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The shifting ground of Australian Higher Education through the lens of reflexive modernisation: compromising the quality of planning education?

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(Received)

The aim of this paper is to explore the changes taking place in the Australian higher education sector and to discuss the implications of these changes in planning education. In addressing this aim, this paper draws from theories of reflexive modernisation to discuss how processes of individualisation, risk and reflexivity are shaping the behaviours and decisions of university managers, students and academics. These shifts and challenges are important for employers, just as they are for academics, to understand. The paper calls for more strategic and informed engagement in higher education policy and with the student communities to complement the growing dialogue between academics, the planning profession and employers.

Keywords: planning education; higher education; reflexive modernization; new public management

Introduction

In Australia, rapid and profound changes in higher education have redefined the nature of university management, redefined academic work practices and the delivery of education (e.g. Dearn, 2006; Marginson, 1997; Marginson and Considine, 2000; Pick, 2006). The rise of a global student marketplace, and the introduction of the Bologna Model in Europe, the changing demands of mass markets and declining public investment in higher education have created a different playing field to the one that existed three decades ago (Australian Government, 2006; Coady, 2000a). According to Marginson (2008, p. 270) the new management context is 'conceived as a managed economy in which competitive markets and market simulacra are nested in a framework of external supervision by government'. New public management approaches adopted by university managers to deal with these changes include the deployment of funding based economic incentives, consumer-driven production of education products, product standardisation and formats, performance measurement, competitive ranking, partnerships with other types of education providers and auditing by external bodies (e.g. Bok, 2003; Dearn, 2006; Marginson, 2008).

Within this context, the aim of this paper is to explore the changes taking place in the Australian higher education environment and to discuss the implications of these changes on planning education. Our underlying premise is that within current debates about the future of planning education (e.g. see Gurran *et al.*, 2008; the Special Edition of *Australian Planner* March 2009; and the 60 years of Planning Education Symposium, Adelaide, February 2009) there is limited discussion of the sweeping changes taking place in Australian higher education, the drivers of this change, or how they influence key stakeholders. We contend that in current discussions there is an over-emphasis on the needs of industry and the challenges associated with providing work-ready graduates prepared for the pressures of contemporary planning practice (PIA, 2004; Whitzman, 2004). These discussions should be balanced against an appreciation of the wider changes occurring within universities, student communities, and planning academic communities. What little research there is tends to be anecdotal, or inferences are drawn from research in American and European contexts (see Faludi, 2009; Stiftel, 2009). Gurran *et al.* (2008) briefly discuss the impacts of such changes, but only in terms of quality assurance and accreditation issues. Yet these changes have far reaching ramifications that will shape the nature of higher education in the future.

The significance of this paper is to open up discussions about the transcendental changes taking place in Australian higher education and the impacts on planning education, on students and academic

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communities. Academics have been witness to these changes for some time, but it is important that employers and practitioners more fully appreciate the changing education environment from which their student and graduate planners are emerging.

The changes in Australian higher education can be seen as part of a broader social change known as 'reflexive modernisation', an idea that explains both the socio-politico–economic drivers of change and the government, group, institutional and individual responses to that change. Reflexive modernisation also provides a useful set of ideas or a framework for understanding both the changes, and the effects of change, in higher education and will be used accordingly in this paper (e.g. Pick, 2006; Slantcheva, 2004).

The next section outlines the idea of reflexive modernisation and the broader social changes it entails. Whilst it is outside the reaches of this paper to explore and evaluate the extensive writings on reflexive modernisation, a brief overview is provided here as it assists understandings about the drivers of higher education reform that are discussed later in the context of new public management. The section also introduces three key concepts of reflexive modernisation, namely, the process of individualisation, risk and reflexivity.

The focus then turns to Australian higher education beginning with a broad overview of the changes occurring therein. It then addresses the way in which individualisation, risk and reflexivity have been playing out in our universities. The paper then shows how this changing context has been producing new public management approaches in our universities.

In the final sections we address the implications for planning education, examining first the general implications, before focusing on our own research into one small aspect of these changes – that of planning student engagement with their study and of the possible implications for their education and the profession.

