From crisis to containment: Managing unmet demand for Australian higher education[1]

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Abstract

This paper is concerned with the 'crisis' of unmet demand for Australian university places, how it has been mainstreamed by the mass media and, more specifically, how it has been managed by the Federal Labor Government through its policy agenda. After highlighting some of the social and economic factors which led to the dramatic increase in qualified applicants failing to gain higher education places 1990-1993, the paper focuses on four areas. There is a brief overview of the discourse of unmet demand since World War II. The discussion then locates the idea of unmet demand within economic policy frameworks which require western governments to continually negotiate crises, such as unmet demand. The specific ways in which Australia's Federal Labor Government has managed unmet demand are considered. Finally, the paper assesses the key role of open learning in containing the 'crisis' of unmet demand.

Introduction

The issue of unmet demand, with its accompanying emphasis on the need for more places for young people in postcompulsory education (particularly in university education), has been a recurring theme in the Australian media during recent years. Mainstream debates have tended to focus on the Government's 'failure' to provide sufficient additional places (despite an increase of 70,000 quota places between 1988 and 1992) and the general issue of the relationships among schooling, Technical and Further Education (TAFE) and universities. The discussions have occurred in contexts (among others) of increasing participation and retention rates in schooling; the continuing transition from 'elite' to mass higher education (DEET, 1993); and significant changes in the role of the nation state during a period of globalisation and a deregulated and declining world economy.

This paper reviews the issue of unmet demand, focusing particularly on the development of a discourse of unmet demand and the meanings that have been ascribed to the term; the responses of Labor national governments to the 'crisis' in a period characterised by fiscal constraints and the (alleged) failure of Keynesian policies; its management strategies for 'solutions'; and the rhetoric of open learning as the most recent attempt to manage the 'problem' of unmet demand.

Post World War II

Post World War II represents the time when politicians turned to a form of human capital theory and subsequently to universities in order to supply the graduates who were perceived as essential to projected industrial, economic and social recovery. There was widespread support for increases in both the number of universities and the funding allocated to them, a support predicated on the identification of a need for more scientists, engineers, doctors, dentists and teachers, as well as for arts graduates capable of filling managerial roles in industry and commerce (Benn and Fieldhouse, 1993: p. 301). This period can be seen as one in which 'unmet demand' meant that universities were physically incapable of meeting demand and therefore needed to expand in order to facilitate the Government's economic, industrial and social goals.

During the period, as McCollow and Knight (1993: p. 10) demon-

strate, the Commonwealth Government gained the power to levy income tax and fund higher education. The number of universities more than tripled. Thus, this first real crisis in the supply and demand context of university expansion was met with huge financial support and a correspondent growth in student numbers and course offerings.

Increasing access and meeting demand (1960-1988)

A similar immediacy characterised the upsurge in demand for university education which followed on from both the sixties (with the widespread success of the civil rights movement) and the seventies (with the high profiling of feminist issues). In both eras, the Australian government responded with the development of inclusionary education policies designed to accommodate the increasing numbers of 'marginal' groups who were demanding equal access to higher education.

This commitment to equal opportunity reached a peak during the Hawke administration with Labor's overt equal opportunity and social justice policies. As McNamee (1993: pp. 34-35) notes:

the Higher Education Equity Program instituted in 1985 by the Commonwealth Government seeks to redress the social imbalance in higher education by supporting compensatory action for persons of disadvantaged backgrounds. The Higher Education Equity Program endeavours to improve access to higher education for indigenous peoples, those with low socio-economic status, those suffering from rural isolation, people from non-English speaking backgrounds, those with physical disabilities, and women trying to enter traditionally male-dominated areas of study.

