

# Looking back into the future

**Arthur O'Neill & Bob Speechley**

Having worked for many decades at the hopeless task of administering higher education institutions, these two old codgers regurgitate their experience for the benefit of new chums and speculate about the next half century. This paper is based on one presented at the TEM Conference, 3-6 October 2010, Melbourne.

## Introduction

We've racked our brains, as much as is left of them, to figure out what happened in Australian post-secondary education over the last fifty or so years; and to predict what sort of arrangement our great-grandchildren, and great-great-grandchildren, will encounter fifty years hence. To put this modest project another way: what in 2060 might a historian (assuming there are, then, historians) write about our topic over the previous one hundred years?

Then, as now, she/he would know that society and study are a two-way stretch: education is embedded in and gives layers of expression to prevailing socio-political conditions. As these alter, or stay relatively unaltered, so does the shape, size, content and direction of education; and so also does the language used to hatch and cross-hatch bits of it. Raymond Williams (1976) sagely reminds us of the historically shaped senses in which certain keywords are used. We have in mind the variable ways in which 'advanced', 'higher', 'sector', 'system', 'technical', 'technological', 'tertiary', 'training' and 'vocational' have been associated with use of the word 'education'. We say more about that later.

To help provide a testamentary source for a future historian, we've picked out three intertwined social and educational phases over the last fifty and-a-bit years, starting around 1957 and ending now. Then we make some guesses about the social order in 2060, and

therefore about how Australian post-secondary education might be in that year. We best say now that it won't be a pretty picture but, as one of Murphy's Laws says, 'Smile ... Tomorrow Will Be Worse'.

## The past

In January 1957 a conservative Prime Minister, Robert Gordon Menzies, set up a committee chaired by a Pom to inquire into the future of Australian Universities. Its report instituted a shift to federal direction and funding by way of successive States Grants (Universities) Acts, to endorsement of and support for new universities and increases in the sizes of old ones, and to the establishment of an advisory grants committee to provide continuing advice to governments about universities (Murray, 1957).

Menzies catered for a demand. Susan Davies, a first-rate historian of these and later events, says:

The years from the late fifties to the middle sixties marked the second phase of post-war expansion of tertiary education in Australia. From a low point in the mid fifties, student numbers grew in colleges and universities. The systems of technical education – in particular in New South Wales, Victoria and Western Australia – underwent rapid expansion. Existing institutions increased in size and new technical colleges were established in rural and metropolitan locations. The number of teachers in training doubled and trebled in some instances. In

every Australian State at least one new teachers' college opened its doors in this period (Davies, 1989, p. 15).

Not only was the expansion brought on by population growth but also it indicated altered expectations about continuing formal education beyond secondary schooling. Menzies catered to the ambitions of a rapidly increasing Australian middle class; and the changes he instituted had a knock-on effect, leading to further demand. In short order, revised estimates of enrolments led the advisory grants committee – called the Australian Universities Commission and chaired by Sir Leslie Martin – to recommend what amounted to a review of the structure of post-secondary education and the disposition of component institutions. A binary system of colleges of advanced education and universities emerged from the review (Martin, 1964-65). 'System' was employed to convey the idea that colleges and universities were articulated to form a whole; and that 'tertiary' or 'higher' education' (the adjectival forms were used interchangeably) referred to the sum of these two

parts rather than solely to universities. In turn, this sum was called a 'sector', meaning a component of a larger whole, namely the organized educational activities that were on offer after secondary schooling. Susan Davies' comment about the origin of the binary system is pertinent. She says:

... Menzies acted to contain future costs by the creation of places of higher or tertiary education in non-university institutions. It was an act of political expediency ... Almost certainly Menzies did not believe the sophistry at the heart of the binary policy, namely the separation of pure from applied study and research. He had no illusions about what would happen to the colleges given adequate government support: they (some of them at any rate) would develop into universities (Davies, 1989, p. 170).

