

# Australian Higher Education Reform: A Reflexive Modernisation Perspective

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## ABSTRACT

*Globalisation is a major force driving the many profound changes occurring in policy-making in Australia. The far-reaching and deep transformations in the social, economic, political and cultural fabric brought about by globalisation are usefully conceptualised in the theory of reflexive modernisation. This aim of this paper is to use the reflexive modernisation thesis to examine the Nelson reform agenda for Australian higher education. The Nelson reforms are an intensification of a process begun in the 1980s that is opening the sector to competition, privatisation and marketisation. The trends identified have significant implications in that the Australian higher education sector is being fundamentally transformed, calling into question the nature and role of universities.*

## KEYWORDS

Higher education; individualisation; globalisation; reflexivity; reflexive modernisation; risk.

## INTRODUCTION

Policy announcements by the recently re-elected Australian Liberal (conservative) government mark significant change in the power of the government to implement a neo-liberal reform agenda. With regard to higher education this agenda is expressed most noticeably in the Nelson Report (2003). Some of the proposed reforms have already been implemented, for example, the April 2005, announcement of changes to workplace relations requirements in universities. These changes force universities to offer staff individually negotiated contracts as an alternative to the current collective bargaining arrangements. Under the policy, universities must comply or face loss of future government funding of 5% in 2006, rising to 7% per annum in later years (Department of Education Science and Training, 2005). Further reforms will occur from July 2005, when the Liberal government gains control of the Senate and will be able to overcome the resistance opposition parties have mounted to many of the policies outlined in the Nelson Report (2003). In addition to changes to workplace relations, the Nelson Report (2003) includes changing the governance of universities and allowing local and international private education institutions to begin competing with local universities. These reforms mark a further step in the reflexive modernisation of Australian universities that began in the 1980s (Pick, 2004) reshaping the higher education system into one that emphasises competition, privatisation, and marketisation. This article examines the Nelson reform agenda in the light of these trends.

## REFLEXIVE MODERNISATION AND THE NELSON REFORMS

Reflexive modernisation was outlined in detail over a decade ago by Beck, Giddens and Lash (1994) and further elaborations are developed in Beck (1992; 1994; 1997; 1998), Giddens (1991; 1994) and Lash (1993; 1994; 1999). The major theme developed in the reflexive modernisation thesis is the emergence of a new epoch in the development of Western society. In essence, the transformations that are occurring are conceptualised in terms of a continuation of modernity rather than a continuation of capitalism (Beck, 2000). Beck (1994) identifies the role of 'modernity' as the engine of change, firstly in the shift from 'traditional' (Western European) society into 'industrial' social forms and secondly, the subsequent 'reflexive modernisation' of industrial society. As such, reflexive modernisation involves far-reaching and deep changes to national, regional and international institutions of economic, social, cultural and political governance that mark the re-shaping of society after the end of the cold war. Beck argues that globalisation is a major process driving this transformation in that it is 'changing the foundations of living together in all spheres of social action' (Beck, 1998, p.17). It is interesting to note here that the work of leading reflexive modernisation theorists (particularly Giddens) have generated major ideas informing policy development around the world (Dannreuther & Lekhi, 2000). With this in mind, this article uses reflexive modernisation to illuminate the complex social, economic, political, and cultural effects of globalisation on the key national policy area of higher education.

Whilst reflexive modernisation puts forward key concepts that can help generate greater understanding of the multi-dimensional social transformations taking place, it has been subject to wide ranging discussion and debate (Clark, 1998). Whilst there is no doubt that the reflexive modernisation perspective is an influential and original formulation, there are three areas around which criticism is focused: an over-emphasis on the transformational power of risk, that modernity has too much prominence, and the problem of reconciling reflexivity and reflection.

With regard to risk, Beck (1998) describes an erosion of class-consciousness. This erosive effect is caused by inescapable global risks (eg global warming, ozone depletion, species extinctions) that threaten everyone in the same way. Beck (1998) argues that regardless of social class everyone belongs

to the same community of fate because eventually, global risks catch up with those who profit from them causing a kind of equalising effect. The risk-fate of industrial modernity thus confronts everyone in a similar way. However, as Elliott (2002) points out, Beck does not adequately account for how individuals are drawn into the processes of reflexive modernisation (eg individualisation) which may embody the asymmetrical power relationships of social class evidenced in the emerging gap between information-rich and information-poor communities and the socially excluded underclass. Elliott (2002) argues that rather than having an equalising effect, increasing risk is accentuating social inequality and division.

