

Revolution could take some time

Vin Massaro | 9 July 2008
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At a Seminar last week, the Chair of the Government's Higher Education Review, Professor Denise Bradley, told us her Review team was prepared to make some bold proposals for change in higher education, but she pointed out that for such proposals to be given form will require a Government with considerable political will.

It is heartening to hear that we might get a review that addresses the difficult challenges facing higher education, but the caveat would have surprised no-one.

The government came to office suggesting that it is willing to undertake nothing short of a revolution in education, filling most of us in the sector with renewed optimism.

But Professor Bradley's note of caution and the concern apparently being expressed in the review's consultations are well founded, because higher education reviews have a very poor implementation record.

Several such reviews over the past fifty years have looked at the whole sector, or dealt with aspects of it. We have also had several Senate inquiries, select committees and House of Representatives inquiries.

What is astounding is that apart from the Murray Report of 1957 and the Martin Report of 1964, no major Review has been implemented. There was a small victory with the Wills report on health and medical research funding in 1998 and one could count the Wran Committee of 1988, which proposed the introduction of HECS. However the latter was conducted within the framework of the Dawkins Green and White Papers and had a very specific task.

But the Williams Report (1979), the Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission Report on Efficiency and Effectiveness in Higher Education (1986), the Hoare Report on management (1995) and the West Report (1997) all went nowhere.

I will not attempt to list the parliamentary inquiries because they were generally politically motivated, often proposed by oppositions, and would not be expected to have gone very far.

The main changes over the past thirty years have been brought about by Ministers deciding to act either through Ministerial Statements (Wal Fife on College amalgamations in 1981), Green and White Papers (Dawkins in 1988), or Discussion Papers followed by action (Brendan Nelson, *Higher Education at the Crossroads*, 2002).

Dawkins and Nelson obviously wanted to act on the system and used their publications to test ideas and implement them. Fife's Ministerial Statement in 1981 was made with no public consultation or advice, but simply emerged because the

government had decided that there were too many colleges – the arguments and discussions came later as several of the proposed amalgamations ran into difficulties.

The Dawkins Green Paper was written within the Department, informed by a small group (the “Purple Circle”) with whom the Minister canvassed possibilities. But ultimately the Minister decided what would go into the Green Paper and how much notice to take of the subsequent discussion before issuing the White Paper.

Professor Bradley was right to recall that the implementation of the White Paper was a combination of threat and charm, but there was no doubt about Dawkins’s intention to act and he was prepared to argue his case strenuously and consistently. The pattern was followed by Nelson, although that process was kept well within the control of the Minister.

This may tell us something about the failure of reviews. They have not always given advice that was unpalatable to government - the 1986 CTEC Review made some important recommendations, many of which found their way into the Dawkins White Paper. But Ministerial ownership gives ideas an impetus that focuses the debate and ensures that they are implemented.

In the case of a Review, members give their professional advice, but they do not have carriage of implementation, the vital part of any change process. They are steeped in the issues while they are undertaking the review and will understand the nuances of what they are proposing and how far proposals can be bent before they break.

But they then move out of the picture and the Minister needs to pick up the task of negotiating the implementation of proposals with which she will not have been completely familiar or necessarily in agreement.

The task for the Minister is further complicated because she will need to act on several levels simultaneously: first to justify why certain recommendations from an ostensibly expert group will not be accepted; second to argue for some of the unpopular recommendations that she does want to implement; and thirdly to do the hard task of negotiating the changes through the system.

All change ultimately comes down to a series of negotiated settlements where the aim is to ensure that the prime objectives are achieved. However, to preserve the integrity of any change the negotiated settlements must not go beyond the tipping point of achieving consensus at the expense of core objectives.

In the case of a Review the recommendations will be clear enough, but the logical steps that need to be taken and the degree of latitude available for negotiation on any one of them without risking the whole, are not always apparent. A Minister is therefore left with some good architectural drawings, but with few of the tools necessary to ensure that the edifice will still stand as walls are moved and foundations compromised.

In the case of a Ministerial decision to act, the Minister will have decided on what needs to be done and how far she is prepared to negotiate or capitulate on any element of the reform process, including the degree to which she is willing to change the

original design to achieve other ends, while still maintaining the integrity of the original plan.

So why do we have reviews? They can give the appearance of doing something when you're not - or don't intend to do anything for some time - but want to be seen as prepared to listen to what people are saying. They can be used to test the political boundaries of reform alternatives, in case you might want to do something. Or they can prepare the political ground for something you do intend to do.

In the present case, the context must be seen as the government's policy intention to bring about an education revolution.

The nature and extent of the revolution is not articulated, so an expert group was established to test the boundaries. And it seems that the Review team has decided to take the government at its word.

So far, this is good public policy as revolutions are messy things, mostly because the planning is applied to having the revolution rather than building the structures that will follow it.

So developing a detailed set of strategies with good arguments to back them up will provide for a controlled and positive revolution, but it will not be neat and the government will inevitably be left with some political problems.

Whether the government will make the hard political decisions to implement the reforms will depend on the political context prevailing at the time of the report.

With reports on health and climate change each making significant and competing calls on the government's financial and political capacity, fine judgement will be needed to determine how many battles to take on and how many it might win. But the need for reform in higher education and the expectations that have been created are great. Let us hope this Review does not meet the fate of its predecessors simply because of a failure of nerve.

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