The federal government’s economic policy agenda has politicised Australian higher education to a degree not seen since the peak of the student revolt in the 1968 to 1971 period.

But this time the left is not setting the agenda. The government is drawing its ideas more from the political right than the left, and the left’s main role has been to react.

In December 1987 John Dawkins, federal Minister for Employment, Education and Training, issued the government’s Green Paper on higher education. The Green Paper placed education policy squarely in the centre of government economic strategy, proposed major changes in universities and colleges of advanced education (CAEs) and immediately set off a furious debate that has not stopped since. Higher education has been front page news for much of the year.

The Green Paper stated that the spread of technological skills and higher levels of general education would promote greater “flexibility” and “responsiveness” in the labour force and, in turn, the economy. A “well-educated workforce” was seen as necessary to the development of a more competitive export sector, the heart of the government’s economic approach.

Therefore the Minister argues for a 42 percent growth in the number of graduates by the year 2001, from 88,000 per year in 1986 to 125,000 per year. While under this scenario the annual rate of growth would be little greater than we have experienced since 1975, the Green Paper’s “indicative” target of 125,000 held out the prospect of long-term expansion and with 20,000 students per year unable to find places in the system and school retention rates increasing by leaps and bounds, few could disagree with that. The other aspects of the Green Paper were more controversial.

First, the Minister declared that the government could not afford to pay all the costs of the expansion itself and he set up the Wran Committee to investigate alternative sources of financing. While contributions from industry were within its brief, its main attention was focused on individual “user pays” arrangements — student fees, whether paid at the point of enrolment or paid through the tax system after study had finished.

The Wran Committee reported in May, proposing a tax on former students at two percent of taxable income to be paid at income levels of $21,500 and over. This has been somewhat modified in the tertiary tax scheme approved by Cabinet in late July for inclusion in August’s federal budget. If the scheme is finally introduced next year (opposition inside and outside the ALP remains very strong) students’ tax debts will accumulate at the rate of $1,800 per full-time year and payment will commence at $22,000 per year (one percent), rising to two percent at $25,000 and three percent at $35,000 until the indexed debt is cleared.

The tertiary tax is highly regressive because whatever your income level, you end up paying the same amount to the government. Medicine graduates accumulate tax debts at the same annual rate as nurses, despite the massive income disparities between the two and despite the Minister’s argument that the level of private benefits accruing from education qualifications justifies the education-specific tax.

Second, in the Green paper the government sought to secure efficiency through the amalgamation of smaller and medium-sized institutions with other institutions. To “encourage” amalgamations, Dawkins declared that institutions under 2,000 students would not be funded in future and that institutions of under 8,000 students in size would not be funded for research across the range of their disciplines. While this was in reality an ambit claim, it created a climate of uncertainty and vulnerability and set off a furious scramble over merger options.

Third, the government sought to intervene more directly in the work of higher education institutions to secure particular economic objectives. Greater priority was to be given to applied sciences, technology, engineering and business studies; research was to emphasise marketable products and links with industry; and the academic labour market was to be rendered more “flexible” through the erosion of permanent employment, market-based wages that varied between disciplines, and the declaration of redundancies.

These policies were confirmed in the government’s White Paper on higher education, issued on 27 July this year. The second paper is more carefully worded to reassure the critics but the main messages are the same. Only in the areas of equity
policy (where the government will now intervene somewhat more strongly in requiring institutions to develop equity strategies) and research funding (which will be even more centralised and where there may be a substantial erosion of the research time of university academics working outside disciplines of economic priority) is there much of a shift from the Green Paper.

**Political Centralisation, Economic Decentralisation**

The Dawkins approach is most usually understood as the assertion of Ministerial power over institutions that have enjoyed a large degree of autonomy in their day-to-day work — an autonomy for which there is little public sympathy — but the reality is not quite so simple.

In significant respects, the Dawkins approach is also deregulatory. Institutions are being encouraged to develop their own market activities by the provision of full fee places to overseas students and the development of full fee postgraduate courses (a two-year MBA is now available at the University of Melbourne for $17,000). The tertiary tax would introduce price signals into enrolment decisions, albeit through managed and uniform prices. Public funding of research is being deliberately constrained to force institutions into direct relations with industry, and more emphasis on market-driven applied research as recommended by EPAC two years ago.

This coupling of political centralisation and economic deregulation — strong state, strengthening markets, weakened social policy objectives such as social equality — is the approach perfected by the Thatcher government. Indeed, the Australian Green and White Papers have an uncanny resemblance in both substance and style to the parallel documents issued by the UK government in 1985 and 1987 respectively. The Thatcher government has gone further in one respect in abolishing tenure for all academics newly appointed, promoted or transferred after November 1987. But Thatcher stopped short of introducing a tertiary tax.

But the positive side of the Dawkins reform package also needs to be taken into account.

The educational profiles to be negotiated between the government and individual institutions will require the latter to formulate and implement strategies for rendering fairer the socio-economic mix of the student population, through changes to student selection policy — a more positive approach to the “tax inequity” problem than the introduction of a tertiary tax!