Reflexive modernisation may also be criticised for placing too much emphasis on modernity. Beck (1994) argues that society is going through a period of transition to a new modernity and that reflexive modernity is a continuation rather than radical departure from modernity. This then excludes the possibility that this transformation may be propelling society *beyond* modernity and underplays the role of wider institutional and epistemological factors in this transition (eg the levelling of social hierarchies and the fracturing of knowledge claims) whilst privileging the concepts of risk, reflexivity and individualisation (Elliott, 2002).

Problems also arise in that reflexive modernisation includes reflexivity and reflection as separate phenomena. The 'reflexivity' of reflexive modernisation implies unthinking and unknowing responses to modernisation whilst the 'reflection' of reflexive modernisation refers to a deliberate (knowing) response to unintentional and unseen (reflexive) dissolution and endangerment. Beck (1994) argues that reflection follows reflex, but Elliott (2002) disagrees. He contends that by splitting reflexivity and reflection into mutually exclusive categories, Beck has separated blind social processes and practices (reflex) from knowledge residing with social actors (reflection). Elliott (2002) maintains that rather than reflex and reflection being separate, they are bound together in a complex relationship requiring the development of more heterogeneous, interpretive analytical methods.

These criticisms represent two major challenges for higher education policy-makers. Firstly, the issue of tackling social inequality has so far been a central theme of educational policy and therefore care needs to be taken to ensure that the use of reflexive modernisation includes an examination of whether the processes at work are serving to reduce or accentuate inequality. Secondly, the reconciliation of reflex and reflection coupled with the reality of difficult to track, discontinuous change, are challenges that policy-makers cannot avoid if they are to develop relevant and effective policy. For policy-makers it means confronting the difficult task of confidently tracking trajectories of discontinuous change that may be propelling nations into new forms of modernity. If the policy responses to reflexive modernisation is to take-cover and hide or simply go along with the tides of contemporary forces such as globalisation, then policy-making becomes at best a futile endeavour.

In sum, reflexive modernisation may be criticised for proceeding from a modernist perspective, from which a utilitarian methodological approach is an inevitable consequence, neglecting interpretive knowledge and culture, whilst placing too much emphasis on risk, and ignoring the connections between reflexivity and reflection. Such problems have led Lichtblau (1999) to maintain that the concept of reflexive modernisation lacks theoretical ambition and cannot be taken seriously as it fails to reconcile the social and cultural worlds, and lacks an account of the specific aesthetic experience of modernity. However, in a time of paradox, contradiction, and uncertainty, novel ideas, insights, and methods are needed. Reflexive modernisation is particularly useful in this respect with regard to examining the effects of globalisation. It can help researchers interested in exploring the connections between the global, national, and local contexts enabling these different levels of influence to be integrated and understood in their entirety. Higher education is one area where the global, national, and local overlap and interact in complex and unpredictable ways (Marginson & Rhoades, 2002).

Australian higher education policy has been very much at the forefront of reform driven by recognition that universities are a key location for the development of the 'knowledge industries' of global capitalism. As such, the sector has received much attention from successive governments intent on creating new and lucrative export markets. Consequently, higher education policy has forced universities to undertake rapid and profound change over the past few decades — changes that are radically redefining the nature and purpose of higher education. In the context of Australian higher education, reflexive modernisation includes three concepts that capture the present policy trajectory outlined in the Nelson Report (2003). These concepts are individualisation, risk, and reflexivity. Individualisation refers to a process by which people are progressively being differentiated into separate functional arenas disembedded from collective social structures and as this happens they must create their own life chances. In the context of this article, risk is defined in terms of unforeseen and unintended side effects. The importance of risk is that

rather than debate being focused on policy proposals, attention is paid to side effects which then begin to dominate public discourse. Reflexivity is used in terms of describing the responses of individuals and social institutions (eg governments and universities). These responses are self-referential, and frequently without reflection leading to a situation where the outcomes of policies and decisions are not necessarily those that were originally intended or desired. The following sections examine Australian higher education policy in the light of these concepts.