Reflexive modernisation

Reflexive modernisation emerged out of collaborative discussions between social commentators Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens and Scott Lash (1994) to explain socio-politico–economic drivers of change and government responses to that change. This body of work discusses the transformations of society from Modernity's industrial technocratic order to a more disaggregated, individualised order shaped by technological and scientific advances, rising consumerism and global capitalism (Beck, 1994). In this shift, Beck observes a world in which the traditional institutions of government are facing mounting contradictions – their power is being eroded by individualism and self-politics, but at the same time they are becoming more important in addressing the unintended consequences of industrial society (Beck, 1994, p. 38).

Three key concepts in reflexive modernisation debates are useful in understanding the changes in higher education: individualisation, risk, and reflexivity. Individualisation refers to processes whereby people, groups and/or institutions become disconnected from traditional social structures and lose the collective capacity to exert pressure for change (Beck *et al.*, 1994). De-unionisation provides a good example of individualisation, where the decreasing membership and the growth of individual contracts have led to a loss of collective bargaining power, but also of identity and social connection. Beck refers to this as the 'gutting of politics', whereby the rapid pace of change is driven by individual responses and a weakening of collective power.

Risk refers to the way in which society and institutions of government perceive and respond to the risks emerging from processes of globalisation (Beck, 1992). While managing risk is not a new concept (it has been the concern of governments for millennia), Beck (1994) argues that risk, and responses to the perceived nature and intensity of that risk, are becoming key drivers of change and government action. The recent demise of the Home Insulation Program is a good example of a situation where a suite of risks (i.e. environmental, economic, political and social) brought about the sudden withdrawal of a program.

Reflexivity refers to the nature of the responses to change, its effects and perceived risk. Put simply, the latent and cumulative effects of our neoliberal system of production and consumption are giving rise to cumulative effects that can no longer be ignored. Environmental impacts, marginalisation of social and ethnic groups and the widening gap between rich and poor exemplify these unintended consequences. Uncertainty and risks are erupting, and individuals, groups, institutions and governments are responding directly and often compulsively, to those risks. In this way, there is limited opportunity for public debate or a considered collective response. Responses are reflexive; they are 'knee jerk' reactions rather than considered actions. How individualisation, risk and reflexivity play out in the higher education, and impact upon planning education in particular, will be the focus of the remainder of this paper.

Higher education in Australia

Since the 1970s' restructuring of higher education from an elite to mass system, the funding pressures associated with this increased student load, and declining public investment in higher education,

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have created a set of problems that have pushed Australian higher education into crisis. According to Davis (2005, p. 2) the central dilemma is essentially fiscal: growth in the number of universities since the 1970s, a push for improved access to high education, and globalisation and increased competition within the higher education sector are amongst those factors that have contributed to the crisis in higher education.

Between 1984 and 1992 alone, enrolments increased 57% (Gillard, 2009). At the same time public expenditure in high education declined relative to GDP. There has been an overall decline in investment in infrastructure, and research activity has been underfunded, resulting in cross-subsidisation from teaching funds (Bradley *et al.*, 2008; Marginson and Considine, 2000). In order to address funding shortfalls, Australian universities have aggressively targeted overseas markets with international student numbers growing from 24,998 to 95,607 between 1990 to 2000 (Atkins and Herfel, 2005). While in 1981 the Commonwealth typically provided around 90% of a public university's income, by 2002 universities could no longer be considered public enterprises, with the Commonwealth providing an average of only 40% of total income (Davis, 2005; 2006, p. 21). To make matters worse, the recent global economic downturn has impacted heavily on some universities' investment portfolios, the returns from which have been important to university operating budgets (Slattery and Lane, 2009).

Over the same time, there has been a proliferation of higher education providers, and growth in the variety of programs and pathways into higher education, which has in turn stimulated increased consumer choice and competition (Bradley *et al.*, 2008; Marginson and Considine, 2000). The challenges for the future of Australian higher education are, therefore, not to be underestimated. Projections undertaken at the height of the recent economic boom suggest that, by 2010, the supply of people with undergraduate degrees will not keep pace with demand, which will in turn impede growth in sectors of the economy with skill shortages (Bradley *et al.*, 2008). Moreover, disadvantaged groups are currently underrepresented in higher education. Increased engagement of these groups is needed to combat a possible widening of socio-economic fault lines and urban–rural disparities (Gillard, 2009).

