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The era of universal participation in higher education: Australian policy problems in relation to cost, equity and quality

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Belinda Probert was a DVC at both the University of Western Australia and then La Trobe University and in both institutions wrestled with the challenge of how to make good teaching a higher priority for all academic staff. The Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching (OLT) provided an opportunity to subsequently reflect on these experiences, and the rapidly changing context of Australian higher education, in a series of OLT Discussion Papers published between 2013 and 2015. Belinda is currently working on a book chapter evaluating the Abbot/Turnbull government's record in higher education policy (with Sharon Bell).

The move towards universal levels of participation in higher education has been widely welcomed in Australia, as has the focus on improving the participation of under-represented equity groups. Although the challenges posed by universal levels of participation are becoming apparent, they are rarely analysed as a set of interdependent problems that threaten the quality of Australian higher education in the future. This paper uses the work of key thinkers such as Trow, Barnett and Douglass to identify the global structural pressures facing university systems at this time, before proposing some policy options to address the general problems of cost, equity and quality that might be relevant to the Australian context. The paper is addressed not only to policy makers, but to the academic community itself.

The ideas in this paper were originally developed for a presentation at the University of Notre dame Australia Fremantle Campus at a symposium sponsored by WAND - the West Australian Network for Development (established to support Office for Learning and Teaching activities in Western Australia), entitled *Higher education teaching in an era of universal participation: for better and worse?*

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As Australia moves to universal levels of participation in higher education there are a number of system-wide pressures that are likely to have an impact on the quality of that education. The uncapping of student places occurred in a political context where there was a strong focus on equity and access, and much has been written about the challenges presented by cohorts of students who are not well prepared for university study. However, a system of universal participation presents many other challenges, and these need to be studied in a joined-up way if we are to identify the threats it may pose to the quality of higher education, and also the policies that might support and encourage the continuous improvement of higher education as a whole.

Some of the stresses created in the contemporary higher education system are easily visible. Much is being said about the enrolment of students with very low ATAR (Australian Tertiary Admission Rank) scores, and retention has become an important focus of institutional improvement. Less is being said about the threat to institutional survival posed by the intensity of competition for enrolments in the new uncapped higher education market. At the level of workforce pressures, much has been written about the growing reliance on sessional staff to undertake an increasing proportion of undergraduate teaching, especially in first year. Less has been written about the impact of increasingly managerialist and individualist approaches to evaluating teaching performance within a shared higher education culture that still undervalues teaching (Probert 2015).

This paper argues that the move to universal levels of participation is having an impact on the quality of teaching and learning in many different ways, and this is true for every country that has reached this point in the provision of higher education. What is needed is a focus on the way these systemic pressures manifest themselves within Australia's particular structure of higher education.

Universal participation

Martin Trow (2007), perhaps more than anyone, has provided us with a provocative road map to the recent evolution of higher education, and the way different systems of higher education have been able to adapt. His characterization of the move from elite to mass and now universal levels of participation defines the last of these a response to the need ensure 'the whole population' is able to adapt to rapid social and technological change (p. 243). Michael Gallagher (2016) has recently adapted Trow's typology to analyse the assumptions underlying Australian higher education policy from 1945 to now, defining the current period as one of 'open access'. As Trow warned:

In practice...the explosive expansion of higher education over the past two decades has almost everywhere preceded the move toward broad comprehensive secondary education aimed at preparing larger numbers for entry to higher education. (p. 263)

For Gallagher this open access policy is reflected in admissions criteria with an 'emphasis on inclusion of all social groups, and higher education replacing TAFE in compensating for deficiencies' (p. 29). The mission statements of many of Australia's younger universities clearly illustrate this expansive focus. The latest strategic plan for Victoria University (2016) for example, defines the university as one that promotes 'opportunities leading to success for *any student from any background* who wants a tertiary education' (emphasis in the original).

