

Academic Accountability

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Employment, Education and Training Minister, John Dawkins, is not alone in his concern about Australian Universities; the academics themselves need little prompting to tell of waste, sloppiness and irrelevance. However, the remedy proposed by the, in some circles, infamous Green Paper might be worse than the disease.

The Green Paper, which was written by academics, is itself an example of much that is wrong with academia. The paper is a political document, written to appease competing interests, and, like all such documents is driven into ambiguities and contradiction. For instance, it promises autonomy to the institutions but proposes measures which will give Canberra-based bureaucrats even more effective control over enrollments and "education profiles". The very existence of the document implies that "he who pays the piper has a responsibility to call the tune", but it does not say so plainly. The authors believe in academic freedom, but do not tell us plainly what academic freedom is and what aspects of it most need to be preserved. The conflict between academic freedom and taxpayer accountability intrudes into every chapter but is nowhere squarely faced.

Universities are an integral and significant part of the economy producing intellectual capital and tying up resources. Skilled graduates and knowledge raise overall productivity, and through the tax and budget system they draw resources away from industry, welfare and other ends. Within the institutions it matters whether finite resources are allocated to applied women's studies, ancient history or mechanical engineering, but there are no *a priori* criteria by which Mr Dawkins and his minions can choose, yet the Minister cannot afford to leave the choice to unaccountable institutions and those academics who speak and behave as though resources were infinite.

An institution, faculty or course contributes to aggregate well-being only to the extent that it uses the resources it commands in ways that produce more valuable products than those resources would otherwise produce. With due respect to the special pleaders on both sides, the truth of this consequence of finite resources is not diminished by the inability of a market, a Canberra bureaucracy or a

University Senate to identify the most valuable production precisely.

The Green Paper calls for forty two per cent more students by 2001, more aborigines, and of course more women. (As women already outnumber men at universities the concern has become "under-representation" in certain faculties.) The numbers of dollars that pass through a university's bank account, and the numbers of students, academics, women and members of racial groups that pass through its portals, are not measures of knowledge discovered or passed on. Lowering entrance or pass standards to accommodate these people prostitutes the institution---as Kingsley Amis said: "more means worse". What is more, encouraging more students and more academics into universities will actually reduce national productivity if the additional people are better suited to other callings.

Perhaps the authors recognise that by increasing university inputs they will not necessarily increase the most appropriate outputs, because the paper proposes to offer assistance to those institutions which "adopt those principles and practices considered to be for the general community good". However, defining output as "the general community good" gets them nowhere unless Canberra bureaucrats can pick winners in terms of the general criterion. Bureaucrats are seldom innovators.

Universities worthy of the name are places of critical enquiry receptive to unfashionable ideas. Without institutional autonomy, which is essentially the right to be different, unfashionable ideas and conceptual mutations will be lucky to find climates to sustain them. Yet the Green Paper actually talks of a unified system of national education.

Admittedly, universities are not to be forced to join the proposed arrangement. However, they will suffer substantial financial penalties if they don't. When faced with a choice between money and principle, Vice Chancellors have been remarkably consistent, so I predict that the Green Paper proposals will give us universities which are as imaginative, colourful, innovative and exciting as the civil service, of which they will, in effect, be part.

Faced with what he believes is a choice between accountability and academic freedom, I think I understand why the Minister has chosen more accountability. There is a general belief, whether justifiable or not, that universities have wasted taxpayers' money to hire some patently Mickey Mouse academics, to teach some Mickey Mouse courses in faculties which are premature retirement villages. Defenders of the institutions point to the majority of courses that are rigorous, but that defence misses the point: because of the way they are funded, the institutions are properly beholden to the taxpayer for every course. The taxpayer and his trustee, the minister, are fed up, and the payer is insisting that the piper play his tune.

The paid academic (or anyone else for that matter) must be held accountable for the value of his salary---only the insufferably arrogant believe otherwise. Academic freedom is best protected by an absence of government regulation and a wide choice of sponsors---the antithesis of what we have now. In such an environment poor intellects, poor ideas, and poor teachers will be employed but they will also be sacked---when paying with their own money people are careful to whom they grant tenure. That tenure will become hard to earn won't matter, however, because people with important contributions to make need to find only one employer among the many. Persecution can take forms not protected by tenure---only a wide choice of institution will protect the odd man out.

Without autonomy, real universities are impossible, and without sources of independent funds, including fee-paying students and business philanthropy, university autonomy is impossible. The market for universities' services will be imperfect and will be improved by scholarships and research subsidies, but a market which makes the providers accountable to many buyers is the only escape from the dilemma posed by the necessity for both accountability and academic freedom.

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