Individualisation, risk and reflexivity in Australian higher education

Individualisation

Within this changing higher education environment, individualisation is playing out in rising competition between universities, in efforts and expenditure to differentiate, promote and market universities and programs, and in the mergers of schools and disciplinary groups to create constellations of cross-disciplinary study distinct from competitors' offerings. The growth of double degrees in many areas is evidence of this trend (Wood *et al.*, 2002). The individualisation trend is also illustrated in the Howard government's Nelson Report (2003) argument for differentiating the missions of universities, and creating a tiered system of research intensive and teaching universities (Pick, 2006). Whilst the current Labour government appears to have moved away from this position, acknowledging that there can be no separation in the teaching and research functions of universities, the capacity of different universities to attract funds and students will inevitably see these processes of individualisation continue.

Individualisation is also playing out in changes to the student and academic body. According to Pick (2006), students and academics are in charge of creating their own biographies and career trajectories. Students are carrying an increasingly large financial burden for their education (Karmel, 1999; Bradley *et al.*, 2008) and are taking advantage of heightened competition amongst universities offering increased choice in programs, diversified pathways, and variety in modes of delivery. Within this context, students have become increasingly empowered to chart their own pathways through the curricula space and drive their own education outcomes. Government policy directions and university managers are emphasising the student experience and student-centred learning, and have devised measures to capture achievement in this area (Australian Government, 2009; Gillard, 2009). The University of Queensland's 'University of You' and La Trobe's 'Infinite Possibilities' media campaigns aptly illustrate this individualisation.

There is also evidence of individualisation within academic staff. Sessional staff comprise an estimated 40 to 50% of all university teaching (Bradley *et al.*, 2008), which has a range of implications for both the individual and the university. Casual staff often balance multiple jobs, their access to professional development and training is more limited, and they are usually not paid for a range of activities, including attendance at staff meetings, moderation, preparation, and student consultation (Percy *et al.*, 2008). This situation means that universities have less control over casual staff; they are often not fully supervised. This has created a situation where sessional staff often operate as entrepreneurs not fully aware of university policies and practices.

Slaughter and Leslie (1997) also observe that the competitive global higher education environment has

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promoted the emergence of academic entrepreneurship, with many academics becoming 'state subsidised entrepreneurs'. That is, while they have lost their traditional power bases as a result of the dissolution of their disciplinary communities, those that have been able to network with industry have gained a new form of freedom via external funding (Slaughter and Leslie, 1997; Marginson and Considine, 2000) and have become active agents in the remaking of their work (Marginson, 2008). These processes of individualisation play out unevenly across the academic workforce, where the tribal politics of research centres can influence individual work profiles that can, in turn, marginalise some staff (Becher and Trowler, 2001). Individualisation and its associated disconnection from decision making structures is also reflected in the shift of university governance away from collegial, consultative and democratic modes towards those that are managerial, corporate and autocratic (Coady, 2000b; see also Davis, 2006, p. 24).

Risk

Given the transcendental restructuring of universities, the remaking of academic work practices and changes in the structure and demands of the higher education marketplace, it is not surprising that universities are faced with an ever-widening range of risks, many of which are outside the immediate control of university managers (Marginson and Considine, 2000). According to Pick (2006), the federal government has exacerbated these risks with regard to the decline in public funding and removal of protection and support mechanisms for universities. While the 2009 national budget seeks to reverse some of these trends, sustained lack of investment of previous decades will take some time to address (Australian Government, 2009) and the sector is likely to continue its focus on the management of perceived risks.