While some observers focus on the radically expanded role of higher education in preparing citizens for a new world of rapid social and technological change, others insist that we need to reconceptualise post-secondary education altogether. As the Bradley reforms began to take shape in 2008, Stephen Parker argued that we should ‘abandon *a priori* distinctions between ‘higher’, ‘vocational’ and ‘training’ (2008, p. 3). Parker argued that the old post-secondary sectors made sense in an earlier era where there were elites, professions, white collar workers, blue collar workers and manual labourers, each relying on quite different kinds of education. However, that era has passed, and even so-called vocational occupations often need ‘high level theoretical understanding and general education’. (p. 4). This is also the major conclusion of a national review of what college education should provide for students in the United States (National Leadership Council for Liberal Education and America’s Promise, 2007).

From this perspective it is important to ask what is ‘higher’ about higher education today (Probert, 2015, pp. 12-17). Parker is skeptical about neat answers, suggesting that while some of what universities teach is indeed at the most advanced level of theory and creativity, some of it is also just new to the student because it is not taught in high school. Much of what is now taught is the product of the professionalization and credentialisation of many occupations over recent decades. And some of it is

teaching how to do things like speak ancient languages, paint or perform, all of which is great for civilization but is neither higher nor lower. The higher education sector, in truth, is a mix of higher, happier, harder and further education. (2008, p. 4)

Sometimes these elements are combined in one area of study where technological change is central, such as programs in new media or gaming. Parker points out that the bachelor’s program curriculum might include globalization and ICT; neurology; software programming; creative writing and product design. So, ‘is it higher education? Is it vocational education? Is it training? Does it matter?’ (2008, p. 5).

In imagining the impact these changes are having on the quality of Australia’s higher education system, it is important to acknowledge the substantial recent achievements of the sector – the platform that exists on which to build a universal system of participation. The fact that Australia appears so strongly in the new global rankings for universities under 50 is a reminder of what can be achieved in an egalitarian system of mass education, despite Trow’s skepticism (2007). Over the last decade policies to raise the profile of teaching have had a major impact, and there is now a generation of genuinely knowledgeable leaders in teaching and learning, active across the sector. Similarly, expertise in technology and learning is widespread. There has been some wider professionalization of higher education teaching, and new academic staff are now expected to undertake preparation and training as teachers (even if the generic approach found in many Graduate Certificates is already looking dated given the very different needs of the increasingly varied cohorts of students across the sector). Institutional academic promotions policies have all been revised to recognize successful teaching, in theory at least.

The political context

Australia’s progress towards universal levels of participation is occurring in a particular structural and political context that closes off some policy options and drives us towards

others. For example, many well-informed observers of secondary education systems would love to see Australia adopt the Finnish approach, but this is incredibly unlikely given our very different social democratic traditions. And while the radical proposal to de-regulate fees and encourage private providers of higher education with access to Commonwealth funded places was rejected by the Senate during the Abbott government, it must be acknowledged that it might well have succeeded. The key elements of neo-liberal ideology – a belief that markets are the best method for delivering services such as education and health, with a large component of user pays – remain central to coalition political philosophy.

With the failure of the Abbot higher education legislation, some in the sector (Davis, 2016) have called for a return to effective regulation with an independent agency providing expert policy advice, along the lines of the Hong Kong University Grants Committee. There is little evidence, however, to suggest that either side of politics is prepared to cede any influence to such a body.

Perhaps the most important lesson to be drawn from this is that the higher education community needs to be far more engaged in the political debate than has been the case in the past. Leaving the stage to Universities Australia is a risky strategy given this peak body has remained quiet about the cutting of all funds to support the improvement of teaching and learning while supporting the de-regulation of fees. Without the assiduous work of the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) and a very small number of senior figures in the sector with the Senate cross benchers, it is entirely possible the Abbott government's legislation would have been passed.

In the latest budget (May 2016), the Turnbull government is diverting funds from the Office for Learning and Teaching to the Department of Education's Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching (QILT). This is to be the mechanism by which students can exert their market preferences for good teaching, despite the absence of any evidence to suggest that they value this more than status and rankings. Both the Coalition and the ALP promise increased investment in the Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency (TEQSA), but there is no enthusiasm for any form of institutional auditing that would hold universities accountable for teaching quality (Probert, 2015, pp. 59-74).

