

EDITORIAL

Higher Education Futures

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This special collection of articles is the product of critical and probing examinations of the future of higher education – encompassing questions concerning teaching, the curriculum and the very idea of the university as we move deeper into the twenty-first century. The articles emerged from examinations of higher education in the United Kingdom (UK), the USA and Australia, and arose from the fifth bi-annual International Conference in University Learning and Teaching held in 2010 at the University of Hertfordshire (UK) in partnership with the Universiti Teknologi MARA (Malaysia). The theme of this international conference was ‘Issues for the Future’, which was explored by participants through experiences and points of view from different parts of the world.

If hindsight is known proverbially as an exact science, peering forward to see ‘what may be’ offers room to think widely and creatively but lacks the comfort of precise awareness of the events that will constitute the future. Yet it is possible to bring a discipline to forward thinking through the construction of alternative scenarios. This approach is used by Anne Jasman, Eddie Blass and Steve Shelley in order to explore the issue of teaching quality, in their article ‘Becoming an Academic for the Twenty-first Century: what will count as teaching quality in higher education’. They look forward to 2020 and consider what different scenarios may mean for teaching quality, and the consequences for the role of academics. An underlying point these authors emphasise is that, whatever scenario is in store, the nature of teaching is likely to change quite markedly because of changes in how knowledge is created and acquired and in the needs and lifestyles of students. In other words, radical change is going to occur regardless, and the challenge for academics and higher education institutions is to reshape themselves as rapidly as their context is evolving.

The process of reshaping the role of academics and university curriculum and pedagogy in response to external changes is not a technical exercise, however. Profound questions concerning the values, purpose and accessibility of universities are integral to considering their teaching and learning activities. What their values and purposes should be are matters for debate, conflict, and targeted, strategic influence, as Steven Seldon illustrates in ‘Sponsored Neo-Conservative Challenges to Diversity and Intercultural Competence in the US Undergraduate Curriculum’. The processes by which US conservative foundations have worked, over a prolonged period, to transform public perceptions and university policies are given careful and detailed examination. Steve Seldon describes a contest between two positions. One is a university vision for the fostering of global competence, which embraces citizenship and loyalties not only to local place and national identity but also to an emerging economically and electronically connected global society. The other is a view that sees in this a misguided promotion of multiculturalism and a forsaking of the Western academic tradition. The argument of the article is not that there is a sinister or corrupt conspiracy against a more progressive, globally orientated curriculum; its purpose, rather, is to illuminate some of the patterns of support, sponsorship and influence which impact upon US

universities and to suggest how global competence can be seen as worthy of the support of both conservatives and progressives.

A narrowing of the purposes of higher education is the concern also of Alan Montague's 'Review of Australian Higher Education: an Australian policy perspective', this time under the impact of government policy. He challenges the narrow 'economic objective and focus' of the review that has influenced Australian government policies aimed at increasing access to university education and developing a 'student entitlement' model of funding. Far from the policies achieving the aim of supplying the required balance of human capital as conceived by policy makers, the laissez-faire approach of funding following students' enrolment may well increase the vocational imbalance of available skills and capabilities. The most fundamental critique, however, is of the theoretical foundation of the policies, leading to a conclusion in the article that, in the context of global changes, the idea of the university needs rethinking in order 'to link ethical stewardship and benefits in industry, communities, people security, well-being' and a sustainable environmental context. This call – aimed at the Australian government – has international resonance too, as higher education charts a course through turbulent times and is forced to consider how a breadth of vision for enhancing human knowledge and growth can be renewed.

Combining these contributions, the implications for policy stem from three factors: firstly, the need to consider purpose and human capacity, i.e. who the provision of higher education is going to serve and who is going to be providing it; secondly, the role of government in driving this agenda and responding to the needs of the electorate and to power brokers in their national constituencies; and thirdly, how universities bridge pressures from these two factors so as to sustain the critical and highest ideals of university education.

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