The Bradley Report (Bradley *et al.*, 2008) and 2009–2010 Budget Papers (Australian Government, 2009), which responds to the Bradley Report, reveal the range of perceived risks[1] including:

- declining public investment has led to a situation where the competitiveness of the higher education sector is at risk over the medium and long term, especially when other OECD countries have started to increase funding (Bradley *et al.*, 2008, Marginson and Considine, 2000);
- funding of research has been well below actual cost and has effectively impeded research and innovation (Bradley *et al.*, 2008; Marginson, 2000);
- cross-subsidisation of research from teaching has adversely affected student experiences (Bradley *et al.*, 2008);
- Australia is losing ground, dropping from seventh to ninth amongst OECD countries, with 29% of the population aged 25–34 with a higher education qualification. Other OECD countries have set targets of 50% for degree-level qualifications (Bradley *et al.*, 2008);
- the nation will need more qualified people. Projections suggest that demand for graduates will outstrip supply by 2010 and this will impede economic growth, particularly in those sectors where there are skill shortages (Bradley *et al.*, 2008);
- declining participation rates amongst minority groups and lower socio-economic groups has the potential to further deepen socio-economic fault lines, and lower participation rates in regional and rural populations could impede regional growth and development (Coady, 2000a; Gillard, 2009);
- a shortage of academics is predicted. Changing academic work practices, increasing student–staff ratios, and casualisation of the academic workforce has resulted in a situation where academic careers are perceived as unattractive and stressful (Bradley *et al.*, 2008; Coady, 2000a).

It is outside the scope of this paper to examine these risks and the responses contained within the 2009–10 Budget Papers. However, these risks and proposed targets and measures contained within the current Budget Papers (Australian Government, 2009) illustrate that the identification and perception of risks are driving government responses.

Perceptions of risk can also be observed in the way that students are engaging in study. Students are balancing the heavy financial commitment of study with work in an effort to offset bourgeoning debt (Carney *et al.*, 2005). As a result, they are increasingly working throughout the duration of their university education, juggling a range of study, work and life commitments (ABS, 2002; Brooks, 2006; Rolfe, 2002). In Australia, a decrease in the proportion of students receiving Austudy or Youth Allowance as their main or only source of income has fallen, and there has been an increase in the number of students who work (Krause *et al.*, 2005). Whilst the present government has sought to address these issues, it will be some time before the effects of increased support filter through to students (Australian Government, 2009). Students are also seeking to address risk around their employment prospects especially after

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investing large amounts of money in education. As a result, many students seek to improve their 'employability' by obtaining work experience prior to graduation (Krause *et al.*, 2005, Brooks, 2006). Moreover, structural changes in labour markets, including increased casualisation and flexibility in some sectors (such as retail and hospitality), have enhanced opportunities for students to work while studying (Brooks, 2006). In Australia, strong, sustained economic growth from the late 1990s to 2008 created a shortage of skilled and professional workers, contributing to a situation where most students found well-paid part-time employment in their professional field well before graduation (Birrell and Rapson, 2006). In planning, these trends have been increasingly evident as students gain professional employment prior to graduation, often as early as the end of first year. It is too early to determine impacts of the economic downturn from late 2008 upon student work opportunities. What is clear, however, is that planning practice courses (practicum, work placements and internships) are becoming well established within planning programs and are an important link between study and graduate employability (Jones *et al.*, 2008).

Reflexivity

Within the higher education sector, there has been a transfer of social, political and individual risk away from the state. Over the last three decades the federal government has progressively withdrawn from taking financial responsibility for the higher education sector, and has instead implemented macro-structural and micro-reforms. As a consequence – as is evidenced in the following discussion – universities have responded reflexively to the risks that confront them. Pick (2006, p. 273) explains the contradictions that universities face in terms of

> ... the requirements from government to monitor and control their [universities'] performance according to prescribed criteria such as research quality, teaching quality, financial operations, and student enrolments. This micro-management of universities through regulation stands in contrast to the neo-liberal macro-policy stance of creating a privatized higher education 'market'. This contradiction of macro-steering and sometimes complex micro-regulation (e.g. student fees and industrial relations) is leading to a situation in which university man agers and administrators are responding in ways that are self-referential and reflexive (i.e. without reflection).