In other words, the much vaunted social justice agenda of the Hawke/Keating administration has attempted to identify and correct a disparity in the distribution of available higher education places. This has led to the development and implementation of 'access' programs: overt political initiatives which target previously designated 'disadvantaged' groups in order to 'include' them in the higher education environment. As Williams et al. (1993a: p. 9) point out, the Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission responded to a 1984 directive to increase the access of under-represented groups by allocating most of the additional places made available in the 1985-87 triennium to institutions in outer-metropolitan and regional areas. Additionally, the *Higher Education Equity Program* of 1985 provided funding for pilot projects specifically designed to 'include' disadvantaged students in Higher Education Institutions (Williams et al., 1993a: p. 9).

Towards unmet demand

It is important to note that the construction of the 'fact' of unmet demand occurred during a period characterised by the apparent failure of Keynesian policies and the election of a Hawke Labor government in 1983. Once in office, Labor was required to attend to a series of economic changes and recessions, shaped in part by international and global factors beyond Australia's control. Keynesian policies (with their focus on maintenance of high employment, control of inflation and public investment through variation of tax, interest rates and other regulatory mechanisms), were seen to be no longer sustainable or

adequate for the full implementation of Labor's social democratic reform programs which would require a strong fiscal base as well as value and policy choices.

Unlike Laborism of the early 1970s which espoused social democratic ideals without sufficient concern for implementation, Labor of the 1980s was determined to implement its social reforms *and* sustain economic growth based on internationally competitive industries. Hence, it adopted a more pragmatic, corporatist approach which it hoped would be seen to be both efficient and responsible in managing the State and the economy. In this context, there was a need for expanding provision for higher education based on growth and equity grounds, but with no real increase in funding. Mass university provision could only be provided at a cost. It was seen to be what the economy required - a more skilled workforce 'in the national interest' - but the basis for containment was fiscal. The pragmatic approach adopted by Labor since 1983 in its response to issues such as unmet demand must be seen in this context of greater emphasis on efficiency and effectiveness in a deregulated economic environment. As a consequence unmet demand has become, in recent years, a visible, priority issue necessitating new and economically efficient responses.

Undergraduate unmet demand

The statistics on unmet demand compiled from the AVCC/ACDP and thereafter the AVCC Unmet Demand Surveys for each year indicate a number of these recent trends.

Table 1: Undergraduate Unmet Demand in Higher Education

Unmet Demand Categories	1990	1991	1992	1993
1. Number of eligible applicants [i]	198,676	212,627	232,755	249,398
2. Increase in % of applicants [ii]	0.5%	7.0%	9.4%	7.1%
3. Applicants with offers	149,759	148,895	127,554	157,888
4. Applicants without offers	48,917	63,732	99,201	91,505
5. % without offers	24%	30%	43%	36%
6. % range of eligible applicants [iii]	6.9-10.2%	9.6-14.3%	15.8-23%	12.5-18.5%

Source: AV-CC/ACDP and AV-CC Unmet Demand Surveys

i. Eligible applicants *before* discounting which is a method used to take into account eligibility, double counting, interstate applications, and restrictions on offers and preferences.

ii. Increase % on previous year.

iii. Distance education figures are excluded from at least some of the surveys.

First, there is an overall increase in the number of eligible applicants to undergraduate courses from 1990 to 1994 of 25.5% in that period. This is in a context where Year 12 retention rates rose from 60.3% in 1990 to 71.3% in 1992. Second, the gross number of eligible applicants increases steadily over the period with a peak at 9.4% over the previous year for 1992, the year of highest demand. Third, there was a similar number of eligible applicants receiving offers across the years with a sharp decline in 1992, but an increase over previous years for 1993. The latter year (1993) represents the vigorous enrolment strategies of universities and their high over-enrolment for that year. Fourth, 1990-1991 and 1992-1993 have an approximately similar gross number of applicants *not* receiving an offer but there are sharp differences in the magnitude of figures for these two periods. The data indicate that gross unmet demand has been highest in recent years with a peak of 43% in 1993. Similarly, after discounting (see note above), the highest percentage range of unmet demand occurs in 1993. Finally, figures for 1993 indicate that there is an overall decrease of 14% in the range of eligible applicants not receiving an offer; an increase of 7% in eligible applicants; and a decrease of 8% in eligible applicants *not* receiving an offer of a university placement. Overall, the 1993 figures indicate there is less unmet demand and that demand is 'off the boil'. This decline has

continued into 1994 with latest figures indicating that umet demand decreased by 4.4% from the previous year to a range (after discounting) of 21,000-31,000 (*Campus Review*, July 14-20:3).

