

Higher education: Who gets to define the direction now?

JOHN Dawkins, Federal Minister for Education, Employment and Training, has initiated a major inquiry into higher education. The thinking behind this inquiry is that higher education should be made more relevant to the economy.

The danger is that pressure for immediate relevance will be at the expense of the valuable critical function of higher education in society. The dangers can be illustrated by a bit of history.

A few hundred years ago, education systems were controlled by churches to produce clerics, as in England, or sometimes directly by governments to produce bureaucrats, as in Russia. As education expanded and became more important in society, various competing interest groups became dissatisfied with education controlled by a special group. For example, neither industrialists nor governments were well served by church-based education.

The struggle for control ended up with education funded by government. In some countries, such as France and the Soviet Union, there is central government control over education. These highly inflexible systems are subject to occasional massive challenges as grievances mount with no easy outlet. The French student protest in 1968 almost led to the toppling of the Government.

In other countries such as Denmark and England (and its colonies) a more decentralised education system resulted. Various groups can influence educational policy: industry, professions, teachers, churches, parents and governments. Other groups have little influence, such as the poor and ethnic minorities. Change is not easy but it is seldom catastrophic. This is because it results from several competing groups, often with different aims.

In Australia, different parts of the higher education system serve different groups.

The question is not whether higher education should be relevant; it already is relevant. The question is, which groups and which purposes should it be relevant to?

History suggests that the larger danger is to be tied too tightly to the goals of powerful groups — especially government itself. Only by being significantly independent can higher education protect freedom and diversity.

In the 1930s in Germany, the Nazis tried to get the universities to help them by doing research to aid the economy and the military. Most of the academics and scientists did as they were told. Joseph Haberer, who studied the capitulation of the German scientists, called this 'prudential acquiescence.' Another phrase would be 'serving those who have the power and money.' Unfortunately, scholars did not lead the resistance against the Nazis.

A healthy democracy will have vigorous debates about ideas and policies. Higher education can contribute to this, and can even help protect freedom. But this is only likely if universities are not too tightly tied to governments.

Australian academics, arguably, are more inclined to 'prudential acquiescence' than courageous dissent. In

The Federal Government wants higher education be 'more relevant to the economy'. Yet the phrase hides a bevy of traps for knowledge and independence in society according to DR BRIAN MARTIN*.

Queensland over the past two decades the State Government has curtailed civil liberties such as free speech and assembly. While a few academics have openly opposed this, the universities as a whole have provided almost no resistance.

The government wants higher education to be more attuned to government defined priorities. I argue that Australia would be better off if academics were more independent and critical than they are at the moment.

One reason for Australia's lagging industrial productivity is, arguably, that workers are not involved in decision-making. In Japan for example, worker suggestions are regularly incorporated in production processes. Proponents of industrial democracy in Australia — including many academics — raised these issues years, indeed decades ago. They were ignored and sometimes derided. Australia is paying the penalty today.

In many other current areas, such as computers and privacy, equality for women, genetic engineering, military and foreign policy, occupational structures, environment and jobs, there is a need for more discussion and more debate. Academics need to become more active in public controversy, not more attuned to the Government's current perception of what is good for the economy.

The drive to make higher education more relevant to the economy assumes that we know what path to take and just need to go down it faster. This is a dangerous illusion. Rather than making higher education more responsive to government-defined goals, it should be made more open to serve a variety of interest groups.

One promising development is the "science shop". Science shops have been established in the Netherlands and some other European countries. Groups without funds or relevant personnel, such as community welfare groups or trade unions, can approach the shop with problems involving science, such as evaluating chemicals or new technologies. The shops then try to find scientists at the local university to work on a suitable research project.

Higher education is concerned with producing knowledge and making it available to others via teaching and writing. Knowledge should not be a commodity designed only for those with the most power and money. Rather than serving just some groups, in a democracy higher education should become much more of a knowledge shop for the whole community.

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