History as a policy tool: a case study from Australia's binary policy of higher education

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This paper[1] discusses a history project that examined the binary policy of higher education formulated in Australia in the mid-1960s. That project aimed to do what Rennie (1998, p.293) articulated as one of the contributions historians can make to policy, namely to examine 'the historical antecedents of topical issues [and thus] seek to redefine the way in which a problem is formulated and addressed'.

The project, commissioned by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER), had two parts. The first was an historical analysis, published as *A differentiated model for tertiary education: past ideas, contemporary policy and future possibilities* (2014a). This re-reading of the Martin report on the future of tertiary education in Australia (1964–65) and the implementation of its findings identified several enduring problems in tertiary education – beyond the central matter of funding on which the contemporary debate is fixated. They were: insufficient diversity; obstacles to seamless pathways within the system; competition for research dollars; and overly complex governance. The second part of the project involved a roundtable of senior figures in the education sector, who were asked to brainstorm these themes with a view to identifying future options for tertiary education. The author drew on their bold thinking to produce another paper, *What next for tertiary education: some preliminary sketches* (2014b). History sparked fresh ideas. But did these influence public debate and policy development?

The research was published in 2014 as the government was proposing to uncap tuition fees and reduce public funding for universities. Its findings do not appear to have gained much attention. Reasons for this may include: the misfit between the pace of research and policy development; modest dissemination efforts; and the political and media focus of the debate on fees. By reflecting on the unfolding of the research, its dissemination and its reception, this paper considers how history can be a tool of policy and what the impact historical research might have on policy development.

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[1] An earlier version of this paper was published in the International Journal of Training Research (2015). This version expands the ideas about history as a policy tool and updates the material on impact.

Context

> These are interesting times for higher education policy and potentially an exciting time for Australia's higher education industry. What was revealed in the Abbott Government's first Budget of 13 May 2014 represents the most comprehensive and far-reaching development in Australian higher education in at least 30 if not 40 years (Gallagher, 2014, p.1).

At the beginning of 2016 the potential that Gallagher[2] saw for a game changer in higher education has not been realised. That is in part because of poor process: to announce the most comprehensive reform of a generation in the budget papers, with consultation to follow, was a recipe for fiasco. Nevertheless, as Gallagher explained, the reforms proposing deregulation did not come out of the blue. They were another milestone in Australia's policy response to the demand for tertiary education. Yet most of the commentary – Gallagher's, who has written much of the history, is an exception – ignores the past. In the debate on deregulation, the public attention has been on fees. That narrow focus has masked some of the structural changes the mooted reforms herald. One of the decisions the Coalition Government made was to provide financial support for those doing associate degrees and diplomas as stepping stones to degrees and to allow non-university providers (both for-profit institutions and public further education providers or 'TAFEs') access to those students. This changes the tertiary education landscape and could encourage the diversity for which higher education systems constantly strive. But the measures need to be implemented properly across the federation. In 2016 – in the wake of poor design and misuse of the VET FEE-HELP[3] loan scheme – they are under review.

Definitions

In revisiting debates in the 1960s and 1970s about expanding post-compulsory education, it is immediately striking that imprecise definitions in Australia of terms like 'tertiary', 'vocational' and 'advanced' education have clouded thinking for 50 years. The research project adopted the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) definition of tertiary, being a minimum of two years full-time study designed to provide students with the professional knowledge, skills and competencies required to enter the labour market or a pathway to higher learning at bachelor's level (UNESCO, 2011).

This classification mirrors the binary system of universities and colleges of advanced education ushered in in 1965 (and replaced by the unified system in 1988). Under the binary policy the universities were deemed to have responsibilities for higher learning and research, for which they received specific funding, and the colleges of advanced education (CAEs)

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2 Gallagher was executive director of the Group of Eight universities at the time.

3 VET FEE-HELP is a federal government loan which assists eligible students studying higher level vocational education and training qualifications to pay their tuition fees.

were primarily to offer vocationally oriented programs, accompanied by relevant liberal studies. The CAEs were to serve the community's social and economic needs. The aim of the binary policy was to provide access to all who were able and interested in tertiary study, as well as to build Australia's research capacity.

History as a policy tool

In March 2013, a former head of the civil service in the United Kingdom, Lord Butler of Brockwell declared:

> I believe that each department should appoint a historical adviser, not to advise on the historical background to every problem which a department has to manage – no single person could have the expertise to do that – but to put the policy-makers in contact with a source of such expertise.