There is no simple answer to explain either why demand rose so dramatically or why it has now lessened in intensity; some answers are context specific, particularly in terms of the year and the profession to which entry is sought. Demand for access, however, can be linked to several factors. First, the statistical success of equity/inclusion initiatives has led to a situation where there are now (in percentage terms) more women, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, working class, disabled and ethnic students participating in higher education than ever before. Second, the resultant changes to the popular Australian understanding of both university education and the 'representative' university student, and an increasing number of role models for members of the previously identified disadvantaged groups have impacted on the numbers of people demanding university entrance. Third, Australians have experienced and responded to steadily increasing unemployment and attendant government efforts to increase high school participation and retention rates.[2]

Finally, the widely publicised changes to the education system and the abolition of the 'two-tier' or binary university/college model which followed Dawkins' (1988) White Paper also played a significant role. The 'upgrading' of CAEs to universities impacted strongly on regional areas where students would previously have had to leave their family home in order to attend 'university' at a distance. By extension, the higher cultural capital of 'universities' rather than 'colleges' has encouraged a number of regional students to strive for university enrolment rather than employment or study in a TAFE college.

The discourse of unmet demand

As the previous section demonstrates there are a number of reasons which may account for the clear disparity between the numbers of qualified students applying for admission to higher education and the number of students actually receiving offers. This paper, however, is more concerned with the significance of this disparity, particularly as it relates to the way in which the crisis of unmet demand (and the discourse which underpins it) has been both mainstreamed and managed.

The almost overwhelming nature of the statistical 'truth' outlined previously raises questions concerning both the ways in which the information is collected and the means by which it is transmitted. Specifically, the process by which a particular set of figures is presented, and the subsequent ways in which these same figures are taken up and re/produced by the mass media, raises the issue of how the discourse about unmet demand has been simultaneously constructed and valorised.

In the process of collecting, distributing and responding to the facts about unmet demand the federal government, the AVCC and the mass media work with and naturalise[3] particular definitions of demand, access, gender, age, and ability resulting in a specific 'unmet demand discourse.' Central to this way of speaking, this 'crisis', are the following points:

- the 'failure' of governments/universities to provide 'eligible' candidates with university places: "The Government...had failed to keep pace with the educational aspirations of the community." (AVCC & ACDP, 1990a); "It is now time for the Government to 'bite the bullet' and announce what its intentions...are" (AVCC, 1991a)

- the numbers of eligible Year 12 Home State students not receiving places: "Most were aged 20 years or under" (AVCC & ACDP, 1990a); "our young people" (AVCC & ACDP, 1990a)

- the social and economic consequences of 'unmet demand' for this particular group: "This is a terrible waste of potential" (AVCC, 1991a); "The Government cannot encourage our young people, in particular, to aspire for a university education and not provide

more places and the infrastructure to support them." (AVCC & ACDP, 1990a)

* the importance of identifying how unmet demand affects males and females but the lack of follow up analysis of the statistics: "In general unmet demand was evenly divided between males and females" (AVCC & ACDP, 1990a); "'unmet demand' has increased more for females than males" (AVCC, 1991a)

* the need for the government to 'solve' this problem for the economic and social benefit of all: "If we are to build on the concept of a clever country, it is not logical to deny access to those who have already showed their ability." (AV-CC & ACDP, 1990a).