A reading of the two sets of Compact agreements made between individual universities and previous Labor governments between 2012 and 2015 suggests that key aspects of quality improvement are becoming central to institutional planning and review across the sector (Probert, 2015, p. 10). However, it is also the case that institutional cultures are highly vulnerable to leadership turnover and the particular enthusiasms of new Vice-Chancellors. In this respect it is hard to overstate the priority given by Vice-Chancellors and University Councils to global rankings and plans to climb up them.

The tyranny of global rankings

Ellen Hazelkorn (2015) has argued that global rankings have 'charmed audiences around the world by their crude simplicity. By equating inputs with outputs, rankings privilege age, size and wealth.' As so many observers have noted, the most respected and widely known rankings are based on research performance measured in quite particular ways. Rankings in Australia are used not just to reassure governments that public money is being well spent. They are also, critically, used to attract international fee-paying students and to justify wide variations in the prices charged in the international market.

Given the obvious ways in which research rankings have acted as an incentive to research investment at the institutional level, it is not surprising that there have been sporadic calls for the development of parallel rankings for teaching quality. In Australia the short lived Learning and Teaching Performance Fund showed how difficult this is to measure, and the challenges are even greater as we move to more differentiated kinds of teaching in a system of universal participation. Despite the widely recognized difficulties in attempting to measure teaching quality, in the U.K. the Conservative Cameron government has announced a commitment to ‘introduce a framework to recognize universities offering the highest teaching quality’ (Grove, 2015). For this it promised the development of a Teaching Excellence Framework, using outcome-focused criteria and metrics. With such measures, it would then be possible to allow universities to have their student fee caps *indexed* only if they were performing at a particular level. Nonetheless, as Jack Grove (2015) has argued, it is not at all clear that this can in fact be achieved, whatever the enthusiasm.

Another approach to giving teaching quality a stronger focus as higher education systems become more diverse is the U-Multirank framework, developed by an independent European consortium with funding from the European Commission. This is an important and useful tool for comparing performance in specific fields of study, but it is largely ignored, perhaps because it has been designed expressly to discourage simplistic institutional rankings as such. It does not produce top 100s or top 500s but only rankings based on the particular variables that a user selects.

If teaching rankings are not going to threaten the dominance of research-based rankings then it is essential to continue with legitimate criticism of the global rankings as we know them. A serious contribution to this criticism is to be found in a new book edited by John Aubrey Douglass (2016), entitled *The New Flagship University: Changing the Paradigm from Global Ranking to National Relevancy*. Douglass alerts us to the way that rankings as we know them are intimately connected to the strangely unexamined concept of the ‘world class university’. The ambition to be ‘world class’ on some dimension or other is now ubiquitous in Australia’s higher education institutions, with a place in almost every strategic vision statement.

For Douglass, ranking regimes and world class universities are part of the same game. Both are characterized by ‘a focus on a narrow band of internationally recognized indicators of research productivity’ (p. xiv). They help create a world-homogenous model of higher education, even though this makes little sense if universities are increasingly expected to serve the national interest. Douglass goes on to argue that it is possible policy makers are now ready to see that this global focus ‘draws universities away from spending resources where the impact on local and national communities might be greatest’ (p. xvi). He proposes that concepts of differentiation, relevance and usefulness might be coming to the fore, as interest grows in what he calls ‘national relevancy’.

For Douglass the focus is still, however, on national flagship universities: elite, research-intensive institutions that have a leading role to play in any national higher education system. Other well-respected scholars of higher education are even more critical of contemporary thinking about the university, which Ronald Barnett (2011) describes as ‘hopelessly impoverished’ (p. 453). Like Douglass, Barnett is interested in defining ‘the best kind of university that we can hope for under contemporary conditions’ (p. 440).

