

Schools and Universities

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The interactions between schools and universities have always been strong, in both directions. The universities in Australia have always played a large part, some would say too large a part, in determining courses in the higher years of secondary schools. Even more importantly, though less noticeably, they have affected all levels of the school system though their influence on the general 'philosophy' of education and through their training of teachers.

This system might well continue with little change for a good many years but for important moves towards school autonomy which seem to be taking place in most parts of Australia. These moves will mean that schools and teachers will have more individual say in the determination of educational policy—a system to be welcomed for many reasons, but which is at the same time fraught with many dangers.

One of the problems to be faced by all those who must make decisions about the new education system—and that includes principals, teachers and parents

—will be to sift and evaluate the conflicting advice given on nearly all subjects. Much of this advice or influence will come from universities, as it has done in the past, both in the form of entry requirements for the 30% of students completing high school who will wish to go on to university, and through more subtle influence on what subjects should be taught, how they should be taught, and what sort of people should teach them.

I do not intend to discuss the formal requirements for entry to universities or other tertiary institutions. While these are important, their discussion is open, their statement is formal and precise, and their implications are generally clear. Instead I will look at some of the less obvious but ultimately more important influences and interactions mentioned above.

In doing this I lay myself open to a charge of simply airing my own prejudices, but this is a danger for anyone who writes about education unless he has a secure niche in an Education department (with a capital E) and a formal qualification as an 'educationalist'. Having neither of these protections, I must simply take my chance.

The 'university view'

Anyone who speaks of a 'university view' on any topic as though it were a jewel of reasoned opinion, clearly defined and stated, simply does not know universities. The strength, and at the same time the weakness, of universities lie in the great number of conflicting views that can co-exist in them. There is not even any general agreement about the essential features of a university as such—I have argued my own view elsewhere.¹

This same diversity of opinion and practice extends to the disciplines studied and taught in universities. At one end of the scale we have the 'hard science' types of subjects where all statements can be demonstrated or refuted by experimental test or logical deduction, where 'scientific method' is so much just a matter of common sense that it is never mentioned, and where the body of established understanding and technical procedure is so great that a Ph.D. degree is virtually a licence to express an opinion.² Mathematics and physics are prime examples. At the other end of this particular scale come the 'soft sciences'. These are generally the social sciences and their near relatives—education, sociol-

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gy, economics etc.—and here the approach is entirely different. Few if any statements are demonstrably either true or false, the 'discipline' is largely a comparison of the opinions of 'authorities', and the body of established knowledge and technique is not large.

Subjects like music and literature do not fit into this rough classification and, of course, there is a continuum of approach rather than the dichotomy which seems to be implied, but the examples probably make my meaning clear.

Education, which is one of the softest of the soft sciences, is our concern here, for I wish to suggest that there is a marked division of view between 'educationists', as the followers of this academic discipline like to call themselves, and most other university academics. I am making my comments not as a critic of the academic discipline of education, which I recognise as an important and difficult field, but simply as an observer of the facts. Much of my information derives from recent prolonged discussion at this and other universities about the future of teacher training. The remainder is distilled from experiences on syllabus committees and from the speaking

and writing of many of my colleagues.

The 'educationist view'

The position maintained by most members of education faculties in universities is summed up in the dictum

We are not teaching subjects in schools—we are teaching children.

There is a great deal of good sense in this view, emphasising as it does the integrated development of individuals all having different talents and levels of ability. I would even agree that, properly interpreted, this aphorism should be central to the philosophy of all school systems.

Unfortunately it is the interpretations which are the problem. Most educationists add the following corollary to their basic tenet

The teaching profession is a unity consisting of teachers who happen, at a given instant, to be teaching different things to students of different ages.

This is perhaps a little arguable, on a practical basis, but the trouble comes with its extension in the form

In the education of teachers, the prime requirement is a study of the philosophy, his-

tory, theory and comparative practice of education, supplemented by a certain amount of practical training.

Now we see the real difficulty, for a 'qualified teacher' is defined to be a person possessing a formal qualification in education (say a university diploma in education) without any reference to knowledge or understanding of the subject he may be required to teach. Teachers organisations tend to adopt this convenient definition, and to State education departments it is an immense boon—all teachers are interchangeable—after all, they are all teaching children.