Closer to home, the head of the Department of Defence Dennis Richardson, once a student of the Sydney University historian Neville Meaney, has championed history as part of the training needed by public servants. Richardson has done so because he worries that, without at least some understanding of the historical context, officers will not be able to formulate views on the matters before them; they will become mere issues managers.

Butler's remarks sparked a cacophony of voices in the UK in support of his proposal. Sir David Cannadine – a prominent English historian currently teaching at Princeton – observed:

> Most government ministers live very intensely in the present. They often don't know much about the history of their department when they weren't in charge of it. They aren't allowed to see the papers of their predecessors, and live in some historical vacuum (Chambers, 2013).

Those voices were not heard in Australia, where such presentism also prevails. When ministers do draw on historical analogy, it is usually to support rather than establish or refine their positions. The former education minister, Christopher Pyne, was fond of quoting Robert Menzies, Australia's longest serving, Liberal, Prime Minister. In February 2014, Pyne delivered a major speech at the Universities Australia conference (Pyne, 2014) in which he drew on the Menzies era to pave the way for reforms that, according to Pyne, would deliver greater autonomy to universities. They were also intended to reduce the federal government's share of university funding. While the individual quotations were accurate, the tenor of the speech was a distortion of the Menzian belief in the centrality of higher learning to democracy and of Menzies' concerns about the public purse. Until recently, such inconsistencies would probably have gone unnoticed, the reforms of the 1960s being all but obliterated in the mists of time. But the rekindling of political interest in Menzies has brought to the fore some historical insight. Forsyth (2013), for example, reminds us that the archives reveal a Menzies:

> sympathetic to the universities [but who] was also compelled to ensure that federal funding resulted in national benefits…To Cabinet, he argued: Money is the weapon by which oversight of universities will be secured, but the intention is more than monetary. It is hoped that the [Australian Universities] Commission will devote itself to thought about the development of universities in the widest sense. It will advise precisely on the buildings which the Commonwealth should support at each university…as well as expenditure on other matters such as laboratory equipment or libraries.

Nevertheless, in most areas of the Commonwealth public service history is an *ad hoc* affair. This is regrettable for, as Lord Butler pointed out, historical advice can be useful when considering public service reform. He noted that 'a lot of what has been proposed in the government's latest programme for reform was actually done in the 1980s and 1990s, when I was head of the civil service'.

In Australia too historical perspective is useful for those in the midst of reform frenzy. Take education as an example. Unlike Foreign Affairs, the federal education department has no historical section – if it did it would be hard pressed to define its scope, given the regularity with which the department changes its shape and focus, not to mention its ministers!

The tertiary education system does have the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER), whose remit is to inform policy and practice in tertiary education and training. Its research is decidedly applied and its publications aim to engage policy makers and practitioners. NCVER does not do much history, although the turbulence of recent policy has prompted some activity, including essays on the history of vocational education and training (VET) policy (Ryan), on the evolution of apprenticeships and traineeships in Australia (Knight) and the project discussed here, which looked back to 1961 when Prime Minister Menzies, faced with the challenge of rapidly growing demand for university places, asked Sir Leslie Martin, the chair of the Australian Universities Commission, to 'consider the pattern of tertiary education in relation to the needs and resources of Australia, and to make recommendations to the Commission on the future development of tertiary education'.

Initially the research project was to be an historical exercise looking, from the perspective of the current wave of reform, at primary and secondary sources on the Martin report and the subsequent binary policy of higher education. At a workshop to discuss the project, it was decided to add a second phase: a roundtable with senior actors in tertiary education, who could comment on the history essay and ensure the project's write-up would resonate with current policy makers, one of NCVER's main constituencies. Such engagement with stakeholders is also consistent with NCVER's advice on how to maximise the impact of applied research.

