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LEARNING IN TWO JURISDICTIONS' POST COMPULSORY EDUCATION AND TRAINING POLICIES

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Learning seems to be irrelevant to many national post compulsory education and training policies which are typically preoccupied with funding, fees, structures, credentials and outcomes. Is the converse true: is national policy therefore largely irrelevant to learning? This paper compares the implications for learning of the Australian Government's higher education policy arising out of its Crossroads review and the recent Draft national strategy for vocational education and training 2004 – 2010 with the UK's analogous policies. It concludes that Governments' main effect on learning is indirectly through their policies on the form and content of the curriculum .

Learning in Australia's national strategy for vocational education and training

The hottest curriculum issue in Australian post compulsory education and training over the last 5 years has surely been training packages. Training packages were introduced in vocational education and training gradually from 1997 and now just over half the hours of publicly funded training are provided as training packages (NCVER 2002, p.11). You will recall that training packages comprise the core endorsed components of workplace competency standards, workplace assessment guidelines and qualifications, and optional non-endorsed components of support materials such as learning strategies, assessment resources and professional development materials (ANTA 2003a).

Training packages are prominent in the Australian National Training Authority's national strategy for vocational education and training 1998 – 2003, *A bridge to the future* (ANTA 1998). The 1998 strategy summarised a group of policies which in aggregate are making major changes to vocational education and training. In addition to training packages the 1998 strategy tied vocational education and training qualifications to the Australian qualifications framework (ANTA 1998, p.6), it gave private training providers formally equal standing with public TAFE institutes by establishing both as registered training organisations (ANTA 1998, p.8) and from these elements ANTA constructed what in the 1998 strategy was called the Australian recognition framework (ANTA 1998, p.14) and which is now called the Australian quality training framework. The national training framework establishes national recognition for every program offered by every provider under the framework. This is a major achievement well beyond the informal recognition in higher education.

The 1988 strategy also incorporated traineeships which had been established in 1985 with modest changes to traditional apprenticeships to form 'new apprenticeships' (ANTA 1998, p.6), it stated a strong commitment to equity (ANTA 1998, p.16), and it stated State and Territory Governments' commitment to increase the amount of training they provided by cutting costs, a strategy it described as growth through efficiency (ANTA 1998, p.22).

Training packages are most emphatically not about teaching, which the Australian National Training Authority disparagingly refers to as 'teachers' traditional roles' (ANTA 2003b, p.6), nor even about learning: they are about the accumulation of

workplace competencies. Yet they potentially have significant implications for learning and teaching. Curriculum that had been constructed on standard principles of cognitive and conceptual development had to be replaced by ‘the specification of knowledge and skill and the application of that knowledge and skill to the standard of performance required in the workplace’ (ANTA 1999, p.3). The workplace competencies from which training packages have been constructed have been widely criticised as reductive and atomistic as has the requirement to assess competencies in actual or simulated workplaces (Wheelahan & Carter 2001, p.309) and even the notion of vocationally specific yet transferable competencies assessed from observable performance fails in its own terms (Stevenson 1993, p.97).

Training packages are prominent in ANTA’s summary evaluation of its 1998 strategy which noted that their implementation was variable and still had problems, or ‘issues’ as ANTA said (ANTA 1998, p.6). But they all but disappear from ANTA’s *Draft national strategy for vocational education and training 2004 – 2010* (ANTA 2003c). The Authority notes amongst the sector’s achievements that ‘Competency standards in training packages now cover most skills and knowledge needed for work, and training packages are being recognised as a broader human resources tool to drive company performance’ (ANTA 2003c, p.5), but complains that ‘The importance and flexibility of training packages has not always been effectively communicated to clients or providers’ (ANTA 2003c, p.6). Training packages’ only other appearance in the 2004 strategy is in the glossary.

Competencies fare only a little better in ANTA’s draft 2004 strategy. In addition to the references above as part of training packages, ANTA proposes that the first objective for 2004 - 2010 include that ‘Employers and workers will be more involved in influencing policy and defining competencies for the work of the future’ (ANTA 2003c, p.8). This is remarkable first for admitting that employers and workers haven’t been sufficiently involved in defining competencies. Teachers and their institutions have been systematically excluded from the process, so one wonders who has been involved. It is also remarkable in admitting workers into the process. Hitherto ANTA has referred to ‘industry’ to describe what has in fact been a shift of power to employers and employer groups.