## **INDIVIDUALISATION IN AUSTRALIAN HIGHER EDUCATION**

Individualisation may be used to give subtle insights into the effects of the Nelson reform agenda not just on the higher education sector, but also on key stakeholders (eg employees, students, and employers of graduates). Beck & Beck-Gernsheim (2002) refer to individualisation as, 'living a life of one's own in a runaway world'. For Beck, individualisation is the 'exhaustion, dissolution and disenchantment of the collective and group specific sources of identity and meaning of industrial societies' (Beck, 1998, p.32). The significance of this is that it enables the invention of new forms of life (Beck, 1998). A particular strength of this concept is that it makes the effects of policy not only 'out there' phenomena that are remote and far away from people. The effects are also 'in here', influencing intimate and personal aspects of people's lives (Giddens, 2002). The overall implications of individualisation has been discussed extensively by Beck (1994), Beck (1998), and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002). From these accounts, three key aspects of individualisation can be identified: differentiation, choice, and disembedding.

*Differentiation* – This is the breakdown or disintegration of peoples lives into separate functional spheres. In living differentiated lives, people are only partly integrated into society through its institutions (eg as students, voters, taxpayers, and car drivers). They are therefore dependent on those institutions that facilitate these interactions (schools, taxation office, and government agencies.). There is a paradox here in that peoples lives are at the same time differentiated and standardised by the legalities and norms set by society's institutions. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) argue that differentiation actually means living non-identical lives that are mediated through institutions.

Higher education in Australia forms one of the mediating institutions referred to by Beck and Beck-Gershiem (2002). However, the higher education system is itself being subject to a process of mediated differentiation through the policy process. The differentiation of universities in Australia is a stated policy objective in the Nelson Report (2003). Under the banner of 'diversity', the Nelson reforms will actively encourage universities to 'differentiate their missions' and specialise through 'developing a strategic portfolio of research activities and training programmes' (Nelson, 2003, p.31). This marks a shift in policy thinking from unplanned to planned differentiation from which three tiers of universities will emerge. A small number will be research-intensive institutions, the second tier will be universities that have a less significant research profile with more focus on teaching, and the third tier will be teaching-only. This resurrects the pre-1980s divide between the 'universities', 'institutes of technology', and 'colleges of advanced education'.

*Choice* – In this context, individualisation refers to the notion that people must create their own biographies. This means that the structures of social 'class' (eg gender roles, sexuality, and race) no longer determine life choices as the reflexive transformation of society's institutions undermines and renders them obsolete. Whilst the idea of individual choice has a positive meaning in that one has one's own life, this includes the individualisation of both successes and failures. People not only to personally reap the rewards of success but also carry the burden of risk of failure. For example, individuals are increasingly required to take responsibility for their own health care, their own education, old age pension, and unemployment with limited recourse to social welfare.

With regard to higher education, the policy of 'choice' is manifest in the form of viewing students as consumers or customers. In the Nelson Report (2003), the value of individual choice justifies a re-framing the Higher Education Contributions Scheme (HECS) placing the idea of choice under the issue of allocating public subsidies. In the previous HECS system, students were required to contribute to their higher education course fees either by paying up-front or through the taxation system after graduating. The Nelson reforms signal a change to this system. Nelson introduces the idea of full-fee paying places for Australian students and has given universities the option of increasing the cost of government subsidised (HECS) places by up to 25%. These changes are in addition to an earlier introduction of differentiated HECS fees for different types of degree courses. This contrasts significantly from the previous system of all universities charging the same fees to local students regardless of location or

course. Thus, the burden of paying for a university education is shifted to a greater degree from the collective to the individual. As government subsidies to universities falls, the cost of a university education will rise and failure to complete will bear heavily on the student's financial resources. Under the Nelson system, whether someone succeeds at getting a place at university will depend more on personal resources – financial as well as intellectual.

*Disembedding* – In living a reflexive life, people are free from the structures of industrial society by the process of individualisation so that they become self-monitoring. They are disembedded from the taken-for-granted heteronomous structures of simple modernity (eg family roles, class, race, gender, and trades unions) that formerly defined their lives as these structures are dismantled and replaced by heterodoxical contingencies. Beck argues that there follows a process of re-embedding into new forms of life as new means of integration and control are created. However, Baumann (2002) contends that there can be no re-embedding as the structures and institutions of society are in a constant state of flux, so any re-embedding that takes place will only be transient. Individualised people are in a chronic state of disembeddedness.

