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Australia's Experiment with Quality Assurance

by

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I write at a time when, for the first time, the Commonwealth Government is considering making substantial cuts to the operating grants of Australia's universities. One cut which is already plain, since it could be inferred from the Government's election policy document on higher education, is in the field of quality assurance in higher education.

Australia went down the quality track in 1992, when Peter Baldwin, the Minister for Higher Education at the time, secured some \$70 million for each of the next three years from his somewhat reluctant Cabinet colleagues to be spent on quality enhancement in higher education. This was not what the universities wanted; they had been seeking higher funding per student, on the ground that Commonwealth support for higher education, measured on that basis, had fallen in the past decade and needed restoration. Peter Baldwin's unexpected coup caught Vice-Chancellors in particular by surprise.

How would the 'quality money', as it was ever afterwards called, be distributed? It did not take the Australian Vice-Chancellors Committee (AVCC) long to decide that the allocation should be in the hands of the universities rather than of the Government, even if it meant that university independence was somehow compromised — better that than a tribe of government inspectors poking around! No doubt the Commonwealth Government saw that outcome with equanimity, since it did not have the staff or the expertise to do the job itself.

The result was a Committee for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (CQAHE). Since the acronym which could not be pronounced felicitously, the committee was usually referred to as 'the Quality Committee' or sometimes, after its Chair, 'the Wilson Committee'. Brian Wilson was the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Queensland, a former President of the AVCC and man widely regarded as straightforward and honourable. It was not a task that he accepted with any enthusiasm. His Committee colleagues were academics with some claim to knowledge in the field of quality assurance plus people from outside the higher education sector with comparable experience. The Committee had a tiny staff from within the Department of Employment, Education and Training (DEET) supplemented from the universities themselves during the period of university visits.

The work of the Committee began before there had been any substantial discussion of what the Committee was expected to do, or what the expected outcomes were. Moreover, early in 1993 Peter Baldwin was promoted to a senior Ministry and was replaced by Kim Beazley, who had rather different expectations of the outcome. Baldwin had not wanted an explicit ranking of universities; Beazley did. It can safely be said that no vice-chancellor wanted a

ranking outcome if the result were to place his/her own university in other than the first rank. Beyond that there was not much agreement.

So the Committee began its first round in 1993 without any clear sense on the part of the universities about what would be wanted, other than the knowledge that the Committee would be considering each university as a whole, with perhaps a small emphasis on research performance. Would the Committee be looking at processes or results? If at both, in what proportion? Would proper attention be paid to what each university was trying to do? How would the allocation of money be related to the Committee's findings? Would one outcome be a set of ranks or grades? Nervousness abounded, and was not eased by the Minister's remark that he thought all the money should go to the top half and none should go to the bottom half. Since 19 of the 36 universities in the 'Unified National System' produced by the changes of 1988 were those who traced their ancestry, at least in large part, to things called 'universities' there was an understandable anticipation that all of them would be found in the top half.

By the time the Committee reported on its first round there had been another Ministerial change, with Kim Beazley (promoted to Finance) replaced by Simon Crean. The new Minister was happy to accept the Committee's findings, whatever they were, and had no fixed views of his own about quality in universities. The result was a bit of a muddle. All Australian universities were pronounced to be excellent, but there were six ranks of excellence, perhaps from 'really and truly excellent' to 'decently excellent, all things considered'. The older universities were mostly to be found in the top ranks, but not all were, and there were a few surprising judgments of relative order. The money was to go mostly to the excellent and all of it was to support excellence, not to repair deficiencies.

In the week following the publication of the Committee's report there was a great deal of expressed outrage, an emotion plentifully evident in universities at any time. The Committee and its Chair played a straight bat and dodged most of the bouncers, confining itself to occasional mutters of pain and regret.

Round Two was to focus on teaching, an area in which the newer creations expected to do rather better. The Committee made a few changes, while the new Minister made clear that he saw no need for the ranking system for Round Two to be the same as that for Round One. By now universities were learning the game. The more successful of the participants in Round One had their submissions studied in the spirit of true scholarship, people who had been attached to the Committee found themselves unexpectedly popular as invited visitors to other universities, and those who were responsible for university submissions tried their hands at such theatrical activities as casting, script conferences and dress rehearsals. The Committee, for its part, tried to even things out by letting it be known that it was awake to ploys of this kind and would discount for them.

The outcome of Round Two made it abundantly plain that the Committee was no better able to decide what good teaching was than was anyone else. Inevitably, perhaps, it concentrated on quality assurance policies, which produced results pleasing to the older creations but hard to swallow as a statement of excellence in practice. Universities which had strong research

cultures but long-established centres intended to support good teaching (which staff avoided if only because of the implied suggestion that any visitor was a lousy teacher) came out trumps, while the newer universities, many of which had in fact concentrated on teaching because they were not funded for research, once again found themselves towards the bottom of the pile. But the ranking system was in fact a new one, and the allocation of money was much more even. There was less furious complaint.

Round Three focused on research and 'community links', and by now those universities which saw their standing as related to the annual quality exercise put even more effort into their submission, their data and their performance on the day. The Committee, stung perhaps by the criticisms of Round Two, set out a matrix which showed how much attention it would place on policies, management and outcomes in each of research and community links. Its findings were once again a mixture of the predictable and the unexpected, and its allocation of funds was even closer to one based simply on the size of the operating grant. Brian Wilson, his task completed, went off thankfully to retirement.

The election of a new Government seems to have brought to an end the notion of an annual quality exercise, and for a few months even put into doubt the universities' receipt of the proceeds of Round Three. After three years the universities had dropped much of their opposition to the inquisition on quality, and there was little doubt that one excellent outcome had been much greater attention to quality issues, especially in teaching. A couple more rounds, one devoted to management and one to information technology, might have been a good thing. As for rankings, no-one can now remember what those of Rounds One and Two were for any university other than one's own, and Round Three's pecking order is fast disappearing from the memory. The universities have survived being ranked.

A commonsense appraisal might be that Australian universities are pretty good in comparison with any other national set of universities, that each of them has some areas that are outstanding, and that each of them has areas that could do with improvement. The Quality Committee actually said something very like that after Round One. It's probably fair to say that the Committee's work has in fact improved the universities' quality, and for a much longer time span than the three years of the Committee's existence. It would be hard not to give its own work the grade of 'Effective'.

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