
A TALE OF TWO UNIVERSITIES: THE LIBERAL TRADITION AND THE BUSINESS CASE IN AUSTRALIAN AND VENEZUELAN LIFELONG LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines two universities as contrasting sites of lifelong learning: Central Queensland University as an Australian regional university; and the Universidad Central de Venezuela as that country's oldest university. The comparison reveals different but increasing pressures on both institutions, yet also identifies respective places of nourishment for lifelong learning.

INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the axiom that place makes a difference in education, by adding the qualifier that sometimes difference creates new places in lifelong learning. That is, despite the onrush of globalization and the associated risks of cultural homogenisation, an interrogation of national convergences and divergences in lifelong learning policy and provision highlights the multiple intersecting and disconnected contexts in which such policy and provision are located. This creates both challenges and opportunities for those committed to maximising the transformative potential of lifelong learning.

We illustrate this argument by reference to two universities as contrasting sites of lifelong learning. One site is Central Queensland University (CQU), an Australian multi-campus regional university which also has many international students at centres in Australian capital cities and overseas. CQU has large numbers of mature-age students and students from low socio-economic backgrounds, and it has specialised programs for "second chance" learners, Indigenous Australians, and women studying science and technology. At the same time, it is prey to government pressures to diversify its funding base and to demonstrate corporate accountability.

The other site is the Universidad Central de Venezuela (UCV), the oldest Venezuelan university, which is located in the national capital, Caracas. Its offerings can be considered "traditional", with emphasis on high status professions, and it is the centre and source of strong cultural capital. On the other hand, it has

initiated a number of support programs, and it contributes to a long history of multiculturalism in Venezuela.

We use Bailey's (1999) useful distinction between "the liberal tradition" of education and "the business case" for education (pp. 10-11) as a frame for comparing policy and provision in the two universities in this tale of lifelong learning. We contend that the interplay between these two discourses is manifested differently in the two institutions, reflecting the influence of national and regional forces. Yet we assert also that in each institution there are places where the educational transformation promised by lifelong learning can be nourished.

LIFELONG LEARNING AND CENTRAL QUEENSLAND UNIVERSITY

The central features of Australia's 36 public and 2 private universities are diversity and autonomy. These institutions, like those in many other parts of the world, are responsible for the ongoing lifelong learning of pre-undergraduate, undergraduate and post-graduate students from a wide range of Indigenous backgrounds, nationalities, age groups, and socio-economic circumstances. They are deeply committed to research and scholarship, and to advising and commenting on national and international issues. Each university is particularly involved with its own local, regional, state, national, and global communities. They supply employment for a large number of people (both Australian and international), and they play an important vocational role in providing top-level employees for the workforce as students complete their degrees in a wide range of disciplines. Higher

education in Australia is older than Federation, commencing about 150 years ago, and it continues to grow and develop at a remarkable pace (Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee [AV-CC] Publications, 2000).

Central Queensland University (CQU) was established in the regional city of Rockhampton as the Capricornia Institute of Advanced Education (CIAE) in 1967. Since its inception, CQU has undergone a number of significant changes in its journey from institute to autonomous university. There are four regional campuses apart from that in Rockhampton: Bundaberg, Emerald, Gladstone, and Mackay. While the Rockhampton campus remains the largest, the others have grown significantly in terms of student and staff numbers and infrastructure. CQU also has locations in other parts of Australia and overseas. In the years from 1990 to 2003 the total student population tripled, increasing from 5,956 to approximately 18,621 (Analysis and Planning Division of CQU, 2003; cited in Luck, Jones, McConachie, & Danaher, 2004, p. 4). This growth is remarkable when one considers that Rockhampton, the university's centre, has a relatively small population (65,000), is isolated (649 kilometres from Brisbane, the state capital) and can be regarded as conservative. Despite, or perhaps because of, these perceived limitations, CQU has demonstrated a strong commitment to lifelong learning.

The student population at CQU is remarkably diverse. Mature-age students have enrolled in increasing numbers, particularly as enabling courses have made university entry achievable for people who have not completed Year 12 of secondary studies. The numbers of Indigenous and international students have increased, despite the setbacks to international numbers caused by terrorism and the SARS epidemic. Distance education continues to play an important role, and students have the opportunity to opt for mixed modes of study, including online education. Lifelong learning, by its very nature, should embrace diversity, and CQU continues to support this axiom.