Another noticeable silence in ANTA’s draft national strategy for 2004 – 2010 is online learning. The 1998 – 2003 strategy’s objective 1, outcome 3 was ‘The vocational education and training sector will have established a clear presence in the new online delivery environment and will lead the development of new world-class training programs and learning experiences available online’ (ANTA 1998, p.12). But in the 2004 – 2010 draft strategy online learning becomes ‘flexible and technology-assisted learning and the use of e-business for system transactions’ (ANTA 2004c, p.6) and is not included in the strategies.

It is hard to be sure of what ANTA’s draft national strategy for 2004 – 2010 is about, since it alternately general and vague, and the authority is apparently conducting a secret discussion parallel with the public consultations (Elson-Green 2003). Specific strategies are written as outcomes, and include recognition of prior learning (which ANTA prefers calling recognition of current competence – outcome 1); equality of participation and achievement by peoples with disabilities and by Indigenous

Australians (outcome 4); flexible funding, planning and accountability (outcome 7); partnerships between vocational education and training and schools, universities and adult and community education organisations (outcome 10); increased VET exports on shore and off shore and harmonising Australian VET standards with international standards (outcome 12) (ANTA 2003, p.9).

The strategy also refers to 'brokers' (outcome 6) and 'brokerage services' (outcome 2). ANTA doesn't elaborate on the role of brokers, but it seems they may 'negotiate possible training options with workplace management and with training clients' (Central West Community College production team 2000, p.13). One can imagine brokers being funded to deliver specified training outcomes which they in turn sub contract to training providers. This would be a way of 'Help[ing] clients navigate and interact with vocational education and training' and helping 'Clients, particularly youth in transition and small businesses, find vocational education and training more understandable and enjoy easier access to information, career development, navigation and brokerage services' (ANTA 2003, outcome 2 p.9) without actually simplifying the system and its overlay of national and State/Territory controls.

Learning in the Australian Government's new higher education policy

The Department of Education, Science and Training (2002) devoted a whole issues paper to the *Varieties of learning: the interface between higher education and vocational education and training*. But vocational education and training is hardly mentioned in the Government's higher education policy paper *Backing Australia's future* (Commonwealth of Australia 2003) and the Commonwealth barely mentions varieties of student learning after the issues paper.

There were other learning and teaching issues prominent during the inquiry and the proceeding year: large classes, 'soft marking', plagiarism, assessment generally and on-line learning. The Commonwealth is well informed on some of these issues. It has commissioned numerous studies on on-line learning, and the Australian Universities Teaching Committee is supporting extensive projects on teaching large classes and assessing student learning. In addition, Minister Nelson has expressed annoyance at Commonwealth funds supporting programs in aromatherapy, surfing science and golf management, what he calls cappuccino courses (Noonan 2003, p.7). However the Government's policy does not refer directly to any of these issues. It prefers to deal with these and other learning and teaching issues at a remove, by establishing a national institute for learning and teaching in higher education, new Australian awards for university teaching and by establishing an institutional learning and teaching performance fund.

The national institute for learning and teaching in higher education would be responsible for managing a competitive grants scheme for innovation in learning and teaching and a range of associated activities (Commonwealth of Australia 2003, p.28). The learning and teaching performance fund would be allocated 'using a range of indicators, including student progress and graduate employment outcomes' (Commonwealth of Australia 2003, p.29). The additional funding proposed for learning and teaching is 13% of the total additional funding proposed, less than half of each of the 2 major proposals for conditional increases in institutions' grants (28%) and the

conversion of marginally funded places to fully funded places (24%) but more than other proposals. The institutional learning and teaching performance fund would be about 1.5% of institutions' current operating grants, more than the 0.5% of funds allocated for institutions' performance in equity, but dwarfed by the 15% of total operating funds allocated for performance in research and research training.

The Commonwealth's lack of direct involvement in learning and teaching may be surprising in view of the serious issues raised during the policy review, but it is not unusual. The Commonwealth hasn't been directly involved in learning-teaching since 1988. This contrasts sharply with the deep involvement it seeks in institutional governance, program profile, industrial relations and research management.

