

# Why academics must empower themselves

WHAT is the driving force behind John Dawkins's initiatives on higher education?

The Department of Employment, Education and Training (DEET) says that amalgamations are necessary for efficiency, and that the Unified National System is necessary for accountability.

Academics have responded with some powerful counter-arguments to the DEET position, for example in the special issue of *Australian Universities' Review on the Green Paper*.

The critics have won the intellectual debate, such as it is, but the Dawkinising of higher education continues apace. The academic critics have been diverted by a questionable assumption: that there is some sensible educational rationale behind the process.

The best explanation of the Dawkins initiatives is the direct exercise of power. Amalgamations, in most cases, won't increase efficiency. If they did, why should the Government provide extra funds for them? What they will do is increase managerial hierarchies and reduce the number of independent institutions to be administered from Canberra.

This is efficient for the exercise of power from on high, but not for the taxpayer. The reduction in the size of governing bodies, the introduction of research profiles, the diversion of funds to ARC — all these have the same sort of effect: more power to the centre. Responding to a power-grab with intellectual refutations of the rationalisations for the grab is quite insufficient.

It is easy to say that academics deserve what they get if they race to be the first to acquiesce to the latest government directive.

But there are some things in academia worth struggling for, I believe, such as service to a wide range of interest groups (not just government and industry), the maintenance of critical perspectives on society, and working relationships based (in part) on collegiality and rational persuasion rather than on hierarchy and formal authority.

These values are not shared by those who seek to administer an even more cumbersome education bureaucracy. One need

## COMMENT

By BRIAN MARTIN

not stand long in Canberra to find out that DEET is an extremely hierarchical organisation.

Although it contains many talented people, many of their skills are squandered, because the organisational structure inhibits intellectual discourse. Policies are decided from the top, largely by Mr Dawkins, and only implemented by those in the department.

This means that a vast wealth of information about higher education, both inside and outside DEET, has almost no effect on policy. The organisational basis for testing of ideas, of intellectual give-and-take, is absent.

There is a large body of literature showing that organisational structures such as DEET are extremely inefficient when it comes to utilising the talents of workers to produce informed

## ‘Managerial hierarchies will increase’

outputs. The DEET is relatively efficient, though, in responding to the demands of one person at the top. It is not too much to say that DEET could serve as a model for Dawkins's vision of the higher education system.

If the changes being pushed on higher education are driven by considerations of power rather than economic efficiency or social welfare, then the question is, how can they be opposed?

One approach is direct action: rallies, sit-ins, refusal to cooperate with policies.

I am reliably informed by someone who should know that had several key universities refused to join the Unified National System, it probably would have collapsed after a couple of years. But the universities acquiesced.

Furthermore, more concerted and aggressive action against the graduate tax could well have stopped it in its tracks.

The effectiveness of direct ac-

tion is likely to be greatest as the Government nears an election.

But these approaches have not been taken up. Academics seemed to have decided to play the game politely, although Mr Dawkins certainly has his gloves off.

Another strategy is intellectual counter-attack. Academics are supposed to have intellectual skills. Properly sharpened, they can find new targets.

One area worth studying is the centralism of the ALP. This enforced lack of open intellectual independence is a typical feature of authoritarian organisations.

Then there is the easily observed male domination in the ALP, not to mention the link between party brokers and corporate elites. It's a pertinent, and not so academic, question to ask, who does this serve: the people or the politicians?

Another area of study is the aftermath of policies, especially the failures. How about a study of the costs and benefits of amalgamations, or the impact of managerialism in higher education on academic freedom?

What, then, about the psychopolitics of Mr Dawkins himself? Is it worth investigating whether he has a personal antagonism to academics, and whether this has affected his policy-making? What about the effects of his personal wealth, his ambition in politics, and his confrontationist style?

It would not take long to come up with a long list of intriguing research projects of this sort. They could even be justified on classical efficiency grounds. After all, if we understand better what makes policy-makers tick, then surely the occasional policy disaster could better be avoided.

The real rationale for critical studies of policy-making is to exert some countervailing power. This power can best be exerted by exercising the intellectual freedom that academics so often proclaim as a vital need in a free society. In conjunction with sympathetic

Continued — Page 2



## The time is ripe for a potent counter-attack

From page 1

media (the "free press"), intellectual counter-attack can be potent indeed.

Related to this strategy is the specific targeting of the public servants who deal with higher education policy, presenting them with arguments, insights and alternative plans.

These bureaucrats can be invited to address seminars and conferences, and quizzed, cajoled and perhaps persuaded. Now is the time to pursue this path, as many of the key players in the higher education part of DEET move elsewhere and the initiative for top-down "reform" is becalmed.

To be effective and convincing, intellectual freedom cannot afford to play favourites. By being able and willing to criticise any policy or group in society (not just Mr Dawkins and the ALP, for example) intellectuals increase their own credibility and reduce the chance that any group will see them as an easy target.

The trouble with this is that most academics have been too hesitant to criticise anyone, least of all themselves.

Although Mr Dawkins may be involved in a power-grab, it is not enough for academics to defend the status quo.

There is a need for greater efficiency and accountability in higher education. But efficiency for what, and accountability to whom?

The old model of the elitist ivory tower is indefensible. It is the arrogance, hierarchy, ambition and intolerance that are all too common in academia that make it easy to attack from the outside.

Academics need to come up with their own models and policies for serving and being accountable to the public. Without this, the Dawkins version will win by default.

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