Impact

The Australian Government is championing the idea of applied research. Its focus is on innovation in industry, though some attention is also being paid to innovation in processes, including policy development. In response the Australian Research Council (ARC) has devised a Research Impact Pathway Table. The table sets the bar very high – too high perhaps for a discipline like history. The outcomes and benefits from research articulated by the ARC (2015) are as follows:

| Outcomes	Benefits
- Commercial Products, Licences and Revenue - New Companies – Spin offs, Start Ups or Joint Ventures - Job Creation - Implementation of Programs and Policy - Citations - Integration into Policy	- Economic, Health, Social, Cultural, Environmental, National Security, Quality of Life, Public Policy or Services - Higher Quality Workforce - Job Creation - Risk Reduction in Decision Making

The research project discussed here was less ambitious. In line with NCVER's remit to inform training policy and practice, it sought to influence the discussion about tertiary education reform. In particular, it wanted to draw attention to the institutional structures of tertiary education, thereby lifting heads above the fight over dollars.

In NCVER's good practice guide for measuring and maximising research impact in social science, Stanwick and Hargreaves (2012) remind us that influencing policy is not straightforward: sometimes the impact seems to occur just by osmosis. And Bamber (2014) argues that social policy, being contingent on many influences and always on the move, can only be *informed* rather than *based* on evidence. That evidence has multiple sources, including formally published research, the grey literature that permeates the policy world, as well as the evidence derived from practitioner experience and insight, which may not be documented at all. In to the mix comes the political context in which decisions are made. So measuring impact and discerning its precise nature is not easy.

At the outset, it is important to be realistic in establishing the potential impact the research might have. This includes acknowledging that not all research will provide new solutions; it can still be useful when it validates or raises questions about existing policies. NCVER's investigation into creating impact therefore describes various categories of influence (see figure 1). It places considerable emphasis on the iterative process of synthesising and disseminating research outcomes; on the efficacy of a suite of research reports rather than a

single report; and, as seen in figure 1, on the potential of stakeholders as catalysts for enhancing the impact of research (Stanwick, Hargreaves & Beddie (2009), p.12). It notes it can take some time to assess what the impact of research has been. Studies in the biomedical and health sciences – where impact measurement is a more established idea – of the time it takes for research to translate from academia into wider societal benefits estimate that period to be, on average, 17 years (Jones and Grant, p.29).

Figure 1: Model of impact for NCVER research (Stanwick, et. al, 2009)
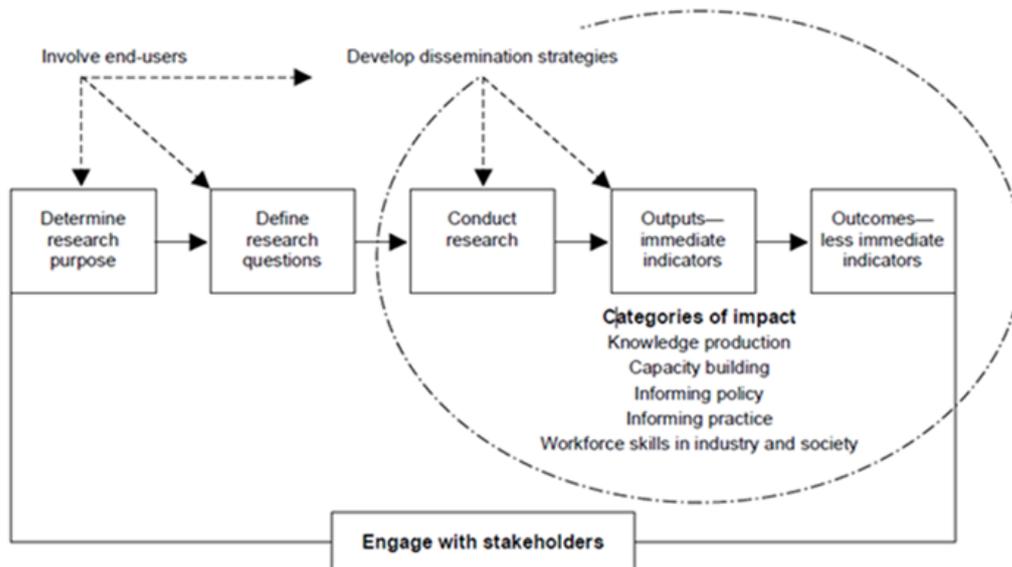
An important element in achieving impact is the engagement of the end users throughout the research process. In this project, end-user input was received at different stages: at the very beginning during the selection of bids for NCVER's competitive grants, which is conducted by stakeholders in the Australian training system (e.g. public servants, union officials, industry representatives); at the roundtable; in the formal peer-review of the two papers that resulted from the project; and from responses to conference presentations. The decision to have two documents — the historical essay and a shorter piece distilling some ideas for a future tertiary education landscape — was made on the basis that the second *What Next?* publication (2014b) would appeal more to a policy audience.