How can a university such as CQU retain its own identity while catering for such a diverse student population? Part of the answer to this question lies with access and equity. In Australia it is an accepted principle that each and every individual has the right to enjoy the benefits of lifelong learning. During the latter part of the

20th century and into the 21st century, government policies have supported this principle at federal and state levels. The Nelson Review (Commonwealth of Australia, 2003), for example, is an indication of the Commonwealth Government's recognition of the need for enabling programs as a means to enhancing access to tertiary education. CQU is committed to the acceptance of all students without discrimination, provided they have demonstrated the ability to complete a degree course. Thus accredited enabling courses exist for prospective students who might be considered marginalised by ethnicity or socio-economic circumstances. Complete wheelchair access to all buildings and levels is provided, and special equipment is available for students with seeing or hearing difficulties. In accordance with its policy of providing for a multiplicity of particular needs for all students, apart from the faculties, CQU also has a number of divisions to cater for a wide range of student requirements.

An equitable system of payment for the cost of undergraduate education (subsidised by the Commonwealth Government) is provided by the Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) whereby students receive an interest-free loan; the amount varying according to the academic degree. These loans can be repaid once the graduating students begin earning income at a set level. Theoretically, therefore, every person in Australia has the opportunity to access a tertiary education. In a predominantly working-class city such as Rockhampton, this is an important factor.

As an autonomous body, each university in Australia has the right "to specify its own mission and purpose, modes of teaching and research, constitution of the student body and the range and content of educational programs" (Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee [AV-CC] Publications, 2000, p. 1). However, higher education in the 21st century is undergoing a continuous process of social, cultural and economic transformation. CQU may seem to be fairly remote in terms of geographical perspective, but it too is exposed to a number of significant issues, including market forces. Bailey (1999) distinguishes between the liberal tradition of tertiary education and the growing emphasis on economic rationalism. Thus CQU strives to provide quality, not only in teaching and research, but also in community service and management. For example, the university includes an Institute of Sustainable Regional

Development and also hosts a number of research centres. CQU is simultaneously an institute of learning and a business organization, emphasising both the reproduction and the transformation of the traditions of lifelong learning.

Australian universities are subject to a process of quality assurance. The Dawkins Report of 1987 advocated the establishment of a Unified National System (UNS), combining the existing universities and colleges of advanced education. The purpose was to set up a system of mass higher education whereby public universities would remain autonomous and attract government funding (Candy & Maconachie, n.d.). At CQU many students have identified themselves as the first members of their families to attend university. As Australian universities have grown larger and more complex, a national quality assurance body has been established.

The aim of the Australian University Quality Assurance System is to oversee a self-assessment process whereby universities assess their processes and outcomes against their own goals. An audit body, made up of representatives from the universities, government, and the community will undertake eight audits a year over a five-year cycle. A report on each audit is made available to all interested parties, and each university receives accreditation based on the results of the report. CQU, therefore, has been accredited as a recognised autonomous university, eligible for government funding subject to quality assurance.

The tertiary institution now known as Central Queensland University has a relatively short history; less than 40 years. In that time a regional CAE (College of Advanced Education), established as a direct result of community interest and lobbying, has grown into a university of international status. As CQU has become more diverse the challenges have multiplied. However, as part of a convergent system of Australian advanced education, where divergent interests are recognised and celebrated, the university continues to empower its staff and students in their quests for lifelong learning.

LIFELONG LEARNING AND UNIVERSIDAD CENTRAL DE VENEZUELA

Like Australia, Venezuela (with a population of approximately 24 million) has both public and private universities, with the former being divided into autonomous and experimental universities. All Venezuelan universities are bound by the regulations of the National Council of Universities (CNU), created in 1946, and of its technical office, the Office of Planning of the University Sector (OPSU), established in 1972. Venezuelan universities provide degrees of at least five years full-time equivalent study in professions such as architecture, economics, education, engineering, and medicine, whereas university colleges provide three-year full-time awards that are similar to Australia's diplomas awarded by Colleges of Technical and Further Education (TAFE). Like the United Kingdom but unlike Australia, Venezuela has one university specialising in distance education provision, established in the 1970s, although other universities have recently provided distance education and online learning as well.

