

Monash Commission: Rethinking post-compulsory education in Australia

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From the Monash Commission Terms of Reference

Australia will advance as a fair, democratic, prosperous and enterprising nation, a good global citizen that promotes human progress at home and abroad. Its citizens will benefit from strong economic growth, resilient public institutions, competitive industries, plentiful jobs and strong social support in a nation built on education, expertise, curiosity, innovation and enterprise. They will have access to work that is meaningful and productive, in an open and cohesive society that supports high living standards for all.

Introduction

The purpose of this brief paper is to assist the Monash Commission with their project on re-thinking post compulsory education for the future.

The working definition of post compulsory education used herein is education and training intended for people who have either completed compulsory schooling (usually of 12 years duration) or an agreed portion thereof.

Currently in Australia there are 2 major forms of post compulsory education- that which is available at a university and that which is available through a recognised vocational education provider of which Technical and Further Education (TAFE) is the largest. There are other providers of education and training beyond schooling and many of these, if not most, are valued by those who use them. However, while they will most likely be part of some future diverse palate of offerings and pathways, they are not considered here.

A number of key questions flow from the purpose and the Monash vision statement such as:

- what is the purpose of post compulsory education;
- what should the overall structure and design of post compulsory education be like to optimise its purpose;
- who should have access and under what circumstances (if any);
- how should post compulsory education be resourced;
- how should rigor and standards be ensured?

Responses to these questions- and others- are shaped and will be shaped by many factors and considerations.

As well, given that I transmitted my report into regional, rural and remote (RRR) education to the Australian Government in January this year, Appendix A is a compilation from the report which I believe may be helpful to the Monash Commission's deliberations about the structure and design of post compulsory education for the future. A very important priority

for the Commission is engaging with the challenges and opportunities of post compulsory education in RRR from a non-deficit standpoint.

Factors and considerations:

Globally they include:

- world population growth to 9-10 billion by 2050; Australia's will grow to around 35 million by this time
- increasing urbanisation versus regionalisation and rural (estimated 2/3:1/3 by 2050) and the concomitant consequences for food production and distribution, energy, territorial security, physical and social mobility
- climate change
- pressures on the natural environment and especially species extinctions and the ripple effect on all of life plus reduction of bio-diversity caused by relentless drives to explore and exploit natural resources for commercial gain
- the growth and spread of Artificial Intelligence- a digitally saturated world- and perhaps the extinction of 'aloneness'
- hyper connectivity- the pollution of the instant, the collapse of the value of the journey (see Virilio, 1997 and dromospheric pollution)
- tensions (and opportunities) between world religions and the ways these shape culture(s), societies and nurture 'unshakable' views of others
- massive disparities in individual wealth and overall wealth distribution
- intensification of competition and marketisation in all major spheres of human endeavour
- dispute resolution from diplomacy to minor conflicts to war
- the reach and impact of mega enterprises on nations and alliances

These factors and considerations impact variously on Australia and there are others that are more specific to Australia such as:

- population- growth as already stated; distribution- currently less than 5 million Australians live in just under two thirds of the land mass (namely WA, NT & SA); density- from around 0.2 persons per square km in the NT to over 14,000 in Melbourne; age, gender and cultural profiles
- ensuring universal access to basics for living including- energy, water, food, clean air, healthy built environment, nature, shelter
- the growing possibility of a 100 year life for a significant proportion of the population
- expanding opportunities for Indigenous people and locating their cultures, history and being in the centre of national life
- sustaining and valuing cultural diversity
- achieving an 'enabling for all' balance and blend of equity and excellence
- values that build and nurture social cohesion and also foster social and economic entrepreneurship
- vast natural environments and fragile eco-systems
- its geo-political location and alliances

- modes of wealth generation and distribution
- national security

As well there are relational challenges such as the balance and mix of individualism and building community, fostering hope and aspirations, pursuing and celebrating excellence and other dimensions of achievement and, living productively with differences, especially of belief and political persuasion.

What is the purpose of post compulsory education?

Broadly, there are three strands that comprise the purpose of post compulsory education.

The first is ensuring a nation has the requisite knowledge, skill and human capital required for it to prosper and endure.

The second is providing individuals opportunities to experience the benefits that can accrue from rigorous post compulsory education, and developing the wherewithal to live well with uncertainty.

The third strand is generating and promulgating new knowledge and techniques through undertaking pure and needs based research.