Is education at a tipping point?

This was the question used to kick-off the roundtable. It is not a new question and perhaps the answer is that education, or at least education policy, is likely always to be at a threshold. Nevertheless, at present various factors are coalescing in a way that suggests we should be on the brink of serious structural change. These factors are, as always, a limited budget; the rapid

disappearance of old industries and skills; youth unemployment; and the fundamental shift in the way information is disseminated and knowledge produced. The last ingredient adds to a familiar mix a greater impetus for new approaches to education for those, both young and older, entering the knowledge economy.

In the early sixties the term 'tipping point' was not widely used in public administration. Yet, the policy makers fifty years ago were confronted by the same dual challenge of expanding tertiary education and containing costs. Nevertheless, in re-examining the Martin Committee's report and its reception, it was important not to jump on false parallels with the present or use history to dictate how decisions should be made today. As Lord Butler (Civil Service World, 2013), has pointed out, history never repeats itself exactly: there are always new currents flowing and new influences at work, yet to make sense of these policy makers need to be aware of history.

The Martin Committee and the binary policy of higher education

Times were different in the 1960s. When the Committee on the Future of Tertiary Education in Australia reported in 1964/5, Australia enjoyed virtual full employment. The committee's notion of a mass tertiary education embraced the twenty per cent of secondary school students who matriculated. Despite these significant differences, its approach was based on the familiar premise, articulated at the time by Lord Robbins (Willetts, 2013) that tertiary education (sometimes interchanged with the term 'higher education' and meaning diploma and above) should be available to all citizens according to their inclination and capacity.

In 1965 Menzies delegated the job of responding to the Martin report to then Senator John Gorton, who wanted a system that lifted the standing of applied advanced learning, by combining higher vocational with liberal education, and who had to make that system affordable. Realisation of the goal of a new system of applied tertiary education was stymied not only by the hierarchy of prestige within tertiary education but also by entrenched occupational status and inadequate understanding of the notion of 'advanced' education. It was also undermined by the Australian coyness about elitism, which even the conservative 1960s could not overcome. Moreover, by the time the colleges of advanced education were up and running in the 1970s, times had changed. The baby boom was over, the economy weaker and youth unemployment high.

The binary policy was replaced in 1988 by the Dawkins 'revolution' (named after the minister responsible for the reforms), which was intended to further expand tertiary education in a way that supported the economic reforms of the Hawke-Keating governments by

producing graduates the economy needed. What ensued was an increasingly uniform set of higher education institutions, nearly all called 'universities'.

At the beginning of the 21st century that familiar pattern of Australian higher education, made up primarily of around 40 universities, is dissolving as it faces the unrelenting push for greater productivity, the introduction of a demand-driven funding (and probably some deregulation of fees), as well as heightened discussion about contemporary occupational requirements and persistent concerns about the system's quality. As the system evolves, we are seeing experimentation with new approaches to undergraduate programs; greater demand for post-graduate professional qualifications; the rise of online learning; and new institutional arrangements across the higher education-vocational divide. We are also faced with the tenacity of a system of prestige, in which universities fiercely guard their name and position in the hierarchy. It may even be that one of the tipping points to be addressed is whether the goal of achieving equity is being lost. As Marginson (2014, p.8) has argued in a reflection on Clark Kerr, the author of the 1960 Californian Master Plan for Higher Education:

> We cannot divorce the question of the university from the question of society... The root problems are in the social and political culture. The public/ private balance has shifted; a more self-centred individualism is dominant; and in higher education an instrumental economic focus has so strengthened the emphasis on private individual rewards as to exclude the common good. The system is nominally public, but does not serve everyone.

What can history tell us?

The major result of this project's re-reading of the Martin report and its implementation was its distillation of some of the enduring issues that confront education policy, or in a phrase deployed in policy circles, the 'wicked' problems, which are complex, multi-causal and hard to solve (APSC, 2007).

The issues that confounded the binary policy were:
- the elusive goal of achieving parity of status for applied and advanced vocational learning
- the perennial difficulty of building seamless transfer arrangements from one kind of education to another and to the labour market
- the pivotal influence of status and funding of research on institutional behaviour
- the quest for autonomy in a publicly funded and regulated federal system.