In an indirect way, the binary arrangement did afford some recognition of trade and technical education as another segment of the post-secondary orange, though 'training' was often used to distinguish what went on in technical and trade schools from 'education'. Terms, you see, are plasticine in the hands of those who shape them to preferred social ends.

We who lived through these changes were less compelled by advocacy for the proper existence of equal but different sorts of institutions than by concurrent happenings: the alignment of students and socialists in revolt, first in Paris, spreading to other French cities and thence to the western world; and opposition to engagement in the war in Vietnam. If you were young in the late 1960s and 1970s then it was not *all* about sex and drugs and rock 'n roll. There was resistance – to the State and authoritarian institutional structures, to rampant capitalism dressed up in pietistic gab, to patriarchy, to orthodoxy in all its guises – and there were emergent movements: conservationism, feminism, alternative medicine, alternative lifestyles; and there were changes to the organisation and conduct of education, especially in new institutions such as, in Australia,

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Deakin and Griffith Universities. It was a good time to be alive, unless you were drafted to fight in Vietnam or were punched up by the cops at an anti-war protest or on a university campus under siege.

While Murray and Martin had no brief to cover technical education in their

inquiries, 'technological education' was another and rather clouded matter. A University of Technology had been established in Sydney in mid-1949 but existing Central Institutes of Technology in the Australian States were incorporated in the new tertiary sector as advanced education colleges. It pushed the boundaries of sense to maintain that, for example, their engineering students and teachers were different sorts of animals from those in universities. Their courses had to satisfy professional bodies in this and many other overlapping areas. Still, 'technology' had an inconvenient ring about it and in this and later cases when university status came (think of Victoria University) the 'of Technology' bit appeared in smaller and smaller case until it was put out of legislative existence, or was reduced to a capital, as in UTS and RMIT University.

Our second phase begins in 1987, some twenty years after implementation of the binary scheme. By then another sector, Technical and Further Education, had been defined and had prospered. But its moment was still to come. The emphasis now was on efficiency and effectiveness, the idea being that the tertiary education machine could be improved and its pace quick-

ened by adjusting the levers of input, throughput and financing. John Dawkins said when announcing his December 1987 Green Paper that a new approach

was essential if our higher education system is to cope effectively with future growth while maintaining quality and increasing equity ... We need significant growth in higher education to support opportunities for economic growth and create places for the increasing number of young people leaving school. We are currently well behind the best in the world. To be more competitive internationally the number of graduates from our higher education system would need to rise significantly (Dawkins, 1987).

A consequence of his shift of gears was promotion of diversity and competition; and a 'market rules' preoccupation took hold in the executive management suites of universities. But some thought Dawkins was a commo rather than a free marketeer. David Penington, who was Vice-Chancellor of the University of Melbourne at the time, says in his autobiography that Dawkins' model of a Unified National System of higher education 'had less the flavour of Adam Smith than that of the later economists, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, let alone of the political economist Vladimir Lenin' (Penington, 2010, p. 245). Professor Penington - we call him 'Surfer Dave' on account of the photo of him on the dust jacket of his book, titled *Making Waves* - did not want to ride his board alongside bolshie staff and students. He says that:

The top-down administrative-law approach [to university management] was, in my view, seriously flawed with respect to both our education and research functions, but 'democratising' with the University Assembly [an elected student and staff consultative body started at Melbourne in 1974] and extensive committee-based decision-making on all issues in academic departments was also seriously flawed (2010, p. 216).

We should mention that Surfer Dave had a less than enthusiastic view of goings-on in earlier years. He mentions 'student unrest' and continues: "Tom Lehrer's song "The old dope peddler" reflected the rising use of cannabis, a symbol of dissent' (2010, p. 213). So do elders misapprehend the pleasures attendant on rebellion.' As Paul Rodan notes in his review of Surfer Dave's opus:

This brings us of course to his clashes with reforming Education Minister John Dawkins, covered in a chapter headed 'The Dawkins Problem' (which sits nicely with 'The Problem of Illicit Drugs' chapter and elevates the Minister to the level of the drug menace) (Rodan, 2010, p. 79).