When taken as a whole, these points (and the relevant statistics) paint a picture of a crisis which is central to the Australian economy, closely connected to the future of 'our' youth, and equally pertinent to men and women. Left unsaid (uncounted?) in this statistical picture are a number of extremely significant issues:

* the fact that the economic agenda outweighs the equity agenda

* the way in which emphasis on Year 12 or under 20s glosses over the access problems for people over that age

* the function of 'gendered' statistics in naturalising the absence of figures (and, more importantly, discussion) on race, ethnicity, class, and disability

* the acceptance of 'eligible' as an unproblematic term based on objective criteria

* the construction of 'unmet demand' as a term which relates only to those students who actually apply for admission. No consideration is given to those students whose demand (need) is unmet long before first round offers are sent out. Indeed, a 1989 WAPSEC document describes 'unmet demand' as "the difference between the number of applicants genuinely seeking a place in higher education and those who actually obtain a place" (p. 1)

* the emphasis that is repeatedly placed on physical barriers to access; an emphasis which does not acknowledge the underlying ideological barriers which, it could be argued, continue to keep thousands of people out of the university environment.

Two important issues underpin each of these points. The first is an absence of reflection on the nature of the questionnaire or, by extension, the nature of the data collected, except where such reflection attests to the validity and authorised nature of the end product. That is, methodology is repeatedly scrutinised and justified so that the information collected and distributed can be unproblematically presented as that which is central to the 'unmet demand' debate. The 1991 AVCC survey data is prefaced by the representative comment that "the survey is a legitimate one, conducted annually", and a later acknowledgment that "the broad principles and methodology of the survey have been supported by the Federal Department of Employment, Education and Training" (AVCC, 1991b).

The inclusion of 'discounting' factors in the analysis and the consequent reduction in the 'real' numbers of students who are not receiving places also contribute to the legitimisation of the final figure. This process of validating the data means that the information that is collected and distributed, (age of applicants, state of origin, and gender) while no doubt 'useful' is produced and 'naturalised' as *the* essential material. In this way, the *absence* of data, the questions that are *not* asked, and the meanings attached to these blank spaces, become difficult to spot. Indeed, in order to conduct a reading of the data that is not predicated on the above mentioned oppositions, the analyst must conduct a 'reading against the grain'.

A final point that might be made (and one that leads into the next section) concerns the way in which the unmet demand crisis can be read as representative of a social/political process that creates and embraces scandal or crisis in order to reinscribe the 'normality' and 'rightness' of the system itself. While the unmet demand discourse is not in the same category as American Watergate or the assassination of the Kennedys, nor even on a par with Australian whiteboard or sandwich shop scandals, it nevertheless serves as an illustration of how a democratic political system must continually produce 'problems' so that the inevitable solutions can better attest to the rightness and integrity of the system itself. Baudrillard (1983: p. 27) makes this process explicit when he notes that "The denunciation of scandal always pays homage to the law". Through the process of identifying, mainstreaming, solving and surpassing social or political crises any system participates in what Baudrillard (1983: p. 30) describes as "a simulation of scandal to regenerative ends". In this way "everything is metamorphosed into its inverse in order to be perpetuated in its purged form" (Baudrillard, 1983: p. 37). This points to the importance of identifying how the Australian federal government has managed, and thereby contained, the unmet demand crisis.

Managing unmet demand: Government responses

In times of (economic) crises governments are required to (or aim to) demonstrate an ability to manage such crises. If the origin of crisis lies in the economic system, the State does not allow crises to explode, but often displaces them into the social and cultural order. Hence the government/media focus on issues of unmet demand is a displacement into the social/cultural order. The 'official' (read 'objective') unmet demand discourse has been produced in approximately equal parts by Australian universities, the mass media and the federal government, although each institution plays a different role. Responsibility for the collection and initial dissemination of 'relevant' statistics falls with the AVCC which clearly aligns itself with those people not gaining entry. Press releases accompanying the 'official' statistics include headlines such as "Unmet Demand Rockets" (AVCC, 1991a); and "Thousands of Qualified Students Still Unable to Find Places" (AVCC & ACDP, 1990a). By headlining the 'negative', the AVCC produces itself as sensitive to the distress experienced by those who miss out on places, and thereby claims the moral high ground. The 'responsibility' for mainstreaming the information meted out by the AVCC rests with the mass media. The predictable media hype then guarantees that the federal government will recognise and respond to the carefully constructed (almost formulaic) 'crisis'.

