The New Inheritors

Transforming Young People’s Expectations of University

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This groundbreaking book examines why the majority of Australian school leavers want to go to university and have resisted government attempts to promote alternative forms of tertiary education. The New Inheritors explores differences in young people’s understanding of the purpose of university and their reasons for wanting to enrol. The book reveals that although there has been a general shift in values towards the utilitarian perspective, there is still significant support for the traditional liberal idea of university education as a cultural experience. This support is concentrated in well-educated families, regardless of their financial resources, but there is a substantial number of young people from less well-educated families who have absorbed the liberal perspective. The book begins with an extensive and unique overview of changes in Australian federal government tertiary education policy and changes in the public discourse on education. This overview provides a framework against which differences among today’s students are examined in detail. Drawing on a study of over 200 secondary school students from diverse backgrounds The New Inheritors records their attitudes to university – including access, fees and the role of government – and explores how these are formed by their family backgrounds and influenced by public policy on education. The New Inheritors uncovers the complexity of young people’s attitudes, and what processes occur in the forming and reforming of those attitudes to university and what young people really want from university education.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS


1. Changing assumptions and expectations 3
2. A revolution in policy 13
3. Nurseries of liberal values, nurseries of economic values 41
4. Culture and class 61
5. Inheritors and Newcomers 77

Part 2: Transforming young people’s expectations of university.

6. “Going to university will ...” 89
7. Knowledge and higher education 107
8. Access and payment 121
9. Conclusions 135
PART 1: THE CHANGING CONTEXT OF AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITY EDUCATION.
CHAPTER 1

CHANGING ASSUMPTIONS AND EXPECTATIONS

The large number of students enrolling in university for the first time has challenged assumptions and expectations about the nature of the undergraduate university experience – experiences that have their origins in the elite system of higher education some 30 years ago. (McInnis & James, 1995, p. 4).

Around two thirds of Australian school leavers would like to enrol at university, but just what they hope to achieve there or to gain from the experience is unclear. Students who are commencing their university studies are also more diverse than ever before in terms of their age, gender, home location, ethnicity and socioeconomic status than ever before. Until recently, undergraduate university students were drawn from a narrow band of society and shared similar backgrounds, educational experiences, values and expectations of university. They constituted an ideal, but recognisable, student archetype against which aspiring students could be measured to see if they merited a university education. This is no longer the case: since the 1940s when the Commonwealth Government first involved itself in the provision of university education, Australian society has changed almost beyond recognition in terms of demographic composition, employment patterns, the status of women and popular culture. During this period, monetarist economic theory that advocates the deregulation and privatisation of public utilities has become widely accepted at the policymaking level and higher education policy reflects the view that university education is a product to be traded in an open market. Sociologist Michael Pusey has argued that economic policy has a pervasive effect in determining social values, but it is unclear if today’s university students share the traditional model of university as an opportunity for intellectual and personal exploration and development, or whether they subscribe to a new model that regards university as a way of maximising occupational choices and employment prospects (Pusey, 1990). Despite the abundance of research into the factors contributing to academic success and attrition from tertiary study, there has been little attempt until now to ask prospective university students what they believe to be the purpose of university education or why they wish to enrol.

The young people who want to go to university are diverse in terms of their family backgrounds, ethnicity, school experiences, academic achievements and ambitions. I wanted to discover whether this diversity would produce markedly different views about the purpose and value of university education. When those young people sat down to complete their tertiary entrance applications, what prompted them to select university ahead of a technical college? And what mental
image of university motivated their choices – did they see themselves joining a community of scholars or was it a means of entry into a more desirable type of occupation? Were they hoping for a transformative experience at university or anticipating several more years of “school”?

This book offers some answers to those questions based on a study, undertaken over several years, which invited young people to articulate their values and aspirations, and to offer their own opinions about nature and purpose of higher education and the role it would play in achieving their goals. Nine schools took part in the study; their status and the socioeconomic background of their students spanned the full range from elite to disadvantaged. The young people who participated in the study were divided into two polar groups for comparison using their father’s educational attainment and occupation as the key selection criteria. Those young people whose fathers are graduates and whose occupations are described as professional or senior manager are described as the Inheritors; they closely match the stereotype of the traditional student. The second group of young people in this study consists of young people whose fathers did not complete secondary school, irrespective of their occupation or income. They are the Newcomers.

The responses from the study, which I explore in later chapters, are synthesised with evidence derived from almost sixty years of research into the attitudes of school leavers and undergraduate university students to show the connections between these results and existing social trends. The answers indicate the possible structure of Australian society in the future as today’s students graduate to become influential members of the community. They also go to the heart of the policymaking process since education policies that do not take students’ beliefs and attitudes concerning education (particularly higher education and all of the myths, desires and dreams encompassed in that term) into account are likely to be ineffectual or counterproductive.

During the process of analysing and interpreting the answers revealed through the studies, I have engaged with a range of theories about the formation of young people’s identity, values and attitudes. The most significant of these is Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital. Bourdieu found that economic obstacles were not an adequate explanation of the enormous differences in the rates of school completion or university enrolment between middle class and working class children. If money (economic capital) were not the principal reason why an industrial worker’s son had a less than two in a hundred chance of enrolling at university, (compared with a better than one in two chance for a senior executive’s son) then another force must be at work; he named this force “cultural capital” (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979). Bourdieu defined three forms of cultural capital: institutional, objectified and embodied. He argued that each of these played a significant role in the process of developing children’s perception of themselves as learners and determines their educational progress.

In its institutionalised state, cultural capital refers to academic qualifications: those certificates and prizes that act as proof of cultural competence and confer upon their holders “a conventional, constant legally guaranteed value” (Bourdieu, 1986).
Academic qualifications are guaranteed by the institutions that issue them, and this allows the community to assess the status and market value of the person holding them.

The objectified state of cultural capital refers to material objects that are valuable not only because they signify various things about their owners, but also because their owners can use them to enrich their stores of cultural capital. A student who has the latest computer equipment at home has an advantage over others who have to depend on public facilities or less sophisticated equipment: ownership also indicates that the student’s family has sufficient money to purchase new equipment and it provides an index of the family’s values that other members of their community find easy to interpret. The family that invests a substantial amount of money on educational equipment has identified itself as a family that endorses a set of values very different from that of one that spends the same amount on a high-tech television or on customising a car.

The last form of cultural capital, the embodied state, refers to the habits that lead to success. These “dispositions of the mind and body” include dedication to the long hours of study or practice that are needed to master particular fields of study, but they also include ways of approaching a task or acceptance of the need to sacrifice immediate gratification in favour of long-term rewards (Bourdieu, 1986). This is the form of capital that was of most interest to me in writing this book – it is transmitted at home from early childhood and frequently without conscious effort on the part of the adults or of the child. Cultural capital in its embodied form is a crucial factor in determining academic success; it creates a desire for institutional capital in the form of qualifications such as a degree from a high-status university and for material objects that have cultural capital, but it also enables the student to make use of them. Wanting a degree from a prestigious university is not enough if the young person concerned has not acquired the self-discipline and work ethic necessary to achieve that end.

Using Bourdieu’s theory of cultural capital, I asked the young people in this study about their interests and activities, their perception of themselves as students or intellectuals, their reasons for wanting to go to university, the people and things that had influenced their choices and their understanding of the purpose of university education. Previous research suggests that few students have thought deeply or coherently about their plans for tertiary education before enrolment (Archer, Cantwell & Bourke, 1999). But the majority of students completing secondary school prefer university to TAFE (Harvey-Beavis & Ellsworth, 1998; James, 2000; James, 2002; James, Baldwin & McInnis, 1998), regardless of their prospects of success, even though they do not always understand their own reasons for this preference. Class boundaries have blurred to the extent that many young people now take for granted educational and occupational opportunities that their parents struggled to achieve and which their grandparents could have imagined only in dreams. The feminist movement of the 1970s has wrought such profound changes to the expectations and experiences of young Australia women and men that are so great it is difficult to calculate their magnitude. There has also been a vast change in society’s understanding of the purpose of education since the end of the Second World War. In the past, Australian educators have held one of two competing interpretations of the
purpose of education: it would contribute to the emancipation of the industrial working class and reduce the disparity between classes or it would enable less privileged members of society to join the middle class (Bennett, 1982). I wanted to know how young people’s lives were affected by the outcomes of the changes that had occurred and how they interpreted the purpose of education.

THE SCHOOLS AND THEIR STUDENTS

The study on which this book is based was conducted in nine schools located within one Australian state, Victoria. In Australia, the school education is the responsibility of the state governments which determine policy and curriculum and administer the public system. Catholic secondary schools are administered by a network of Catholic Education Offices located across Victoria. The Association of Independent Schools is the peak body for schools run by other religious denominations and community groups. Independent schools range from elite institutions dating back to the colonial period to newly-established schools run by parents.

