AUSTRALIAN TERTIARY EDUCATION IN THE EIGHTIES — A CANADIAN PERSPECTIVE

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Introduction

If there is one major impression which can be drawn from regular and continuous study of the tertiary educational scene in Australia it is that the problems which beset the system, be they educational, economic or philosophic, appear to be universal in that they are representative of a syndrome which has characterized 'western' higher education during the past two decades.

The author, while primarily a student of post-secondary educational developments in North America, has had the opportunity to assess similar issues in Australia through a number of extended periods of study since 1970. The observations which follow, partly factual and partly speculative, are offered as a basis for critical discussion within the Australian context.

From the outset it must be recognized that any analogies which may be drawn from North American experience must also recognize certain fundamental differences. The 'culture' which permeates higher education in Canada reflects an emphasis towards decentralization. Universities, while expressing a commitment to national and international goals, preserve a high degree of autonomy in curriculum, salary and associated benefits for faculty, and in important questions of budgetary control and governance. Colleges are, in every sense, community oriented, a factor which has had considerable bearing upon their ability to adjust to continuing challenges to their relevance.

In concert with this concern with decentralization, there is little overt presence of the federal government in Canadian higher education. Certainly, federal money directed at constitutionally acceptable functions such as manpower training, research and development, and language instruction, are channelled to tertiary institutions through provincial agencies, but there are no ministries, boards, commissions, or funding agencies located in Ottawa which influence directly the operation of educational institutions.

Having accepted the foregoing it is legitimate to examine whether, and to what extent, conditions affecting tertiary education in Canada are also evident within the Australian context. If this is so, the second, and more important question, is to explore whether the structural, financial and legislative procedures utilized successfully in Canada have any application to another constituency.

It is proposed that, even after accepting certain essential differences in the cultural and political order, many of the phenomena which have impacted tertiary education in Canada during the last two decades may be identified in Australia. The variations which do exist are more a matter of chronological time period and degree than of substance. These phenomena will be examined.

The Changing Climate of Tertiary Education

Since the 1950's higher education in Canada has passed through a number of well documented phases.[1] The 'golden period' of the sixties was characterized by seemingly unlimited public and political support reflected in an abiding belief by society in tertiary education as the passport to a rewarding future. These attitudes were accompanied by dramatic increases in both the number of 'college age' students and the percentage of that cohort which sought post-secondary education.

Beginning in the early seventies, however, the climate changed. public support for higher education, particularly for more traditional models, deteriorated. Political decision makers, sensitive to public opinion, responded by assigning a lower priority to tertiary education in budgetary allocations.

With respect to media attention, education surrendered the focus to more pressing social and economic issues such as energy, unemployment, inflation, and concerns with the environment. The popular spectre of the unemployed college graduate, accurate or not, added yet another dimension to the general disillusionment with post-secondary education.

All of the foregoing has been accompanied by certain demographic changes. The number of high school graduates has declined gradually. Even more alarming to educational planners is evidence that the percentage of the traditional age group seeking education beyond secondary school has also declined. In Canada the percentage of the 18-24 age group enrolled in universities in 1975 was 12.4. The equivalent figure in 1979 was 11.4.[2]

Together with the decline in student enrolment has been rapid and often unpredictable fluctuations in demand for specific programmes of study. The most dramatic example of the foregoing is the problem of teacher supply and demand. Evidently the situation is unstable at best as the beginning of the next phase, a teacher shortage, is already causing concern in certain parts of Canada.[3] However, a variety of other programmes, such as engineering and forestry, have also experienced unstable demand, while business, accountancy and computer studies have been confronted with an excessive number of applicants.

One further development in society which has had a considerable impact upon the non-university sector in particular is the so-called 'taxpayer's revolt'. While it is important not to over-react to this phenomenon there is nevertheless much greater direct concern expressed at the community level with the utilization of tax money by post-secondary institutions. More than ever before colleges are being asked to justify their considerable operating budgets through programmes designed to meet the needs of the wider community. While a particular emphasis has been placed upon job training, a broad segment of society is seeking opportunities which contribute to personal development and enrichment of the quality of life.[4]

Finally, the seventies produced a new student clientele which is continuing to have an impact upon post-secondary education. An increasing percentage of students are part-time, mature, and to a large extent, female. Further, a widening emphasis upon adult literacy and numeracy has created new challenges for colleges to develop programs to meet these needs. Different arrangements with regard to course organization and scheduling, designed to accommodate student requirements, have run into difficulties with faculties and staff oriented to more traditional modes of operation.