New public management in Australian higher education

This context has created an environment ripe for new public management approaches characterised by, amongst other things, a focus on value for money, identification of benchmarks and performance criteria, a customer focus, downsizing, outsourcing and flatter management structures. Fiscal austerity and restructuring now characterise the sector, and there is an emphasis on entrepreneurialism in both research and teaching activities as a means of accessing resources controlled by the government, non-profit organisations, and private sector interest groups (Becher and Trowler, 2001; Marginson and Considine, 2000). In line with these management approaches, consumer-responsiveness has become increasingly important and measures of student satisfaction, retention, engagement and graduate outcomes have become important indicators guiding university management. Student-centred approaches to delivery of education, standardisation of educational products, increased flexibility in modes of delivery and routine program and unit evaluation are now part of the mantra of university managers (Dearn, 2006; Cleveland-Innes and Emes, 2005). Becher and Trowler (2001, p. 5) claim this 'slide towards performativity has prompted a downward trajectory of teaching and learning'. Universities, conceiving students as customers, are pushing academics to be student-centred and customer responsive. However, individual academics burdened by increasing loads are finding it difficult to be customer responsive and at the same time uphold academic processes and standards (Lafferty and Fleming, 2000) as well as be entrepreneurial and research intensive. A plagiarism case at the University of Newcastle illustrates this difficulty where academics were put under strain from mounting workloads, pressures to be student-responsive, and a complex layering of ad hoc policy and procedures that had been developed reflexively (Atkins and Herfel, 2005). Moreover, there is evidence to suggest that students are not particularly well informed consumers when they choose a program of study, so there is a risk that student expectations and levels of satisfaction can be given too much weight by university managers (Brennan, 2001; Dredge and Coiacetto, 2006).

The new public management has had important implications for the disciplinary structures around which university programmes have traditionally been developed. Universities have been described as unusual institutions, sitting somewhere between centuries of tradition and the contemporary needs of the knowledge economy (Marginson and Considine, 2000).

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Once structured around and managed according to disciplines, these boundaries are becoming increasingly less important as universities restructure into larger management units to supposedly cut costs and reduce management hierarchies. Indeed, tribal politics associated with disciplinary structures often gets in the way of a new breed of university managers eager to dissolve boundaries and improve performance indicators (Becher and Trowler, 2001). The resulting restructures have created cross-disciplinary schools, research centres and programmes that are 'flattening out the distinctions between different types of knowledges' (Marginson and Considine, 2000, p. 10). Moreover, increasing emphasis on professional degrees and work ready graduates is breaking down traditional barriers between knowledge acquisition in the ivory tower and practical professional knowledge derived through internships, practicum and work placements (Becher and Trowler, 2001; Hambleton, 2006). Much of this change is reflexive in nature, driven by the need to establish competitive advantage and cut costs. Moreover, consultation with affected groups is usually limited (Coady, 2000a).

These changes have also bought about an evolution in academic work practices and profiles. Becher and Trowler (2001) note that prior to the massification of higher education, there was a stronger sense of academic community. Staff tenure was more secure, there was a stronger sense of autonomy about program content, structure and delivery, and a strong sense of academic community identity was derived from spatial concentration and socialisation. The massification of higher education has brought with it multi-nodal campuses with less staff cohesion; the casualisation of the academic workforce; a de-professionalisation of the workforce, and; 'de-jobbing' (Becher and Trowler, 2001; Chun and Evans, 2009). 'De-jobbing' refers to the situation where jobs, as social artefacts, disappear within the landscape of work to be done. Academics function as entrepreneurs across a range of activities inside and outside the organisation; they become administrators, researchers, teachers, counsellors, managers and service providers. Ironically, changes like these and growing managerialism, emphasis on performativity and entrerpreneurialism, corporatism, the changing academic roles and the increasing administrative work required of academics has been accompanied by inflation of the university bureaucracy: the ratio of bureaucratic to academic staff at the University of Sydney, for example, leaped from 23.6% in 1980 to 94.5% in 1994 (Coady, 2000b, p. 17).

As a result of reflexive responses to the financial management challenges of universities, a significant body of commentary and critique has emerged about issues such as academic integrity and freedom, the quality of education, and about the role of universities in society in general (e.g. see Coady, 2000a; Marginson and Considine, 2000; Morely, 2003). Universities are now caught in vexed debates about whether higher education is a public good or whether it should be managed as a commercial, user-pays venture (Ralston-Saul, 1997). However, it is important to balance this critique against increased participation rates, the flexibility afforded to students, and the valuing of different styles learning that have been opened up through different delivery modes (Morley, 2003).