Victoria’s oldest private schools were intentionally modelled on the nine English “Great Schools” and for years their senior staff were recruited from those schools whenever possible, or from lesser public schools (Selby-Smith, 1983). The uniforms, prefects, emphasis on sporting activities, traditions and, until recently, their curricula all reflected their spiritual and ideological, if not actual, origins. These private (mostly Anglican) schools were intended to serve the needs of wealthy middle- and upper-class families. Like their English antecedents, they were designed to promote and transmit an elite form of culture, one based on notions of inherited ability or aptitude for leadership. These schools existed to train society’s leaders, and as a consequence came to be regarded as the standard to which other schools should aspire, and against which other schools would be measured for generations to come. Many of the schools established in the mid to late 19th century by other religious denominations did not seriously challenge the model of education provided by these schools or dispute the values they promoted, but copied their practices in order to claim a share in the tradition for their own constituents (Sherington, Petersen & Brice, 1987). Since the Second World War, many newer private schools have felt obliged to emulate at least some of the aspects of the local “Great Schools” to make themselves acceptable to parents. Newer private schools (and government schools) were also pressured to define themselves according to the standards of academic or artistic excellence set by the established schools: when they are criticised it is for not being like (or as good as) the established, private schools. As a consequence of this history, going to a private school has become much more than a matter of personal choice; it is a public demonstration of allegiance to a specific set of values (Teese, 1981). All nine of the schools which participated in the study (and which have been given pseudonyms) reflect the traditional model of the private or independent school to some degree.
Ariel Grammar prides itself on its commitment to academic excellence and creativity; it regards itself as the epitome of a traditional liberal arts education – a little unconventional compared with other independent schools but far more creative. Excellence is what counts regardless of the field in which it is achieved; outstanding results in music and mathematics are celebrated as highly as sporting achievements. The school provides a very wide range of programs in art, music and drama as well as traditional academic subjects: it has a full orchestra and choir, its drama productions are of professional quality and its sporting reputation is excellent. Ariel Grammar students are often selected for state or national teams, but it does not choose to compete in some of the more prestigious school sporting events. Founded in 1895, the school is located in an area that has had a rather bohemian past, but is now very fashionable and expensive. Its central location makes it accessible to families from all over the metropolitan region, but the majority of them are drawn from the affluent, bay-side suburbs close to the school. Ariel Grammar has the highest socioeconomic status score though not the highest General Achievement Test scores of the nine schools.²

St Terrence’s College was founded in 1918 as the matriculation college for Catholic boys living throughout the Melbourne metropolitan region. At a time when sectarian discrimination was common, St Terrence’s provided a pathway into higher education for boys who could not afford to attend the elite Xavier College. The school remains under the governance of a religious order although there are no longer any brothers on the staff. The order which owns the school was established in Ireland in the nineteenth century to make up the educational deficit produced by systemic discrimination against Catholics; their original mission was to educate poor Catholic boys for employment and advancement once the restrictions on Catholics were removed.

The school moved to its current location in 1932 in what is now one of Melbourne’s most exclusive suburbs. St Terrence’s College is regarded as the jewel among the order’s Victorian schools. Many of the students come from the local area, but it draws students from all over the eastern suburbs. There is also a small number of students who commute across the city from the northern and western suburbs, occasionally transferring from an affiliated school in the inner west. The school has a reputation for firm discipline and excellent pastoral care, but it is also notable for its extensive sporting facilities and achievements. Over the last few years, St Terrence’s College has worked hard to improve its academic reputation and recently topped the state examination results.

St Mary’s College was founded in 1883 by an order of Irish nuns that had arrived in Australia in the 1860s. They opened their first Victorian school in 1873 and St Mary’s College followed 10 years later in what was then a semi-rural area on the outskirts of Melbourne. St Mary’s was established to ensure that talented Catholic girls had the opportunity to pursue their education as far as possible and until the late 1990s many of the students came from lower-middle and working class families. It was one of the first girls’ schools to offer Matriculation and it has
always prided itself on its academic reputation. In the last decade, gentrification has changed the surrounding suburbs and the school is now in one of the wealthiest areas of Melbourne. Now many of the students come from very high socioeconomic status backgrounds. Although a number of past students have considerable prominence in professional fields and its examination results are generally impressive, the school does not choose to publish that information, preferring to congratulate all the students for their efforts.

Students from these three schools have the highest socioeconomic status, and they have the most educated parents; their mothers are the most likely to be professionals, and their fathers most likely to own or operate a business or hold a managerial position. The students attending these three schools are very strongly oriented to university and appear to regard it as their natural destination.

The Inner Western Schools

The inner western schools are not quite as close to the traditional model of the private school as the schools in the east/south east metropolitan region, but they look similar in many respects. The uniforms and school organisation are similar. These schools are comfortably middle class, but a long way behind in socioeconomic status and academic achievement.

St Brigid’s is similar in age to St Mary’s College and regards itself as having a long tradition of promoting academic excellence combined with “development of the whole person”, nevertheless it did not offer Matriculation until the 1950s and its reputation is not as distinguished. Some of the students come from the surrounding wealthy suburbs, but the majority come from the newer subdivisions up to ten kilometres away in the “McMansion” mortgage belt or from the older, city-fringe suburbs that have been gentrified in recent years.

St Cormac’s College opened in 1953 on its present site at what was then the very edge of the metropolitan area in response to the growing demand from the new housing estates nearby. The school offers a wide range of subjects, including an extensive vocational program and also a comprehensive informal curriculum, to approximately 1,100 young men. One of the most striking features of the school is its extensive sports facilities: it is better known for the students’ achievements across a wide range of sports than for its academic reputation. In recent years the school has moved away from this focus on sport and has competed successfully in the National Rock Eisteddfod and in various debating competitions.

The Outer Western School

Western Regional College is the face of contemporary Catholic education. Built in the eighties in the middle of a newly created suburb on the western plains about fifty minutes drive from the city, this school is a senior regional college, administered by the diocesan Catholic Education Office. It accepts students from three junior regional schools. Until the late 1990s, the surrounding area was farmland and some traces of that history were still visible among the recently constructed housing
developments. The area grew rapidly due to the availability of budget-priced housing, and families with young children skew the population. This is Australia’s new melting pot: 21 per cent of the students were born overseas, more than double the figure for any other school. Of the nine schools included in the survey, Western Regional College was the most culturally and linguistically diverse. Ten languages other than English were in use daily in the home: Italian was the most common (8 per cent) followed by Croatian (5.8 per cent); Arabic tied with Maltese for third place (2.3 per cent). The school had the lowest SES figure and the lowest General Achievement Test score of the nine schools that participated in this study. The students from Western Regional College are more likely to live in a single-parent family and to have parents who are unemployed. Western Regional College is the furthest removed from the model of the traditional private school, but it is populated by families who aspire to a successful future for their children.

The Regional Schools

Catholic schools have played a special role in Victorian education ever since the 1850s gold rush brought prosperity to the state. In many rural areas they were the only secondary schools available until the expansion of the state secondary system in the late 20th century. They drew their pupils from the local Catholic communities, but ambitious families who wanted middle-class accomplishments such as music, elocution and drawing also enrolled their children regardless of their religious affiliation. As a consequence, rural Catholic schools remained close to the model of the traditional private school, but used the fees they charged wealthy families for these accomplishments to subsidise places for needy pupils. As a consequence, Catholic schools – particularly in rural areas – have always been more ethnically and socioculturally diverse than other private schools (Rogan, 2000). The student profile of a country Catholic school continues to depend on the nature of its local catchment areas. Enrolment in a regional Catholic school, particularly a boarding school, can represent a significant investment of a family’s time and money; some students must travel long distances to attend a particular school, and as rural incomes are generally less than metropolitan incomes, even modest fees may be a significant drain on the family economy.

Western District College is located 286 kilometres from Melbourne in Victoria’s wheat belt; it is the only boarding school in the sample and of the three country schools in the study it comes closest to the traditional model of the private school. The college is set in 48 hectares of grounds that include extensive sporting fields, stadiums and a swimming pool that reflect its origins as a boys’ boarding school. In the early 2000s it had one of the largest cadet units in Victoria offering adventure-type activities including abseiling, unarmed combat, radio and signal work, first aid, canoeing and orienteering. Senior day students have the option of attending supervised study and dinner: this program was introduced in recognition that transporting children to school over long distances is very disruptive to farming life and that it can be difficult for young people to study effectively at home. Western District College’s prospectus emphasises that it provides “genuine care for the
individual and a safe and nurturing environment for the young people of our district”.

Most students attending Gippsland College live in the regional city where the school is located, but a substantial minority travel by bus from the surrounding small towns and farms. The Gippsland region depends on dairy farming, mining, timber cutting and fishing, and is the poorest region of Victoria. Although the city itself is more prosperous than the surrounding area, opportunities for further education or employment are limited. Gippsland College was formed in 1979 by the amalgamation of 2 existing single sex Catholic schools. Privately, teachers admit that things have not been the same since a major petrochemical company closed its main office in the early nineties. In those days, the student body included the children of engineers, chemists, accountants and skilled technicians; they had positive attitudes to school and high ambitions. After the company withdrew, there was more violence and drug use among young people who struggled to find school relevant. In the early 2000s, the school added vocational subjects to its curriculum and introduced the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning believing that its practical nature would appeal to many of the students and provide them with sought after skills.

North Central College was formed in 1984, also by the amalgamation of two older single sex schools. It is located in a regional city at the heart of Victoria’s fruit-growing district and attracted large numbers of Italian and Greek migrants in the 1950s and ‘60s. Since 2001 a large number of Iraqi refugees have also settled there to be followed more recently by Sudanese refugee families. Very few of the newest arrivals have enrolled at North Central College, but the school has joined other community organisations in practical activities designed to help the new arrivals. The economic outlook for this region began to improve in the early 2000s and employment grew, mainly due to tourism, however, opportunities for further education are limited and employment is precarious. A prolonged drought and globalisation of the Australian economy have severely reduced the income of many farming families throughout the whole region. The most striking feature about the students attending all three of the country schools is their monoculturalism. Less than two per cent of their students were born overseas, and just one per cent commonly speak a language other than English at home.

Plan of the Book.

Part One of the book provides a contextual framework for the results from the study. In these chapters, I have traced the history of Australian higher education policy in the post-war period, showing how the policy discourse has changed since the 1940s, traced the ways in which community attitudes to university education have changed throughout the course of the 20th century and examined research into the links between students’ socioeconomic status, attitudes and enrolment/completion levels. In the final chapter in Part One I test the validity of Bourdieu’s concept of a class of Inheritors in the Australian context and conclude that a similar group can be identified within the Australian population.
Part Two contains three chapters that explore the attitudes of young people who took part in the study detail. It confirms the existence of two distinct groups on the basis of their families’ socioeconomic status, which I have called Newcomers and Inheritors. However, I have identified another division running across these socioeconomic categories. This division is not based on wealth, but on cultural values. Culturists, as journalist and social commentator Andrew West (2006) calls them, value the inherent and intangible benefits of education, while the other group – the Materialists – make no special claims about the unique value of education and regard it as a commodity like any other. There has been a general trend towards the utilitarian end of the spectrum, but this additional dimension to the division indicates that there has been an exchange of values between the Newcomers and Inheritors. Many of the Newcomers have become Culturists; they have acquired an appreciation of the traditional liberal-humanist perspective on education as well which has had a significant effect on their reasons for wanting to go to university. The final chapter in this section examines responses to questions of access to university and who should be responsible for the costs associated with higher education.