UK

The UK Government's skills strategy white paper *21st century skills – realising our potential: individuals, employers, nation* (Secretary of State for Education and Skills 2003b) released in July 2003 is heavily reminiscent of the language of ANTA's 1998 and 2004 strategies in its commitment to 'Give employers greater choice and control over the publicly-funded training they receive and how it is delivered' (page 13), 'Putting employers' needs centre stage' (page 21), establishing a "demand-led" system' (page 21). The UK's strategy is also similar to Australia's in 'Strengthening and extending modern apprenticeships, as a top quality vocational route designed to meet the needs of employers' (page 14). The UK's strategy is also similar to ANTA's 1998 strategy but stronger than ANTA's 2004 strategy in its emphasis on 'Supporting the development of e-learning across further education, with more on-line learning materials and assessment' (p.15).

The UK strategy is quite different from ANTA's strategy, however, in seeking to build social partnerships to implement the strategy. The UK Government proposes to 'Form a national skills alliance, bringing together the key Government departments with employer and union representatives as a new social partnership, and linking the key delivery agencies in a concerted drive to raise skills' (p.15). The UK Government seems to have adopted a matrix coordination of its strategy, although it doesn't state this explicitly. Along one axis is industry sector in which 23 sector skills councils are to be coordinated by a sector skills council network (p.14). The other axis is geographic. The white paper says 'We will ask the Government office in each region to support regional development agencies, local learning and skills councils and local strategic partnerships in their region to identify suitable areas' (p.29).

The white paper also proposes to '... develop a stronger link between the Department for Education and Skills and the Department for Work and Pensions, and between the operations of Jobcentre Plus and the national Learning and Skills Council.' This is to 'give more encouragement for benefit claimants (including those on long term inactive benefits) to gain skills and qualifications to boost their chances of good jobs' (p.29). It will guarantee free tuition for adults to acquire 'employability skills' (p.13) and extend the education maintenance allowance for 16–19 year olds to adults undertaking their first post compulsory qualifications (p.23). The Government also proposes that fees be charged for students 'who already have good qualifications and who wish to undertake further study at the same or a lower level'. The Government proposes 'that in future,

each college and training provider should agree an overall income target with the Learning and Skills Council as part of its development plan. . . . Colleges will be free to develop their own strategies for securing fee income or other revenue' (p.28).

Finally, the Government proposes 'Introducing a credits framework for adults, to help both learners and employers package the training programmes they want, and build up a record of achievement over time towards qualifications' (p.14).

The UK Government released its white paper on *The future of higher education* in January 2003 after a delay of some months, reportedly because of a disagreement within Cabinet over its student financing and fee charging provisions. The white paper proposes to abolish up front tuition fees and allow universities to set their own rates for graduate contributions of between £0 and £3,000 a year. These would be deferrable by a graduate contribution scheme (Secretary of State for Education and Skills 2003a, p.85) similar to Australia's higher education contribution scheme. UK Labour's fee charging policy is thus remarkably similar to the Australia Coalition's policy.

The UK Government proposes to complement increased fees by increased grants for students from low socio economic status backgrounds (p.86), and almost as contentiously as the new fees, by an access regulator who would approve and monitor institutions' access agreements which state their action 'to safeguard and promote access' and meet the targets they would set for themselves (p.75). Britain already has a postcode premium – an increased grant for students whose home residence is in a post code with a low socio economic status – which the Government has asked the Higher Education Funding Council for England to increase and reform (p.67).

The Blair Government has established the very ambitious target of increasing the participation of 18 – 30 year olds from its present 43% to 50% by the end of the decade. Most of this expansion is planned for 'two-year work-focused foundation degrees, as they become the primary work-focused higher education qualification', and 'many' would be offered in further education colleges which would have stronger links and progression to higher education institutions (p.57).

The Government proposes to make additional funding for higher education institutions 'conditional on higher education institutions having human resource strategies that explicitly value teaching and reward and promote good teachers' (pp.47, 52) but the additional funding would be only 10% of the additional funding proposed for research (p.24). The Government proposes to establish new national standards for teaching in higher education and provided accredited training for all new teaching staff by 2006. A national training and induction program would be introduced for external examiners (p.47). The Government also proposes to extend the title of 'university' to institutions which are not authorised to award research higher degrees (p.47).