Barnett's historical typology of universities is determined, like Trow's, by the kind of knowledge produced, but stretches back to the 'metaphysical university' of the late middle-ages which was characterized by a single world of knowledge, of use in a highly stratified society. For Barnett, his typology is to be understood as forms of social imaginary, in the sense meant by Charles Taylor (2007); in other words as the dominant background against which the university understands itself at any particular time. The metaphysical university was followed by the research university, which marked a move 'from scholarship and learning to knowledge and research', and from unified knowledge to sharply differentiated disciplines (Barnett, 2011, p. 442). The research university privileged science over the humanities, and research over teaching, focused on 'its own knowledge production activities'. From this period we get such familiar concepts as 'knowledge for its own sake', 'academic freedom' *from* society; and more pejoratively, the 'ivory tower'. (pp. 442-3)

For Barnett the next major change is the appearance of the entrepreneurial university, or the 'performative' university. It is characterized by a focus on measuring impact and identifying market returns, and gives us the language of 'third stream' activities. Barnett acknowledges Michael Gibbons and his co-authors (1994) who defined this shift as being from Mode 1 ('formal, propositional, disciplinary, universal and public') to Mode 2 knowledge ('in-situ, ephemeral, multidisciplinary...and problem-oriented'). (p. 444)

It is important to recognise that neither Barnett nor Douglass see universities as merely passive receptacles, waiting to be filled with the dominant ideas of the time. Many contemporary universities have embraced key elements of neo-liberal ideology, and some academics have taken on entrepreneurial identities, committed to the increasingly competitive structure of university systems, and playing the resulting rankings game as hard as they can. As universities compete against each other 'for contracts, for clients and for customers, and for public visibility and external confirmation', Barnett notes that the '*collective* academic community fades' (p. 445).

The domination of the entrepreneurial university 'imaginary' is far from total, however. It has met with widespread resistance from within the academic community that had been formed within the 'imaginary' of the research university (Collini, 2012). This resistance is visible in many parts of Australian higher education, manifested in mobilisations around the defense of academic freedom, and expressed in ambivalence about letting outsiders - whether industry, government or other bodies - determine research priorities, not to mention overt hostility to the growing power of university executives. Resistance to Mode 2 knowledge has also been a function of what Becher and Trowler (2001) famously called the 'academic tribes and territories' associated with the powerful culture of disciplines.

The entrepreneurial university is, in itself, a paradoxical thing since it encourages risk-taking in an uncertain world, and also sees the need to manage that risk. Barnett identifies an increasingly managerial and bureaucratic form of self-organisation in the entrepreneurial university, 'replete with its expanding systems of regulation, surveillance and evaluation' (p. 448). Other observers of the contemporary university have described this in terms of an increasingly pervasive 'audit culture' (Morley, 2003). It is not hard to find evidence of the impact of this entrepreneurial/ bureaucratic university on the management of teaching performance (Probert, 2015, pp. 47-52). So, if we wish to stimulate serious discussion about improving teaching in a system of universal participation, then we need to assess the extent of the demobilization of the academic community - caused by both competition and the intensity of individual performance management.

The university in an era of universal participation

Both John Douglass and Ronald Barnett are trying to capture and shape the emergent ideas about the forms of the university in the coming decades that they see as both possible and desirable. Barnett has identified four kinds of 'being-possible' that are worth examining: the liquid university, the therapeutic university, the authentic or enquiring university, and the ecological university in which he sees the potential for both authenticity and responsibility.

The ecological university will be an engaged university, a critical and an enquiring university and a university-for-development, acting to put its resources to good effect in promoting well-being. (Barnett, 2011, p. 452)

In other words, it will be both inward-focused and outward-focused, and actively engaged with the world in order to bring about a better world. In these ways it would resemble Douglass' new Flagship University.

Such typologies are necessarily highly abstract, but it is significant that neither engages directly with one of the central differentiating aspects of the new era, namely universal levels of participation in higher education. The authors do, nonetheless, believe that the university has to accept responsibility for thinking seriously about the question of just what it is to be a university in the 21st Century, which takes us back to the conditions for collective thinking in the entrepreneurial or 'world class university'.

Making teaching central to the ecological university in an era of universal participation

If we let ourselves believe that deep and engaged debate within the wider academic community about the future of the Australian university is possible, then what are the particular kinds of challenge created by universal levels of participation? It is widely accepted that the uncapping of student places in 2012 has been a success, both in raising levels of participation, and in pressuring providers to improve the first year experience, provide higher levels of academic support, and increase rates of retention and success.