The conclusion highlights young people’s expectations and outlines the factors that have shaped them. It then identifies areas where the government’s assumptions about what young people want are out of step with reality.

NOTES

1 The term Great Schools refers to nine English schools identified by T. W. Bamford, *Rise of the public schools: a study of boys’ public boarding schools in England and Wales from 1837 to the present day*, Nelson, London, 1967 as Eton, Winchester, Westminster, Charterhouse, St. Paul’s, Merchant Taylors, Harrow, Rugby and Shrewsbury. These schools set the standard for private schools throughout the British colonies.

2 The General Achievement Test (GAT) is a test of general knowledge and skills in written communication, mathematics, science and technology, humanities, the arts and social sciences. The Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority use the GAT scores to contribute to the statistical moderation of school assessed tasks and to check the reliability of exam marking.

REFERENCES


CHAPTER 1


CHAPTER 2

A REVOLUTION IN POLICY

Where the frontier between the state and the market is to be drawn has never been a matter that could be settled, once and for all, at some grand peace conference. Instead, it has been the subject, over the course of this century, of massive intellectual and political battles as well as constant skirmishes. In its entirety, the struggle constitutes one of the great defining dramas of the twentieth century. Today the clash is so far-reaching and so encompassing that it is remaking our world – and preparing the canvas for the twenty-first century (Yergin & Stanislaw, 1998, p. 11).

Young people’s personal values are deeply affected by the dominant values of the society in which they grow to maturity. Those values continue to shape every aspect of their lives by defining what is normal and by creating expectations of how things ought to be done; while a minority of families discuss changes in public policy and their implications, those changes have a subtle and pervasive effect on the formation of young people’s ambitions and expectations with regard to education and employment.

There has been a profound transformation in the values underpinning public policy in Australia which has its roots in an ideological movement that began during the Second World War. From the mid-1940s to the mid-1980s eighties a group of economists worked steadily to convert the governments of most English-speaking nations from a Keynesian approach to economic management to a model described as monetarist or economically rationalist, and to encourage the spread of a political philosophy known as neoliberalism.1 The general effect of their success in this endeavour has been the adoption of a market approach to public policy and the subsequent privatisation of many services formerly provided by government departments coupled with a determination on the part of government to make the remaining public bodies, including universities, function like private companies and corporations.

Rather than resisting this trend, or adopting a cautious approach to this new economic philosophy, the Australian government was among the first to embrace it in the mid-1970s (Jaenesch, 1989). Since then neoliberalism has guided successive Australian governments to varying degrees who have applied it across the range of policy areas, including higher education. One specific effect of this ideological approach has been the creation of a university system that not only reflects the generalised paradigm shift in Australian social and cultural values, but is designed to produce a new kind of graduate, “an economic citizen … better attuned to the
requirements of an enterprise culture” (Marginson 1997, p154). The magnitude of these changes has been so great as to be described as a “counter revolution” (Hambly, 1997) in public policy, but they did not occur suddenly, nor were they inevitable. There have been a number of key events or decisions that represent significant turning points in Australian higher education policy; each of which marks a stage in the gradual move from an understanding of higher education as a way of reducing the disparity between classes, or public benefit, or a matter of national interest, to a conviction that it is a positional good for which the consumer must pay.

The Pre-war Period

Until the Second World War the Commonwealth Government played a very minor role in education of any type and its role in tertiary education was negligible. Commonwealth Governments of all persuasions had been reticent, if not hostile, to the idea of involving themselves in educational matters during the first forty years following Federation. The Second World War altered this situation irrevocably; it not only revealed manpower shortages in many crucial areas such as chemical engineering, but it transformed public opinion about the value of scientific research. The war also brought the Commonwealth Government and the universities into close contact for the first time as they strove to solve wartime problems. This new relationship persuaded the government that investment in scientific and technical education and research was crucial to the nation’s survival and it began to look for ways to become involved. During the state of emergency it was reasonable for the Commonwealth Government to assume responsibility and provide funds for “strategic studies” under the defence power and national security regulations, but the Curtin Government’s real plan was much larger. Despite being composed of working men, many of whom had not completed secondary school, it was the first federal government to realise that education was a matter of national, rather than state or regional, interest and to act on that belief.

A more or less coherent education policy swiftly emerged. Under Prime Minister Curtin, the government created the Universities Commission in 1943 and appointed a committee of inquiry to review the Commonwealth’s responsibilities in education with a view to extending its influence. The committee’s recommendations were incorporated into the Education Act (1945), which established the Commonwealth Office of Education. Next, the Australian University Act (1946) established the Australian National University to allow graduates to undertake post-graduate study without having to travel overseas. To put its constitutional power to make laws supporting university students beyond dispute the government included “benefits to students” among the other social services mentioned in the 1946 referendum. As troops returned after the war, enrolments more than doubled rising to almost 32,000 in 1948 (Coaldrake & Stedman, 1998). Even Curtin’s death could not stop this trend. In September 1949, Prime Minister Chifley approved 3000 university scholarships for veterans and other able students who wished to undertake studies in fields deemed to be relevant to reconstruction; ten thousand secondary scholarships were intended to follow (Whitlam, 1995).
Just how radical a change in attitude had taken place was revealed by an exchange between Robert Menzies (then Leader of the Opposition) and J. J. Dedman, the Minister for War Organisation of Industry. When Menzies tried to persuade the House of Representatives to express support for the importance of education in post-war reconstruction Dedman asserted that the government was already well aware of its importance and had been making plans for some years. Henceforth, (and in contradiction to the constitution) the federal and state governments, would be equal partners in education (Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates, 26 July 1945, pp. 4616-4617). Shortly before the 1949 election Chifley articulated his party’s motives at its national conference:

I try to think of the Labor movement not as putting an extra sixpence in somebody’s pocket, or making somebody Prime Minister or Premier, but as a movement bringing something better to the people; better standards of living, greater happiness to the mass of the people. We have one great objective – the light on the hill – which we aim to reach by working for the betterment of mankind, not only here but anywhere we may give a helping hand (Chifley, 1949).

**Menzies and the Forgotten People**

The election brought about a change in government, but the shift in direction of higher education policy was scarcely perceptible during the first few months. Prime Minister Robert Menzies continued many of the programs initiated by the previous government, including the university scholarships, although he declined to fund the secondary ones. He did not abandon the Mills Inquiry, which had been set up by the Chifley Government to investigate the financial and other requirements of the universities, but he redefined the committee’s terms of reference and added his own nominee. Consequently, in 1951 Menzies presented the *States Grants (Universities) Bill* to parliament. The bill ratified existing commonwealth grants, and at the same time, introduced a new procedure that Menzies himself described as revolutionary, the provision of grants to the states to assist the universities under Section 96 of the Commonwealth Constitution. Menzies declined to provide financial support for the expansion and improvement of the public education system, arguing that it was clearly a state matter, but he was willing to make funding available to the universities because he believed that they had a major role to play in providing the administrative and professional class necessary to govern the nation, and because he understood the mood of the electorate at the time.

In 1950 Australia was on the brink of a period of rapid social change resulting from the upheavals caused by the recent war. Many of these changes affected the middle class, to whom Menzies referred as the “forgotten people” of Australia, more dramatically than any other part of society (Menzies, 1943). Throughout the fifties the development of secondary and tertiary industries, corporate and government bureaucracies facilitated the expansion of the middle class. Many newly affluent families probably saw the opportunity for their children to study at
university as another way of improving their career prospects, rather than a means of developing a cultured personality through participation in an intellectual community. Regardless of the reason, there was an immense and growing desire for university places that Menzies was happy to encourage.

Before the Second World War, Australia’s universities were small and impoverished by European and American standards. They had suffered badly during the Depression and the war had reduced their position even further; by the late 1940s they were in poor financial shape and barely coping with the huge influx of students (Davies, 1989). The provision of federal funding in 1951 alleviated the worst effects of the financial difficulties facing Australian universities, but it was only a short-term solution. In 1952 the vice-chancellors sought federal help a second time, and by the mid-fifties it was again apparent that something would need to be done to cope with the steadily rising demand for places. By this time Australia’s economic recovery had progressed to a point where money was available for a coherent, long-term solution to the problem of university finance. With this in mind, Menzies invited Sir Keith Murray, Chair of the British Universities Grants Committee, whom he had met during his 1956 visit to England, to chair a committee of inquiry that would report on the state of Australia’s universities. Released in 1957, the Murray Report found that because the state governments could not afford to finance them, “Australian universities were short-staffed, poorly housed and equipped, with high student failure rates, and weak honours and post-graduate schools” (Davies, 1982, p13).

Following the report, funding for new growth was made available by the states, with increased support from the Commonwealth Government. It seemed as if the universities might have to continue growing indefinitely in order to provide sufficient places to satisfy demand; in 1958, 1959 and 1960 the annual increase in enrolments exceeded 13 per cent. Throughout the fifties and sixties several new universities were established in Victoria, New South Wales, Queensland and South Australia by converting university colleges into autonomous universities or building new campuses, but pressure for further Commonwealth support was mounting. Despite Menzies’ resistance to further involvement, the level of Commonwealth support for all forms of education increased.

During the same period the economics of education emerged as a popular study worldwide. Economic theory was extrapolated into a conviction that improving the educational standards of the entire population would automatically improve the productivity of the nation. Following this line of reasoning, the purpose of university education was not simply to educate an elite cadre of social and political leaders, but to produce a continuous supply of skilled professionals who would drive the national economy. The mining boom that began in 1963 also strengthened the connection between economics and higher education. Mining and manufacturing companies could not find enough engineers and metallurgists and demanded that university places be increased; increasing job opportunities led to a further increase in applications. Most tertiary institutions could not keep pace and the situation was becoming critical. Business, industry and the government could not avoid the obvious conclusion; tertiary education had a vital role to play in Australia’s national development.
As Menzies saw it, there were several major problems to be dealt with in relation to the expansion of tertiary education in Australia. Universities were expensive. Business, commerce and industry all needed more qualified professionals, but the tendency of students to specialise in a particular field of study early in their studies meant that the broad liberal education he valued was being undermined. There was also a real possibility that in their haste to graduate more students the universities might lower their standards and destroy the university as a place of intellectual excellence. Menzies was convinced that higher education should be reserved for the select few who could benefit from the “refining and purifying process” (Martin, 1996, p. 22) it entailed. He genuinely dreaded the creation of what he called “second-rate homes of learning” (Bessant, 1977, p. 91). His personal feelings about the value and role of university education and his admiration for the elite British traditions help to explain why he was also reluctant to consider the American model of mass tertiary education institutions. He was not alone in this respect; as early as 1950 some academics foresaw difficulties ahead if the trend towards a mass system was to continue. Faced with these conflicting issues Menzies set up a new inquiry into tertiary education led by the Chairman of the Universities Commission, Sir Leslie Martin. Menzies chose Martin precisely because he was an Anglophile and a traditionalist. Martin had also given the vice-chancellors the impression that he, and the Universities’ Commission, were actively working to expand the university sector (Davies, 1989, p14).