The White Paper also provides for more liberal credit transfer arrangements so that it will be easier for students to be credited for their past work when moving from TAFE to higher education, and between higher education institutions. This could be a major step forward in equity; it would also serve the government's efficiency goals.

The abolition of the hierarchical distinction between universities and CAEs is also to be welcomed. All institutions will become part of a unified national system and all will receive some access to research funds.

The dangers to watch for here are the possibility of some education activities (e.g. critical social sciences, women's studies) in the smaller universities being cannibalised to feed the legitimate resource needs of the CAEs, and the probability that the differential social status, social power and private fund-raising capacities of institutions will lead to a new hierarchy in which market forces will play a greater part in creating inequalities of resources and standards. The unified national system may become a unified national market.

And more than a little significance may still be attached to whether or not an institution receives the formal title of “university”, preserving elements of the old binary distinction.

Beyond the ‘Community of Scholars’

The Dawkins language of higher education policy has created a closed space in which the value of certain academic activities (marketable research, some vocational training) is enhanced but the bulk of academic activities — and most significantly, the traditional liberal notion of academic practice — are diminished in value or excluded altogether.

The White Paper gives lip-service to a broad cultural orientation — at a number of points, the importance of the social sciences and humanities, and research and scholarship across the range of disciplines, are affirmed in general terms — but does not find for these activities a productive role within the new economic strategy.

The traditional balances of the modern university are thus being disturbed in a fundamental way. The Dawkins approach is incompatible with the formally equal status given to the sciences and the non-sciences, and to “pure” and “applied” research. It does not fit with the self-image of academic communities as communities of scholars, equal to each other, selected on the basis of “intrinsic” merit, who practise the creation of disinterested knowledge. The new economic strategy gives priority to outcomes, recognises knowledge as tied to interests and names the interests that should be served: the needs of industry and hence, the needs of the national economy — a particular reading of economic interests re-presented as the national interest through the authority and the funding powers of the state.

It is not surprising that many academics have reacted so critically to the government’s policies. The field of legitimacy established by these policies threaten to exclude their work and radically negates their own self-image. It is equally clear why these academics are socially isolated. To most people, the new notion of the social responsibility of higher education that has been posed by the Minister — however crude its formulation and narrow its
orientation — is preferable to the older image of the academy: isolated, disinterested, socially and intellectually elitist.

In practice, knowledge is never disinterested and knowledge and power relationships are closely intertwined. Knowledge and power produce each other. And most often, higher education has been linked to conservative powers. Scientific knowledge in higher education services only a minority of society directly and the humanities produced in the traditional community of scholars have provided social elites with ways of distinguishing themselves from the masses.

The Dawkins policy claims to impose the “real world” on higher education from without; public opinion is happy to identify with this “real” outside world. In this context, Dawkins appears to be (and in some respects is) a democratic reformer, a posture all the more easy to construct because he and his supporters in the media have connected with the anti-intellectual populism traditional to the Australian cultural psyche.

The Response of the Left

In the face of these rapid shifts in the terrain and the emergence of a thicket of new issues, the response of the left has been largely reactive rather than proactive.

There have been two main responses on the left to the government’s policies.

The first and most common response has been simply to oppose everything the government is doing, in continuity with the left’s political strategy during the Fraser years. The problem with this approach is that not everything the Labor government is proposing is undesirable (e.g. the credit transfer reforms and the abolition of the university/CAE—distinction), and much of it has connected powerfully with popular opinion.

Opponents of the official line are being marginalised as self-serving and conservative; a left position of simple opposition often comes down to uncritical defence of the status quo in higher education, an approach indistinguishable from that of the old Right on campus — the classic academic elitists. (Ironically, these people were the bitter enemies of the left in the earlier era of campus radicalism.)

The other left response has been simply to support some or all of the government’s policies. This is also a position of weakness. It means being carried along willy-nilly in a vehicle someone else is driving and some of the destinations of that vehicle are worrying indeed. There is something wrong when left people find themselves supporting one of the highest user payments in the OECD (the tertiary tax), applauding attacks on intellectuals as a group and welcoming not only business involvement — which is desirable — but also business control of key parts of the public education system.

In education, as in some other social spheres, the influence of the New Right has been profound. While the right is often politically divided, it is ideologically coherent and in the present era it has defined the field of debate. The right now occupies the territory once particular to the left; it has made images of progress, radicalism and iconoclasm its own property. Dawkins is riding a wave of “reforms” generated by the wave machine of the right. The right has the ideological momentum.

Left activists inside and outside the higher education sector need to get the politics of higher education right. Our understanding of the way things work should tell us why. Higher education is an important, influential site with complex social roles. It is closely intertwined with
the practices of the professions: it is a
principal social selector. More and
more of the population is seeking
entry. Much of our knowledge is
produced there. Despite the growing
role of the media and of the think-
tanks and private consultancies, the
cultural importance of higher
education is great.

It is a central part of the social
order.

