Diversity straightjacket

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There is in part shadow boxing between the Australian Government and universities. The current and previous Australian ministers for education claim that the system lacks necessary diversity and universities claim diversity already exists, but they are not prepared to acknowledge the extent of diversity across their activities. There is a persistent narrow focus on research performance in establishing ranks of prestige and there is a failure to seriously account for local missions. Some universities hide behind the cloak of ostensible uniformity of university standards and standing.

In size, Australian universities range from universities that are little bigger than some high schools – Bond, Sunshine Coast, Notre Dame and Charles Darwin universities have fewer than 3,000 equivalent full time student units – to universities that are larger than the provincial cities of Bathurst, Gladstone, Kalgoorlie and Mildura – Monash and the universities of Sydney and Melbourne have more than 30,000 equivalent full time students. In organisation they range from the ANU and the universities of Western Australia and the Sunshine Coast which are located predominantly on one campus, to universities such as my own that has 5 campuses within a well defined region, and to the dispersed Central Queensland, Monash and RMIT universities that have major campuses overseas as well as several across Australia.

Universities differ very considerably in their use of distance and flexible learning and in their proportion of mature age and part time students. Similarly in modes of professional education, many universities including Griffith have offered the choice of a wide range of professional programs at the graduate level for many years.

There are also, as we know, very considerable variations in Australian universities’ student intakes. The universities of Adelaide, Sydney and Melbourne recruit over two-thirds of their students from school-leavers, while school-leavers are less than 15 per cent of the intakes at the universities of New England, Charles Darwin and Charles Sturt. Less frequently remarked as an indicator of diversity is the very considerable variation in cut-off scores between institutions and programs. These reflect very considerable variations in student demand and prestige as well as very considerable variations in the perceived quality of students.

While diversity has considerable advantages when it develops organically, enforcing it by government regulation has major disadvantages. It produces stasis. It prevents unplanned, open-ended institutional experimentation which stimulates innovation and progress. It also restricts institutions’ capacity to respond to their communities, entrenches privilege and disadvantage, and induces complacency at the top and reduces incentives at the bottom. As the League of European Research Universities observes ‘A rigid institutionalised system of selectivity runs a severe danger of fossilising the system at a particular point in time. It is essential for research universities to be dynamic and to enable new centres of expertise to develop, possibly at the expense of more established ones that have lost their edge’.

Neither would ‘diversity’ enforced by government regulation allow universities and the whole sector to respond flexibly to changes in society. Queensland’s population weighted by higher education participation rate will grow at twice the national rate from 2006 to 2011 and will grow by 6.3 per cent from 2011 to 2021 compared to a fall over this period in the rest of...
Australia. Queensland universities therefore face a different demographic challenge to
universities elsewhere, and the universities in Adelaide and Tasmania are clearly more
challenged by demographic change than universities in Melbourne and Sydney.

Likewise regions have different needs. A university which is the sole higher education
provider in its region has different responsibilities and serves a different role to the universities
in cities and regions whose catchment areas overlap with other universities. Universities in
regions with mainly agricultural economies serve different needs to those with manufacturing
or service economies. Universities in areas of social and economic disadvantage have
different challenges (although arguably the same responsibilities) as those located in
privileged areas. Regions’ needs change over time.

If ANU economist Ross Garnaut and Treasury secretary Ken Henry are right, a sustained
minerals boom will shift economic growth to Western Australia and Queensland, and if Henry
is right, this will shift economic activity from manufacturing to mining. This will require
universities in Queensland and Western Australia to change, as will universities serving
manufacturing economies, but clearly they will need to change in different ways.

Further changes may be expected from internationalisation, technological change, the effects
of information and communication technologies on learning and teaching, the new economy
and mode 2 research. Current commercial pressures are forcing some universities to
disaggregate their academic roles. Intensifying commercial pressures may force more
universities to outsource most of their teaching and become effectively examining and
certifying bodies. Lest this seem outlandish, it is worth recalling that the University of
London was initially established in 1836 to act as an examining body for its colleges and other
approved institutions. The University of London acted solely as an examining and certifying
body until 1898 when the university was established as a federal teaching university.
However, the university maintains its external system which it reports has recently revived due
to the globalisation of higher education. The University of London now has over 34,000
students following its external system and an increasing number of overseas academic
institutes are once again offering University of London diplomas and degrees.

Segmenting universities into tiers of research intensity is not even needed to produce top
ranked universities. Of the top 12 universities in Shanghai Jiao Tong University’s institute of
higher education’s 2005 world academic ranking of universities only the University of
California – Berkeley, ranked at number four, is the product of a segmented system.
Cambridge at two and Oxford at ten receive special funding from the British Government, but
within a system that is otherwise not formally segmented into research tiers. All the other top
ten US universities are private and thus not the product of formal segmentation.

The great promise of university recognises that while they reproduce elites, they also can
transform the lives of individuals and communities. We need a flexible, dynamic system that
is responsive to change, rather than a system which reproduces inequalities. Higher education
policy should promote competition. While this is true for much of our research funding, it is
not the case for learning.

My university argued in the Crossroads review for competitive funding for research, service
and teaching, and that universities should bid for one or two of such funds. The current
learning and teaching performance fund gives universities no choice in how they participate in
the fund, nor on what basis they compete. There is no reward for Griffith University to seek to
be the best in work integrated learning, or flexible learning, or access for equity groups, or
education in engineering or the creative arts unless these incidentally improve the performance
measures selected and aggregated by the Government. This contrasts with research where universities can compete on their self identified areas of strength.

Fair competition requires a level playing field and there are two elements that are particularly important. In a market open to public and private providers obligations and responsibilities should be similar. Universities have a range of public good responsibilities – including supporting local developments, schools and industries and high cost programs. Public institutions effectively return the surplus from the teaching of more low cost programs to high cost and public good activities. No such responsibility exists for private for profit providers. Second, in any market questions of standards arise. Australia needs a mechanism that assures the quality of educational outcomes – of standards.

The best strategy to deal with the future is not to fix institutions in unchanging roles, but to give them the flexibility to try different ideas. Not all will succeed, of course. But if the system is sufficiently competitive institutions will quickly discard the strategies that fail and adopt strategies that have succeeded elsewhere.

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