Consequently, Menzies was surprised and angered by the Martin Commission’s interim report, published in June 1960. The changes it proposed would have increased the number of universities dramatically and at a cost the government could not afford. The government had been under intense pressure for some years to act on the problems facing the universities, but Menzies was aware that it could be electorally damaging to spend a very large sum of money on something that most voters would not use. He informed the vice chancellors that while his government would do its best to honour any agreements that had already been made, there would be no further large injection of funds; the universities would need to make good use of the money they received. Menzies had made it clear that if large numbers of Australians were to embark on tertiary education then it would be outside the universities. Following the brief given to him, Martin instructed the committee to investigate ways of meeting unmet demand for further education, but he did not allow them to question the philosophical assumptions underpinning the way in which Australian universities were organised and financed, nor did he permit them to speculate if American-style “multi-versities” might be more suited to Australia’s needs. Mindful of Menzies’ desire to preserve the elite model of university education, Martin proposed a compromise.

The Commission’s final report (known as the Martin Report) was presented to parliament in 1965. It upheld the view that tertiary education should be available to all applicants who had the capacity to undertake it. However, it also concluded that expanding existing forms of tertiary education was not an appropriate response because universities could not provide the sufficient variety of courses or cater for the range of abilities involved. The report proposed that three distinct
categories of tertiary institution should be developed – universities, colleges or institutes and teacher-training facilities (Committee on the Future of Tertiary Education in Australia, 1964).

Menzies rejected the recommendation that teacher-training boards should be included among its responsibilities and the proposal to establish an Australian Tertiary Education Commission responsible for all forms of tertiary education, but he accepted the plan for a two-tier system. A two-tier, or binary, system of universities and colleges would provide a larger, improved and more diversified higher education sector. Necessary expansion could take place, but under tight government control:

An uncontrolled expansion could lead to the situation, as in the United States, where many universities had deviated radically from these traditions. He realized that there could be no longer any justification for an elite based on privilege alone having a virtual monopoly of university places. The elite had to be expanded, but he was determined this would be done within predetermined limits (Bessant, 1977, p. 90).

Differences between universities and the new Colleges of Advanced Education (CAEs) were not clearly articulated and concerns about the Martin Report began to surface in academic circles even before it was released. In an unpublished paper, written in 1965, prominent academic P. H. Partridge criticised the committee for failing to address the “fundamental education theory, the central principles it purports to be following in the proposals it makes concerning the future role of the universities and the and the nature and functions of the new colleges … we are not told at all accurately in what ways the teaching should differ …” (Richardson, 1972, p. 4).

It’s Time: The Whitlam Years

In 1972 the Labor Party swept into power under the slogan “It’s Time”. The slogan promised a young and vigorous government that would enable Australia to take its place in the modern world (Barrett, 2001). It was understood that education would play a major role in the revitalisation of society. Prime Minister Gough Whitlam had held very strong beliefs about the role of education since the start of his political career; his first major speech in the House of Representatives in 1953 set the tone for the next 20 years:

Education is absorbing an increasingly larger part of the Budget of each of the States. At present, education is the largest item in each of those Budgets. I have no doubt that, as with every activity in respect of which the Australian government makes finance available, the Commonwealth will gradually be obliged to take over that function from the States. Everybody in Australia is entitled without cost to the individual, to the same kind of educational facilities, whether it be in respect of education at the kindergarten or tertiary stage or the post-graduate stage (Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates, 1 October 1953, p. 941).
He returned to the same theme at the end of the parliamentary year:

It is impossible any longer to regard education … as a State matter …. education has expanding frontiers …. and the Commonwealth is the only authority that has expanding financial frontiers. Education is a national and not a State matter (Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates, 2/3 December 1953, p. 836).

Whitlam’s political philosophy centered on the promotion of social equality and his attitude to education was shaped by his belief in social democracy, his strong sense of nationalism and his hatred of inefficiency. He was convinced it was the responsibility of government to intervene in society and to manage the economy in such a way that people were not disadvantaged by what he termed “inequality of luck” (Whitlam, 1977, p. 268). He rejected totally the values implicit in Menzies’ Forgotten People speech that, in his opinion, argued that fear and self-interest were the basis for social progress. As Whitlam saw it, education was the means of equipping citizens with the necessary knowledge and skills to become democratic political citizens; only education could equip people for full participation in society. If the constraints of poverty and ignorance could be removed, and a sense of community developed, many of Australia’s social and economic problems would disappear.

Soon after coming to power in 1972, Whitlam set the process of reform in motion. Determined to put his ideas about education into practice he created the Schools Commission to oversee primary and secondary education. Having done that, he asked the Chair, Professor Peter Karmel to examine the position of government and non-government primary and secondary schools throughout Australia and to make recommendations on ways of meeting their immediate financial. The Karmel Report, tabled in parliament in May 1973, described a school system riven by inequality and suffering from inadequate funding, and drew attention to the inequalities of educational opportunity in Australian schools remarking that:

The test of whether equality of opportunity existed would be that those going to on to higher education were drawn from all groups in the same proportion as each group was represented in the population … (Karmel, 1973, p. 17).

The Schools Commission proposed a long-term plan to ensure that all Australian schools met a minimum acceptable standard by the end of the seventies; the government welcomed the report and announced that it would implement its recommendations as a matter of urgency.

Further evidence of the Whitlam Government’s understanding of education as a means of achieving social justice followed: abolition of tuition fees at all universities, CAEs, technical colleges and teachers’ colleges, establishment of the Tertiary Education Assistance Scheme, a stringently means-tested living allowance that replaced the Commonwealth Scholarships paid to some 17 per cent of students and creation of range of educational programs designed to promote equality of opportunity. By devoting extra resources to all stages of education from pre-school to university, and by ensuring that the bulk of available funding went to public, not private, institutions Whitlam intended to reduce the traditional educational advantage of high socioeconomic status students over their poorer neighbours.
The Whitlam Government considered these reforms to be long overdue, but they were also expensive, and by mid-1975 they were costing more than six billion dollars. The cost would not have been a problem but for the oil crisis in 1974 and the worldwide recession that began in 1975. The Department of Treasury was unhappy at high levels of expenditure on what it regarded as non-essential services, and this unease spread quickly to the public. The 1975-76 Budget contained no further increases in tertiary education funding, but it also protected some areas. Had the Whitlam Government been returned to office in 1975 it is likely that the need for financial restraint would have prevented further expansion of the universities, but it is unlikely that the impact of any cuts to funding would have been as severe as the ones which followed the election of the Fraser Liberal Government in 1975 (Spaull, 1979).

A New Economic Policy

In 1944 Austrian economist Friedrich Hayek published *The Road to Serfdom* in which he argued that the trend towards government intervention in the economy (the eponymous economic philosophy championed by John Maynard Keynes) would stifle private enterprise and ultimately lead to a loss of individual freedom as various national governments attempted to manage both demand and supply for goods and services. Hayek was regarded as a maverick by mainstream economists, but his ideas found favour with a small group of academics at the University of Chicago and with members of the Mont Pèlerin Society, a group of intellectuals (mainly economists) who met regularly in Switzerland. American economist Milton Friedman was also a founding member of the Mont Pèlerin Society; together they embarked on a mission to reformulate thinking on economics and the role of government around the world. For more than two decades, Hayek argued that the social order should be based on individuals linked by contract and exchange, that individuals should take full responsibility for their own fate and the government should not interfere with the individual’s freedom of choice; liberalism should be stripped of its social democratic aspects to re-emerge in a fundamental form – neoliberalism.

Until the economic crisis of 1974, Hayek, Friedman and the other Chicago School economists had found few supporters for their ideas among politicians or heads of state. Most Western governments had accepted the Keynesian dictum that governments had an obligation to regulate growth, to provide services and generally manage the economy, but the first worldwide recession since the 1930s changed that view, at least in the English-speaking world. Production, development, investment and employment dropped sharply in most developed nations under the combined impact of economic uncertainty and the second OPEC crisis, but in defiance of all previously known economic laws, unemployment rose while inflation continued to grow.

In Australia, the Whitlam government’s first response to the worsening economic situation was to employ the conventional Keynesian strategies and increase government spending, but this did not have the expected effect: inflation
continued to rise while growth slowed. Instead of injecting further funds in the 1975 Budget, Treasurer Bill Hayden, spoke of a need for the government to restrain spending in order to give the private sector the opportunity to invest. In doing so he became the first Australian Treasurer to abandon Keynesian economics in favour of the newer monetarist model: his 1975-76 Budget, which declared that 1976 would be treated as a special year outside the normal triennial funding model would come to represent a crucial turning point in Australian higher education policy since the Second World War. Notwithstanding Hayden’s flirtation with monetarism, the Fraser Government which took office in 1975, was the first Australian government to implement policy based on this approach to economics (Marginson, 1997).

The Anti-Father Christmas

It would be an exaggeration to describe Malcolm Fraser as a New Right politician; nevertheless, the influence of neoliberal philosophy is discernible in many of the decisions taken by his government. On the surface it appeared that the Liberal Party’s understanding of the role of education had not changed significantly since the 1960s when the Menzies Government emphasised personal advancement within the context of national development, but in reality the new government’s approach was very different:

In its approach to social policy, the Fraser Government has taken a position strongly opposed to the style and substance of the Whitlam administration which preceded it. The differences are not confined to the philosophy of social policy itself, but also flow from a radically different view of the roles of the public sector in the economic system and of the Commonwealth Government in Australian federalism (Scotton, 1980, p. 1).