In the wash-up, realisation of Dawkins' unified national system turned out to mean that a much smaller number of much larger institutions had to do much more with much less. Removal of statutory boards and commissions meant that governments no longer were constrained by their advice. Opening the market led to the appearance of a large number of much smaller private colleges, many of which now offer accredited Bachelor, Diploma and Certificate courses. Some have been contracted to run outsourced service programs, like courses in English for overseas students. The enrolment of overseas fee-paying students became a financial relief valve: on 2007 figures, Australian universities had a little over 7 per cent of the world market for international students and ranked fifth in the top six countries in this field (*The Economist*, 2010).

On the ground, the unified system remained segmented along old lines. A friend of one of us employed in an administrative position in a re-named university of technology did not have her appointment confirmed after probation. Her supervisor reported that she had difficulty in understanding the prevailing organisational culture. She was told that she might be better suited to an organisation that was less pragmatic and less risk-averse, one that placed more emphasis on theoretical constructs in problem solving. Many of those working in the newly-minted universities lived out such claims to distinctiveness: they proclaimed (and believed) that theirs were places for the real world; they brought knowledge to life; experience was the difference; they offered a new way to think, a new school of thought. In contrast, the dismissed staff member exemplified what were held to be characteristics of 'old' universities - their caution, conservatism, abstract emphasis, impracticality. She was being invited to get in touch with her inner self and go back to work for one of *them*. There were horses for courses.

## Now

Our final phase starts in 2008. By then, students had turned away from activism, having been scared out of their wits by the spectre of unemployment. Securing economic benefit from education was now in the forefront of student minds; and of the collective mind of a review panel chaired by Denise Bradley. It proposed increasing rates of participation in higher education, extra federal money to accomplish that and to remedy, at least in part, earlier funding shortfalls (Bradley *et al.*, 2008). Who could argue against such worthy

objectives? The trouble is, government cannot at once support most of the recommendations in the Bradley Report and not provide adequate funding to give effect to them. At least, its credibility suffers when, as Vin Massaro cogently argues in a recent paper; '[t]here is a major shortfall in the means of achieving the higher education revolution ...' (Massaro, 2010a). Not that he (or we) reckons that government policy will bring on revolution in any accredited sense of that word.

One feature we want to pull out of the Bradley Report is the response given to a term of reference about 'establishing the place of higher education in the broader tertiary education system, especially in building an integrated relationship with vocational education and training (VET)' (Bradley *et al.*, 2008, p. 179). The review panel starts by converting this broader tertiary education system into what it calls a 'tertiary education and training system'. So are changes rung: a tertiary or higher education system had been made out of universities and advanced education colleges in the mid 1960s. In the late 1980s and early 1990s a unified national system of higher education had been realised by collapsing colleges of education into universities. Twenty years later, another system comes about by assigning higher education and VET as its two sectoral components (Bradley *et al.*, 2008, p.200). Meanings shift as authoritative bodies, or Humpty Dumpty, make words mean what they choose them to mean.

What is higher education? The Bradley Report tells us:

Higher education is defined in this report as Australian Qualifications Framework qualifications at associate degree and above and diplomas and advanced diplomas accredited in the higher education system (Review of Australian Higher Education, 2008, p. 2, n. 2).

This is like grading eggs by weight, without reference to what the chooks are fed and how they are accommodated. We need a wider and deeper understanding of what is meant by education, not one that resurrects an equal but different slogan in contrasts of 'higher' and 'vocational' on the one hand and 'education' and 'training' on the other.

