Research policy and the changing nature of Australia’s universities

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Abstract. Two central features of Australian universities are a strong research base and a structural organisation which reflects a close relationship between teaching and research. Current policy deliberations have produced recommendations in the “national interest” for the future development of Australian university research which are incompatible with these two central features. The recommendations consolidate the recent trend towards greater centralisation, co-ordination, selectivity and concentration of university research and its funding. Although certain sectors of Australian university research will benefit from the changes, the recommendations reflect neither a longer term view of the total higher education system, nor a sufficient concern with preserving the excellent and productive qualities of the current system. Their implementation will mean the adoption of research goals inimical to the fundamental purposes of universities; a less flexible and more conservative research system; a re-orientation of the research role of universities so that it is less harmonious with their teaching role; and a potentially harmful differentiation of academic staff, subject areas and institutions. In responding to the new demands of government, universities face a challenge in preserving their current strengths and core functions.

Introduction

Since the end of the Second World War, Western universities have found it increasingly difficult coping with mounting social, economic and political pressures. Many of these pressures have tested the traditional functions and organisation of universities. Although universities in different countries have responded to these demands in varying ways there are some underlying similarities. In many cases, a massive expansion in student numbers has been followed by a squeeze on resources and accompanied by increasing calls for relevance in teaching as well as utility and applicability in research.

Australian universities have not been exempt from this trend. During the last decade, the research role of universities has come under ever closer scrutiny by the Commonwealth Government. This has resulted in a number of new policy directions which, if fully realised, will produce radical changes in the purposes and functions of universities. The emergence of these new policy directions and the associated debate have been discussed in the context of organisational, manpower and financial considerations in an earlier paper (Lindsay & Neumann, 1987).

This paper describes the features of university research which have evolved
over the last century as research has come to occupy a prominent place and argues that, in Australia, the teaching-research nexus is at the core of university organisation and activity. It then analyses the recent initiatives and recommendations made by government agencies for the redirection and reorganisation of research and suggests some national and institutional implications arising from them. These implications are examined in the context of the features of university research and the teaching-research nexus. The incompatibility of the recommendations with these core features means that a period of tension and conflict is likely as the universities resist, or struggle to accommodate to the pressures for fundamental and far-reaching changes. To conclude, some unresolved issues associated with the government's foreshadowed policy directions are highlighted.

University research and the teaching-research nexus

Historically, the research function in universities has evolved in close relationship with the teaching function. Originally universities provided professional training in areas such as law, theology and medicine but, in conjunction with this teaching function there was a major concern with the notion of scholarship and the preservation of knowledge. The institutionalisation of modern science in universities during the nineteenth century grew out of this tradition of scholarship and critical argument and the Humboldtian idea of the unity of teaching and research became one of the "cardinal principles" of German, American and British universities, which has continued on into the twentieth century (Redner, 1987). Australian universities exemplify this integrated approach to teaching and research. Hence, research policy for higher education must take into account not only national research needs but also the full range of purposes of higher education, and its concomitant values, structures, and processes.

Research within universities is characterised by certain well-established features:

1. Research receives its main impetus from problems defined within the framework of a discipline. That is, the contribution that a research project may make to the field is the primary consideration, with any direct economic or social benefits being secondary. As a result, both research proposals and outcomes are judged mainly on the basis of excellence rather than their immediate industrial or social relevance.

2. Both individual researchers and their departments/centres require a high level of freedom from external interference in order to adequately pursue specific research goals as well as the general purposes of higher education.