To do them justice, most educationists might not go quite as far as this, but they would not stop much short, and the reason is easy to see. Very few members of education faculties—and remember these are the 'experts'—have studied any substantive discipline to an appreciable depth. The most authoritative speakers on education in science turn out rarely to have done more than a three-year pass-course in science, and some even less than that, while the most common academic qualification is a degree in education with a minor in some general soft-science or humanities area.

We all tend to place the assumed boundaries of knowledge only a little outside our own individual experience, so that it is little wonder that such people vastly undervalue the importance of real understanding of specific subject areas.

Lest I seem to exaggerate, the following is a typical and almost random selection. (I found it in the second article³ I looked at!) showing the extreme educationist view.

Teacher education . . . will not be concerned with providing academic knowledge and training for skills . . . Essentially . . . teacher educators will be more concerned with helping to provide and organise experiences which will allow their students to explore and analyse human relations and human experience, providing the skills which will enable them to adopt the role of learning consultants. These skills will be generally to help learners to identify and express educational needs and set educational objectives, to individualise programs that meet these objectives, and evaluate the success of this learning. The trend has already begun . . .

The tragedy of this view when imposed on an education system should be obvious, but unfortunately it is often unrecognised and its real consequences take some time to appear. Our State school system, for example, recruits, teacher trainees without regard to their subject area, so that most of them are equipped to teach English, history or geography, though biology is also not badly served. The teaching of physics or chemistry, for example, is perforce then done by a teacher trained in biology or geography with the result that the lessons are at best confused, while very often the students are taught incorrect principles and distorted interpretations either by their teachers or by fellow students in misguided 'discovery' projects. Worse still, the situation may not even be recognised.

Even those subject areas in which teachers would generally

seem to have reasonable academic competence suffer from the anti-intellectual preaching of the educationists. To actually know something and to try to teach this to students is somehow suspect. It violates the sacred principle³ of

emphasis upon student initiated learning rather than the arbitrary imposition of academic knowledge of some discipline and may even establish the dreaded condition³ of

the teacher's controlling the learning situation by authority derived from possession of knowledge.

With friends giving advice like this, what education system needs enemies!

Conscientious adherence to these educationist principles will almost inevitably lead to a community of individuals, each secure in his or her invincible ignorance and recognising no opinion as of more value than his own. It is, perhaps, a democratic ideal that no-one should be conceded to know more than anyone else, but its limitations are obvious. The teaching of surgery or civil engineering is quite obviously a professional business and bridges designed by amateurs are almost bound to fall down, but the damage done to the community when excessively egalitarian ideals are applied in the general education of children is, in the long run, even more serious.

The 'academic view'

Academic staff from university departments teaching substantive disciplines generally disagree profoundly with the educationist platform. If pressed, they would probably state their basic tenet as

The prime requirement in a teacher is that he understand thoroughly the subject matter which he is teaching
and then that

In the training of teachers, great emphasis should be placed on the various techniques of teaching and on professional experience in teaching situations.

They would probably go on to add

A teacher should also have the background to relate his subject teaching to the needs and interests of individual and community.

Many educationists would accept these views generally, though disagreeing with their emphasis. This is, however, a very real disagreement and its implications are plain. Teachers at primary level must have a broad understanding of many subjects, but at secondary level the depth required for a 'thorough understanding' is such that teachers must specialise in particular subjects and should, indeed, have regular refresher courses in academic content. A 'qualified teacher' on this basis must not only have had an appropriate professional training in teaching but must have, even more importantly, an extensive and up-to-date knowledge of his subject.

In curriculum construction, it must be admitted, the academics have a mixed record. Some of the syllabuses which have been devised by predominantly academic committees have been very good, but others have failed badly because of unrealistic ideas about the practicalities of teaching and the abilities and interests of teachers and pupils.

The academic view, too, can be taken to extremes. In the past we have seen insistence on particular foreign languages or mathematics for university entrance—admirable and useful subjects certainly but perhaps not of universal necessity. We may reasonably lament the passing of Latin as the common language of scholarship, or refuse, privately, to accept as really educated a man who knows nothing of conditionally convergent series, but we must try not to impose these standards too rigorously on others.