As the unmet demand debate illustrates, the State must continually defend its actions and it does this by formulating new policies 'in the national interest'. In this instance, the State has made a number of managerial responses to issues of unmet demand. In doing this, its responses may be assumed to be economically driven, that is, occurring within an Australian economic framework of tight fiscal balancing; or politically driven, where regulation of university entrance controls the supply of professionals for a 'clever country'.

The specific responses and strategies adopted by Labor governments since 1983 to manage unmet demand include attempts to increase access and diversity of courses through a system of distance education centres (DECs); the restructuring of TAFE through a training reform agenda and a consequent diversion of applicants away from universities; the promotion of alternative pathways between schooling, TAFE and universities with a particular foci on schooling, TAFE, industry links; and most recently, the establishment of a mass education approach through 'open' learning. Each of these points bear closer consideration.

An early Laborist strategy for 'solving' the problem of unmet demand was the creation of national Distance Education Centres (DECs). During the 1970s and the 1980s there was considerable tension among higher education institutions wishing to expand the range of education opportunities and the Commonwealth's aim to increase efficiencies in avoiding duplication of offerings (Small, 1994). This applied particularly to 'external' provision where it appeared significant efficiencies (through rationalisation of courses and cost effective production of materials) could be achieved. As a result, the Commonwealth's White Paper (Dawkins, 1988) proposed a continuing expansion of provision of places for external students as the means for offering opportunities to mature age and remote area Australians, whilst emphasising this provision would be met through greater efficiencies such as the rationalisation of courses, units and the number of providers. The expected increased level of participation, therefore, in some sense aimed to address the issue of unmet demand.

The level of participation increased between 1988 and 1992 but there was also considerable expansion in the number of courses offered with an overall increase in DEC course offerings of 77%. The increase in courses *across* institutions probably reduced any possibility of economies of scale with the subsequent demise of a national system of DECs.

A second 'solution' to the management of unmet demand has involved the Technical and Further Education (TAFE) sector. Crisis triad of the Finn, Mayer and Carmichael Reports has focussed on the need for a better trained youth workforce and the need for schooling, industry and TAFE links. The Finn Report recommended a massive injection of funds so that by the year 2000, 95% of nineteen year olds will complete Year 12 (current participation level is 76%). The targeted increase in TAFE participation by 2001 is 54.7% with universities' target being only 18.5%.

While the Commonwealth has indicated TAFE funding will be 'new', no indication has been given about the source of such funds. On the other hand, under the unified national system, universities (whilst receiving a significant increase in the number of extra places) cannot expect further increases until well into the year 2000. As Henry and Taylor (1994) point out, they are being controlled by regulatory strategies relating to fiscal controls and deregulatory 'carrots' encouraging them to enter more completely into the 'free market choice' arena. Henry (1992) has well analysed the complexities underlying schooling, TAFE, university relationships with their 'contradictory logics'. The current aim of the Commonwealth (within complex Federal-State relationships especially as these relate to TAFE), is to 'cool down' aspirations of young school leavers for university education; and to 'warm up' the opportunities and incentives for a TAFE 'vocational' education. The general aim, therefore, is that 30% of young school leavers will enter universities while the remainder will access a TAFE (now adequately funded). Education and unmet demand are thus *demonstrably* well managed and well met. The 1993 AVCC Media Release explicitly urges "unsuccessful applicants for a university place to consider their career options in the context of other post-secondary education providers, especially the TAFE system".

A third means of managing unmet demand is related to the second and also discussed in this issue by Henry and Taylor (1994). In all the policy statements on restructuring TAFE, there has been a focus on the idea of multiple pathways across the sectors of schooling, TAFE and universities (private providers and trainers are generally 'forgotten'). Prior to the 1990s, these sectors were well 'gatekept' but the 'new vocationalism' has been advocated as the means to a better skilled workforce and more equitable outcomes for those who have not had/don't have the opportunities of a post-compulsory education. Credentialled pathways are seen as the means for 'solving' unmet demand issues despite the problematic of continuities and discontinuities, at once philosophical, organisational, political and problematic, so poignantly analysed by Henry and Taylor (1994).