As an eminent (if unreconstructed male) historian who also fancied himself as an economist once said: 'The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living'. It is the past that has us in thrall and we repeat it - 'the first time as tragedy' he says, and 'the second as farce' (Marx, 1954, p. 10). We may be repeating binarism by designating universities and vocational education and training as sectors of

a tertiary education and training system. The trusty Vin Massaro thinks that this could be an unintended consequence of the Bradley Report (Massaro, 2010b). Other important recommendations in the Report flag arrival of the moment for TAFE institutions by moving towards parity of treatment across the sectors.

## The future

We are not taken by the idea that improvement is the general tendency in human affairs; and that social formations evolve or unfold in accord with their inherently progressive characters. Experience has undermined our native optimism. A cause for our worry is the absence of debate about qualities to be fostered by education, about the manner of preparing cultivated human beings, and about philosophies informing the educational project. Instead, betterment turns on providing more of the same. The Vice Chancellor of Monash (Byrne, 2010, p.21) ends a recent article by saying that 'To develop a smart Australia, we need great people, and that is what great universities deliver'. He continues: 'University leaders crying in the wilderness will not get us there. It is time for both sides of politics, the business community and for all who have benefited or hope that their children or grandchildren will benefit from university education to speak up, because the future of Australia's universities is the business of all of us'.

That's a nice bit of tub thumping. It conjures the poster image of a vanguard of orthodontists, divorce lawyers and assorted other graduates striding forward, their arms linked with politicians and businessmen of all stripes. They know what's best for the great unwashed trailing behind: giving more dough to universities. Does the Vice-Chancellor have any other ideas? Yes. He tells us: 'Beyond the economic benefit that individuals enjoy as a result of higher education is the ability to follow their dreams and make a difference. Of the last 10 Australians of the Year, for example, six have completed PhDs' (Byrne, 2010, p.21).

What education nightmares will weigh on the brains of Australians fifty years hence? We can be pretty sure our successors will be tossing in institutional hulks and twisting to free themselves from chains that our generation and the one before have forged for their captivity. We are saddled with the belief that the 'investment return' of education is all that matters; and with the commodification of education. So far has this gone that advertising hype is the staple of public utter-

ance. Courses of study are products made in factories and sold by the gross. Phoney surveys – ranked in the top one hundred universities in the world, voted the best Business School in the Southern Hemisphere – are used to show that the goods are worthy of purchase.

Simon Marginson and Mark Considine say in the concluding chapter of their book, *The Enterprise University*, that:

It is, to say the least, ironic that an era in which the 'client' and 'customer' have been foregrounded, and universities are more open to the external world than before, their larger purposes have been obscured. There is a corrosive tendency to treat these larger purposes merely as feints or marketing ploys. In the long term this might fatally undermine public support and public investment in the university (2000, p.243).

If 'ironic' is the least that can be said about it then what would be to say the most? It's downright tragic that puff substitutes for making plain that the high intellectual demands of courses are their attraction. Instead, staff are induced, on pain of retrenchment, to offer stuff that will garner high enrolments. As a letter writer to *The Times Literary Supplement* rhetorically put it: 'Are we going to allow market forces to determine the nature of British Universities in the twenty-first century?' (Josipovici, 2010, p.6). I fear the answer, there and here, is 'yes'; and, increasingly, labourers in the vineyard of higher education are treated (in the ironic coinage of a former boss of one of us many years ago) as 'academic peons'.

We've come to think that the growth of managerial imperatives and the decline of academic collectives can be laid at the door of Dawkins. His policy led to the appearance of very large, multi-purpose, multi-campus universities that of necessity are organised and managed in ways that emphasise executive control and decision-making; that require the designation of performance measures and targets; and that conceive mission statements in the manner espoused by public relations advisers. Also, it is paradoxical to have a federal government promoting the goal of diversity in higher education when its own emphasis is on devising and applying uniform policies and practices. Another paradox undermines the advocacy of Marginson and Considine for what they call 'changed forms of governance, including a national policy that [amongst other things] discourages conformism ...' (2000, p. 19). This is to look to the very instrument of conformism, central power, for remedy.