Other problems plaguing post-compulsory education stem from inadequacies in schooling. This was one of Martin's concerns – he wanted to see all teacher education upgraded and therefore proposed a trinary system, which would have included separate teachers colleges.

That recommendation was shipwrecked on two other complications in the system: its federal governance arrangements and industrial relations. Martin also understood, but did not have to contend directly with, the crucial question of who was to pay for tertiary education and how. Hence, examination of specific funding models was beyond the scope of the project. This marginalised the project from the current higher education debate.

The binary policy also suffered from lack of clarity on fundamental questions about the types of knowledge, types of research and types of learning it was addressing. These opened the way to blurring of boundaries and missions and the reassertion of a hierarchy of status. Such definitional matters go beyond semantics: vague usage of the word 'tertiary' still confuses policy development and terms such as 'competency-based' or 'training packages' are poorly understood and value-laden. Labels also matter in the workplace, where the status of occupations reigns over much of the educational landscape. The perceived prestige of a professional as opposed to a tradesperson affects learners' choices. To change the system requires new mind-sets not just among educationalists but also employers, parents and students. Uncovering its history can help, by underlining the tenacity of some of the issues all these stakeholders need to tackle and by trying to avoid repetitions of past failures.

Policy history

This analysis of the binary policy of higher education is 'policy history' in the sense described by Pierson (2005), namely as an unfolding story of policy development over a considerable period of time (from the 1960s to the 1980s). Its focus was not only on the policy actors – although their personalities and beliefs about education were influential – but also on the dynamics of the institutions created by the policy, coloured not only by forceful individuals but also by institutional cultures and entrenched views about educational hierarchies. These combined with the politics that swayed the government's decisions and the changing economic and political circumstances explain the flaws in the original policy and its implementation. Some problems were clear at the time – in 1967 Gough Whitlam, the then Leader of the Opposition, elucidated in the House of Representatives the contradictions inherent in the notion that colleges had 'comparable status in the eyes of the community', while being able to admit students who had done less well at matriculation (in Beddie, 2014a, p. 19). Others emerged as the CAEs started operating. Unlike universities they had to answer to two sets of masters, the federal government which was supplying funds, and the states and territories which had long regulated technical education. For those CAEs that were not greenfield sites, there were a variety of institutional legacies to overcome or absorb. More

cracks appeared as academics joined the CAEs in the 1970s, keen to preserve the benefits they had enjoyed in the university sector.

Pierson, a political scientist advocating for an historical approach, argues that looking back and analysing more than particular points in time:

> can be extremely helpful for identifying likely paths of policy reform. If we know, for example, which elements of policy arrangements have generated important adaptations for which sets of actors, we are more likely to be able to identify which kinds of revisions they would regard as acceptable and which they would view as problematic (p.15).

Applying this reasoning to the history of tertiary education reform shows it is imperative to realise how strong the prestige of doing research over tertiary teaching remains within the sector. This implacable attitude points to a fundamental question for today's policy makers: can teaching and research be separated? And should it be, if the aim of tertiary education is to prepare students to be agile thinkers and adaptable workers in the knowledge economy?

Pierson ends his article on an optimistic note:

> that historical investigation focusing on unfolding processes can greatly illuminate our understanding of the present. If work in this vein continues, it will mark the end of a strict separation between our efforts to comprehend "the historical" and "the contemporary" in public policy. This will be good news for the study of policy history, and even better news for the social sciences (p.16).

Breaking the mould

The roundtable participants in the second part of the project were presented with the wicked problems uncovered in the historical analysis. These participants, who had been involved over many decades in both higher and vocational education – as senior administrators in universities and the TAFE system, or as labour market and educational researchers – said they found the distillation of persistent themes useful. Several remarked that this was a stark reminder of the intractability of some of the issues they had been tackling for many years.

Each participant was asked to comment on one of the themes identified and to offer some bold ideas about how to approach tertiary education policy differently. Perhaps it was seeing how persistent some issues had become that encouraged them to break the mould.

For those who had been players in the binary system, the analysis prompted both reflections and fresh thinking. And because the group represented different segments of the system, the discussion ranged across disciplines and sectors, something reflected in the suggestions for the future and which emphasised the stimulus cross-disciplinary collaboration can produce.

The results of their brainstorming are summarised below. They are the author's distillation of the discussions and the literature.