Fraser, who was once described as “the anti-Father Christmas” (Henderson, 1998) possessed a vision of government that was extraordinarily narrow. It rested on his conviction that people are natural adversaries and relied on fear as its motivating force; life was not meant to be easy, but restrained, self-reliant and fiscally responsible. Providing benefits to those who had not earned them or governing through consensus were dangerous because people would lose their vigilance and society would become soft (Little, 1989). Moreover, the Liberal Party under Fraser was ill-prepared for government when it took office in 1975. It had no real domestic policy except to reduce inflation; its broad objective was to reduce the size of the public sector while leaving the largest possible proportion of total resources in the hands of the private sector. Education was singled out for special attention because it had been the vehicle for Whitlam’s social reforms (Spaull, 1979). Where Whitlam had intended to use education to enable citizens to exercise their democratic political rights, Fraser’s intention was to create social conditions that would produce individualist, economic anti-citizens and his education policy emphasised meeting the needs of business and industry, and the importance of individual responsibility.
Throughout 1976 the Minister for Education, Senator Carrick, fought a rearguard action to defend his portfolio from the Treasury, but by early 1977 it was clear that the Treasurer, Phillip Lynch, had succeeded in persuading the government that education funding must be cut. Fraser’s pre-election commitment to two per cent real growth in Commonwealth funding was abandoned, the eight funding categories for secondary schools established by Karmel were reduced to three and financial support for the wealthiest schools was restored. In the same year Carrick ordered the Schools Commission to transfer $13.8m from government schools and joint programmes to non-government schools on the grounds that the states’ improved financial position would enable them to direct more funds to public schools and that the poorest schools would have reached the minimum standard suggested by the Schools Commission and therefore did not need further support (Connell, 1993). The greater part of these redirected funds went to needy Catholic schools, but a substantial amount went to wealthy private schools on the grounds that they provided choice and diversity in education (Spaull, 1979).

In 1981 the government set up a cabinet sub-committee to examine ways of reducing government expenditure. The “Razor Gang”, as it became known, initiated a complete restructure of the CAE sector into a much smaller number of large institutions, suggesting that these would be more efficient in the management of their resources and offer greater opportunities to students. The net effect of these policies was to reverse the trend towards a system of mass tertiary education that had been in progress for 20 years. During this period the number of secondary students completing a matriculation year continued to rise, making competition for tertiary education places more acute (Connell, 1993). By cutting funding to public schools, and to the universities, Fraser effectively stopped university expansion, and in doing so he preserved much of its elite nature. Funding for universities and CAEs was cut to the point where it could barely keep pace with inflation; only the recently established Technical and Further Education (TAFE) sector received an increase in support. Getting a degree was a privilege largely restricted to the upper middle class – as it had been in the 1950s and early ‘60s. At the same time, business and industry would be supplied with skilled technical workers by an expanded TAFE sector in the role that Menzies had envisaged for the CAEs.

By 1982 it was apparent that a change of government was imminent and support for monetary economic theory presented the Labor Party with a dilemma. Keynesian economics did not seem able to provide a solution to Australia’s economic problems, but a neoliberal approach to economics was at odds with the ALP’s traditional values (Barrett, 2001). It would be five years before this conflict was resolved.

Those who expected or hoped that a return of a Labor government in 1983 would mean a return to the idealistic education policies of the Whitlam years were sadly disappointed. Desperate to win, the party had replaced Bill Hayden with Bob Hawke in the lead-up to the election. Unlike previous Labor leaders, Hawke had friends among wealthy business leaders as well as trade unionists giving him a more corporatist outlook than his predecessors. Hawke was also the first Prime
Minister in almost a decade who had not been Minister for Education at some stage in his career: in his opinion, education was simply not a priority issue, but it was expensive and therefore in need of attention.

Cabinet in general had decided that Whitlam’s education largesse had not been electorally rewarded and that education was a 1970s issue that should be dropped a long way down the reform agenda (Ryan, 1999).

The Hawke Government was faced with three possible choices: (i) endorse Whitlam’s vision of higher education as a means of transforming society and fund expansion, inviting accusations that it was ignoring election promises about fiscal responsibility; (ii) concentrate on the economy, limit the growth of the tertiary sector and ignore the problem of youth unemployment and the demands of business and industry for more trained personnel; (iii) provide a small funding increase for tertiary education while developing new sources of funding, and allow student demand to set the limits of growth. In an attempt to balance competing demands, the government opted for the third alternative.

The Labor Party was elected for three successive terms of government between 1983 and 1996. During that period, it became progressively more enamoured of the monetarist approach to economic policy. Policy produced between 1983 and 1985 conformed to the party policy articulated before the election and its first two Budgets relied on a (more or less) Keynesian approach in combination with a variety of policy adjustments and an agreement between the government, business and the unions to control wage and price increases intended to control inflation, known as the Accord.

Rising youth unemployment led to a focus on schools and on increasing the number of students remaining at school until Year 12, but the government also created 3000 additional tertiary places in 1984 and promised a further 10,190 between 1985 and 1988. A substantial number of these were to be allocated to non-traditional students including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, women, migrants, low-income groups and people with disabilities. However, as the process of opening Australia’s economy to international markets continued, the Keynesian approach became difficult to sustain in the face of deteriorating economic conditions. Evidence of how this new attitude would affect education emerged when the Minister for Finance, Peter Walsh, attempted to persuade the government to reintroduce tuition fees of around $1400 for university students and $900 for CAE students. Walsh argued that free tertiary education could not be justified in the tight economic circumstances facing the nation, and that it amounted to a subsidy for the wealthy (Power & Robertson, 1988). Caucus rejected Walsh’s proposal, but the Budget included a Higher Education Administrative Charge (HEAC) to cover part of the administrative costs of university degrees. Although the amount was small – $250 per full-time student – imposition of the charge appeared to make a mockery of the statement delivered two weeks earlier by the Minister for Education, Senator Susan Ryan, that the government would not impose tuition fees in accordance with party policy. The government was able to claim that the administrative charge was not a tuition fee in the true sense of the word.
The transition from the traditional Labor commitment to social justice to a monetarist approach took place between 1985 and 1987; Ryan remained Minister, but efficiency and economy became the new catchwords of the period. Greater emphasis on economic management led the government to prompt the Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission’s 1986 Review of Efficiency and Effectiveness in Higher Education. CTEC noted that while funding had remained unchanged in real terms for more than a decade, student numbers had increased by 25 per cent and recommended that tertiary institutions should derive as much income from the private sector as possible (Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission, 1986).

By its third term the Hawke Government was talking about the need to restructure the whole economy to ensure it remained globally competitive. Higher education was to be made to contribute directly to the national economy. When the Hawke Government came to power in 1983, 91 per cent of university funding derived from the Commonwealth Government and three per cent from fees, charges and research; since then the proportion of government funding had declined steadily, but by 1987 members of the government were beginning to question its role in funding university education at any level (Smart & Dudley, 1990).

This change in the interpretation of the purpose of higher education was due to equal parts of economics and ideology. Between 1985 and 1987, the funding crisis in universities had deepened, but appeals for help were largely ignored and the universities were told to make do with existing funds or seek alternative sources. A number of key ministers who were strong advocates of deregulation and privatisation gained ascendancy; these included Paul Keating, John Dawkins and Peter Walsh. It was Walsh and Dawkins who had insisted on the Higher Education Administrative Charge, a radical overturning of the Labor Party’s commitment to free university education that had been accepted as the one of the key achievements of the Whitlam Government. Key advisers (such as Professor Michael Porter from the Centre for Policy Studies at Monash, an advocate of private universities and the reintroduction of fees) were recruited to assist with policy development. Within a short period, there would be no public support for an alternative point of view among Labor parliamentarians.

In 1987 Hawke appointed John Dawkins, one of the strongest advocates of monetarist economics, as the Minister for Education with the express aim of remodeling it along ideologically acceptable lines. Dawkins already had an impressive reputation for his efforts in the Department of Trade, and he was determined to use those skills to deal with what he saw as the problems in education. His appointment, and the consolidation of the Department of Education into the meta-Department of Employment, Education and Training (DEET), symbolised the completion of the transformation in progress since 1983 (Maslen & Slattery, 1994). The unprecedented union of education and employment signaled that education’s primary, if not sole, purpose was to serve the economy.

Dawkins wanted a bigger system with bigger institutions that would offer more opportunities and produce more graduates, possessing qualifications in areas deemed necessary to national development, but he also wanted to avoid paying for it out of the public purse. As a neoliberal (but not a hard-line one), Dawkins
believed that the universities should raise a substantial part of their own funds and students should contribute directly to the cost of their education. More than economics motivated Dawkins: he had toured the university campuses as a member of the Labor Shadow Cabinet prior to the 1983 election, and had come away with the view that they were not only elitist, but “fat, lazy, complacent institutions” unprepared to face reality and to make hard decisions (Maslen & Slattery, 1994). In comparison, the CAEs worked longer hours, spent less per student, engaged in applied research and had no-nonsense, top-down management systems. He was impatient with the universities’ attempts to deal with the restraints resulting from the 1982/83 economic downturn, and made it clear that he believed they needed to take more responsibility for dealing with the difficulties facing them.

Dawkins implemented his planned changes very rapidly to prevent critics in the university sector from organising against him. The first step came in September 1987 when he issued a statement, *The Challenge for Higher Education in Australia* foreshadowing the government’s intention to undertake a major review (Dawkins, 1987b). A month later, the various education commissions set up by Whitlam were rolled into the newly created Department of Employment, Education and Training (DEET); ironically, the Minister who owed most to Whitlam’s style was the one to destroy his legacy. Ministerial power was strengthened and sources of possible opposition removed; power was centralised in his control in an unprecedented manner. Dawkins could intervene directly in the affairs of tertiary institutions to ensure that they were obedient to government policy.

At the same time as he released his statement on higher education, Dawkins announced the commissioning of a Green Paper to be released in December 1988 (Dawkins, 1987a). Overturning 30 years of tradition by refusing to appoint a committee of inquiry, Dawkins wrote the Green Paper in consultation with a core group of advisers from the public service and a group of 12 publicly unnamed advisers, nick-named the “Purple Circle”. Like Menzies and Whitlam before him, Dawkins had a clear vision of the type of education he wanted and was deeply involved at every stage of the policymaking process.

