INTRODUCTION

I was invited here to reply to Professor Chipman’s paper and relatedly to provide a response to the West Review from the viewpoint of an academic involved in postgraduate supervision.

Not knowing exactly what Professor Chipman was going to say and not sighting all of the final West Review (released last Friday) somewhat restricts my capacity to make detailed comments about either, and in any case I have only got about 10 minutes.

Nevertheless, I can say that many academics feel alienated from and marginalised by the New Agenda in Higher Education (HEd). And, this sense of alienation and marginalisation is linked to the increasing sway of a perspective exemplified within the main direction of the West Review and advocated by Professor Chipman today.

THE WEST REVIEW

So, let’s turn briefly to the West Review. The West Review contains three major themes, which are very poorly integrated: one of these themes is dominant and the other two are marginal and residual.

The dominant position is one you would all be familiar with and is characterised by the relatively new notion of HEd as an ‘industry’. While there is some interest in regulation at postgraduate level, the overwhelming tenor of the Review is market oriented. (This is unequivocally evident in relation to undergraduate studies which clearly has an effect on the postgraduate arena.) It is argued in this context that HEd should be more directly regulated by market forces. HEd should be more attuned to the model of competitive self-interest derived from business and correspondingly it should be administered in the style of ‘most business boards’ (in the words of the Executive Summary). The crux of the argument here is that Higher Ed should become more like the market. Let’s sum up this dominant standpoint in the West Review by symbolising it in the timely figure of Peter Reith. Most of the West Review amounts to the desire to Reithafy HEd.
But simultaneously in the West Review there is a marginal theme which is associated with the language of ‘excellence’. This marginal standpoint amounts to a version of traditional elitism which can be summed by the symbolic figure of an Antipodean Oxford Don, the traditional scholar.

This strand of traditional concern with ‘excellence’ sits uneasily alongside a third rather residualised theme which points to the mass nature of HEd and occasionally pulls on compassionate and social justice terms of reference. There are invocations to an ‘inclusive society’ which offers mass access to Higher Ed and hence democratises learning. A vague conception of ‘opportunity for all’ occasionally surfaces.

Additionally, at times the marginal and residual themes in the West Review are very loosely linked together, even though the tensions between them are not confronted. This linkage expresses a desire to reconcile elite conceptions of intellectual merit with mass conceptions of access. In other words, the Oxford Don ‘excellence in Education’ figure is loosely linked with the symbolic image of Mass Democracy in the West Review in, for example, references to high-flown notions of turning the whole of Australia into a ‘learning society’. The suggestion here is that everyone will have access to excellence. Everyone will be intellectually upgraded. The combination of traditional elitism and mass access may be symbolised by the Caring Don.

The figure of the Oxford Don, the image of the Democrat, and their somewhat unwieldy amalgamation in the Caring Don, involve several notional directions in HEd, but none of these directions in the West Review are likely to alarm academics, none are likely to be entirely rejected by academics. For a start, they do reflect existing features of HEd.

In many ways the Oxford Don and Democrat strands in the West Review simply reiterate tensions that have been around in HEd and indeed social democratic societies for aeons. In the specific instance of postgraduate supervision these threads are also quite recognisable. We have had after all two major ‘styles’, for want of a better phrase, of postgraduate supervision for some time. And these styles effectively coincide with the two lesser standpoints in the West Review, in that existing Postgraduate supervision has been marked by either the older, more established style of Master/Apprentice relations—a style strongly associated with the Oxford Don figure—or the newer style of Pastoral Care, which is associated with the image of the Democrat.

The marginal and residual themes in the West Review and their loose amalgamation are unlikely to be considered objectionable by academics. They are not problematic in part because they reflect existing practice. But more than this. Such elements in the Review are indeed likely to be those with which academics are quite at ease. Why? Because both lesser themes and their amalgamation all involve, despite divergent elements, a characteristic understanding of academic
life, including postgraduate supervision. That understanding of academic practice rests on a notion of responsibility, a sense of responsibility that goes beyond one’s self and one’s self interest or even the self interest of one’s department, one’s university or the HEd sector as a whole. This notion involves a sense of responsibility to the pursuit of knowledge, the community of scholarship and to the learner and learning. The notion of responsibility as the basis of academic practice is one which academics themselves embrace, whether or not they individually live up to it.