Implications for planning education

This overview of national and international trends and influences on higher education places in context the changes occurring within planning education over the last two decades. Unfortunately, there is little research in the Australian context that examines the nature of change in planning education, the change in characteristics of planning academics and their communities, or the changes occurring within planning research. Many of the papers published are commentaries, opinion pieces or polemical, relying on personal experience and observation. Even the recent Inquiry into Planning Education (Gurran *et al.*, 2008) was completed with nominal funding, and such wider questions were outside the project brief. As a result, research tends to be anecdotal or infer ences are drawn from the American and European contexts. Given that Australia played a leading role in the restructuring from elite to mass system in the 1970s and 1980s (Bradley *et al.*, 2008), that Australian planning education has progressively diverged from its British roots, and that practitioners are forging new roles (Steele, 2007), the lack of research about changes in planning education needs to be addressed. It is time to for greater reflection as opposed to reflexivity.

Planning, as a field of study is relatively new, gaining momentum in Australia as universities begin to respond to a range of vocational needs derived from the post-war economic boom (Budge, 2009; Marshall, 2007). In this early pre-massified higher education environment, planning education was delivered to small student cohorts primarily using intensive problem-based, face-to-face learning pedagogies. Studio-based teaching was prevalent, wherein students explored planning problems, debated issues and crafted solutions (Heywood, 2004). Anecdotally, these traditional modes of planning education encouraged the development strong and identifiable

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student communities and identifiable communities of academics (Heywood, 2006).

In evidence of the move from elite to mass education as discussed above, there was a 23% increase in undergraduate enrolments over the period 1993–2000 (PIA, 2004). There are no figures available for the period since 2000, but given strong economic growth and the shortage of planners that was the subject of a Planning Ministers' Inquiry in 2004, anecdotal evidence suggests that over the decade end ing 2009, enrolments in some established programmes have doubled while there has been a proliferation of new programmes. Moreover, over the last two decades there has been a decline in university infrastructure investment. As a result, teaching spaces have come under increasing pressure as cohorts of over 100 students become more common. The shortage of academic planning staff and the staff-to-student ratios required for studio teaching have exacerbated the difficulty of offering a reflective planning education (see e.g. Birch, 2001; Forester, 2000; Sandercock, 1999; Schön, 1983). Moreover, the increasing diversity of students' academic abilities requires many planning educators to exhibit high levels of student and professional engagement in an effort to craft students' understanding of complex multi-layered planning problems (Budge, 2008; Heywood, 2006). In some universities there has been pressure to replace studio teaching with more traditional delivery. Indeed, many of the decisions being made about planning education have been made reflexively, with little consultation or debate about the impacts on student learning or on academic staff. Some aspects of this situation may be addressed shortly with two important studies being supported by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) that deal with aspects of planning education: studio teaching (see http://www.studioteaching.org/resources.htm) and work practices in urban planning (see http://www.plannereducation.org.au/).

Other changes observed in planning mirror broader trends in universities adopting new public management. For example, planning has been merged with allied disciplines such as geography, architecture and environmental studies to create larger units or 'superfaculties' and flatter management structures (Heywood, 2006). Undergraduate programmes have been adapted to accommodate common core subjects and students are now being taught by academics with diverse 'home' disciplines (Heywood, 2006). Whilst some might lament the changes, it might also be argued that there are advantages in terms of the increased number and diversity of graduates, and the planning curricula has benefited from other fields of study and disciplinary input (Baum, 1997).

Of concern, however, is that at both national (e.g. PIA, 2004) and regional levels (e.g. LGAQ, 2007; NSWLGA, 2006) questions have been raised about the ability of graduate planners to cope with the pressures of professional practice. These surveys reveal graduate planners are not coping well with the demands of their work. There is also an alarming 'leakage' of planners from the profession, with stress mooted as a major reason for the departure of planners with one to five years of experience (PIA, 2004). A closer examination of these trends and likely impacts is important, given the critical shortage of planners, retention issues within the profession, and the growing concerns about the match between planning education and practical professional development and coping skills of young planners (Budge, 2009).

Individualisation, risk and reflexivity: student perspectives

Against this background, the remainder of this paper reports on one small aspect of these changes – that of planning student engagement with their study and the possible implications for their education and the profession. We have chosen to explore the student perspective in order to balance what we see as a focus on the risks perceived by universities, employers and the profession in current debates about the future of planning education. In particular, this paper reports the findings of a small survey of first and fourth year students to explore how processes of risk and individualisation play out on balancing work and study. The survey sought to answer three key questions.