Restructure pathways from secondary school into diverse tertiary institutions

The labour market's demand for post-school qualifications means it is time to create different learning tracks from school to study and work and maybe back again. While strong literacy and numeracy skills are essential building blocks, the academic path does not suit all secondary school students. For some, their necessary education is better completed in a vocational setting, either in an apprenticeship or adult learning environment or in high-quality VET-in-Schools programs. Conversely, including vocational subjects in the mainstream school curriculum can inform students' post-school choices and display the value of applied learning.

It was suggested that, for the majority of students, the first tier of post-school education (years 13 and 14) should prepare them for higher education and/or work. Some would then enter the labour market with para-professional qualifications; others would go on to complete their professional education or move into a research-intensive university.

Another way of acknowledging the vocational mission of most tertiary education could be to create institutions that vertically integrate broad occupational training in a certain field, for example, health, teaching or engineering. These schools would offer qualifications ranging from the certificate to the doctorate. Their focus would be on teaching and research relevant to their industries. Doctors, nurses and pharmacists, for instance, would learn together. They would have strong links to the professions; their research would be cutting edge. Students could move in and out of the workforce and higher learning. Such approaches are already being tested in various ways. There is the professional doctorate, for example, and in Italy, the University of Bergamo (Italy) offers 'industrial' PhDs, where students work on their research projects while operating at the premises of the funding company, something akin to an advanced apprenticeship (Casano, 2015).

Lift the reputation for applied learning

One of the perennial problems for applied learning in technical schools, CAEs and now the VET sector is its poor image and second-class status. This means that public and private VET providers need to ensure that employers and universities have confidence in the qualifications they deliver and that students are equipped with foundation skills (literacy and numeracy as well as employability skills), technical knowledge *and* conceptual ability. The latter is an

essential ingredient in a successful system of transfer from the VET system, with its competency-based approach, to universities. Credit transfer also depends on trust and strong collaborations, as well as robust policies within institutions.

Decouple funding for research and teaching and better concentrate research infrastructure monies

One of the flaws revealed in the binary system was the teaching–research divide. Now that knowledge is created and widely available outside the classroom, we need to reimagine the tertiary teacher: to see them as a person who can transmit capability in using evidence and analysis rather than functioning as a one-way channel of information. That means the tertiary teacher needs also to be a scholar.

The challenge for the system is how to support such scholarship. Research is expensive; hard decisions are required. Striving for diversity – the principle underpinning the binary system – may help to guide judgments about the allocation of public funds and reduce the huge effort devoted to trying to win competitive grants (which rarely cover the full cost of the research activity) and to achieve academic rankings. This would involve acknowledging the legitimacy of an elite tier of research activity, though not one necessarily housed exclusively at the sandstone universities. Institutions across a diverse sector would earn prestige from their specific missions in conducting pure or applied research or in teaching. For it is imperative that more restricted eligibility for research infrastructure finance does not deepen the teaching–research divide. The system needs also to incorporate explicit funding to support scholarly practice, which should include collaboration beyond the academy. Such money could be found in a restructured tertiary landscape. That was the premise on which Menzies and Gorton acted. But they were willing to spend more money and were starting with a relatively blank canvas.

Rethink governance and funding models

The tertiary system – regulators and funders at both Commonwealth and state levels, the institutions themselves and the professions – needs a new mentality that recognises not all forms of advanced education have the same purpose or need the same funding. According parity to diverse institutions is an almost insurmountable challenge when the system operates within an established hierarchy of prestige and across a federation. As the binary experiment taught us, the component parts of the system must be funded and regulated on a firm community-wide appreciation of their individual merits. That understanding is enhanced by clear definitions, for example, of 'tertiary' education, and by clear missions.

As Menzies acknowledged, the enterprise of university education is 'vastly expensive' (in Beddie 2014a, p. 10). The way governments contribute funds to that enterprise can have powerful effects on its operations. To remain affordable, it is vital the tertiary education Australians receive is efficiently constructed to meet both their individual aspirations and those of the nation. That means ensuring people are appropriately educated for specific jobs as well as encouraging the pursuit of pure learning, which nurtures creativity and flexibility and allows people to operate across the labour market and beyond. Achieving this in the federation is complicated. While few would argue against having a national approach, we still do not have firm principles to underpin decisions about which governments fund what. A publicly supported tertiary education system relies on the participants (policy makers, providers, students and employers) having sound understanding of the economic drivers at local, state and federal levels. Those framing the system also need to have trust in the instincts of individuals and respect for the principle of academic freedom across the sector.

