

Comment on Learning for Life

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This comment

I make little attempt to justify the remarks I make in this comment, but claim that given time to expand them they could all be justified.

I start the comment with remarks about the use of Communications technology in university teaching because of the reliance the Committee makes on developments in this field to both justify and achieve many of the committee's goals and also because most comments on the Discussion Paper that I have seen appear to share the committee's belief in the impending impact of these technologies. I recall only two comments that contain more than passing reference to that belief. One of these (Simon Marginson) warned that Communications technology developments were most likely to be taken up by mature-aged students and not used to any significant extent by school leavers. The other was Michael Osborne's scathing reference to Doom-laden banalities about the impact of information technology . . . R

In the second section I address some issues on the quality of university teaching, again because of the importance the committee's statements seem to imply (in spite of the scant attention the Discussion Paper gives the issue). In the final section I make some brief remarks about my general response to the Discussion Paper.

Technology and Teaching

The Committee, and the vast majority of commentators, have uncritically accepted the current rhetoric that the revolution in communications technology will inevitably have a major impact on university teaching and that one of the impacts will be to decrease the cost of delivery, increase collaboration between institutions and increase flexibility for students as well as being the medium carrying a major threat to Australian higher education institutions through international competition.

Given the claims made for your committee's chairman, I'm very surprised that the Discussion Paper shows no evidence of any sense of history - even very recent history. Higher Education is scattered over the last half century with grandiose claims of the impending dramatic impact of modern technology on university teaching. In our 1994 report for Griffith University, technology and teachings (referred to below as our T&T report) my colleagues and I quoted BF Skinner making predictions in 1954 (prompted by educational television) about the imminent revolutionary impact of technology on university teaching and an almost identical prediction by another professor of education in 1994 prompted by the hype about interactive multimedia. We could easily have inserted predictions arising from teaching machines, programmed learning and computer aided learning (we asked: Whatever happened to PLATO?S) (As an aside it's the overhead projector and the photocopier that have been the technologies that have had the major impacts on university teaching over the last few decades.)

The point of the quotes was, of course, to remind readers of the abject failure of those predictions - and of the very high resilience of traditional teaching methods in universities - including Griffith, which had been a major innovator in teaching at the time of its establishment, a mere two decades before the date of our T&T report. In fact the proportion of teaching based on traditional methods had increased markedly at Griffith over the few years leading up to our report.

Our third quote was from Sally Bowles in RCabaretS: Maybe this time

The depressing outcomes from earlier technologies could, of course, have been because those making the predictions had completely misjudged the potential of each new technology. That seems most unlikely - the failures arise from more subtle factors.

For one (but only one) of the factors involved it is worth repeating the quote from the Concluding Remarks of our T&T report:

Education is . . . one of the subtlest of human activities. And whether the potential benefits that the computer seems to offer are actually achieved depends largely on the teachers who use it (Hodges & Sasnett)

Obviously an equivalent statement can be made about information or communication technologies, or any other Teaching technology. As we warned (again by way of quote) at the end of Section 8 of the T&T report:

Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it (George Santayana)

(I attach the Executive Summary of our Teaching & Technology report)

Of course circumstances have changed significantly since our T&T report (April 1994). At least one significant change being the replacement of interactive multimedia by the Internet as the major saviour of/threat to universities. In that respect it is nice to be able to feel vindicated: we got it right! We recommended against funding interactive multimedia development and recommended putting resources into developing processes for using the new electronically accessed information sources as integral components of university teaching (see Recommendations 8 onwards). However we also identified the requirements to convince teaching staff and to train them in the new techniques and didn't shirk from discussing some of the issues involved.

But, just as some knowledgeable commentators on interactive multimedia were critical of many endeavours in that area as merely electronic page turnings, I fear that many developments in education through the Internet will be nothing more than students downloading, at their own (considerable) expense, teaching materials that are little, if any, advance on standard external studies notes (or even worse: just copies of lecture notes) and then returning their (standard) assignments electronically. To do this students would, naturally, have to have (or have ready access to) the appropriate equipment and software as well as having to bear the cost of connection and downloading). To call such procedures student centred would be a cynical misuse of the term. To devise curriculums that use the information manipulation procedures in an educationally effective manner would come at a considerable cost in development terms. Failure to recognise this will certainly fulfil Santayana's p!

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rediction.

I firmly believe (along with the Committee) that the new technologies (not really all that new now) have the potential to facilitate productive interaction between external students and between them and their teachers, but to realise that potential again requires careful development - not a cost free activity. However, that isn't the outcome we envisaged from our recommendations which referred to on-campus students (although the outcomes we had in mind would obviously have been useful for external students as well; but that would require even further development work).