- To what extent are planning students working during their studies? (This question builds a profile of students' work habits.)
- What factors influence how much work students do? (This question seeks to examine whether processes of individualisation and perceptions of risk influence work habits.)
- What factors influence whether students attend class? (This question seeks to examine whether processes of individualisation and perceptions of risk influence attendance.)

The study does not presume to be a comprehensive assessment of the impacts on planning students, nor can it be assumed to be generalisable to other universities or other cohorts of students. It is a snapshot of the challenges that students face and attests to the need for further, more comprehensive study to examine the challenges of the contemporary planning student body. Its value as a case study is to reveal

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insights into processes of individualisation, and responses to the risks that confront students in their choices and decision-making. The survey was undertaken in 2006, during a period of prolonged economic growth and industry demand for planners was strong. It was conducted at the start of two respective first and fourth year courses.

To what extent do planning students work during their studies?

The survey revealed that 81% of first-year students worked during the semester ($n = 55$) working between 7 and 32 hours per week and averaging 18.1 hours per week. Similarly, 78% of fourth-year students indicated that they worked during the semester ($n = 52$). The hours worked per week ranged from 9 to 35 hours with the average being 16.6. Absenteeism amongst the first year students averaged 20% over the semester and 52% amongst the fourth years. Whether work or other commitments was the reason for the significant fourth-year absenteeism is unclear. Certainly, by the fourth year, students are encouraged to take an individual and independent approach to their learning, which could be a factor.

The sector of employment differed markedly between first and fourth year. Almost all first-year students worked in retail or hospitality positions, while most fourth years held professional planning-related jobs. The important consequence for teaching and learning is that whereas first-year students can fit their work around study commitments, fourth-year students in professional employment are usually required to work office hours, and on specified days, resulting in higher rates of absenteeism and greater demand for flexible and intensive weekend delivery modes:

> I selectively attend lectures if I am working full or part time. I go to lectures if they are early in the morning or very late in the afternoon so that I can either arrive late or leave early and still do a day of work. (Fourth year student)

What factors influence how much work students do?

The factors that influenced how much students worked are diverse. Factors first-year students mentioned included the need to generate income for themselves and/or family members, to support consumer lifestyles, and to support a family-owned business. Although some first-year students were already working in planning-related roles, career development was rarely mentioned. As expected, by the fourth year, students were more commonly focused on enhancing their career paths by accruing professional experience, responding to employers needs (i.e. 'we're short staffed and we have so much work on') or making sure that their post-graduation employment is secure. Overall, these findings are consistent with the broader literature as stated earlier.

What factors influence whether students attend class?

Our survey suggested that the reasons students attend or do not attend face-to-face classes were highly individual, especially among first year students (e.g. work commitments, practicum placement requirements, financial motivations, subject content, mode of delivery and availability of learning resources on the web). Most responses suggest a highly individualised student body characterised by a plethora of demands on time, diverse ties but with no particular commitment to a learning community and a focus on the instrumental tools of learning, i.e. assignments, lectures, and whether attendance counts. A deeper sense of commitment to transformative learning and acknowledging the challenges of moving oneself beyond the 'stuck places' of current knowledge frames (see Meyer and Land, 2005) were not particularly evident in first-year student responses, for example:

> If I think I might learn something then I will go to the lecture ... I generally do.

> [I decide if I will attend] by weighing up the pro and the cons. Firstly, if I have enough to pay the bills and cover rent, then do I have an assignment that needs to be finished immediately; then how important is the lecture or is it assessed? As a general rule of thumb I try to attend all the lectures.

> ... to decide whether I attend, I see whether it relates to the assessment, and if the information is available elsewhere – e.g. lecture notes, readings, a friend. I also think about whether I know the information already and what I can learn. Then I think about how exhausted I am.

> I skip lectures if I can get a day's work.

> I decide to attend based on my sleeping patterns due to shift work.