Joining the conversation

Have any of these ideas gain traction? Some were already in the ether and have come into play in the fluid environment tertiary education policy finds itself in Australia. For example, in June 2014 the chief executive of the Business Council of Australia made a landmark speech (Westacott, 2014) arguing in the same vein as the project that:

> if we undervalue VET, we will continue to push the university sector to become more of a mass education sector, which it was not designed to be.

Westacott also mentioned the need for better vocational pathways. To take advantage of such high-level business interest in vocational learning will mean bringing researchers' ideas and those of practitioners together with those best able to influence policy. This requires deft knowledge management and resources that were not available to this modest exercise in historical analysis.

NCVER does have a well-oiled machine for alerting stakeholders (Westacott being one of these) about research findings and distilling these into digestible formats. It does, however, struggle to gear its quality assurance (peer review, production and clearance) to the fast-paced and sometimes unpredictable rhythm of policy development. This is a challenge faced by most researchers: seizing the opportunity to join the public conversation, while protecting the quality of the output. The two papers arising from this project were released when all eyes were firmly fixed on the prospect of fee deregulation. Their publication went under the radar. This may also have been because the publisher had its own interests to consider. As a

ministerially owned company, whose research funds come primarily from contracts with the federal government, NCVER must listen to its owners. At the time, the push was for the company to return to a strong focus on VET rather than the whole tertiary education sector. A history project on the binary policy of higher education may have seemed a low priority for an already stretched dissemination budget.

Additional funds were found for the roundtable, which did give the historical analysis an airing among senior people (including government officials) actively engaged in the tertiary education sector. The re-reading of the Martin report was welcomed as a way of highlighting the persistent nature of many of the elements colliding in the present phase of reform. The airing, consistent with NCVER's recommendation that researchers engage with end-users, also served to test the relevance of the themes emerging to current policy thinking. And it did stimulate ideas for the future. However, because the roundtable discussion was held under Chatham House rules, the public expression of those ideas came without the weight of their collective provenance. It may therefore be that the sketches put forward were seen as utopian, although recent announcements about piloting new approaches suggests the time may be coming to break the mould. If so, this project may be able to make a small difference by adding some historical ballast to policy development in this tumultuous period of higher education policy in Australia.

The author has sought to inject some of the ideas about structural reform into the public arena through newspaper articles and discussions on social media (including the Professional Historians Association of NSW and ACT blog), and by sending comments on government discussion papers, notably those on reform of the federation. These did not address the hot topic of money, which might seem to have been a tactical error. But this would have been historically dishonest. Menzies was certainly exercised by the cost of expanding tertiary education. By the time he resigned as Prime Minister in 1966, 'Commonwealth provision for university education, historically novel in 1950…had amounted …to a grand total of roughly $270,000,000' (in Beddie, 2014a, pp.10-11). Of this he was greatly proud. But in 1961, the terms of reference given to the Martin Committee were 'to consider the pattern of tertiary education in relation to the needs and resources of Australia and to make recommendations to the Australian Universities Commission on the future development of tertiary education'. They were much wider than those given to recent reviews into higher education. Finding the angle that will spark interest without distorting the analysis is one of the challenges for researchers wanting to be part of the policy dialogue.

And while the opportunities for getting the message out on one's own terms have expanded enormously with the advent of online publishing platforms, the vast proportion of news and social media consumers are 'lurkers' so it is hard to know what impact this dissemination has had in the broader community. This is borne out by the statistics for individual views of a PHA NSW & ACT blog post[4] on the project published on 28 August 2014. The post prompted only one comment from those who viewed it: 33 in August, 280 in September, 697 in October, 295 in November and 57 in December 2014.

Crude web statistics give the numbers of downloads from the NCVER website and the VOCEDplus[5] database for the two reports and a podcast about the research. Since publication in 2014, the web statistics are as follows:

> *A differentiated model for tertiary education: past ideas, contemporary policy and future possibilities*:

- views on both VOCEDplus and the NCVER portal = 1,862
- downloads from both VOCEDplus and the Portal = 1,056

> *What next for tertiary education: some preliminary sketches*:

- views on both VOCEDplus and the NCVER portal = 1,570 plus 328 for the podcast
- downloads from both VOCEDplus and the portal = 782 plus 232 of the MP3 of the interview.