Higher education is implicated
in ruling class power. It is also a
crucial democratic space. Since the
1960s, through the history of the
Australian Union of Students in the
1970s and early 1980s, universities
and colleges have been a political
laboratory for progressive politics
and a source of many activist recruits
now located in the trade unions, the
media, government, the social
movements, the Labor Party and the
parties of the left. The politics of
higher education today have
considerable longer term implication.

The present division in the left
over the Dawkins agenda is a serious
problem, but it is really the symptom
of a deeper malaise: the absence on
the left of a productive approach in
this social sector. As Stuart Hall has
put it, what we need to develop in
higher education is:

.... a perspective on what is happening
now, a vision for the future, a capacity to
articulate these vividly through a few
clearly-enunciated themes or principles,
a new conception of politics. In short, a
political strategy. (Marxism Today,
March 1988.)

Elements of a Left Strategy

It is clear that defence of the
traditional academic approach is no
longer a viable option and it cannot
be justified in social terms. It is
exclusive of needs of most people,
whether these needs are expressed in
the abstract form of the “ordinary
taxpayer” or understood as the needs

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of workers, migrant communities, Aboriginal communities, local communities, and so on.

Higher education should be socially responsible. To that extent the Minister is right. This means, firstly, that the left within higher education should be much more vigorous in pressing for completely different methods of student selection, especially into the privileged professional faculties such as law and medicine (credit transfer from nursing to medicine is an important avenue to explore). Traditional academic selection is culturally biased and socially exclusive. The evidence is clear. Universities and CAEs are public institutions and should serve everyone.

Second, social responsibility needs to be developed differently to the way in which the government understands it. Better integration with material production in the economy is only one aspect of it. We should welcome the development of higher education's specifically economic role to the extent that, and in the areas that, this economic role is a direct one: some applied research projects, vocational training to meet shortages of skills, and so on.

But the economic benefits of most teaching, learning and research are indirect and unquantifiable. Like political rights and freedoms (to which they contribute) they also have other, non-economic benefits. If the generalised organisation of teaching, learning and research is subsumed under the rubric of vaguely defined but specifically economic national priorities this will lead to the truncation of much that is socially valuable in higher education.

The democratic benefits of education lie most of all in the subjectivity of students themselves: in engagement with knowledge and its application, in the personal and hopefully, collective empowerment which this can bring. Learning, analysis and the construction of new languages and new ways of seeing society have always been part of the left during its periods of upsurge. In this sense, the benefits of higher education — or rather, the potential benefits, because the present system falls well short of this conception — should be brought within reach of everyone.

This means that we need to generate the long-needed debate about the content of higher education courses. Historically, the left has established small enclaves in higher education that practise relatively progressive courses.

The left inside and, especially, outside the institutions needs to be much more vigorous in making connections with these courses — influencing their content, using their knowledge, defending their existence (a much needed task) and spreading their approach elsewhere.

But the left in all locations needs to start examining and criticising the content of "mainstream" courses. Trade unions should be interested in what is taught in industrial relations and economics. Environmental organisations should start to question the social responsibility of science and engineering courses by looking at their content in detail and raising issues publicly within the institution concerned and in broader debate.

In short, we need to start taking the intellectual/political issues seriously. We cannot afford to leave them to "autonomous" higher education institutions and the social elites who have been traditionally serviced by them. And we cannot afford to leave them to the New Right and the economic rationalists, who are using the present high priority on science and on neo-classical economics to rewrite the language of politics, rewrite the map of disciplines in higher education (with incalculable long-term consequences) and restructure the organisation of higher education and the social structure of its beneficiaries — all, at present, with little challenge from the left.

It is therefore essential that the left defends the right of academics/intellectuals to research and teach in areas that are not directly economically beneficial or even popular. Though never neutral, intellectual production is a good thing. We need new ideas and new ways of ordering information. But a positive attitude to intellectual production must be combined with the demand that it be brought into the public eye, its values and its social implications subject to close and critical scrutiny. Individual democratic rights, social responsibility and collective organisation need to be combined.

Collective organisation also means collective responsibility. The quality and quantity of the work of higher education institutions can be improved. The Minister has seized upon a public perception that academics could be more productive. Performance indicators, collectively managed, might improve both the work and the standing of higher education.

To carry through such perspectives the left will also need to reforge methods of organisation in higher education. Higher education is characterised by individualism and careerism. The present policies are setting academic against academic, student against student more specifically than before.

Collective forms of organisation do exist, but they are under-developed and sadly under-utilised by the left.

A serious and sustained left intervention in staff association politics is necessary in order to democratise the industrial policies of the academic unions — which would certainly strengthen collectivity on the campuses — and to raise distinctly left views on the education policy issues. And in student unions the left needs to move beyond the present fractionalism; the National Union of Students mirrors the last days of AUS in that regard.

Much good work is done by left student activists on campus, but the most urgent need is not to capture the student union apparatus; it is to change the agenda of political debate. The Minister understands that. The New Right understands that. It is about time we started to work that way ourselves because there is much at stake.

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