As expected, fourth-year students' responses mirrored more complex decision-making about attendance and a deeper commitment to transformative learning:

> I thought this course was not going to be relevant to me because my political ideology is based in a rejection of government. But by sitting and listening, really thinking about it all, hearing what others are saying, I can now place [the learning in this unit] in perspective. It's helped me understand why it's

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> important and I can relate all this theory to practical examples and personal experiences. (Fourth-year student)

However, practical issues such as reconciling professional employment and timetabling restrictions exacerbated the stress students experience in balancing work and study:

> In the first semester of this year, most fourth year students were required to undertake practicum placement at a planning firm, many with the hope to carry this work through the whole year. [This semester] most of us will be unable to work in the [timetable] gaps on Wednesday and Friday. For some, it is impossible to work and study on these days being employed at [local governments outside Brisbane]. I'm sure you can appreciate the inconvenience of having no choice in the spread of the compulsory subjects over three days, without the consideration of a fourth, elective subject ... (Fourth-year student)

McInnis and Hartley (2002) argue that the increasing proportion of full-time students who work and the increasing number of hours worked does not necessarily mean that students are becoming disengaged with their study. These authors observe that the impression of non-engagement is a manifestation of shifts in the values and expectations about attendance. They argue for a 'negotiated engagement', where students' particular issues and needs are addressed via more focused and targeted engagement and learning. E-learning specialists are highlighting that such change is only beginning: students in the US can obtain lectures without delay on their mobile phones and laptops; in the near future, texts, video lectures and tutorials will be packaged and sold across the world. 'On the internet Harvard University is just as close as the University of Sydney' (Nolan 2009) although implementing flexible delivery and innovation carry attendant challenges and costs mentioned earlier (see 'New public management'). Current debates about planning education should also consider issues of student engagement and the possibility of transcendental changes in learning styles in the coming decades.

Discussion and conclusion

This paper has outlined the changes taking place in the Australian higher education environment and has explored the implications of these changes on planning education. Our underlying premise is that greater attention should be placed on exploring these changes and their implications on planning education, its student communities, and the changing characteristics of academic communities and their work practices. In addressing this aim, this paper drew together a broad range of literature to illustrate that there are powerful forces that have transformed Australian higher education since the 1980s.

Reflexive modernisation provides a useful lens to understand these changes through the concepts of individualisation, risk and reflexivity. The move from elite to mass education, and the Commonwealth government's macro-reform and micro-management approaches have created a complex operating environment for university managers. University managers have responded reflexively (and often compulsively), making changes to the structure and location of planning schools, academic work practices, modes of delivery and even program and unit structures. Moreover, there have been profound changes to the nature of the academic community (e.g. casualisation, multi-disciplinarity), to academic work practices (e.g. academic entrepreneurialism, de-jobbing) and to the delivery of planning education (e.g. flexible delivery, work placement programmes). These changes have profound impacts – good and bad – on planning education. Our motive here is to argue for more robust research into planning education, and to engage more fully students, academics, employers and university managers in such debates.

The survey of students discussed in this paper revealed that processes of individualisation and perceptions of risk are influencing the way that students engage with their planning education. The survey suggests that planning students may be working slightly longer hours and enjoying professional work experience earlier in their planning education than Australian students in general. Students are also finding their own ways of engaging in their studies, navigating attendance, timetabling, and other issues. The implications for the quality and effectiveness of planning education need to be considered in light of these changes.

Finally, the future of planning education is one that concerns students, employers, academics and universities. Not only is further research needed to balance out current debates about the future of planning education and to better understand the drivers of change, but meaningful consultation with university decision-makers and higher education policy-makers is also essential. Reflexive modernisation suggests that the transcendental changes occurring within higher education are far from over. Strategic and informed engagement in higher education policy and with the student communities is also required to complement the growing dialogue between the planning profession and employers.

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Note

1. Many of these risks were identified in the earlier higher education review process *Our universities: backing Australia's future* (2002) overseen by the then Minister for Education, Science and Training, the Hon Brendan Nelson MP. The then government's response to the Review in the 2003/2004 Budget was widely regarded as promoting greater emphasis on markets and fees, and greater government intervention in industrial relations and management practices; but in the end it failed to address the perceived risks (Duckett 2004; Pick 2006; Davis 2008).

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