THE EROSION OF UNIVERSITY INDEPENDENCE: RECENT AUSTRALIAN EXPERIENCE*

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ABSTRACT

This article is concerned with the issue of institutional independence in the Australian university context. It considers why institutional independence is important, maps how independence has been reduced since the late 1960s, discusses factors leading to this erosion of independence, and explores possible university responses. It argues that, while recent cases of government interference give cause for disquiet, there is probably more reason to be troubled about where recent developments might lead and about the ability of universities to withstand and contest further encroachment.

Introduction

In 1973, the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, chaired by Dr Clark Kerr, former President of the University of California, identified one of the main problems in the governance of higher education to be the relationship between higher education and government. It highlighted one particular aspect of this problem, reporting as follows:

External authorities are exercising more and more authority over higher education, and institutional independence has been declining. The greatest shift of power in recent years has taken place not inside the campus, but in the transfer of authority from the campus to outside agencies. (Governance of Higher Education, 1973, p. 1)

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These comments referred specifically to the United States scene in the early 1970s, but they could be applied equally well to describe the current situation in the United States and in many other western industrialized nations, including Australia. They draw attention to what many university people regard as the central issue in the relationship between universities and government—the extent to which government policies and activities restrict the ability of universities to govern themselves without outside control. This article is concerned with this issue of institutional independence within the Australian university context. More specifically, it considers why university independence is important, maps recent changes in the distribution of power, paying particular attention to examples and types of government interference and the areas of university activity affected, discusses factors leading to the erosion of university independence, and explores possible university responses.

What the appropriate relationship should be between universities and government is a matter of serious concern and often intense debate in many developed societies today, particularly as academic institutions experience an end to the period of rapid expansion and severe financial problems emerge. Governments now have a major interest in higher education. They provide most—and in many countries, including Australia, virtually all—of the recurrent and capital funds. Higher education institutions in turn perform important roles which affect many different aspects of economic and social life as well as government activity. They prepare trained manpower, they are key producers of research, and they are often useful in providing advice to governments or specialists to assist government inquiries. But even where universities, as in Australia, are public institutions they can also be troublesome, sometimes criticizing public policy or serving as a home for dissident thought. Thus it is little wonder that governments wish to have a part—often an increasing one—in shaping policy for higher education. Yet higher education institutions require a substantial degree of autonomy in decision making if they are to be effective participants, not only in a national context, but in an international community. When universities were small and somewhat at the periphery of their societies, they usually had considerable autonomy and independence of action. But over the past couple of decades, as higher education expanded in size and became of increasing economic and social importance, public authorities have taken greater interest in higher education policy and performance. There is thus today an inherent tension in the relationship between higher education and government. To use the words of a recent report of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching:

Colleges and universities are expected to respond to the needs of the society of which they are a part—while also being free to carry on, without undue interference, their essential work. Ideally the twin obligations of institutional integrity and public accountability can be