Also like Australia, Venezuela's universities reflect its colonial and post-colonial history. For example, the Universidad Central de Venezuela (UCV), Venezuela's oldest university, was founded by Royal Decree of King Felipe V of Spain on 22 December 1721 as the Royal and Pontifical University of Caracas. On 24 June 1827 Simón Bolívar, the Venezuelan Liberator, and a colleague renamed the University of Caracas the republican and secular Universidad Central de Venezuela. UCV has currently more than 50,000 undergraduate and post-graduate students, 6,000 academics and almost 8,000 non-academic employees in nine faculties in Caracas, two faculties in the regional city Maracay, five distance-education centres, and 12 experimental stations in different regions of Venezuela.

In many ways Venezuelan universities continue to reflect and encapsulate the diverse political and socio-economic tensions and opportunities in the broader society. For example, during the military dictatorship of the 1950s, the universities provided a focus for opposition to military control that led to the government's appointment of UCV's rector (its chief executive officer) in 1969, an unprecedented example of political control of a traditionally autonomous institution.

“Lifelong learning” would generally be equated with “continuous education” in Venezuela, reflecting a strong emphasis on formal rather than informal education as both the sites of and the vehicle for ongoing professional education. For example, the Instituto Tecnológico in UCV’s Faculty of Engineering was established in 1964 and currently provides two kinds of courses to both UCV students and interested clients from outside the university: short courses ranging from eight to 40 hours’ duration covering such topics as the transportation and distribution of natural gas, and the supervision of civil works; and accredited programs through licensed agreements with, for example, the World Meteorological Organization. Both the courses and the programs are designed to equip Venezuelan engineers to acquire and maintain professional currency and standing, and to contribute to the nation’s overall capacity to develop technologically.

Venezuelan Indigenous students attend UCV, and they benefit from a specialised support program. Most Indigenous Venezuelans live in the Amazonas region and the Orinoco River Delta, where no university is located, so UCV developed provision for students from those areas. Likewise, it is possible for residents of the so-called “informal settlements” or *barrios* that surround Caracas (as they do in the case of most Latin American capital cities) to attend university, provided that they meet the entrance requirements. In 1996 UCV began the Samuel Robinson Program, named after the alias used by Simón Rodríguez, Simón Bolívar’s teacher, a social intervention program directed at enhancing the prospects of admission of students from low socio-economic backgrounds, who are of sufficient merit to enter UCV, but whose secondary school experiences might otherwise prevent them from doing so.

Also like Australia, Venezuelan universities are responding to government pressure to diversify their funding sources. While government funding is still the principal source of income for UCV, its staff members are encouraged to be entrepreneurial as far as possible. For example, staff members of the Faculty of Engineering’s Instituto Tecnológico broker services for external clients such as conducting mechanical separations and comparing meteorological data collected by conventional instruments and automatic weather stations in terms of the accuracy and utility of the results.

NATIONAL CONVERGENCES AND DIVERGENCES IN LIFELONG LEARNING

In comparing the conceptualisation and provision of lifelong learning at CQU and UCV, we are conscious of Dyson-Hudson’s (1972) dictum that “Comparison to be useful must be quite specific, quite detailed and very controlled”, and that it needs to avoid “the charge of merely re-shuffling pieces of information we already have, for aesthetic rather than illuminating purposes” (p. 23). Similarly, we are aware of Portin’s (1998) assertion that “One of the problems of international comparisons is the rush to conclusions that are not based on careful comparative methodology” (pp. 296-297).

With these qualifications firmly in mind, we have selected Bailey’s (1999) distinction between “the liberal tradition” of education and “the business case” for education (pp. 10-11) as the basis of our comparison. From that perspective, both CQU and UCV demonstrate their origins and their development in “the liberal tradition” of education, but that demonstration also signals their very different cultural, political, and socio-economic locations. UCV is Venezuela’s oldest university, and its establishment reflected initially the Spanish Empire’s and subsequently the liberated nation’s assumptions about higher education as a formal process of enlightenment and of empire, and then nation, building. Although the distinction might be seen as largely semantic, this historical factor also links with Venezuela’s use of “continuous education” rather than “lifelong learning” as a key contemporary educational discourse, suggesting a more formal and potentially homogeneous approach to the forms of education that follow an initial undergraduate degree.