What should the overall structure and design of post compulsory education be like to optimise its purpose?

To optimise the three strand purpose of post compulsory education, the overall structure and design of it should be a productive interplay between head, hand and heart.

By head, I mean the structure and design should provide opportunities for extended duration and in-depth intellectual challenges across all recognised and emerging disciplines. In addition open opportunities should be built in to the structure and design of post compulsory education to facilitate engagement with entirely new fields of learning which maybe an outgrowth from research or by other means.

Hand underlines the critical importance of being able to *do* something that involves manipulation and application of techniques and knowledge to produce an outcome that is tangible and real, such as being able to successfully clip an aneurysm in a human brain, pitching the roof of a house, and constructing a one off tool to do a specific job.

Heart represents what is of deep and abiding interest to a learner; their passion is another way of stating this. High performance across many if not most fields of human endeavour is fostered by the strength of the interest someone has in studying it and/or acquiring the requisite skills and attitudes associated with it.

So looking to the future, the structure and design of post compulsory education needs to facilitate, indeed preference, approaches and opportunities that enable head, hand and heart to work together in pursuit of high quality achievements and outcomes.

This at least will require a more productive and responsive blending of university education and vocational education in ways that encourage the distinctiveness of each to flourish as well as the complementarity of combinations of both. As well, the structure and design of

post compulsory education needs to facilitate increased engagement with industry, enterprises, ‘think tanks’ and independent research laboratories.

Who should have access to post compulsory education and under what circumstances?

Reception/year 1 through to year 12 is essentially the span of compulsory education in Australia. It is also possible that during the later years of compulsory education, students are able to commence a recognised vocational program and enroll in university subjects. The latter often applies to students who are particularly gifted.

Blended school and vocational and school and university ‘packages’ are also available. As well, there is at least one specialist high school (10-12 science and mathematics) in Australia on a university campus (Flinders) where there is very extensive compulsory and post compulsory education collaboration.

Notwithstanding regional rural and remote locations (see Appendix A), arguably in Australia there is universal availability and access to the years of compulsory education.

In contrast to this, post-compulsory education isn’t universally available, accessible or affordable.

Does it need to be?

Yes, and like the structure and design of Finnish Education, there should be no dead ends (see attached Finnish Education Structure and Pathways).

How should post compulsory education be resourced?

Post compulsory education is an investment. The investment benefits individuals, families, communities and the nation. From here, resourcing pivots around a series of further questions/issues about how it should be resourced including:

- fully funded from the public purse with no limits as to the extent of post compulsory education an individual can access
- fully funded from the public purse but with limits as to the quantum and duration
- fully funded by individuals
- a blend of public purse and individual contribution
- a blend of public purse and individual contribution with adjustments for capacity to pay
- a blend of public purse, individual contribution with adjustments for a capacity to pay and a living allowance to enable students to focus on their studies and also re-enter full-time/part-time study for varying lengths of time as employment situations change/require

The envisaged structure and design is one where there is a productive dynamic and interplay between university and vocational education and training and other contributors which will require funding processes that deliver flexibility, portability and fairness. The economic contributions of philanthropy in Australia at around \$129 billion also need to be taken into consideration.

(http://www.acnc.gov.au/ACNC/Publications/Reports/Economic_contribution_report.aspx)

How should rigor and standards be assured?

Assuring the rigor of the design and delivery of post compulsory education and the standards of attainment are of fundamental importance. It goes without saying that if there is any compromise with rigor and standards in any new options, models, processes and so forth, the value to individuals and the nation of post compulsory education will rapidly decline. It will be very hard and costly to recover from.

While there are criticisms of the Australian Qualifications Framework and also the Higher Education Standards Framework, each has played and continues to play a critically important role in leading and maintaining the high quality of education and training in Australia. Very importantly as well, they provide a robust and reliable basis for Australia to engage with the rest of the world in terms of education, research and qualifications recognition.

In addition, an indispensable function of an AQF and a HESF is that they underpin social mobility and advancement of individuals.

So, focussing on a future where there is likely to be greater diversity and blending of post compulsory options than ever before and greater competition from overseas players, assuring rigor and standards will be a 'front and centre' priority.

To conclude:

"In a fundamental sense, we *are* what we pay attention to... Our attention is precious and what we choose to focus it on has enormous consequences... [our] choices change the world" (Fleischner, 2011, emphasis in original, p. 9).

References

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