A fourth strategy implemented by the State in its management of unmet demand and framed within an equity discourse is the media-driven idea of open learning. The rhetoric of open learning heralds a 'new approach' to higher education and is the more recent strategy used by the Commonwealth government in its attempt to increase university access during a period of fiscal constraint. Seen as a 'new' solution to the States' problems with existing university places provision (King, 1993), the term open learning has characterised official documents since the early 1990s (Baldwin, 1991). The first official implementation by the State was the pilot TV Open Learning Project. This was expanded in 1993 into the Open Learning Agency of Australia (OLAA/OLA). A second consortium (Professional and Graduate Education Consortium: PAGE) was developed in 1993-94.

The words flexibility, facilitation of access, and diversity are routinely associated with OLA but, as Moodie (1993) notes, there are a number of problems with these associations. Of particular significance is the existence of what Moodie (1993) describes as "enclosures". In the transition from the pilot project to OLA a refocusing on provision of alternatives to conventional university degrees at the same time enclosed learning within traditional degree frameworks. In other words, open learning no longer serves the wider community (Keepes, 1993: p 187). What is clear is the definitional meaning ascribed to the term open learning by the State, namely its more instrumental emphasis on electronic information technologies incorporated into a view of learning.

It is possible to argue that there are a number of significant points associated with the connection that can be made between unmet demand, open learning and equity. While the unmet demand crisis revolves around the lack of internal places for 'qualified' school leavers, the rhetoric which underpins open learning repeatedly emphasises the solution which it offers 'unqualified' individuals who seek university access but not university attendance. As the 1993 evaluation of the TV Open Learning Project notes, the first priority of the 'one million dollar initiative' was to extend access to "disadvantaged groups" (p. 1-1). The meanings attached to 'disadvantaged' in the open learning discourse (like the meanings attached to 'unmet demand') are once again indicated by statistical analysis. In this case, the collection of information about students who make use of open learning included questions concerning their age, physical ability, educational background, proximity to universities, employment status, gender, and first language. In other words, all of the information that is *not* associated with 'unmet demand' is intrinsic to the notion of the open learning imperative. In this way the exclusions of both discourses are neutralised by the inclusions of the other.

An analysis of these two opposite yet complementary discourses reveals an extensive network of binaries which can be summarised as follows:

The Discourse of Unmet Demand v The Rhetoric of Open
Learning

'Disappointed' Applicants v 'Disadvantaged' Groups

School Leavers v Mature Age Applicants

Able v Disabled

European v Ethnic/Indigenous

Urban v Rural

Implicit in each of these oppositions is an awareness of the difference between the obstacles which impede the access of both the 'disappointed' and the 'disadvantaged' to university. In the first case the barriers are financial (not enough government money, too few university places). In the second case the barriers are physical (too few universities, distance, time, over commitments, physical inability). When these are all lined up together, the resultant scenario is that unmet demand by school leavers is met by increased funding, while the 'other' obstacles to university access experienced by disadvantaged groups (those 'disadvantaged' by age, disability, location, qualifications, experience, gender) are countered by the concept of open learning. The overarching danger is that the State, in seizing upon the solutions of open learning, may see it as *the* means for ameliorating equity problems by enabling them " to meet Commonwealth imposed quotas in order to retain funded places" (Walker, 1994: p. 99) and fail to consider the consequences of the oppositions (outlined above) which such a solution produces.