According to Google Scholar the two papers have each received three citations. This low number might be partly explained by the fact that the papers were not published within the academy. Yet, for all the weight placed on citations as a measure of research excellence, a report by the UK Medical Research Council (MRC) has:

> revealed the ridiculously low level citation rates achieved by most publications: MRC-funded research publications were cited an average of 2.08 times between 2006-13. This was twice the world average. Twenty-one per cent of the world's papers published in this time were uncited and less than 5 per cent were cited more than eight times ——the MRC definition of 'very highly cited'. There is an immense proportion of published work that has very little or no impact - even within its academic community (Nutbeam, 2016).

Impact

Did the project achieve its goal of reframing the debate about tertiary education reform? No, or at least not yet. It can make some modest claims for informing small audiences during the process of the research and then via the publication of the report, media stories and

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4 See www.phansw.org.au/blog

5 VOCEDplus is a free research database for tertiary education. It encompasses vocational education and training (VET), higher education, adult and community education, informal learning, and VET in Schools. It is international in scope and contains over 65,000 English language records, many with links to full text documents.

conference presentations about the binary policy and its echoes in today's tertiary education landscape.

As a Canadian paper on the impact of humanities research (Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences, 2014) suggests, influence can be exerted beyond direct contact with the decision makers. It can also be measured by citations in government documents or by invitations to participate on expert panels or committees. The reports on the binary policy received no citations in Hansard nor in the Federation discussion papers.

One cannot predict when impact will occur. One media reference to the work appeared not at the time of release but the following year, when Stephen Matchett, a wry observer of higher education, noted in his daily *Campus Morning Mail* in July 2015:

> The estimable National Centre for Vocational Education and Research has an anthology of recent research here. The papers are all worth reading, especially Francesca Beddie's major 2014 assessment of the state of training and proposals for a new post-school VET structure. This merited much more attention than it received, getting lost in the deregulated student fees debate, which is but a subset of the issues she discussed.

This comment points to the need for persistence in disseminating work which has a potentially longer life than yesterday's news. So in September 2015, the author made direct contact with the incoming minister of education and training, Senator Birmingham, who responded in December 2015 by saying: 'your publication proves timely as we progress through [the Federation Reform White Paper] process'. The minister also sent a copy of the *What Next?* report to Luke Hartsuyker, the then Minister for Vocational Education and Skills. The author has now written to the new minister Senator Scott Ryan, who will soon be negotiating with the states and territories about the future of VET amidst unprecedented media attention on the sector. Will he have the time or inclination to consider the history of the wicked problems he will encounter or the appetite for discussing the purpose of tertiary education before deciding on appropriate structures and funding models? That is perhaps a step too far in a political climate that has created such high expectations about access to higher education.

Broader reflections on applied history and the policy process

Many professional historians continue to find it difficult to have their voices heard beyond their immediate circles. Suspicion remains between the profession and academia. More importantly, prospective audiences in the policy world are poorly attuned to the possibilities history offers evidence-based decision making. History can change this by being an advocate for itself. That calls for greater efforts to raise awareness of the historical research that is

underway and of the historical method. As a note from the UK Parliamentary Office of Technology and Science (POST) observed, 'often history is viewed as "common sense" or as a collection of facts, and the role of analysis is not understood'.

Telling the story of the past in ways that are pertinent to current policy deliberations can demonstrate the power of the discipline. But as the POST note went on: 'policy makers are unlikely to have time to devote to reading long and complicated histories. Historians who wish to engage with policy need to learn to present their work in a concise and policy relevant form (p.4)'.

Even then most professional historians working outside institutions do not have the resources to engage with the policy process. At the state level organisations like the History Council of NSW have a remit to 'encourage and strengthen recognition of history in policy and practice within the activities of government, business and the general community'. At the national level, there is scope to do more to engage with policy makers, for instance by following the example of [Science meets Parliament](#), an annual event when scientists go to Canberra for a two-day program of professional development and networking aimed at helping them better communicate their science to the media, policymakers and parliamentarians. Taking history to the hill would be one way to foster in Australian policy development Pierson's idea of a merger between 'the historical' and 'the contemporary'.

Acknowledgements

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