The competition for students that has resulted is felt nowhere more intensely than in Melbourne, with eight large universities, all of which are set on a growth path in order to survive financially and to be able to cross-subsidise their research/ranking ambitions. Predictably the lowest ranking universities have been enrolling students with lower and lower ATARs, and in some programs the median ATAR for enrolled students has declined to the mid-30s. It is difficult to get sector wide data on the ATARs with which students are being accepted into university courses, since increasing numbers of institutions decline to advertise their cut offs or admit to them, even though these cut-offs constitute a highly valued (if unreliable) signal of quality for potential students.

The development of the academic skills and attitudes necessary for higher education among these less well-prepared cohorts should be the focus of serious policy review. This 'preparatory' teaching has, until recently, often been sub-contracted to private colleges or TAFEs, or enabling programs, but in the new, more competitive world it is increasingly being taken over by universities themselves. In some newer universities the first year bachelor's degree curriculum has been redesigned to focus heavily on generic study skills, building on the growing body of educational research that is helping to ensure high levels of retention

among these new cohorts. What is less clear is how well a three year specialized degree structure can cope with the need to delay serious disciplinary engagement. Not surprisingly new universities want to focus on the ‘learning gain’ that their students can experience. As Trow predicted:

In institutions of universal access, there tends to be a different criterion of achievement: not so much the achievement of some academic standard, but whether there has been any ‘value added’ by virtue of educational experience. (2007, p. 28)

Alongside these educational challenges, universal participation is also creating serious financial challenges for the federal budget. On the one hand it is widely recognized that the more intensive teaching required to support under-prepared students is costly; on the other it is equally clear that competition and rankings are putting intense pressure on the resources available for research in a national ‘unified system’ of universities, all of which are trying to be good at the same things. Not surprisingly there have been continuous calls for greater differentiation in mission and funding between institutions. Yet there has been remarkably little serious policy work on how this might be achieved.

Universal participation creates at least three major problems for policy making: cost, equity and access, and quality and diversity. We need a tertiary education sector with sub-systems and institutions that are relevant to the emerging world, not the past.

Costs

A national system of higher education with universal levels of participation is going to cost a lot of money. For example, university overheads are generally very high and difficult to bring down in smaller institutions and in those that have inherited multiple campuses. We should not, however, confine our attention to the question of what proportion of the costs should be borne by students and what proportion by public expenditure. We need to look at ways in which costs can be lowered without compromising on quality.

What would it take for Australia to produce a public version of something like Ben Nelson’s Minerva project which has been able to cut the cost of tuition in half by doing away with campuses as we know them, while providing very high staff/student ratios and small classes? (Wood, 2014). We know from our own and the UK’s experience that attempts to introduce flexibility in domestic student fees does not lead to price competition but to simultaneous moves to the highest possible price point. There is no evidence to suggest that greater competition from private providers will have a major impact on the cost structure of higher education provision (Zemsky, 2005).

A great deal of work has been done recently on the extent to which the costs of teaching are distorted by the way student revenue is used to cross-subsidise research in Australia (Norton, 2015). Indeed, so serious is the problem that governments are skeptical about providing higher per student funding in order to improve teaching and learning, fearing that any such increase in funding would be diverted to support research (Australian Government 2011).

Alongside these cost pressures, we have an extraordinarily rigid industrial framework that determines how academic staff time is spent between teaching, research and other activities –

the 40: 40: 20 model. This is combined with an academic culture that tends to view teaching not as the first priority, but as an activity to be minimized wherever possible. Partly because of these historical forces, there has been an enormous growth in sessional academic employment, which is one indicator of the cost pressures in the sector. Despite much hand-wringing about casualisation, there has been little by way of a serious policy response.

Given these widely recognized cost problems, why have successive governments not encouraged debate about whether we need 40 ‘research-intensive’ Australian universities? Should the question of escalating costs be tackled by reducing the total number of universities, cutting overheads and diverting more resources to teaching? Should we be considering a regulatory framework in which there is a clear distinction between research-intensive institutions and teaching-intensive institutions, as is found in the United States? It is perhaps not surprising that Coalition governments default to neo-liberal ideology about the power of markets and competition to produce differentiation, but there is little evidence that the other important policy players are tackling the structural problems of universal participation. The ALP’s announcement in the 2016 election campaign, that it will fund the establishment of a series of new Commonwealth Institutes of Higher Education, funded at 70 per cent of the full university rate, represents the first structural proposal for reform since the establishment of the national system of universities under Dawkins.