From crisis to containment:
The discourse of solution

The solution that the government finds to unmet demand—a financial solution which sees the demand for places go "off the boil" (AVCC, 1993a) and then "slump" (*Campus Review*, July 14-20: 3)—combines with the physical solution which open learning provides to 'disadvantaged groups', to produce a society in which everyone who desires it has physical access to a university education. In other words, anybody who really wants to get into a university, *can* get into a university: scandal or crisis has been contained, the government has

demonstrated its ability to manage social/political turmoil and, as Baudrillard suggests "every act terminates at the end of the cycle having benefited everyone and been scattered in all directions" (1983: p. 31). This end of cycle termination and "scattering" is reflected explicitly in the 1993 AVCC Media Release which describes the level of unmet demand in 1992 as "unprecedented" but emphasises the government's "initiatives in providing wider community access to higher education". The end result, we are told, "is very gratifying" and a "turn-around in the trend" for increases in unmet demand.

Further 'evidence' of this turn-around is provided by the 1994 data (and the accompanying AVCC comments). The publicising of the fact that unmet demand has 'slumped' by 4.4% is accompanied by an acknowledgment that the declining number of applicants--a decline linked to "a successful campaign to encourage students into the TAFE system, prospective students being put off applying...and growing optimism about the economy" (Campus Review, July 14-20: 3)--is part of an on-going downward trend linked to reduced Year 12 populations which will continue until 1996. It is important to be aware, however, that this decline will not be evident in applications for entry to all university courses. The teaching profession provides a good example. While Faculties of Education have been downsized it is quite clear that there will be a sharp increase in demand for teachers from now until 2001 (Preston, 1994: pp. 1-18).

What must be continually emphasised is that the discourse which informs this move from crisis to containment takes account of (and responds to) only a very select number of factors. By establishing the discourse of open learning and promoting the opportunity it gives to designated 'disadvantaged groups', governments, universities and the media are complicit in, firstly, naturalising particular distinctions between groups of people and modes of access and, secondly, eliding any ideological dimension to these oppositions. In other words, by repeatedly emphasising physical barriers and by convincingly positing physical solutions, the government enjoys the rewards of solving a crisis without having to interrogate the political and social practices which establish, maintain and naturalise the oppositions outlined above. As a result, the discourse of unmet demand and the rhetoric of open learning displace all considerations of the ideological barriers which limit university access in the first place.

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Footnotes

1 Throughout this paper we take higher education to refer specifically to university education. Tertiary education refers to all education beyond secondary, including postcompulsory, TAFE and university education.

2 These efforts were so successful that the AEC's national goal of achieving 65% retention to Year 12 by 1992 was in fact achieved by 1990. (Williams et. al, 1993b: pp. 5). The *Participation and Equity Program* (1983) and *Priority One: Young Australia* (1986) are just two of the initiatives which contributed to this 'success' (Williams et. al, 1993b: pp. 12).

3 In this use of the term 'naturalised' we are referring to the process by which any particular practice, ideology or definition is produced as being 'natural', that is, as self-evident, right or unproblematic. 'Naturalisation' is connected to the repetition of one particular 'truth'; the exclusion of alternative 'truths' from dominant discourses; and the association of the 'natural' truth with other previously valorised concepts.

New pathways?: Postcompulsory schooling, TAFE and mass higher education

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Abstract

The new postcompulsory education and training policies (expressed in the Finn, Carmichael and Mayer reports), where goals of microeconomic reform are linked to equity issues, represent an ambiguous policy mix and offer contradictory possibilities for young people. The article reviews the context of these developments and reports on preliminary research investigating how these policies are being taken up in specific institutional settings, with a particular focus on the extent to which the potential for a more equitable provision of education and training might be realised. The broader implications of the findings for progressive reform of the postcompulsory education and training system will be discussed, together with the implications for mass higher education.

A new policy agenda

By 2010, education and training would be characterised by multiple pathways for students. These would include simultaneous school and university study and multi-skilled teaching staff moving between industry and education. The interaction of vocational education and job-based training would lead to a dramatic change in the structure of education...(Gregor Ramsay, Managing Director, NSW TAFE, reported in the The Australian 21 October 1992).

