

Higher Education — Where to From Here?

'Crisis' is a much abused word. Its root is the Greek word for 'decide'. In pathology, it is that point in the progress of a disease when a patient will either recover or die. More loosely, it is the word we use to refer to a turning point in the progress of anything.

I try to avoid it. But today it can be used properly about the condition of our universities. We are at a turning point. Quite simply, there is not enough money to do what has to be done and to maintain standards. If this condition continues, then standards will slip or the system will become smaller. Since we are not allowed to reduce our undergraduate numbers, without more money the quality of undergraduate education must go down. That will affect the quality of Australian life, for everyone.

I do not say these things often, because I have learned that no-one in government is listening, and that no-one else outside universities seems to care. The public side of Australian life has taken a fearful battering in the past decade, and much of what I am saying has been said by people in other walks of life. No-one in government was listening then, either, and again, there was no great answering response from the people.

The reason for my talking like this today is that in the past few weeks we have been able to read the report of the West Committee, the response to it of the Minister, Dr Kemp, and Dr Kemp's own 'solution' to what he sees as the 'problem'. In all three contributions, the problem of inadequate money is simply pushed aside.

The West Committee's Report has a lot to commend it. It looks ahead to an Australia of well-educated citizens, all of whom have had substantial experience in post-secondary education. It recognises that human beings are by nature intelligent, and that they can all benefit from continuous, life-long, education. It recognises that we waste a lot of money by not giving our research endeavours some elementary priority. It even says that the Government must allocate appropriate money to these goals.

But the Committee doesn't suggest how that should be done. Should the Government raise more public revenue for these needs? Should it reduce expenditures elsewhere and divert funds to higher education? The Report is silent on all of this. But it devotes an inordinate amount of the Report to schemes for extracting more money from students, and for changing the way existing public money is spent!

The goals of the West Report are admirable, but its mechanisms do not advance its goals. The more we look to students to pay for their higher education, the smaller the number of students we will have. If we want an educated Australia, we the Australian community will have to pay for it, just as we pay to ensure that virtually all those who want to continue with secondary education can do so, and that all can complete primary education. It has to be a social responsibility. It is as simple as that.

Dr Kemp received the Report with applause, claimed that he had much the same goals as the West Committee, added that he wouldn't be introducing vouchers or other forms of 'student centred' financial provision, and said nothing about where the money to advance the West Review goals would be coming from. It is plainly not coming from the public purse. Indeed, at the moment it is not coming at all.

A word more on money. For the year ended 30 June 1997, the Commonwealth Government spent a total of \$166 billion, of which education — schools, TAFE, universities and student assistance — made up a little less than \$11 billion, and universities not quite \$4.8 billion. So universities represent about 2.9% and universities + student assistance of all kinds just 4.0% of all outlays. These are not dramatically high proportions of Commonwealth expenditure.

What is more, Australia and the USA generate the smallest proportions of public expenditure of all the OECD countries except two — Japan and Turkey. Our problem is not that we are strapped beyond endurance as a country. It is that we are a selfish lot, and do not contribute enough to the public good. Virtually all developed countries do better than we do in this respect.

Now Dr Kemp didn't think that this is the problem. He has found another one altogether: the need to demonstrate universities' accountability and to validate Australian degrees internationally. And he proposes to do it by having all graduates sit a common externally developed and graded test.

If he wanted to take attention off the West Report he has certainly succeeded. I can't speak for the whole system, but I would have thought the accountability of universities was clear enough in what happened to their graduates. Internationally, our best graduates are accepted into the world's best-known universities without question.

At home, our graduates have employment rates far higher than those of the rest of the population. (In some fields, the whole graduating class from my own University becomes employed, and many of them are hired in advance of graduation.) What is more, and my discussions on this point include members of the Business Council of Australia as well as Canberra employers, the graduates of Australian universities are highly regarded in terms both of their knowledge and of their personal qualities.

Universities have had quality reviews over the past few years, and have established quality processes by the score. Where is the problem?

The notion of a common test as a solution to this vague problem which makes one shake one's head in wonderment. First, to my knowledge no country uses such a test as an exit validation. Second, it is simply not possible to design a test which will fairly examine both a graduate in music, say, and a graduate in medicine. Third, if by some strange mischance such a test were indeed put in place and made compulsory (what Soviet-style country are we talking about?), then all universities would teach their students how to perform well in such tests.

The test is a non-solution to a non-problem, and its function seems little more than a distraction. The truth is: there isn't enough money today for universities to pay their staff properly, teach their students properly, maintain their buildings properly, and develop future courses properly. If Australia does want a highly educated society, which both the Minister and the West Committee say is desirable (I think it is essential, if we are to handle the problems of the 21st century) then somehow or other the necessary public finance has to be found for it. Yes, that will require some political leadership.

Over to you, Dr Kemp and Mr Latham!

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