

## book review

Peter Coaldrake and Lawrence Stedman, *On the Brink. Australia's Universities Confronting Their Future*, UQP, Brisbane, 1998, 234 pp

by Don Aitkin, Vice-Chancellor, University of Canberra

There are not a lot of books on the Australian higher education system, and fewer still which engage in the kind of critique which Coaldrake and Stedman engage in. Those who believe that the system used to be just right and was spoiled by all the things that John Dawkins did will get little comfort from it.

Actually, few people will get any comfort from it, because the authors believe that the universities of our country are beset with problems, and that by and large they lack the will and the self-confidence to tackle them effectively. The world in which universities operate is changing rapidly, but they are not. The last paragraph of the book sums it up:

Universities, to many the embodiment of conservatism and inertia, have only one choice in the face of this new environment. They can redefine themselves to operate successfully at the forefront of change, or they can remain as they are, and be overwhelmed.

This is pretty tough stuff, and a lot of people would agree with it. I am rather more confident, partly because I come from a university which has redefined itself pretty successfully (so do they — why are they so gloomy?), and I can see a great purpose for the redefined university in the new century.

But universities do face a fundamental problem. They are by and large creations of a period when public funding was the normal form of financing, and when public money was relatively plentiful. That is not our present case, and there seems no prospect of a return to it. Modern Australians have shown no enthusiasm for a high-taxation regime, and neither side of politics is proposing one.

Without the real possibility of increased public expenditure, those who call for more money to be spent on higher education are in effect asking governments to change their priorities, and to transfer money from other people's activities to ours. Only governments can set priorities, and neither side of politics has given much indication that is going to follow our advice. Indeed, there seems every reason to believe that higher education, for the next few years at least, has had about as much of the sugar stick politicians are prepared to give it.

So what should universities do, given all this? Much of what they actually do is to complain, to say that fundamental principles are at stake, and to resist change. There is not much confident, forward-looking talk coming out of the universities, though there is in fact quite a lot of interesting, forward-looking and energetic action.

Peter Coaldrake is not only a Deputy Vice-Chancellor but a member of the former Hoare Committee, which looked at questions of university

governance and management a few years ago, and one can detect a certain weariness in the book about the preparedness of universities to change what they do to fit what is possible. Having had comparable experiences, I can sympathise; it was plain fifteen years ago that continuous increases in public funding for research were going to be harder and harder to achieve, but it was very difficult indeed to get the university research community to come to terms with that change. Again, the characteristic response was complaint, and a search for scapegoats.

In four substantial chapters — on teaching, research, management and funding — the authors set out what they think the dilemmas are, and what universities might do about them. The book begins with two chapters on ‘the purpose of a university’ (a phrase that I have very little liking for — universities have and seem always to have had, multiple purposes) and what they call the current ‘identity crisis’ of the universities.

Every chapter is a good read, is well argued, and well supported. Yet every reader is likely to find something to disagree with, or to feel that this or that point could have been done differently. For example, I don’t think that the authors ever really come to grips with just how much research needs to be done, or by whom, or under what conditions, or with what funding, and they don’t seem sure whether or not there really is an inextricable link between teaching and research. These are, to be sure, difficult and fundamental questions, and they produce part of the incessant noise in the system as funding for the university’s core activities becomes scarcer.

I enjoyed the book, and hope that it has a wide readership. But I think it might have had a more confident finish. Are our universities really on the brink? I don’t think so. Universities all have a certain amount of historical baggage, and academics are not used to examining their own places of work with the same intensity as they conduct their own research, a point made by A. P. Rowe, a departing Vice-Chancellor of the University of Adelaide, nearly forty years ago.

But universities do change. What we have today are not universities exactly in the mould of the 1980s, let alone of the 1960s, and there are newer and younger members of staff who see the future without the blinkers of the past. The tasks for us are immense, and we are central to humanity’s survival in the 21st century, to put it bluntly. What is coming is a new appraisal of the role of knowledge in our society, and it is hard to see the university being other than the instrument of knowledge acquisition and application, on an immense scale. It won’t and shouldn’t have a monopoly, and staff will do new things, as well as teach. And they will teach in new ways, and overseas, as well as in more traditional styles.

For all that to become widely accepted will require the sort of rethinking that Coaldrake and Stedman argue for. The good news is that it is already happening.