

draft

Submission to the Higher Education Review Committee

by Professor Don Aitkin

Vice-Chancellor, University of Canberra

The challenge for the Committee is to prepare a comprehensive critique of the Australian higher education system in its global context, with attention to historical trends and future possibilities.

This is no small task. An enormous amount has been written just in Australia about the subject of the review in the the last ten years, and the Committee will be able to consult more than a dozen important reports that bear on its task. In every university, Australia's academics and some of their students have been arguing about the Committee's concerns since at least the early 1980s. In my own University's case the issues set out in the eleven dot-points of the 'Scope of the Review' can be seen in our strategic planning papers, our quality submissions, our profile documents, our own faculty reviews and the Vice-Chancellor's regular addresses to his staff!

There is abundant discussion about the issues in Australian higher education, but not universal agreement. The issues are complex, and priorities vary from place to place and time to time. It seems to me most important that before the Committee begins to evaluate what has already been said in existing reports, let alone what the submissions will provide, its members discuss their own assumptions and perspectives on the realm that they are inspecting. Four such assumptions seem especially important to me, because they underpin judgments about what is good and bad, sensible or misconceived, practical or unworkable. I offer my own position on each.

1. *What is the distribution of intelligence?*

When I was first an undergraduate in 1954 I learned in Psychology I that only a small proportion of the population was 'intelligent', defined in terms of intelligence tests. Fortunately for our self-esteem, we learned also that university students and staff were part of the small proportion.

Today's universities accept and graduate about twenty times the proportion which went to university in the 1950s, and some students who had inadequate school education have done very well at univesity. Equally, high performers at school are by no means universally high performers at university or successful in life.

Although the old assumption still seems to be widely shared, there is now abundant evidence that there is a lot wrong with the notion of a single attribute called 'intelligence'. It seems not only that there are many kinds of 'intelligence', but also that possession of one kind guarantees neither possession of the others nor high performance at school or university. There is also an important emotional dimension, sometimes called 'emotional intelligence', which is also plainly involved in success at study and in life generally. My own summary, after more than forty years in higher

education, is that whatever 'intelligence' is, motivation and preparation are no less important in determining outcomes at university. There are indeed people with great natural gifts, but not, in my experience, many of them. But all of us, as well as the gifted, are capable of considerable development. The quality of Australian life is a consequence, in large part, of our having educated — developed — large proportions of our population. I can see no good reason why higher education should not be the ordinary expectation of every Australian given, once again, appropriate motivation and preparation.

2. *What is the essence of a university?*

There is a common assumption that there is a ideal or essential university from which most universities (the speaker's own university is often exempt from such strictures) are unfortunate departures. One reason that there is such an assumption is that universities are long-lived human institutions which stay in the one place. It is tempting to see in Oxford or Harvard, for example, the *continuity* of the university. But anyone who has studied the history of Oxford knows that it has gone through many important changes, and that in many respects it is quite unlike the Oxford University of 150 years ago. The same is true of Australia's older universities, and what is taught in them, and to whom.

Many people are unaware that, for example, English literature is a relatively recent university subject, that laboratory-based science teaching is hardly a hundred years old, that the social sciences are not much older, that what we call 'research' is a postwar development, and so on. The rights of staff and students, what counts as 'learning', the autonomy of the university as against the State, how the university obtains its funds, how the university is structured, the role (or even the existence) of a vice-chancellor or other chief executive officer — all these matters have been subject to great change over time. It may well be true that universities have survived because of their capacity to change and thereby remain relevant to the needs of society.

If there is a core or *sine qua non* that applies to the university it can only be the existence of a body of students seeking knowledge from a group of academics who themselves feel the need to keep learning. I am prepared to be told of exceptions even to such a rule as this.

It is plain also that the modern university is an immensely important knowledge resource for its community. Communities which lack universities are impoverished compared with those that possess them. Much the same can be said of regions and nations themselves. Countries like Thailand which are putting great resources into their universities are doing so because their plans for modernisation make essential the existence of universities which can provide a population possessing knowledge-based skills.

3. *Is education distinct from training?*

Assumptions about 'education' are connected to assumptions about the 'proper' role of the university, and they lead also to assumptions about the distinction between the activities of 'teaching' and 'learning'.

I find these distinctions implausible in principle and unhelpful in practice. My own development as an academic seems in retrospect to have been a continuing mixture of 'finding out' and learning how to do something, often by being shown by somebody else. What I know of the development of other professionals suggests that such a mixture is common. Of course, some subjects have more of finding out and less of learning how to do something, while the inter-relationship between these two activities is subtle, and varies a great deal from subject to subject and from moment to moment in each course.

In any case, it seems pretty clear to me that universities have done both throughout much or most of their existence. Medicine is both knowledge-based and skills-based, and it is hard to think of any profession whose preparation occurs in university about which this could not be said. In each of those known to me (28 in my own university) there is a continuing debate about, for example, how and where to introduce or enhance moral or philosophical issues in the course. I find it hard to imagine that it could be otherwise.

4. Is the modern university much more than an element in the production of an appropriately skilled workforce?

This is an easy assumption to criticise, but in fact I share the notion that universities serve an important social function, and that it is because they do serve that function they are entitled to a share of public financial support. More, I do think that universities ought to be helping to produce an appropriately skilled workforce, and that if they are not doing so something is wrong.

But of course there is more than that at stake, and not simply the value of knowledge for its own sake or the great advantage for any community of having a university within it. Here I cannot help an apocalyptic tone. It seems to me that humanity may have only two generations left in which to sort out how to modify the impact of the human species on the planet. If it does not learn how to do that then the world is likely to experience a catastrophe even more severe than that which followed the collapse of the Roman empire. In comparison to 1500 years ago we do know in some detail what is happening, and we know also at least some of what needs to be done. Moreover, we understand that where we do not know something we can set about finding out.

The principal institution in humanity's race to save itself, if we set aside enlightened governments, is the modern university. Australia has enough of them, and they are good enough, to undertake that part of the task which is our responsibility. For as Australians we have a responsibility to look after ourselves as well as to contribute to the general care of humanity. I do not know of any other long-term national goal which is as important. I do not see that goal set out explicitly in the terms of reference or in the scope of the review. But I hope that you will see that no report on this subject which ignores the predicament of the human race at the end of the 20th century can be of use to our country.

Reasonable people can disagree about the assumptions which they possess. My hope is that the members of the Committee will see that it is important to start a task like theirs by making clear to one another, as the contemporary saying has it, where they are coming from. I would be very happy to amplify what I have written, either in writing or in discussion.

24 February 1997