Access and equity

The current debate about institutional ‘gaming’ of publicly released ATAR cut-offs tells us just how irrelevant this student ranking system is in an era of universal participation. In a higher education system that is genuinely open, there is no need for every student to be assigned a rank on one generalized measure of achievement. There is no reason why institutions should not simply state what they believe to be the required level of achievement in specific subject scores that are relevant to particular courses of study. It is indeed the case that some newer universities are redesigning their first year programs to compensate for what would, historically, have been seen as unacceptably low levels of academic achievement. In Victoria, at least, a student who is determined to get a place is likely to find one almost regardless of their study scores as long as the uncapped system is in place.

This has led Stephen Parker (2016) to ask whether we should not re-cap undergraduate domestic places, and use the savings this would generate to support effective equity measures. He goes on to suggest that any re-capping might include a serious review of all the ‘pathways’ for under-prepared students that have mushroomed since caps on student places were removed – such as diplomas offered by TAFE and private providers; enabling programs; and new first year bachelor programs that are essentially devoted to academic skill development. The concept of enabling programs derives from a period when small, distinct cohorts of educationally disadvantaged students (such as mature age women returning to study after family responsibilities, or indigenous students) could be targeted for intensive preparation. But in an era of universal participation, the groups needing intensive teaching are far larger and more diverse, and more mainstream. Large numbers of school leavers have never experienced academic success, and are the first in family to attend university.

In an environment where the educational outcomes from secondary schooling are becoming more unequal, higher education is going to face increasing challenges in meeting the goal of universal levels of participation. As Clark Burton pointed out back in 1994, there is quite simply a greatly increased level of ‘instructional need’. As newer universities focus

on the radically different first year curricula that are needed to ensure the retention and success of academically ill-prepared students, they are constrained by current funding and qualification models.

Four year degrees, associate degrees and practical learning

Should we at least discuss the potential advantages of four-year degrees in which the growing curricular pressures can be better accommodated? The same question might be asked in relation to everyone's desire to improve the employability of graduates, which also creates curricular pressures. Should we adopt a structure of two year associate degrees providing multiple pathways to a four year qualification, as is found in the United States, China and Hong Kong?

As the educational environment becomes more 'post-secondary' or 'tertiary', and less 'higher', we need a better way approach to conceptualizing tertiary education as a whole in ways that are relevant to the knowledge economy that confronts our students. Stephen Parker (2016) suggests that we might experiment again with new higher education institutions that devote themselves to practical learning at the highest level, and which 'eschew the siren calls' of research-based rankings that are so alluring in the current policy framework. The ALP's proposal for Commonwealth Institutes of Higher Education appears to reflect this kind of thinking. As almost everyone seems to agree, we need more diverse institutions instead of the homogeneity of university experience currently on offer.

A system university

One possible option for attacking the problem of rising costs, intractable overheads, and the need for more differentiated institutions to respond to universal levels of participation is the 'system university'. This model has long been admired in the form of the University of California System, and the writings of Clark Kerr, the most distinguished university administrator of his day. Parker (2008) uses this framework to propose a contemporary Australian version, in which two or three universities might join with one or more TAFE colleges, or other vocational institutions, along with a specialist college, and even several senior secondary schools.

This new organization would have an overarching Board of Trustees or equivalent, with oversight of the component parts, making decisions about what should be taught where, which sort of research should be supported, and how student mobility within the system could best be fostered. Over time, this new organism would move to 'common administrative systems and platforms to warrant really serious investment in them on a scale which is rarely efficient now.' (2008, p. 9). Importantly, the individual parts would have discrete educational missions, determined by whether they offer diplomas, associate or bachelor degrees, postgraduate coursework, or doctoral research, in the manner of the Carnegie classification of US institutions of higher education.

It is not surprising that many Australian universities have formed close partnerships with one or more TAFE institutions in order to manage the 'instructional needs' of many students. But these relationships bring few benefits in terms of costs, overheads or efficiencies, and are notoriously difficult to sustain in the long term – because of underlying competitive interests, as well as the sometimes arbitrary impact of leadership changes within what are still totally autonomous bodies.