All of the foregoing refer to the challenges which Canadian higher education has had to face during the last decade. While there are differences in the Australian context, in this observer's view these differences are, as stated earlier, more in degree than substance. Certainly, the decline in demand for teachers occurred somewhat later in Australia, but the pattern is familiar. The mechanism which provides for the expression of community concern with education does not operate in the same way in Australia as it does in Canada — but the concern is still evident! The demographic, economic and political issues noted are impacting Australian tertiary education in much the same way as in Canada.

Fundamentally different, however, are the post-secondary educational structures in both countries and those differences have a significant bearing upon how each system is able to cope with change.

The Consequences of Expansion

The current structure and organization of post-secondary education in Australia were developed largely during the unprecedented period of expansion from 1960 to 1970. As in other constituencies the major response to the dramatic increase in demand for education was to open more colleges and universities. Unlike Canada, however, the Australian approach was to establish a large number of new institutions, each designed for a specific purpose. As the demand for teachers accelerated more teachers' colleges were established. A greater number of places in universities was provided through the opening of new universities. A documented need for more trained manpower by business and industry was met by the construction of increased numbers of technical colleges and institutes, and Boards of Adult Education expanded their activities through the provision of new programmes and centres throughout the states.

In effect, the end result of the expansionary phase in Australia was a large network of post-secondary institutions which, in contrast with the more comprehensive structures in Canada, were limited in function both by design and by the legislation which sustained them. While there was very limited overlap in function among the institutions there was also very little mobility for students through transfer of academic credit within the system. As the organization evolved the direction was towards even greater isolation of function. In many states the Technical and Further Education Divisions developed as semi-autonomous structures. A series of reports,[5] commissioned during the period, culminated in a system of colleges of advanced education which incorporated the evolution of the former teachers' colleges. By 1975, tertiary education in Australia was distributed through a large number of institutions organized through separate and relatively autonomous systems, each one functioning efficiently within its restrictive role, providing quality education to a limited clientele.

For a variety of reasons, the Canadian approach was somewhat different. With the exception of Ontario, the provinces permitted only a minimal increase in the number of universities. During the same period the education of teachers was placed under university auspices and the provincial teachers' colleges were closed. The non-university sector of tertiary education, which developed in Canada during the 1960's, was characterized by a high degree of comprehensiveness in structure and function. The colleges were given different names in the various provinces[6] but the format was similar — a multi-level, multi-purpose curriculum and a strong orientation to the local community. Programmes, be they academic, technical, vocational or remedial, were designed to meet the needs of the institution's particular constituency. A heavy emphasis was placed upon the recruitment of those individuals who had been denied higher education in the past and hence open admissions, counselling, remedial instruction and decentralization services were all features of the new colleges. While no degree programmes were established, many systems did develop formal transfer policies whereby students could complete the first two years of a baccalaureate degree at their local college and then transfer with full credit into the third year of a university.

As conditions began to change in the 1970's and as the factors noted earlier in the paper began to impact upon tertiary institutions, it was evident that significant changes in their structure must occur. Fortunately the broad mandate and flexible curricular organization of the Canadian colleges provided a basis for fairly rapid and reasonably efficient adjustment. The institutions sought new student populations, developed programmes based upon changing societal needs, re-channeled both facilities and faculty skills into alternative uses and re-ordered budgetary priorities as the needs became evident.

While again it should be noted that this scenario may not have direct application to the Australian setting, there are many aspects which are worthy of scrutiny as tertiary education in this nation faces a new set of challenges in the 1980's.

The Challenge of the Eighties

From this writer's viewpoint there are two imminent issues in higher education in Australia which must be addressed. The first is the need to restructure certain types of institutions in the face of a decline in their traditional constituency, with the accompanying threat of growing redundancy. The second issue is that of drafting a design for the eighties which will accommodate new student populations, new programmes and new priorities in budgetary allocation. Clearly, the two issues are closely interrelated.

If the experience of other tertiary systems may be applied to Australia, and this paper has attempted to make a case for the affirmative, colleges will be asked to accommodate many of the following examples of new student populations in the next decade.