The release in 1991 and 1992 of the Finn, Carmichael and Mayer Reports signalled a new policy target: postcompulsory education and training, involving a restructuring of TAFE and an attempt to develop better articulated pathways between schooling, higher education and work. Underpinned by a mix of utilitarian and utopian assumptions, the reports combine an explicitly instrumental "human capital" approach to education and labour market reform aimed at improving Australia's skills base with a concern to provide a broader range of options for a wider group of young people than currently exists. Here, we wish to briefly review the context for these developments and, based on some preliminary research, speculate on the extent to which and under what circumstances the potential for a more equitable provision of education and training might be realised. These new policies form part of a broader "training reform agenda" with industrial as well as educational implications. Our focus here however is on the educational aspects, with a particular interest in the implications for equity provision.

The Finn-Carmichael-Mayer triad represent what could be called an Australian version of the "new vocationalism"[1]: a concern with "converging" general and vocational education, so that general education is seen as relevant to work and vocational education is seen as broader than specific work-based skills; with extending postcompulsory education to include virtually all young people through the creation of flexible educational pathways between school, TAFE, higher education and work; and with developing competency-based approaches which recognise what people can do or have done, rather than simply the time spent to gain formal credentials. In this, the reports reflect a somewhat uneasy synthesis of post-fordist "new labour market" rhetoric about the need for multiskilled and adaptive workers (seen for example in *Australia Reconstructed* , ACTU/TDC 1987) and older (fordist) demands for workplace flexibility and closer links between school and work.

These reports need to be seen against the backdrop of problems with existing education and training provisions. For example, although the range of courses offered by the TAFE system has broadened during the eighties, the Australian training system has been dominated by an outdated and narrow training model, where credentials were gained by undertaking formal courses or training on or prior to leaving school, (referred to by Carmichael (1992) as 'front end learning'). This model has lacked the flexibility to cater for the needs of those who may not have followed conventional pathways and has preserved the privileged labour market position of credential holders (Freeland 1992, pp. 80-81). It has also been male dominated, with limited training opportunities for women (Pocock 1988). Similarly, while a number of initiatives have evolved within the schooling system, particularly at the senior levels, to "cater for" a more diverse school population, school curriculum is still seen to be university driven and fractured around the 'academic' and 'vocational' divide and its underlying class basis (Connell et al 1982).

The challenge for the new policies then is to open up pathways through systems which, if not totally closed, have certainly been well "gatekept". The essential "new vocationalist" argument is that the policies, as well as contributing to a better skilled workforce, are likely to lead to more generally equitable outcomes than previously because of their more "inclusive" education and training potential. In the words of one of the chief architects of the new agenda, 'If we get the basics right, equity will follow' (Carmichael 1992). Advocates see virtues in the potential for developing credentialled pathways between industry and schooling comparable with those between schooling and the universities. For example, Richard Sweet of the Dusseldorp Skills Foundation comments on the lack of fit between schooling, with its greatly increased and more diverse population, and post-school vocational options. This is in marked contrast, he suggests, to the bridges between school and higher education, laid down by the rules of higher education which 'shape the curriculum for the preceding two years... and the exchange values of the resulting school credential' (The Australian 8 Jan 1992).

The new policies have been developed with the involvement of the Commonwealth and all State governments, business and industry and the ACTU, including the education unions. Generally however, representatives from the education sectors centrally involved with implementation of the policies have been excluded from the national vanguard responsible for framing them. Not surprisingly, then, the policies have generated considerable debate within educational circles, much of which was reported in the pages of the Higher Education Supplement of *The Australian* throughout 1992. These debates provide insights into the scope, complexity and politics of the policy agenda - significant for a consideration of which aspects are likely to be taken up, or rejected. We have reported more fully on these matters elsewhere (Taylor and Henry 1994). For the purposes of this discussion, we will take up one of the significant themes to emerge: the debate around definitions of education and training and, related, the respective roles of TAFE and universities.

While the new policies imply a kind of seamless web of educational and training pathways, opponents, particularly from the universities, tend to conceptualise a clear distinction between intellectual work (education) and applied knowledge (training) with a respective divi-