Which brings me back the dominant theme of the West Review, the account of HEd as an ‘industry’, the Peter Reith figure. This theme—unlike the loose linkage of the two lesser themes—is not integrated or even particularly linked with the other themes in the Review. Indeed the West Review is almost entirely dominated by the Reith version of HEd, with the other themes of excellence and mass access/social justice just tacked on here and there. In effect, those themes which are directly linked to academics’ sense of what their practice is—that is, themes which articulate their sense of responsibility as the basis of their practice—are side-lined.

Now, obviously policy documents are the work of many people and represent many ‘interests’ and so it’s no surprise to find that this one looks rather cobbled together. It’s certainly no surprise to find inconsistencies. What is of concern is the overwhelming credence granted the dominant theme (the Reith view of HEd) and the related problem of reconciling Reith with the lesser combined theme of mass access/social justice—the Caring Don. Because the point here is that Reith and the Caring Don are not the same; they don’t involve the same directions for HEd. They are different.

The dominant theme in the West Review asserts that HEd should be more like the market. The problem is that although the HEd sector cannot be seen as entirely distinct from the market, it does contain certain elements in it which are clearly not like the market. This is a difference which I suggest we need to recognise. It is a difference which in the area of supervision may even approach incommensurability.

It is argued in the Executive Summary of the West Review that it is ‘desirable and necessary’ to take an industry perspective on HEd because it is a part of the economy contributing 1.3% of GDP. This seems to me a very weak basis for a dominant stress on the market which is not sufficiently attentive to the potential difference between HEd and the market. After all the value of the household or domestic economy has been assessed as contributing between 52-62 per cent of GDP in Australia (ABS, 1992) but no one suggests that we ought to start importing a market model into our family life such that we ignore the differential ‘altruistic’ logic of the domestic economy. No one says we should start to weigh up in market terms our exchanges with our sexual partners and children. But the differential functioning of the HEd sector does not appear to get the same
recognition, even though the consequences of introducing market practices into academic exchanges might also be very problematic.

Postgraduate supervision is a good example of this potentially incommensurable difference and explains why most academics are very nervous about the main direction of the West Review. If I were genuinely to take up a market model of practice as a postgraduate supervisor, that is, if I were actually to behave as a competitive individual driven by self-interest, a number of things follow.

- I would be mad to take up difficult students, students with emotional problems or those with challenging risky topics.
- I would never give any extra time to students or give over my own ideas to assist their intellectual ideas or fix a desperately unstructured thesis or provide serious ongoing editorial assistance.
- I would never offer gratuitous time to students who were way over their due submission date.
- I would never help a student who was not ‘mine’.
- I would never comfort a student weeping over the phone at 10 o’clock at night.
- I would try very hard to only take on healthy students with no emotional difficulties, lots of financial support, no young children, preferably from privileged backgrounds, consistently good if not excellent undergraduate results, clear and well developed thesis proposals, who really don’t need much help, can show evidence of being autonomous, highly motivated researchers and will not complain about anything.
- I’d take on, in preference, those students who had projects that could help me develop ARC or other grant applications and/or bring me into contact with business.
- I would only give minimum time to these students and offer minimal guidance individually, and/or see I would see these students in groups so they could support and help each other.
- I would organise an internal market between myself and my mates to ensure that all my students passed, and in return I’d pass all theirs.
- I’d suggest to these students that they regularly nominate me for teaching prizes and contribute testimonials to my applications for promotion as part of the ‘deal’ of them getting ‘through’.
- Moreover, I’d require each one who had a decent idea to produce an article or book from their theses and name me as co-author.

And I’m sure that as long as I was ‘efficient’ about getting students ‘through’, I would continue to find plenty of students to supervise. So-called ‘student choice’ (such as it is) would probably be satisfied.

This is behaviour that does conform to making HEd more market driven, more like the market, but it is at odds with what is actually required in any postgraduate supervision worth the name.
CONCLUSION

Academics in my view are rightly cautious about the new dominance of the Reith version of HEd because it has the effect of making it more difficult, not to say positively silly, to uphold a responsibility model whether it takes the form of the Oxford Don, the Democrat or the Caring Don. Most academics fear that the demotion of precisely those elements to occasional ‘apple pie’ footnotes in the West Review means that the themes of excellence and broad access for a range of students (including non-traditional ones) will be side-lined. This is not a matter of an antagonism to reform per se. It is not a matter of conceiving existing forms of postgraduate supervision as beyond reproach. It is indeed a concern with scholarship and with students, with the very heart of Higher Education itself.

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