Creating new institutions in Australia

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Abstract. The creation of new institutions of postsecondary education offers researchers many opportunities. Although most institutions stress that they will be anxious to "serve the community", a number of writers have suggested that academic institutions tend to be captured by interest groups. For example, the Hurtubise-Rowat Commission in Canada (1970: 121) warned of the danger that institutions could be dominated by powerful academics and administrators. Iannacone, too (1981: 25) argued that academic institutions tend to be ruled by an in-group working to resolve disputes to its own advantage. This article examines the creation of three new institutions in Australia in the 1980s to test whether these statements apply. In short, why were the institutions established, how unique are they and whose interest do they seem to satisfy? The two hundred years' anniversary of white settlement in Australia in 1988 makes such questions more pertinent than usual.

A brief explanation must be made about the nature of the institutions discussed in this article. The 19 universities enrol about thirteen per cent of total students. Most of their students are enrolled in undergraduate courses, but their staff cherish their role in research; this role does not generally extend to other institutions. The colleges of advanced education (CAE's) now number forty-seven. Their students are enrolled most frequently in undergraduate degrees and diplomas but some are completing postgraduate courses. The technical and further education (TAFE) sector is the largest of all. In 1981, it enrolled over 1 million students in over 300 colleges and annexes. TAFE students complete skilled trades, employment programs or adult education courses. Further details on the Australian systems of postsecondary education can be obtained from Harman (1986), Birch and Smart (1977) or Smart (1986).

The political and economic background of the 1980s

Postwar postsecondary education in Australia seems to fall into three stages of development. The first stage, to 1975, was marked by continued expansion, first of the universities, then of the universities and the colleges of advanced education which were created in the wake of the Martin Report in the mid-1960s. It was also marked by continuing Federal initiatives, with tied Federal-State grants being the prime motive force (and local pressure a secondary force) for expansion. At the end of the period, the Federal Govern-
ment assumed virtually full responsibility for higher education and part of the funding for technical and further education. In the second stage, from 1975 to about 1984, Federal financial stringency kept postsecondary expansion and new institutions to a minimum. The advent of the Hawke Government in 1983 led to much more dramatic improvements in schools and in technical education than in higher education. But this third stage seems to be marked by new developments again, in privatization and in state funding.

The keys to the new developments are a changing society and the changing Australian economy. First, economic difficulties continue to bedevil the whole economy, with a decline in primary and manufacturing industry and an expansion in service and tertiary industry. As a nation, we are told by economic commentators that we are living beyond our means (Walsh, 1987) with a high overseas debt and a high current account deficit. The competitiveness of Australian wool, wheat and manufactured goods has declined, leading governments to examine much more keenly the export earning from tourism and full-fee courses for foreign students. Second, there have been significant increases in the number of young people entering the workforce annually, both from natural increase and from immigration — at a time when technological and industrial changes have resulted in a disappearance of many occupations traditionally filled by young people commencing work. Third, in the context of Australia’s bicentennial the question of our national identity approaches a mild form of obsession, with aboriginal, white Anglo-Protestant and “ethnic” Australians competing for increased power and economic wealth in a declining commonwealth. While national and state governments attempt to adopt a proactive role they seem unable to do much more than react to the above social and economic forces. As ever, there is a mismatch between what governments can do and what communities want them to do.

This mismatch is very obvious in postsecondary education. The gap between the number of young people wanting postsecondary education, and academically and financially able to attempt it, is now estimated at between 9,000 and 14,000 students (Susskind, 1986). The threshold level of qualification for many occupations rises continually, while the human and capital resources available for educating them has declined. As Walsh points out (1987), Australia has developed into two nations, with a small privileged sector and a much larger “tail”. And the Hawke Government has worsened the educational mismatch.

Smart points out (1986:1):

the puzzle of the Federal Government’s contradictory strategy of encouraging and achieving substantially higher levels of Year 11 and 12 school retention (rising from 35% of the Year 12 cohort in 1983 to over 50% in 1986) while providing extremely marginal increases in the total number of tertiary places and at extremely marginal levels of per capital funding.