

[for Jane Richardson, *HES*]

## Book Review

by Don Aitkin

Sohail Inayatullah and Jennifer Gidley (eds), *The University in Transformation. Global Perspectives on the Futures of the University*, Bergin and Harvey, Westport, 2000, viii + 270

Ray King, Doug Hill and Brian Hemmings (eds), *University and Diversity. Changing Perspectives, Policies and Practices in Australia*, Keon, Wagga Wagga, 2000, vi + 223

Peter G. Taylor, *Making Sense of Academic Life. Academics, Universities and Change*, SRHE and Open University Press, Buckingham, 1999, 10 + 167

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Some years ago I wrote a paper about the development of higher education in Australia. It was hard work, because almost nothing had been written about it. That is no longer the case. There have been some books and theses, plenty of articles and papers, even a couple of journals. There is now a field of enquiry, and some excellent gardeners.

In the last twelve months, however, there has been a noticeable shift in emphasis as well as in production. First, Tony Coady's *Why Universities Matter*, an angry denunciation of those seen as having perverted the true university. Now, three more books, all of them devoted to the sweeping changes that are passing across the higher education landscape.

The titles and sub-titles of the books under review just about say it all. Universities throughout the world are going through a profound series of changes. As they do there is a pervasive sense of unease on the part of academics about what the academic life is and should be, while old assumptions about access and equity for students are being challenged. All three books have a good deal of Australia in them, and each would have benefited, I think, from more direct comparison and reflection with what is occurring and has occurred elsewhere.

The book I found most useful is Taylor's, which is a guide to the new academic career, thoughtful, well written, sensible and well informed. The tone is cool but sympathetic. Taylor understands what is happening not simply to our universities, and he offers much good advice to those who are contemplating an academic career as well as to those who are worried about what they see as the loss of the point and value of their own.

Like Taylor I see universities as always changing and good at change. He says that it is hard to think of a profession better placed than academia to respond to

change or to develop work practices which adapt well to change. I agree with him also that the future for universities is not a return to some pleasant past, but more change, more ambiguity, more uncertainty.

And both of us are optimists. The change in funding is forcing us all to look harder at how we teach, and what we are trying to achieve. It has always been paradoxical (and hard to defend to critics) that we have not regarded excellence in teaching as important as excellence in scholarship, although the underlying reason is straightforward enough. But the last few years have provided evidence that it is possible to provide a vastly better experience for students if we think hard about what we are doing. Taylor is knowledgeable and encouraging here, and I hope that many old and new academic staff read his book and reflect on its argument.

Taylor's book, though published in England, is based largely on an Evaluations and Investigations Project funded by DETYA. If only they were all as good as this one!

There is some optimism also in the King, Hill and Hemmings collection, and since all three editors/ authors have a place at Charles Sturt University, and CSU has done well in some aspects of change, the optimism is understandable. But the niggling doubts come through in chapter after chapter. We used to have a more confident and inclusive attitude to late developers, to those with non-English-speaking backgrounds, to indigenous students, to students who need support of one kind or another. Are we losing the social goals of education in the rush to secure the financial bottom line? Along with authors' optimism comes a tone of worry about that possibility, which on the whole I share. No one may be intending it, but we seem to be moving on the path to a more elitist society, with access to higher education now restricting opportunity for advancement, rather than widening it.

The Inayatullah and Gidley collection, the most handsome of these books in production terms, is also the most complex. On the plus side, the authors are drawn from several countries, they have thought through where universities have been and where they are going, and examples are drawn from everywhere, not just from Australia. But I found myself quarrelling with the book from the beginning.

First, some of the chapters are self-indulgent in their use of big or new words for old thoughts — 'nomocratic', 'episteme', 'mythos', and the like; the book would have been a lot better without them. Second, as a book it is a collection of short, assertive chapters without much argument or data. Third, there's a bit too much inward group referencing for my liking; although a disparate group, the authors certainly seem to have read one another's work. Fourth, there is an almost uniform tone of worry: we are going to experience staggering and unwelcome changes to higher education. The gloom is eventually quite off-putting. They should all read Taylor for another perspective.

For all my criticism, it's not a book to be dismissed. We are indeed going through a period of powerful transformation, and the authors have a far deeper understanding of the process than most of those who write about higher education change in Australia. In the last ten years there has been at least a doubling of higher education enrolments in almost every country in the world. But in only two countries, Norway and Singapore, has public funding kept pace with the increase.

If we want to understand our situation in Australia we need to start from that datum. It comes, incidentally, not from this book but from the Illinois people who monitor changes to higher education around the world. One consequence of that major shift (and this is, indeed, one of the few pieces of useful data in the book), is that the University of California system, for so many people the exemplar of how to finance and manage fine universities, now receives only 23 per cent of its revenue from the State of California. And what were formerly called 'state supported' universities in the USA are now being called 'state assisted' universities. We are going to have a mix of public and private funding in Australia, whatever we in universities think about it. What is the right mix?

I remain optimistic about the future of higher education in Australia as elsewhere. And I am also conscious that in the 47 years since I enrolled as an undergraduate there have been enormous changes, most of them, in my opinion, for the better. To regard what is presently happening to universities in Australia as simply the work of misguided politicians or managers is abysmally parochial stuff.

If you look at the outcomes, higher education is the bedrock of 21<sup>st</sup> century civilisation. We are shaping that civilisation, because it is our job to do so. Let us do it well, and with confidence, and without lament for some fantasised past or impossible future.