Extreme academics tend to have an excessive preoccupation with formalised learning and with the minutiae of syllabus structure. This is a bad thing in many ways and must prove an inhibiting influence for competent and enthusiastic teachers.

Such teachers, will look forward with eager anticipation to the time when they will design much of their own teaching syllabus and, indeed, many may do superbly well. On the other hand an alarmingly large fraction of high school teachers have to teach in areas where their own knowledge is little more than that needed to teach the present syllabus and, indeed, is sometimes inadequate for that. What sort of syllabus will they then construct, particularly if they are not aware of their limitations?

Let us, however, be chary of academic disciplines which are taught entirely on the justification of tradition. Times change and with them change also the needs of education, not only for practical purposes but to achieve a balanced view of the world. We must by all means preserve our intellectual heritage and it is good practical common sense that basic disciplines are usually a better preparation for the unknown future than are studies aimed at current problems. It is also true that the only sound approach to interdisciplinary studies is through the disciplines involved. But we must beware of teaching Sabre-tooth Tiger Trapping and Woolly Mammoth Clubbing long after these animals have become extinct.⁴

Finally, we must be willing to experiment with new teaching methods and approaches to subjects, without being carried away by them, and we must recognise the individual differences between students. Not all or even the majority, need study traditional 'academic' subjects—there is a wealth of educational as well as vocational value to be had from a whole range of more practical training. But the essence of education is to learn from someone who knows—any system of education which fails to recognise this has begun a process of degeneration from which it will not easily be rescued.

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So far I have written only of the influences which universities bring to bear on schools. There

is an almost equal influence in the other direction.

To many people the universities are taking the wrong approach to change and development these days. Ideally one would like to see the universities with a clear view of their place in the educational scheme, fulfilling that purpose with some sort of unity. Other tertiary institutions with equally well-defined objectives might then provide distinctive types of further education for students with different tastes, aptitudes and ambitions.

Unfortunately this has not happened. The universities, intent on being all things to all men and pushed on to continuous growth by formula financing, have plunged headlong into any field with student appeal. The colleges of advanced education, by and large, are also developing in direct competition with university courses. This is, of course, one possible way to proceed, with a pecking-order then developing among many nearly equivalent institutions, but it does not seem to be the most sensible way.

There is, unfortunately, an aura about universities which calls strongly to the young and their parents. They drift to the universities for want of any very clear alternative ambition and then, finding traditional courses not to their liking, feel cause for complaint. Schools could perform a great service to tertiary education generally by looking carefully at the real aims of potential university students to make sure they would not be much happier and more satisfied at some other sort of institution.

Homily

My position in writing this article seems to have been one of giving advice to all those concerned with education. Lest this seem unforgivably presumptuous, let me conclude with a final piece of advice

Be careful from whom you take advice.

Those who must guide and administer and teach in our schools

will be subject to pressures from both educationists and academics. I have tried to state the philosophies of these groups as baldly as possible to make the distinction clear, but of course the advice and pressure will cover the whole spectrum in between. Perhaps in the long run the universities will resolve their differences in this area, but on past performance this seems unlikely. In the meantime, we all have our barrows to push—ask where we are pushing them and why, and then inquire carefully as to their contents.

1. Fletcher, N. H. *The Role of the University in Society . . . as Seen by the University*. Proceedings of the Sixth Australian University Graduate Conference, Hobart, 1972. Reprinted in *University of New England Bulletin* no. 33, September 1972, pp. 4-11.
2. Ziman, J. M. *Public Knowledge*. Cambridge University Press, 1968.
3. Smith, D. L. 'Implications for Teacher Education', *Education News*, vol. 14, no. 7, 1974, pp. 24-7. To be fair, this author was writing in the context of a discussion about lifelong education, but he applied his remarks also to school teachers. To me they epitomise the educationist view.
4. Benjamin, H. R. W. (J. Abner Peddiwell) *The Saber-tooth Curriculum*. McGraw-Hill, 1972.

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