Better teaching and learning

Much global effort has been expended in trying to define teaching quality. In Australia it is only recently that the government introduced a rather short-lived Learning and Teaching Performance Fund (LTPF), allocated on the basis of a range of familiar measures that have been relied on as proxies for the quality of teaching since the early 1990s. This was followed by a brief period when it seemed as though the government was going to adopt a policy designed to reward institutional improvement rather than the LTPF institutional rankings, which were widely seen as illegitimate. Federal budget pressures put paid to this, but it was also possible for the government to claim that the sector could not agree on how this improvement in learning and teaching should be measured.

In the absence of institutional incentives for good teaching, the higher education sector has fallen back on attempts to define standards that could be used to codify good teaching, and to use them in the performance management of individual academics. As there are increasing demands for universities to be accountable for the quality of teaching and learning, managerialist strategies to monitor individual behaviours have been enthusiastically adopted in some quarters (Chalmers et al., 2014). But it is disheartening that the sector is still talking about teaching standards rather than insisting that the focus be turned to the quality of student learning and evidence of graduate capabilities. As Trow (2007) argued, while we move towards a ‘learning society’, it is possible that educational success will be ‘attested not through examinations and certificates, but through an individual’s performance on the job, or of a unit performing a function or service’ (p. 276).

The lack of sector wide support for the continuation of the Office for Learning and Teaching, or any central strategic focus on improving teaching and learning, suggests that we do in fact still need some sticks and carrots in the system if we wish to ensure sustained support for teaching excellence. Even if many universities are now systematically engaged in improving the student experience, we also need to have ways in which we can assure the expanding student body that their large investment in higher education is of value. As levels of participation become universal, we need to be confident that those who enter less well-prepared will exit just as well-educated as their peers. For this we need to focus on and reward the learning gain, or distance travelled.

If we rewarded learning gain, universities would have an incentive to focus on the success of those who start further behind rather than those who are almost certain to succeed because of their educationally privileged background. If, as a sector, we are prepared to identify and measure learning gain, there would also be an incentive for governments to properly fund the kind of teaching needed to get less well prepared students to the standards of achievement that we identify as relevant to the program undertaken. Without this, we will continue to produce proxy data for rankings like the Quality Indicators of Learning and Teaching (QILT) that will, to a large extent, be ignored by students.

Conclusion

Universal levels of participation in Australian higher education are creating a number of problems that, as yet, are not being systematically analysed. We are well aware of some of these problems, such as rapidly rising public costs, institutional overheads, the variable quality of learning outcomes, workforce casualization, and the lack of institutional diversity. Since the Bradley review, which set Australia on the path to universal participation by

uncapping student places, there has been little progress in developing policy solutions to the challenges created by the uncapping. The political failure of the Abbott government's proposal to let the market do the work of restructuring the sector has left us in a policy vacuum. This has led some, like Glyn Davis, who supported the Abbott reforms, to argue that 'if we are not going to have deregulation we need an effectively regulated system' because 'bad regulation is bad for everybody'. (Davis, 2016).

In New Zealand the government has asked the NZ Productivity Commission (2016) 'to investigate how trends in technology, internationalisation, population, tuition costs and demand for skills may drive changes in models of tertiary education'. The Commission's issues paper of February 2016, designed to kick off a lengthy in-depth discussion of the options for tertiary education in New Zealand, provides an enviable context for thinking about the kinds of challenges we face in Australia. It remains to be seen whether the May 2016 budget paper called 'Driving Innovation, Fairness and Excellence in Australian Higher Education' released by the Minister for Education will stimulate a similarly wide-ranging debate in this country.

The paper draws attention to the problem of financial sustainability, and asks for input on how to expand access to sub-bachelor courses, but otherwise displays little interest in how post-secondary education as a whole might be reconfigured to support the goals of innovation and excellence.

If the Turnbull government is returned in 2016 it is perhaps too much to hope that the ALP's proposal for Commonwealth Institutes for Higher Education might be taken up as one concrete example of how to expand access to sub-bachelor courses, and as a stepping stone to new kind of 'system university' for Australia.

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