Unlike previous reports on the state of Australian education Dawkins’ Green Paper lacked assumptions about the cultural and moral value of tertiary (especially university) education. The Martin Report was written in response to a similar crisis in the late 1950s, but it had still acknowledged that education had more than an economic dimension. In contrast, the language used in the Green Paper suggested that remarks about the intrinsic value of university education had been included to mollify critics. They were not explained, and since there was very little mention of them elsewhere in the document, they did not dilute criticism. Dawkins was not perturbed: speaking at the University of New England in February 1998 he defended his position by repeating the familiar refrain that the Hawke Government had been elected to provide sound financial management.

Before the end of 1988 the proposal to introduce a graduate tax had been endorsed and the legislation passed. From January 1989 almost all university students were required to pay tax under the Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS). The HECS was a complex system with discounts for up-front payment
and provisions for deferred payment through taxation once the graduate’s salary reached a certain level. Although it was unpopular with some sections of the Labor Party, (and with students) the new tax was successfully presented to the electorate as economically prudent and a step towards equity. Dawkins placated the majority of voters by describing the HECS payments as a tax on the middle class who could afford to send their children to university. He also assured the Labor Party’s traditional supporters that it would use the funds it had “saved” on tuition for the wealthy to provide programs for disadvantaged students.

In September 1988 the binary system of tertiary education was dissolved: 19 universities and the 54 CAEs ceased to exist and 39 new universities were created through a series of hastily arranged mergers. Each new institution was required to develop an educational profile, defining its mission and goals, following negotiations with the Department of Employment, Education and Training relating to national priorities.

The years 1989-1996 were a period of consolidation as Dawkins’ reforms to university organisation and funding were implemented and the focus shifted to training and TAFE reform; the universities were told that they should expect “considerably less involvement by the Commonwealth than in the recent past” (Department of Education, Employment & Training, 1993). Policies made during these years emphasised quality enhancement and accountability; Higher Education: Quality and Diversity in the 1990s introduced external audits by the Committee for Quality Assurance in Higher Education which were intended to ensure that the universities did not use the growing diversity of the student population as an excuse for reducing the quality of teaching or research programs. University administrations made decisions on capital funding and salary increases that had long-term implications for the internal structure and organisation of their institutions, but the overall impact of these changes was not visible to the general population because the entire sector continued to grow rapidly. The total number of students in the system increased by a huge 82 per cent creating a mass system of tertiary education for the first time in Australian history. Yet unmet demand continued to grow in the wake of policy initiatives intended to keep young people at school until Year 12 and declining employment opportunities for teenagers. In 1991 over 30,000 qualified people could not get a place at university: by 1992 this figure had increased to 50,000 (Sharpham & Harman, 1997). Dawkins’ plan to create a system of mass tertiary education had been successful. Tertiary education had never been so popular, but demand was uneven. There was huge demand for business and other vocational courses, but a decline in the humanities and sciences.

In the Shadow of Menzies

The Dawkins reforms were completed in time for the 1996 election. The quality assurance review process had been operating since 1991, the new funding mechanisms, including triennial funding, were in place and funds for research and capital works were had been allocated. Most universities were concentrating on internal reforms. Higher education was not regarded as a high priority in the
pre-election period. The Keating Government did not signal its intention to make further changes to higher education policy. The Liberal Party’s policies were not alarming; they contained no mention of vouchers or upfront fees and no hint of reductions to operating grants.

The 1996 election returned the conservative Liberal-National Party Coalition to government after 13 years in opposition. To begin with, the change of government did not appear significant to the higher education sector. It was no secret that Howard regarded Menzies as one of his heroes and admired him to the extent of having one of his old desks installed in his office during the election campaign. Howard appeared to want to model his education policy on Menzies’ example as well, but unlike Menzies, he had no strong, personal interest in education. Howard’s university years were a means to an end rather than an experience to be enjoyed. He had become interested in politics at an early age and planned his career with the intention of entering parliament. He studied law at Sydney University during the period in which the law school was located in Phillip Street in the city and he never experienced a traditional student’s life on campus. Nor did he use university activities as a way of sharpening his political skills as Menzies had done (Henderson, 1995).

In the lead-up to the election, the universities were lulled into complacency by promises of less government interference and more funding for Austudy. Their attitude did not change after the new government was sworn in; the Ministry’s new name – Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs – did not point to any special status for higher education, but was not exceptional. Howard’s choice of Senator Amanda Vanstone as the Minister for Tertiary Education also suggested that he did not regard it as a major priority; Vanstone had hoped to be Attorney-General and was unfamiliar with the portfolio (Hambly, 1997). All the signs supported the Australian Vice Chancellors Committee’s assumption that the universities’ privileged position would be restored, and that the binary system would be recreated with TAFE replacing the CAEs.

The “discovery” of an apparent $8 billion deficit in May 1996 put an end to any possibility of a return to the pre-Dawkins days by enabling the new government to renege on its pre-election promises and abdicate a large part of its responsibility for higher education (Quiggin 1996). The 1996 Budget delivered a cut to the universities operating grants of 4.9 per cent over three years – the first cut since the 1940s. HECS repayments were increased substantially and differential charges based on the cost of delivering courses were introduced, the rate of repayment increased and the threshold for repayment was reduced. Students and their families were required to absorb a substantially larger proportion of the costs. The real significance of these changes is the insight they provide into the government’s ideological perspective. All transactions were an exchange of commodities: ergo university education is a service available to those individuals who can afford it.

The government’s refusal to fund salary increases for university staff, despite conceding that they were justified, had even greater impact than cuts to recurrent grants: between 1997-1999 the universities were obliged to find savings of more than half a billion dollars in order to fund salary increases and compensate for
cuts to programs. Courses were cut and staff made redundant on a scale not seen
since the Fraser Government’s “Razor Gang” set to work in the late 1970s.
Universities were told to seek private funding, or to increase postgraduate fees to
make up the shortfall that amounted to 12-15 per cent in real terms, but
undergraduate degrees were quarantined in a shrewd move that deflected a
possible backlash from voters.

Initially, more undergraduate places became available as the universities were
permitted to enrol fee-paying Australian undergraduates once their target of HECS-
funded places had been exceeded, but the rate of growth in domestic enrolments
soon slowed. The number of secondary students completing Year 12 began to
decline as less effort was made to keep them at school. Universities put more effort
into attracting fee-paying international students and postgraduate students.
Increases in postgraduate fees also changed the composition of the student
population: women, mature-age students, rural students and low socioeconomic
background students avoided fee-paying courses or abandoned plans for study
altogether.

In 1997, the Minister for Education appointed a new committee, chaired by
Roderick West, to review higher education financing and policy. In contrast to
Murray and Martin, West was not a high-profile academic, but the recently retired
headmaster of Trinity Grammar School in Sydney. Committee members were
divided between education and business or industry and their terms of reference
spoke of the role that higher education would play in improving the nations’
economy by equipping people with the skills and knowledge to meet the social and
economic challenges of the twenty-first century and through the development of a
vigorous wealth-generating educational industry.

The West Committee recommended that the government continue to fund
university education and research, but shifted the balance further towards a
market approach by allowing institutions to set fees and by providing limited
support for private providers. It argued that government funding should be driven
by market demand and universities should consider the viability of unpopular
courses regardless of their content or value to the community (Higher Education
Financing and Policy Review, 1998). In a departure from tradition, it used the
term “higher education” to refer to all forms of post-secondary education,
redefined the universities as “providers” and the students as “customers” and
strengthened consumer protection arrangements for students in recognition of
their new role. University education had lost the special role that it had held
under Menzies.

Dr David Kemp replaced Senator Vanstone as Minister for Employment,
Education Training and Youth Affairs in October 1997. Prime Minister Howard
had chosen him to implement the planned restructure of tertiary education even
before the final draft of the West Report was written. Kemp was an ardent
neoliberal. In the 1980s he and Treasurer Peter Costello had been instrumental in
founding the H. R. Nicholls Society (Chan, 2000). He also had a long history of
involvement in educational policymaking: he had helped to draft the Fraser
Government’s education policy in 1975 and his interest in university education was
passionate and personal. Kemp had been a professor of politics at both Monash and Melbourne Universities where his views were not always popular with students and colleagues. With Kemp in charge of education, Prime Minister Howard could concentrate on policy areas he considered to be more deserving of his personal attention – the economy and industrial restructuring – secure in the knowledge that his wishes would be carried out.

Kemp did not disappoint his leader. In 1990, two years after the Hawke Government had introduced mixed public/private funding, the government contributed 68.4 per cent of tertiary funding; by 1999 under the control of Dr Kemp, this had fallen to 49.1 per cent: total funding per student fell by 6.1 per cent, despite substantial increases in revenue from HECS revenue and student fees (Considine, 2001). By progressively withdrawing funding, the government forced the universities to operate like large corporations rather than collegiate or public service organizations, or face the possibility of bankruptcy.

Further evidence of the Howard government’s adoption of a neoliberal approach to education appeared rapidly and in quick succession. Universities were encouraged to market themselves globally and most of them established interstate and overseas campuses or offices. (The Catholic University of Notre Dame, a self-accrediting private institution, was included in the list of higher education institutions eligible to receive the full range of Higher Education Funding Authority services despite being free of the restrictions imposed on other listed institutions.) The government also issued a White Paper on research and training, Knowledge and Innovation which introduced performance-based funding for research-student places and research infrastructure to encourage research in potentially lucrative areas (Kemp, 1999). A plan to introduce student vouchers and to institute real interest rates on student loans was developed, but dropped when the submission to Cabinet was leaked to the media. The following year, the loans scheme reappeared in an amended form, the Postgraduate Education Loans Scheme (PELS) that permitted postgraduate students access to loans of up to $50,000 to assist with tuition fees just prior to the election.

In the 2000s, attention turned to teaching and research. Under yet another minister, Dr Brendan Nelson, funds for research were increased and an independent council established to administer them. Additional university places were also created, but universities were obliged to tender for them and to meet stringent conditions in order to retain them. The Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) was established to audit university standards and the National Protocols for Higher Education Approval Processes were approved.

