

SYMPOSIUM ON THE FUTURE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

INTRODUCTION TO THE FUTURE

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Concern about the future of post secondary education in Australia has usually been myopic. Alvin Toffler, writing in a journal called The Futurist, aptly described a similar situation when he said: "Instead of anticipating the problem and opportunities of the future, we lurch from crisis to crisis" (p. 224). This problem is not confined to education. Bruce Gyngell in The Bulletin (Jan. 8, 1977, p.18) recently described Australians in general as "... walking bravely into the future, backwards - with their eyes on the past".

Although there have been some longer range predictions attempted, such as the Borrie Report (1975), long-range planning for most institutions means a three-year or six-year span, and with the present "rolling triennia" this span could be shorter still. Other countries have not been so negligent: "Project Europe 2000" consists of a number of studies, one of which was entitled A University of the Future (Berstecher et al., 1974). Similarly in North America we see the works of Toffler like Learning for Tomorrow in which he pointed out that "only in the last few years has higher education begun to catch up with the present" (p. 282). There has also been a Carnegie Commission report by Alex Mood called The Future of Higher Education.

In Australia to date, the only long-range attempts which contain anything about education that I have been able to find, are Australia 2025 - by Electrolux Pty. Ltd. in 1975 to celebrate its 50th Anniversary! - and the background papers for Telecom 2000. Both of these had limited circulation, but both are free if you can find the right source.

In 1974 Bain, writing in the Journal of Educational Administration, pointed out that: "...certainly the examination of the present rather than the future was, and still is, the debilitating characteristic of Australian debate on education". We hope that this symposium, and two books which will appear before the end of 1977, will move people to take a more active stance toward the forces likely to bring about change.

The contributors to this symposium have accepted a number of premises:

1. That a rough idea of what lies ahead is better than none at all.
2. That the key to the future is likely to lie in the middle ground between the two approaches found in the literature on the future. One view, the deterministic, holds that the future is determined by the past and therefore given enough data and analytic skills prediction of the future could be made with increasing accuracy. The normative view is that the future does not exist and cannot be forecast but, paradoxically, it can be created, rather like a self-fulfilling prophecy. Of course, havoc is created in both systems by acts of God and politicians!
3. That it is the proper concern of people interested in research and development in higher education not only to identify trends, but also to attempt to influence them if they appear to be leading higher education to an undesirable destination.
4. That our aim is not to supply infallible scenarios but to provide a challenge and provoke thinking about these issues.

Like the graffiti writer who wrote, "Jesus is the answer", to which, on the following day, someone else had added "Yes - but, what was the question?" Let us concentrate on asking the proper questions.

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