It is not clear to me that the external studies developments could be (legitimately) described as offering increased flexibility to students unless all that is being claimed for that term is that students are able to study at their own pace, in their own place and at their own times. But this is nothing more than a commonly claimed attraction of a standard external studies programme (from where the quote arises) and Australia still has an uneconomic proliferation of

such programmes (according to Global Alliance) and has had for many years, in spite of the last Government dictated restructuring that attempted to tackle that problem (among others). But flexibility has only appeared recently as a desirable goal for university education (flexible learning and Flexible delivery being some of the current fads) so perhaps it implies something more than this? But what?

As an aside you will have noticed my deliberate use of the (archaic?) term external studies rather than the more trendy distance and open learning - a term that I regard as having become so debased as to be virtually meaningless. I have the same view of flexible learning except that I have never been able to imagine any sensible meaning for the latter.

My cursory examination of the projects supported by CAUT (and more recently CUTSD) suggests that the vast majority were technology based but that the majority of these were for supplementing existing teaching - not replacing it. Most would no doubt have improved the learning experiences for students but hardly at reduced cost!

As we pointed out in our T&T report, many externally funded and technology based projects result in minimum impact because the institution did not recognise the implications, in approving the application, of the support required to implement the innovation in practice once the project had been completed. In addition, as with innovations using earlier technologies, most of these are the babies of individual staff (or small groups) who are reluctant to let them go and/or who frequently give up because of perceived lack of institutional or colleague support. Certainly few of them survive the departure of the innovator

To summarise: I've identified two possible approaches to the use of communications technology in university teaching (I'm sure there are more): a delivery and interaction mechanism for external studies; and an information retrieval and structuring activity as a teaching approach in all courses. What are my views about how likely it is that those developments will occur on a large scale and deliver the projected benefits for university teaching? I'm afraid that I'm not very sanguine about the outcome.

So what are the implications for the committee's proposals if my view is correct?

This question prompts a reexamination of the Discussion Paper to find what processes are envisaged for the benefits from Communications technology. I interpret the committee's view as being consistent with the above and not adding anything significantly different. I'mid that it is very easy to treat the Committee as appearing to have a naive hope in (or irrational fear of) some unspecified processes yet to emerge.

If we again witness a failure of predictions of a dramatic revolution in university education the committee's vision for increased cost efficiency looks very shaky and the funding proposals will result in even more drastic pressure on the existing teaching processes than the last couple of decades have wrought. The outcome will be a further retreat to traditional (cost effective?) processes (basically mass lectures) and a further reduction in the quality of the educational experience students receive. Which leads into my next comments.

The quality of university teaching

These comments in part follow from those above in that they relate to the implementation of changed approaches to university teaching. The Discussion Paper has as a major aim improvement in the quality of university teaching, and sees a major influence in this endeavour in increasing the status of teaching.

The first of the Discussion Papers Basic Principles on support for learning and teaching is to encourage the expansion of a learning environment of quality (presumably high quality) for all students but nowhere in the Paper is this concept (high quality learning environment) examined or explained. Had it been so it might have assisted in determining what facilities/development/activities might help to achieve this desirable goal. In the absence of any such analysis or explanation one might assume that the Committee took such as generally recognised and agreed - neither proposition has any validity. Alternatively one might assume that the expression is a typical example of meaningless rhetoric.

The second principle of facilitating maximum flexibility for students creates similar problems in interpretation. What flexibility is being referred to? Why do students need or desire that? In what ways is that flexibility absent or restricted in the present arrangements?

It is claims like these two - implying, without explaining or examining, deficiencies in the present system/provision - that makes the Discussion Paper such an unsatisfactory document.

I will now comment on the issues raised in the disappointingly brief section on Encouraging good teachings incentives to put effort into teaching

As a first point: it is the reward that staff obtain from students that is the most direct incentive - but, of course, only those dedicated to their teaching are likely to receive these rewards.

My second comment is that the description gifted teacher is unfortunate: it reinforces the common, but mistaken, view that the ability to teach well is a gift

and cannot be acquired by learning. It is used as an excuse by many poor teachers.

Now to the more direct question of monetary rewards. As these operate at the moment (excellence in teaching awards etc) they are awarded to extremely small numbers of teachers and seem to do little to encourage the majority of teachers to examine their practice. To some they identify the awardees as colleagues who have got their priorities wrong or as oddballs or as poor researchers (the latter usually not being at all true). So, to some extent they can be counterproductive. There are certainly examples of awardees being frustrated in attempts to gain promotion on the basis of their teaching and even the recent Commonwealth Awards seemed to include one recipient still fighting for tenure. There are also still numerous examples of staff promoted on the basis of research who are identified by their colleagues and students as appalling teachers.

The possibility that monetary rewards for good teaching could be incorporated into normal salaries would these days have to be negotiated through enterprise bargaining, an idea that would probably meet some resistance. I feel that the claim in the Discussion Paper that the funding models would facilitate monetary rewards for good teaching is highly optimistic. In any case the issues under measurement would probably be a major inhibition.

measuring good teaching

Having conducted the promotion rounds at one of our newest universities for a couple of years (as an external consultant) I am probably more aware than most of the problems involved in judging the quality of teaching. Having also had a major hand in writing (and rewriting a number of times) the promotion policies and procedures in more than one university I am painfully aware that while good policy and procedure documents are necessary they are far from sufficient to achieve outcomes that match the policy intentions.