By contrast, “the liberal tradition” of education for CQU constitutes something of a paradox. On the one hand, CQU’s foundation campus in the Queensland regional city of Rockhampton has at times been positioned somewhat uncomfortably in a community with one of the lowest take-ups of higher education in Australia. This has meant that the university has had to take the lead in promoting the benefits and values of university provision to its local community. On the other hand, CQU’s rapid expansion from a single-campus institute of advanced education to an integrated regional university with campuses in

five Central Queensland communities to a national and global higher education provider with international students in both Australian metropolitan cities and overseas centres reflects a capacity to innovate and, potentially, to transform the concept of “the liberal tradition” of education in diverse forms that in turn suggests at least some degree of overlap with increasingly heterogeneous forms of lifelong learning.

It might also be argued that CQU’s rapid expansion outlined in the previous paragraph reflects the university’s responses to increasingly urgent pressures to engage with “the business case” for education. The relatively low take-up of university education in Central Queensland has meant that CQU has seen the need to enter the global higher-education market as a means of consolidating and expanding its funding base. This has met with mixed success, with some ventures being considered more financially successful – as well as educationally sound – than others. The commercialisation and globalization of lifelong learning provision by CQU – as for most other providers – have not been as straightforward as initially hoped.

“The business case” for Australian higher education has been accelerated under the current politically conservative government, although it should be acknowledged that the previous Labor government initiated this process. The situation in Venezuela is rather more complex: the global reach of economic rationalism in university governance has encountered, and to some extent been countered by, the interventionist, left-wing government of President Hugo Chávez Frías. Many commentators have analysed this encounter in terms of an increasing polarisation and politicisation of Venezuelan university education. For UCV, this has meant delays in the provision of government funding and government ambivalence about the degree of political support provided by the nation’s oldest and in many ways still the most prestigious university. Many UCV staff members have responded to this situation by combining what they see as their primary mission of conducting research and undergraduate and post-graduate teaching with community outreach interpreted in terms of entrepreneurial links with wealthy private clients (such as the Faculty of Education’s strong associations with the crucial Venezuelan oil industry).

At the same time, both CQU and UCV have established what we argue are places where lifelong learning can and should be nourished. At CQU, CQU Connections is a program established to provide support in university access for students from low socio-economic backgrounds, while there are specially targeted pre-undergraduate programs for Indigenous Australian students, mature-age students, and female students who would otherwise be unlikely to attend university. At UCV, the Samuel Robinson Program has also proved effective at enhancing university admission for students who would not normally attend, and who would therefore have fewer lifelong learning options, if the program did not exist. In both institutions, these places are sites predicated on the assumptions that university education should be available as broadly as possible; that such education must increasingly take on ‘lifelong’ and ‘lifewide’ dimensions; and that the playing field is by no means at the same level for different groups and individuals within Australia and Venezuela.

More broadly, what this necessarily brief and selective comparison demonstrates is the circulation and impact of multiple discourses associated with “lifelong learning” in CQU/Australia and with “continuous education” in UCV/Venezuela. Some of these discourses reflect the universities’ strong cultural capital in their roles of authorising sites of formal learning and of accrediting the forms taken by such learning, leading to varying degrees of accessibility and flexibility in the pathways among and between educational systems and employment sectors. Other discourses highlight lifelong learning as professional growth and development, again stressing the formal elements of such learning. Still other discourses have a utilitarian grounding, by emphasising lifelong learning as the capacity building and the skills acquisition necessary to survive and thrive in an increasingly mobile and volatile labour market. For us, among the most significant discourses attending lifelong learning are those associated with opening up diverse forms of such learning to as many different groups and individuals as possible, whereby “lifelong learning” and “continuous education” might be seen as linking with “access and equity” and with “social justice”. We contend that these kinds of discourses can be discerned in the interplay between “the liberal tradition” of, and “the business case” for, education (Bailey, 1999, pp. 10-11) as experienced at CQU and UCV.