As mentioned earlier, the Bradley Report maintains the equal value of higher education and vocational education and training while holding fast to sectoral differences, just as Martin did so long ago with his university and college of advanced education sectors. On one version of the future, these sectors will converge and perhaps combine to form a unitary system. It is a possibility explored by Leesa Wheelahan in a significant recent paper (2010). If there is a repeat performance of a binary system then there could well be a repeat performance of a Unified National System, leading to the full consolidation of TAFE institutions in fully multi-purpose universities. Where is the next John Dawkins?

We could be looking twenty-five years ahead for this to happen; and the result would be an even smaller number of even larger universities. Even if it came to pass, we think there are signs of a countervailing tendency whose slow motion over fifty years could lead to a quite different arrangement. We reckon big institutions will collapse under their own weight. In their place will be a large number of free-standing colleges and schools, each with a subject focus. Research will be further concentrated in show-piece centres and arms-length institutes. There will come to be as many academies, public and private, as there now are secondary schools.

What about the capital invested in large institutions? Their buildings are ripe for unit redevelopment – think of all the high-rise flats to be put into the Menzies building at Monash University. Selected bits of the real estate will be fenced off and put to continued educational use but most academies will be located hither and yon, for we will come to see the virtue of disaggregating and dispersing portions of the education behemoths. Many of the new small places will enter joint servicing agreements and other forms of partnership, securing for them what Arnold Bennett called the 'mutual independence as regards wardrobes' enjoyed by the two young heroines in his novel, *The Old Wives' Tale*, who had one each in their shared room above the family's drapery shop in Bursley (1938, p. 27).

We don't know what will happen about the education of educators. The intellectual worth of current programs is at best derivative and more often bankrupt, reminding us of a comment about the transfer of teacher training (yes, it was called 'training') from colleges to universities in England in the 1960s: 'Unseemly haste to be the first with the B. Ed. Degree drew, in one place, the melancholy reproof, "We have made our B. Ed. and now we must lie about it"' (Dundonald,

1968, p. 124, f. n. 1). Those who would be teachers deserve better preparation than they now obtain and better students have to be attracted to teaching. We are inclined to think these ends are best served by doing away with Faculties of Education and by assigning the education of teachers to subject schools in the Arts, Humanities and Sciences.

Needless to say, what might happen in education is derived from our views about the future conduct, or misconduct, of capitalism and about the fate of nation states. We are attracted by the ideas of Zygmunt Bauman in his *Does Ethics have a Chance in a World of Consumers?* (2008). He says that shifts towards the disaggregation and dispersion of central authority are in train, and that fluidity and collectivity are becoming characteristic of social exchange. It is the beginning of the era of the 'liquid modern'.

That is an optimistic prediction but maybe tomorrow will see us further along a downhill slope. Twenty-five years after his *Brave New World* appeared, Aldous Huxley wrote: 'The most distressing thing that can happen to a prophet is to be proved wrong; the next most distressing thing is to be proved right' (1959, p.230). Huxley's distress was double-edged because he reckoned some things were turning out to be worse than, and others were just as bad as he projected. His dystopia did not go far enough.

We are about to leave you, dear brethren, with words taken from that eminent economist mentioned earlier. 'It is the same with human history as with palaeontology', he writes to 'Dear Fred', his main collaborator. 'Even the best of minds fail to see – on principle, owing to a certain judicial blindness – things that lie in front of their noses. Later, when the moment has arrived, one is surprised to find traces everywhere of what one has failed to see ... Then they are surprised to find what is newest is what is oldest ...' (Marx, 1975, p. 189).

What is in front of our noses? A not so imperceptible shift of sands below our social and economic order; intimations of the emergence of different world views, of other ways of imagining ourselves in the world; and education will have its part in unmaking the old and making the new.

**Arthur O'Neill is a pensioner and Bob Speechley is Honorary Fellow at the Australia Centre, University of Melbourne.**

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