In 2002 Dr Nelson launched a new discussion paper, Higher Education at the Crossroads which posed questions on a wide range of issues relating to the structuring and finance of universities (Nelson, 2002). These proposals were intended to complete the process of corporatisation; universities were to raise their own funding through fee-paying students and the commercialisation of research, discourage unproductive courses and reduce their costs across the board. The final report, released in May 2003 confirmed what many academics had feared: while most OECD nations spent 2 per cent of gross domestic product on higher
education, the Australian government was spending 1.5 per cent and *Crossroads* indicated that it would spend even less in real terms in the future. Any additional funding would come from students.

In May 2003, the government introduced a new ten year plan for Australian higher education called *Our Universities: Backing Australia’s Future*. It was a comprehensive and ambitious plan that increased funding in some areas and for some students, but imposed stringent requirements as well. Relatively small increases to base funding were made and some additional money was made available for specific areas of research and for undergraduate places in nursing and education; targeted funds were also provided for regional centres and for equity groups including the disabled. However, the real increases would come through performance-based funds: discretionary funding was available to reward institutions that achieved excellence in learning and teaching and those which were successful in persuading staff to abandon union-negotiated collective workplace agreements for individual contracts (Nelson, 2003).

The underlying focus remained on reducing the government’s overall outlay and shifting the cost to individual students wherever possible. The government had already introduced the Postgraduate Education Loans Scheme in 2002 to extend the original Higher Education Contribution Scheme, and in 2003/2004 it made further changes to the whole loans program which increased the annual student contribution at an average compounding rate of in excess of five per cent per annum over the period 1996-2005. Commonwealth direct support (not counting HECS) per Commonwealth Supported Place declined by almost 20 per cent over the same period (ACUMA, 2007a).

During this period, the Howard Government introduced a number of policies that encouraged the proliferation of private schools. The effect was to increase funds to low- and medium-fee paying private schools, most of which were located in new growth suburbs in marginal electorates, but many of the elite schools also received extra funding. The scheme delivered funding according to the socioeconomic profile of the census district in which the students lived, but did not consider individual families’ incomes or take into account the schools’ assets or capacity to raise funds. In an echo of policy introduced by the Fraser government in the late 1970s, the position of the elite private schools that provided the bulk of students entering high-status courses at high-status universities was protected. At the same time, students from “aspirational” families who made up the bulk of enrolment at low- and medium-fee private schools were encouraged to remain focused on higher education. In the medium-term these changes increased unmet demand for university places, but in an interview with *The Age* newspaper Minister Nelson responded to a suggestion that more university places were needed by saying that many school leavers had unrealistic expectations and should be directed into TAFE or apprenticeships:

… I’ve had far too much experience dealing now with industry, with employers and with parents who feel that the advice that their children have been given has either been ill-informed or deliberately misleading.
I’ve also had teachers who’ve told me that they’ve actually been criticised by principals for actually advising kids to think about going to do an apprenticeship at the end of year 11, rather than going on to university (Green, 2002).

Policies on apprenticeships, training and vocational training released prior to the election in October 2004 gave new prominence to alternatives to university education and underscored the change in emphasis from university education to vocational training. Whether or not these policies were intended for the traditional middle class and new aspirational families who supported the government is doubtful, but young people from those families ignored the Minister’s advice to consider a trade qualification and continued to apply for university places in increasing numbers.

By 2005 the universities were in a very difficult situation financially. They were grateful for funding increases, but meeting the targets that would allow them to receive additional payments from the performance-based funds difficult and expensive to manage. several vice chancellors and the Group of Eight (Go8) – an association representing some of Australia’s oldest and most prestigious universities – argued that insufficient government funding was causing average student-to-teacher ratios to rise and putting great pressure on staff and students alike. The universities argued that complying with the new regulatory regime was expensive and diverted money away from teaching and research; the government countered with accusations of waste and inefficiency (Rout, 2007).

The universities financial situation had become more vulnerable following the passing of the Higher Education Support Amendment (Abolition of Compulsory Up-front Student Union Fees) Bill in March 2005. Australian universities had levied compulsory fees to provide student amenities and services as far back as 1906: initially these fees paid for sporting and social clubs, but in time other services including subsidised health care, careers counselling and employment services and childcare were added. As the range of services grew, the power to collect fees and administer services had devolved to the student associations (more commonly known in the English tradition as student unions or guilds). The Howard Government regarded the compulsory collection of amenities’ fees as identical to compulsory membership of an industrial or trade union and set about making membership voluntary. But making membership of the student associations voluntary presented the university administrators with a dilemma: they were reluctant to discontinue providing services to the students who relied on them – particularly in regional areas where alternatives were difficult to find or prohibitively expensive – knowing that it would lead to an increase in the attrition rate, or they could divert funds from core areas such as teaching facilities and library services. There was a net loss of services across the sector and the greatest losses were in the areas that did not have the capacity to generate fees such as legal advice, advocacy and emergency financial loans although a number of sporting programs were also discontinued due to a lack of funds. In all cases, Australian universities continued to provide support services, although in a reduced form, but
the added financial pressure left some of the smaller, less well-endowed universities in a parlous situation (ACUMA, 2007b).

In many respects, the vigour with which the government pursued the case against compulsory amenities fees illustrates its entire philosophy of education. The Howard Government made three separate attempts to introduce voluntary membership of student associations in 1999, 2003 and finally in 2005. The most remarkable aspect of this campaign is its underlying objection to the principle of compulsory membership rather than the use to which the money was put. There had been several cases between 1972 and 1989 in which individual students had challenged how student association fees could be spent – contributions to international political campaigns including the struggle against apartheid in South Africa attracted particular disquiet. None of these had been successful and there was little objection to the idea that universities had the authority to require a student to pay the fee as a condition of enrolment. This situation changed in 1994 when Liberal governments in the states of Victoria and Western Australian each passed legislation outlawing compulsory membership of student unions and guilds. The Victorian legislation permitted universities to collect compulsory amenities fees from students but defined activities of restricted the activities on which they could be spent to those which were of direct benefit to the students at the institution. The Western Australian version was more severe. It amended the universities’ establishing acts to prohibit them from requiring students to join a student guild as a condition of enrolment. It also prohibited them from imposing any fee not directly related to a course of study to prevent them from creating new forms of service fee not defined in law. The federal Labor government under the leadership of Prime Minister Paul Keating amended the State Grants (General Purposes) Act 1993 to counteract the Western Australian form of voluntary student union membership and a protracted legal struggle ensued until the Keating Government was defeated in March 1996. In June of that year the Howard government introduced legislation to repeal sections of the Higher Education Funding Act 1988 which had been used to compensate Western Australian universities for the loss of revenue from the amenities fee. In 1999 it introduced a Bill modelled on the Western Australian legislation, but the Bill failed to pass the Senate.

The next attempt came in 2003 as part of the reform package, Our Universities: Backing Australia’s Future. This move appears to have been influenced to some degree by an attempt in 2001 to persuade the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) that James Cook University in Queensland had breached trade practices law by making the student amenity fee compulsory. The Higher Education Support Amendment (Abolition of Compulsory Up-front Student Union Fees) Bill 2003 was presented approximately four and a half months after the ACCC’s final ruling that it would permit James Cook University to continue collecting the amenity fee from all students as a condition of their enrolment. In response, a subcommittee of the Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education Committee set up an inquiry into the proposed changes to higher education. After considering 486 submissions, the subcommittee
presented its report entitled *Hacking Australia’s Future* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2003) to the full committee in November recommending that the Bill be rejected; it did not pass the second reading in the House of Representatives (ACUMA, 2007b). In June 2005 the Liberal-Coalition government gained control of the Senate: its third attempt at banning compulsory membership of student unions and preventing the universities from collecting fees for any purpose other than tuition was successful.

Although it is likely that the Howard Government was influenced by similar campaigns against compulsory membership of student associations in Canada, the United States and Britain, the legislation it eventually succeeded in passing was more extreme than anything passed in those countries, all of which were prepared to compromise on the principle involved in the face of evidence that such a move would undermine the higher education sector. Announcing the 1999 proposal, Minister for Education, Training and Youth Affairs, Dr David Kemp stated:

> All citizens, including students, should be free to choose whether or not they belong to an association. The government will legislate to ensure that all students have the same freedoms on campus that they have off campus... The legislation will give students more freedom to choose how they use their money. Some students may decide that they are better off investing more in their education than spending compulsorily on the student association (Kemp, 1998).

Kemp’s remarks embody the neoliberal conviction that personal freedom of choice outweighs any damage that may be inflicted on the other members of the community as result. Individual students should pay only for the services they wanted and if other students suffered when services such as childcare became unavailable or the cost rose it was not their concern. Remarks made by Dr Nelson after he succeeded Dr Kemp continued the same line of argument when asked by journalist Kerry O’Brien about the reduction in campus based services:

> ... if they (the Vice Chancellors) can afford to pay their academics nine months’ maternity leave and if child care needs subsidising on campus I would be most surprised if they weren’t prepared to subsidise that in some way ... the average Australian taxpayer, including tax paying students on campus fund and support billions of dollars in support of child care every year in Australia. Why is it when suddenly you walk into a university, it needs to be subsidised by people who are going to university to get an education who don’t have children and may not want to have them? Why should the everyday student be forced to buy a product that they may not want, when what they actually want is an education? (O’Brien, 2005).

In all probability, the campaign against student associations was driven by a desire to silence opposition from the one group that presented an easy target, but it may also have been motivated in part by personal antipathy: David Kemp, the minister who first announced the legislation, was a former academic who had not always enjoyed a good relationship with student groups and the Treasurer, Peter
CHAPTER 2

Costello, had also been active on the conservative side of student politics before making a name for himself in an anti-union court case that enabled his transition to a political career. However, this campaign also highlights the neoliberal interpretation of university education. Rather than providing a well-rounded educational experience, going to university was a fee-paying transaction that should be completed as quickly as possible so that both parties could move on to the next transaction.

Throughout 2005 and 2006 the universities continued to struggle with insufficient funds and a rising demand for services, but as the election approached in late 2007 it became clear that the community was ready for a change of government once again.