CONCLUSION

Perraton (2000) made the following statement about the impact of globalization on open and distance learning in the “developing world”:

...globalization’s main effect has not been in the development of international policy for open and distance learning, or the establishment of specialised agencies, or the development of common courses, or in international enrolment but in accelerating and easing the diffusion of innovations....National policies, and national perceptions of the strength and weakness of distance education, remain the major determinants of its shape. (pp. 175-176)

Perraton’s statement encapsulates something of the ambivalence that we feel about national convergences and divergences in lifelong learning, as reflected in this paper’s tale of two universities. On the one hand, at a broad level there are significant similarities in how the two institutions have grappled with the challenges of “the liberal tradition” of, and “the business case” for, education (Bailey, 1999, pp. 10-11). On the other hand, national differences in approach to conceptualising and valuing “lifelong learning” and “continuous education” have had a considerable impact on the manifestations of those phenomena at the two sites. As well, differences in these manifestations can be traced to locally constituted engagements with national and international forces.

What is the significance of this tale of two universities? Does it tell us anything new? Does it take us beyond existing knowledge and suggest anything about possible future forms of lifelong learning? We believe so. In particular, we contend that this comparison of lifelong learning at CQU and UCV can – in combination with other nationally and institutionally based comparisons – contribute productively to the ongoing interrogation of what one of us and a colleague identified as:

one of the most vital of...recurring educational issues...[:] education’s potential role in replicating existing socioeconomic inequities and/or in challenging such inequities and transforming them into more equitable

relationships between knowledge producers and consumers. (Kwon & Danaher, 2000, p. 111)

That is, we argue that investigating national convergences and divergences in lifelong learning policies and provision must include a substantial focus on identifying and evaluating who the winners and the losers from such learning are, and the impact of lifelong learning on their lives and their life chances. We assert further that the approach adopted in this paper constitutes one among many potentially fruitful means of attaining such a focus, and more broadly of celebrating and valuing those places where equitable and meaningful lifelong learning can be nourished and can flourish.

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REDEFINING VET IN SCHOOLS – ADVANCING THE MIDDLE CLASSES?

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ABSTRACT

The narrowing of social gaps in educational outcomes has been a general theme of recent education policy. This paper will focus on a case study to draw on a deeper understanding of how reforms to Vocational Education and Training (VET) in schools in New South Wales (NSW) are impacting on class issues, and how families from different, or mixed, social-class groupings articulate with schooling.

INTRODUCTION

This paper will report on a three year Australian Research Council (ARC)-funded project into vocational education and equity in senior secondary schooling in New South Wales, which was completed in 2003 (Crump & Connell, 2003). The research explored the relationship between VET and young people’s futures, by investigating the reforms to the NSW external Year 12 exam, (the Higher School Certificate [HSC] assessment process) in which VET courses gained a new and more challenging profile. The intent of the “Securing Their Future” reforms was to make secondary curriculum more socially inclusive and thus set up young people with broader options for lifelong learning and employment, also articulated in the NSW “Charter for Equity in Education and Training” NSW Department of Education and Training (1996). This was to be achieved by reducing distinctions between programs of study that tended to separate privileged students from others, mainly through matriculation status.

THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Recently, international studies of the middle class are re-emerging as explanatory accounts of the conceit of contemporary educational reforms. This paper will indicate how these reforms to matriculation in NSW only weakly

counter a “poverty of expectations” about lifelong-learning options based largely on class lines. While accepting responsibility for improving educational options for young people over their lifetime, the state remains a poor distributor of those options. Policy intent is, to a large degree, defeated by the complexity of critical and pragmatic problem solving in educational provision, and the interplay of factors beyond schooling and within young people’s lives.

In 2003, research into social class was restored to the education policy research agenda, now refreshingly looking out the middle classes and policy reforms such as the marketisation of education by Power, Edwards, Whitty, and Wigfall (2003) and Ball (2003). Power, et al. (2003, p. 1) deliberately mimicked work from the 1960s on working class families and disadvantage, this time “exploring the dynamics and dilemmas of ‘expected’ success and human situations of over 300 academically promising” young people. Power, et al. (2003, p. 151) also report that, despite the policy talk of ‘standards being the key’, structures continue to facilitate or hinder educational advantage, regenerating social divisions, limiting competition, and restricting access to the most desirable credentials. Ball (2003) focuses on particular “moments” in the policy cycle where parents, in a relationship with the state, attempt to exploit structure and rhetoric to the educational advantage of their child. Ball (2003, p. 5) argues