One difficulty in judging teaching is the inability of most staff to document their teaching achievements adequately - an issue I attempted to tackle with workshops and feedback sessions as part of the contract referred to above. The other side of that coin was, naturally enough, assisting the promotion panels to learn how to assess the evidence placed before them.

But one of the most difficult tasks is to change deeply embedded beliefs about how teaching and research are regarded as well as about the legitimacy of judgments of the quality of teaching. The number of times I have heard the claim that teaching cannot be judged adequately are legion. Sadly this common view is reinforced by the existence of many inadequate and indefensible procedures that are commonly advocated and/or used to Reevaluate teachings.

CUTSD

I have commented earlier about the technology emphasis in CAUT and CUTSD grants. When I was involved in the initial (Priority Reserve funded) National Teaching Workshop we had to go to considerable effort to solicit applications that were not technology based.

Nevertheless these schemes are certainly positive - it is a pity that the funds available for disbursement are so small. In addition I think that the dissemination activities could still be improved. However, other than for major innovations, the responsibility for teaching improvement should lie with the institutions funded to perform the teaching. But then we're back facing the attitude problem briefly discussed above, which is certainly not new and complaints about it can be found scattered regularly over at least the last half century. That fact alone suggests that it is a fairly intractable problem: it's not as if it hasn't been identified before or that there have been no previous attempts to alter attitudes. It is probably naive or arrogant of us to believe that we have an easy fix for the problem. It's my view that financial pressures or incentives aren't going to be sufficient.

That particular set of beliefs is reinforced by (or arises from?) equally entrenched beliefs about the effectiveness of traditional teaching techniques and about the role of university teaching. It would be easy to accumulate a vast set of quite staggering beliefs about teaching and the role of university teachers from very experienced academic staff.

a centre for the promotion of teaching

I'm sure that this proposal has been floated before. If such a centre were established it would be important that its role and relationships with existing centres in individual institutions and with those institutions be carefully planned so that it reinforces the existing units rather than undermining them. I think that attempting to define the role, mode of operation and funding procedures for such a centre would be a useful activity, but my view at this stage is that it may be much more productive to find ways of strengthening the existing units, most of whom have experienced cut-backs and some, even more drastic fates.

training of teachers

Many institutions, mainly through their education development units, have introduced programmes for training staff in the theory and practice of university teaching - most at the graduate certificate level. Generally these are not compulsory for any staff, but there are exceptions, particularly for newly

appointed staff. For most, the institution is at least subsidising course costs for their own staff. The programmes have generally had a good reception from participants but I don't know of any reports of studies of their impact on teaching practices - either of graduates or of them and their colleagues - but I'd be surprised if there weren't some studies underway.

What is clear is that the approaches taken by the programmes differ somewhat - leading to a healthy diversity that will (or should) lead to a better understanding of good practice in this field. Given the present position it would be desirable to strengthen the existing programmes (perhaps by explicitly funding them centrally for a specified period) rather than attempting to centralise the activity. If it were proposed to accredit such programmes in some way the accreditation process would need to be flexible enough to recognise and reinforce the desirable diversity of approaches currently in existence rather than trying, through accreditation, to force a desired pattern.

a teaching market

I'm afraid that I cannot imagine what this might be, or mean.

General comment on the Discussion Paper

Along with many of the comments that I have read, I endorse most of the stated aims of the Committee, as expressed in Chapter 1. But, also like the vast majority of those comments, I am firmly of the view that the proposals in the discussion document, particularly the funding models, fit very uncomfortably with those aims. Indeed it is my view that most of the proposals would undermine all of the educational and social aims identified. This situation is not uncommon in the educational policy area and leads to considerable cynicism and to the belief that the stated aims are mere rhetoric. So I'm afraid that I read your Discussion Paper as yet another example of the gap between rhetoric and outcomes that so bedevils educational policy, particularly as propounded by our political masters. I'm afraid that much of the language of the Discussion Paper encourages me in this reading.

As these views have been enunciated by so many commentators I will not detail them any further, but as I have not seen one of the more telling criticisms expressed bluntly let me do so now.

The Committee proposes that a price-differentiated system be established (while ensuring that students have good information on which to base decisions). One can only presume that the Committee believes that differences in price will represent differences in quality. That is: those who can afford to pay

can buy a high quality education; those who can't will have to put up with lower quality.

As an aside my view is that it is equally likely that differences in price will represent differences in prestige; not differences in the quality of teaching.

One brief comment on the language used to define the preferred funding models. Educational developers have put considerable effort over the last few decades into encouraging teaching staff to develop more student centred processes. The Committee has done a considerable disservice to education by using this term to refer to funding. I just hope that the use of that term by the Committee wasn't just a cynical exercise designed to trade on the increasing recognition of the educational need for student centred teaching.

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