- An increasing number of mature part-time students, involving a high percentage of women, who will seek a variety of new educational experiences, particularly those oriented to the enrichment of the quality of life.
- Those adults in the community who lack competence in both literacy and numeracy and possess limited occupational mobility as a result. Migrants would constitute a large segment of this category.
- The variously disadvantaged in society, educationally, socio-culturally, physically, and psychologically, who have enjoyed limited access to tertiary education in the past.
- Women returning to the workforce and to life outside the home.
- Senior citizens — an increasingly vocal segment of society, who seek greater intellectual stimulation in their years of retirement.
- Workers on study leave periods — an established practice in Europe which is just beginning to develop in North America.
- Special groups in the community who have been trained in limited and isolated educational environments. These groups include police, health care and public safety personnel, prison inmates, tourist industry and small business operators, etc.
- The unemployed, particularly the mature, who require retraining in condensed periods of time for job opportunities in local industry.
- Employees of community businesses and industry who need specific training programmes conducted under contract with employer groups.

If tertiary institutions are to respond effectively to these new student demands, however, it is evident that certain conditions must apply. Initially, they must be given the freedom to establish new courses and programmes in response to demonstrated needs. Such programmes must be assessed for funding purposes, not on the basis of their length nor the credential awarded, but on the documented need for such programmes in the wider community. While need will stem from individuals it will also reflect the changing character of technology in industry, economic and physical resources, problems of health care and social welfare and a commitment to raising the quality of life in the region which the college serves.

Alternative ways must be found to redeploy highly qualified faculty when the demand for their particular skills is in decline. Clearly, much of the challenge of diversification must be met by faculty members themselves but restrictive factors to change in this context need to be relaxed. Legislative and funding policies which, in the past, have both limited and prescribed the roles and functions of institutions must be revised to reward an element of entrepreneurism in college programme planning.

If colleges are to become democratizing forces in tertiary education, particularly for their own regions, the will is vital, but determination alone is not sufficient. The financial and legislative tools are also essential to the task. The bureaucracies, political and managerial, at federal, state and local levels, obviously need to hold the same convictions as to the realities of the next decade in tertiary education.

Throughout the twentieth century higher education in Australia has been qualitatively effective — but it has also been selective, highly centralized and inclined to rigidity in its structure. It is also fair to say that elements of duplication and competition among universities, CAE's, TAFE colleges and adult education sectors, both public and private, have begun to characterize the system. It is recognized that the societal changes and new attitudes towards tertiary education which have been speculated upon in this paper will challenge traditional methodology.

While much of what has been said is conceptual, it is not the intention to conclude by discussing the specifics of reorganization. The notion of the restructuring of tertiary institutions in Australia has been addressed in detail by Grant Harman.[7] The viability of the community college concept in Australia has also been given considerable attention.[8] However, it is necessary to offer a few additional ideas by way of conclusion.

Tertiary education must be viewed in the future as a comprehensive system, clearly differentiated from the secondary school sector. Technical and further education, advanced colleges, adult education, and universities, while concerned with different levels of curriculum and instruction, serve adults in what the British now call the non-compulsory educational system. Clearly, the programmes under the system must be coordinated in the interests of a wider adult community. The roles of the first three elements must become more interrelated. The universities, which retaining their traditional uniqueness, must allow for variations among their functions — variations which reflect a changing commitment to society. A more liberal examination of the transfer function between universities and colleges is long overdue in the Australian context, particularly as the former recognize that the flow of students through the system, under the transfer process, does serve their best interests.

The unfortunate association of status with the long established separation of academic from vocational, credit from non-credit, and mature from college-age will begin to erode as CAE's and TAFE roles emerge. The accompanying provision for student mobility among programmes will prove more attractive to a broader representation of society.

Faculty who teach in the tertiary system encounter working conditions, issues of academic freedom, professional development and responsibilities in governance which define their role quite differently from their secondary school colleagues. To continue an association with the latter within an industrial model is difficult to defend in the context of a definitive tertiary system. There are many ways of developing contracts which provide desirable legal protection for faculty and at the same time recognize their particular conditions of employment as post-secondary educators.

Finally, it must be recognized that any assumptions that Canadian solutions may be applied successfully to Australian problems must be regarded as naive, at best. The cultural and political differences which exist between the two countries are real and powerful. There is, however, much that can be learned from the Canadian experience in tertiary education in terms of curricular reorganization, structural change, accommodation of new student populations, community orientation, and the re-ordering of funding priorities. Many of these may be incorporated, to a greater or lesser extent, within the Australian system before the critical changes anticipated in the eighties become a reality.

It is hoped that the ideas raised in this paper will provide the catalyst for a wide ranging and intensive discussion of an important period in the evolution of tertiary education in Australia.

References

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