The Government also proposes to encourage closer relationships between higher education institutions and their regions through a regional development agency established in each region. Regional development agencies would be 'given a stronger role in steering the higher education innovation fund' which is about 7% of the increased research funding proposed. The Government proposes to establish 'a network of up to 20 knowledge exchanges to promote the critical role of less research-intensive

HE institutions in transferring technologies and knowledge, and in skills development, within local communities of practice' (p.36).

Commonalities and differences in impact on learning

The major elements of the new Australian and UK tertiary education policies are summarised in the table below. The table reflects personal judgments and categorisations. For example, Australia's higher education policy includes a 'collaboration and structural reform fund' (p.39), but this would absorb another program and the additional funding proposed is only 1% of the total additional funding proposed for the policy. So I have not recorded this as a major element to increase collaboration with other sectors.

Table1: Major elements of new tertiary education policies in Australia and the UK

	Australia		UK	
	VET	HE	FE	HE
Learning				
Teaching		✓		✓
Curriculum	✓			✓
On-line learning	✓		✓	
Improve credit transfer	✓		✓	
Increase employer control	✓		✓	
Increase fees		✓	✓	✓
Increase participation	✓			✓
Equity	✓	✓	✓	✓
Increase regional role		✓	✓	✓
Increase collaboration with other sectors	✓		✓	✓
Internationalisation	✓	✓		
Concentrate research funding		?		✓

We have already noted some of the similarities in Australian and UK vocational education and higher education policies. Some of differences are also interesting. The Australian Government's planned growth of higher education is deferred until 2007, and even then does not maintain pace with demographic growth. The vocational education and training strategy aspires to strong growth, although no government seems to have made a commitment to achieving it. In contrast the UK Government proposes ambitious growth, but in higher education rather than in further education. The UK Government also seeks to integrate its two post compulsory sectors even further, again in stark contrast to Australia. The two countries plan to reform curriculum in the growing sector, leaving the other sector untouched if not unaffected.

No policy says anything directly about student learning, and both countries' Governments express general hopes to improve teaching in their higher education sectors through intermediate bodies – a national institute for learning and teaching in higher education in Australia (Commonwealth of Australia 2003, p.28) and a teaching quality academy in the UK (Secretary of State for Education and Skills 2003a, p.46). Yet we have seen that Governments' curriculum changes can have a major effect on teaching. Australian vocation education and training's curriculum packages are an obvious example, and the UK Government's proposals to introduce a credit framework for adults and, 'wherever possible' dividing qualifications into 'identifiable units' (Secretary of State for Education and Skills 2003b, p.83) could also affect learning and teaching significantly, albeit indirectly.

But policies' impact on learning seems to diminish as they become more remote from the curriculum. Fee increases may affect who gets into the classroom, but hardly what happens within them. Now that the move to mass tertiary education has been achieved it seems unlikely that more growth – an increase in quantity – would have a qualitative affect on student learning. Even an apparently important development such as a significant increase in international enrolments in Australian higher education has had remarkably little impact on students' educational experience since they tend to study and socialise in their own ethnic groups (Nesdale & Todd, 1993).

Conclusion

Notwithstanding the occasional although remarkably infrequent rhetorical flourish, none of Australia's or the UK's tertiary education policies consider students' learning, let alone seriously engage with it. Starting anew, one could imagine determining learners' needs and designing learning environments to suit those needs and to develop students' potential. This is so far removed from the way these Governments have developed their tertiary education policies that it would have seemed impossibly idealistic to suggest it. Both Governments seek to improve teaching in higher education by professionalising it, but both mediate their influence through intermediaries.

Governments' influence on learning in tertiary education seems to have much greater although indirect effect when their policies are about curriculum: its content and form. Australian Governments' policies in vocational education and training curriculum has not always been beneficial, and some might see it as a good reason to keep governments as far removed from the issue as possible. But I think this is wrong. Learning-teaching is at least two-thirds of universities' activities, most of vocational education and training's activities, and at least 80% of the activities of students and teachers combined. It is surely not healthy for the Commonwealth, which still establishes the financing framework for most of institutions' funding, to have such little involvement in this most important of the sectors' activities.

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