KEVIN 07 AND THE EDUCATION REVOLUTION

In November 2007, the Rudd Government came to power with the promise of a new approach to government. Kevin Rudd, who held the position of Prime Minister until ousted by his deputy Julia Gillard in June 2010, is both a committed Christian and a social democrat. He has expressed a deep, sympathy for the dispossessed and powerless members of society that stems from both his personal beliefs and his childhood experiences: the sudden death of his father in a vehicle accident left the family in financial difficulties and they were homeless for a brief period (Fraser, 2006). An outspoken critic of neoliberalism, Rudd described his government as part of the “reforming centre” – indicating that it understood the importance of market forces in the economy, but it also insisted that those forces be controlled and used for community benefit. In terms of macroeconomic policy Rudd is a conservative who deliberately suggested that he would continue the Howard Government’s approach - prior to the global financial crisis he intended to return a budget surplus of $22 million in his first year, but his perspective was very different at the microeconomic level. To Rudd, the eleven years of the Howard Government were the “wasted years” – a period in which the ideal of a just society was replaced by greed and sectional interests, when policy focused on a narrow and often punitive agenda, relations with Australia’s nearest neighbours were damaged by unquestioning support for US foreign policy and the economic benefits of the natural resources boom were squandered. In a return to traditional Labor values, Rudd, determined to embark on a sustained program of nation building of the kind initiated by Chifley in the 1940s and Whitlam in the 1970s (Manne, 2009). Roads, transport, energy, broadband communications, water and health were all targeted for attention, but the most talked about aspect of this plan was the “education revolution” (Rudd & Smith, 2007).

The Labor Party had campaigned strongly on a co-ordinated education policy across all areas from early childhood to adulthood and implementation began within days of the election. In an indication of the priority given to the portfolio when Rudd came to power, education remained under the control of Julia Gillard, (who was then also the Deputy Prime Minister) despite strong interest from Stephen Smith, who had been the shadow education minister from 2006. In keeping with Rudd’s reforming central approach, the new policy changed the discourse on
education away from an emphasis on individual choice and competition by highlighting the importance of equity (Reid, 2009). Rudd’s policy was a significant turning point, but in many respects it was a return to the language and ideas of the early 1980s. The purpose of education continued to be couched in terms of economic imperatives while major government documents and statements emphasised the importance of education to the development of human capital, but the language of competition was softened (although not abolished). Detailed information about schools, including the results of nationwide standardised testing, was published on the My School website using the rhetoric of accountability and parental choice. Nevertheless, the hard neoliberal edge evident in the policies of the previous government was conspicuously absent and there was more emphasis on the public purposes of education, including community building. One small example provides an interesting insight into the differences: the Howard Government had established a project to develop values education in schools (Department of Education, Science & Training, 2003). One outcome of the project was a statement of values which schools were required to display in poster form in order to qualify for Special Purpose Grants. One interpretation of this exercise is that the Howard Government was concerned to ensure that all Australian schools, particularly public schools, provided education in ethics and morals in an increasingly diverse and mutable society; a more cynical interpretation suggests that it was an attempt to curry favour with the Christian Right in vulnerable electorates. The statement of values for schools (which was very similar to the statement all immigrants were required to sign as part of the process of obtaining a residency visa or achieving citizenship) ensured that everyone, migrants and others, understood the nature of Australian society and its expectations. The original poster listed the nine key Australian values superimposed over an image of the World War I hero Private John Simpson leading a donkey that is carrying a wounded soldier to safety: “Simpson and his donkey” is a patriotic image, well-known to older Australians and was often used in curriculum materials until the 1960s. The Rudd Government retained the values education program, but created a poster using photographs of people from many ethnic and cultural backgrounds to illustrate the same list of values.

Measured by the magnitude of the changes it initiated, the 2007 election was a major turning point in tertiary education: four months after taking office Julia Gillard, in her role as Minister for Education, initiated a Review of Higher Education to examine the future direction of the higher education sector, its capacity to meet the needs of the Australian community and economy and options for ongoing reform. The review panel was chaired by Emeritus Professor Denise Bradley AC (Department of Education, Employment & Workplace Relations, 2008). The Rudd Government’s concerns over the state of Australian higher education were justified. Years of chronic underfunding had taken their toll: the academic workforce was ageing and the most talented postgraduates were more interested in positions overseas where the salaries were higher and the prospects of engaging in high status research were greater. Across the sector, student–staff ratios had risen from 13:1 in 1990 to 20:1 in 2006. The proportion of Australian 25-34 year-olds graduating with a three year degree had declined during the previous
10 years to the extent that the country had slipped from seventh to ninth place in international rankings. At the same time, a second review of innovation and research, chaired by Dr Terry Cutler, a director of CSIRO and Chair of the Advisory Board for the Centre for Excellence for Creative Industries was also established (Department of Innovation, Industry, Science & Research, 2008).

Together, these reports were intended to achieve the interlinking goals of Rudd’s tertiary education policy. He wanted to expand within the whole tertiary education sector, research and innovation that would lead to greater economic productivity in all areas and he wanted to improve social equity by widening access to higher education.

So whether it is through focusing on literacy levels, improving retention rates, or increasing the average number of years spent in education the evidence suggests that more educated economies are wealthier economies. Countries that invest in education do better in achieving their potential economic growth rate.

Beyond economic goals, educational analysts also highlight that education creates other social benefits. It helps build social capital – societies with a strong commitment to education can also enjoy higher levels of civic participation in community and religious groups, greater social cohesion and integration, lower levels of crime and social disadvantage, and a more trusting, equitable and just society (Rudd & Smith, 2007).

Recommendations from the Bradley and Cutler reviews argued that the government could achieve both goals through increasing the proportion of 18-35 year olds enrolled at university and by supporting partnerships between universities and industry. As in the 1960s, the national economy would benefit from the additional supply of skilled professionals, but thousands of young Australians would use their education to secure more satisfying and better-paid employment. More funds for research would lead to scientific and technical innovation and development that would further boost Australia’s prosperity. A key element of the policy was an examination of procedures that would make the transition from TAFE to university easier for older students or those seeking to upgrade their qualifications.

The Rudd Government was prepared to invest heavily to achieve this goal. Even before they were completed in late 2008, the budget committed $5.4 billion for the period 2009-2010 to fund the anticipated recommendations from the Bradley and Cutler reviews, and to develop education infrastructure including capital works. This approach presented a stark contrast to the Howard Government’s attitude to education: between 1995 and 2005, the Australian higher education sector recorded no growth in terms of government outlays; the OECD average for the same period was 49 per cent (Coaldrake, 2010).

Drawing on the recommendations of the Bradley and Cutler reviews the government released Transforming Australia’s Higher Education System in May 2009 which set out its plan in detail: higher education would move to a
demand-driven funding system for domestic students to be phased in through a gradual easing of the cap on places in 2010 and 2011. The universities would be permitted to enroll as many students as they wished, but there was a national target - 40 per cent of 25-34 year-olds should hold bachelor-level degree or above by 2025. Twenty per cent of higher education students were to come from low socioeconomic backgrounds by 2020 and to assist with achieving this target, equity funding was to constitute about 2 per cent of teaching and learning grants, increasing to 3 per cent in 2011, with 4 per cent directed to outreach and retention by 2012 (Kayrooz & Parker, 2010).

Like many revolutions, Rudd’s education revolution did not please everyone and resulted in unexpected casualties. One casualty was Prime Minister Rudd himself. Following the election in 2007 the government had been extremely popular. Rudd’s personal approval rating as prime minister reached 68 per cent in February 2008, but by May 2010 it has plummeted to 39 per cent despite his success in averting disaster during the Global Financial Crisis. The government had over-promised in a number of areas including the environment, social reform and education and had difficulty delivering. It also struggled to communicate its successes to the electorate. The school infrastructure redevelopment program, dubbed “Building the Education Revolution” (BER) was used as a means of averting the worst impact of the global financial crisis that developed during 2007-2008. Over $19 million was poured into grants for school halls, classrooms and libraries, but the speed with which the money was spent led to logistical problems. The “Digital Education Revolution” (DER) promised a computer for every child in the last four years of secondary school as well as improved access for all schools, but this program also experienced delays and difficulties because of the sheer size of the project. There were accusations of waste and a failure to oversee the implementation of various programs in education and other areas. Many school communities were happy with the outcomes, but a small number were frustrated and angry, and these were the images on which the media chose to concentrate. Other schemes to assist students from low socioeconomic status families and improve the supply of teachers fared better, possibly because they were developed more slowly and with more opportunities to check on their effectiveness.

Fearing a loss at the 2010 election after only one term in office, the Labor Party replaced Kevin Rudd with his deputy, Julia Gillard. Simon Crean became Minister for Education.

Looking back over the years it is possible to see that governments have held widely divergent views of the nature and purpose of education in general, and university education in particular. Despite some variations in degree, there has been a steady move at the policymaking level towards a utilitarian perception of education. By the 1990s education was neither the “custodian of mental liberty” (Menzies, 1939, p. 12) nor (as Kim Beazley Snr once described it) “the instrument of every child’s and young person’s dignity and competence” (W.F. Connell, 1993, p. 259), and there had been little mention of the university as a cultural experience in policy documents since the mid-seventies. The Hawke Government started the drive towards a mass system of tertiary education but in the process embraced an
ideology that was markedly different from the one proclaimed by its predecessors. In doing so, Hawke, and his successor Keating, redefined the purpose of university in economic lines. The election of the Howard Government in 1996 was not a major turning point in higher education policy, but it did result in an intensification of that ideology and a more ruthless approach to policy implementation. By reducing funding and by imposing a range of restrictions on university autonomy, the Howard Government reshaped the universities into something vastly different from the traditional communities of scholars beloved by the Menzies. The universities are now major corporations engaged in the business of selling educational services. Current higher education policies assume that this is what young Australians want, and there has been little serious discussion of education as a cultural experience since 1975, but there is evidence that it continues to have a powerful influence on the imaginations of young people.

NOTE

1 Monetarism is an economic theory based on the use of the money supply to control inflation and direct the national economy; neoliberalism is a social movement which seeks to break down all other social relationships, all principles of association and replace them with the market principle. See A. Blunden, “All that is Solid Melts into Air...”. Proceedings of the Hegel Summer School 2006. www.werple.net.au/~andt/seminars/neoliberalism.html

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