Higher education in Australia is undergoing a process of reflexive change in which a crisis of identity and legitimacy brought about in part by government policy responses to globalisation has led to the progressive disembedding of Australian universities from the heteronomous structures of society that originally defined them — structures such as discipline boundaries, professional rules, and academic independence. This process of disembedding, driven in part by the universities themselves, has meant that the fundamental *raison detre* of the university is itself being questioned (Coady, 2000; Readings, 1996). This kind of reflexive self-monitoring is evident in Coaldrake's call for a 'fundamental re-appraisal of university traditions and practices' (Coaldrake, 2000, p.21). As Nelson points out, 'we now have a unique opportunity to achieve fundamental reform ... Australia's competitors are already moving ... to develop significantly more diverse higher education systems that respond to the widening demands of a globalised, interconnected world' (Nelson, 2003, p.10). These reforms include changes to the governance arrangements that will limit the size and prescribe the composition of governing councils as well as redefining their role making them more akin to the boards of directors of private companies.

Disembedding is also evident in the reforms to industrial relations in higher education. These reforms are outlined in the Nelson Report under the banner of 'fostering flexible and responsive workplaces' (Nelson, 2003). The aim of the Nelson workplace reform agenda for higher education is to dismantle the current collective bargaining arrangements whereby the staff unions negotiate working conditions on an institutional basis and replace it with a system in which staff are placed on individually negotiated contracts dubbed 'Australian Workplace Agreements'. These changes include forcing universities to deal directly with individual employees or through a third party nominated by the employee. These workplace reforms are an attempt to transform the current collective bargaining arrangements between trades unions and employers to an individualised system that significantly weakens the role of trades unions in negotiating conditions of employment. The ultimate effect of this will be to erode the conditions of employment won through the collective power trades unions. The Nelson vision of a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Australian university is a workplace of short-term and casualised contract workers with bargaining power restricted to an individual's resources and ability to negotiate.

The Nelson reforms signal an intensification of the disembedding of the ways of life and cultures of universities through proposed significant governance reforms, employment conditions and funding arrangements. Universities and their major stakeholders (eg staff, students, and communities in which they operate) are being progressively disembedded from a mainly social, collective, and collegial orientation. They could then be consigned to a state of chronic disembeddedness in a situation of flux and uncertainty characterised by individualism, economic rationalism, and competition.

## **RISK IN AUSTRALIAN HIGHER EDUCATION**

Risk is conceptualised in reflexive modernisation theory as referring to the unintended and unforeseen side effects of modernisation (eg nuclear accidents, global warming, and ozone depletion). These risks are unprecedented in human history because they threaten irreparable global damage (Beck, 1996). This conceptualisation of risk can also be seen in terms of direct but unintended and unforeseen social, economic, political, and cultural effects. The risks associated with global ecological side effects has forced people into situations of rule-finding, and reflexive or indeterminate judgment as they try to deal with these intractable and unlimited problems. The determinate judgment of the first modernity is undercut by the unintended consequences of modernity (Lash, 1999).

Whilst Beck (1996) maintains that these risks refer to global ecological side effects of modernity, it is possible to also conceptualise risk at a more localised social and economic level. For example, in higher education policy, it is possible to use Beck's notion of risk to provide insights into the side effects of those policies. The gradual withdrawal of government funding and the plan to increase competition represent a major risk for universities in terms of creating uncertainty of future sources of income. Pratt & Poole (2000) identify side effects of this policy at the institutional level. They argue that because of declining government financial support, Australian universities have no option but to rework themselves in order to function because they are exposed to the continually changing circumstances of the dynamic and complex forces of globalisation. Marginson & Considine (2000) examine the consequences of this trend. They maintain that universities are experiencing the side effects of the risks associated with higher education policy in the sense that they are being affected by many factors that are beyond their control (eg government policy and international education market conditions) and in such an environment, their own actions will be decisive in determining their future success or failure. The Nelson proposals are increasing the degree of risk within the higher education system through a deliberate further exposing of the universities to market forces and increasing their dependence on private sources of funding (ie international fee-paying students, fee-paying domestic students, and research partnerships with private corporations). Government funding for the higher education sector was A\$4.3 billion in 1995 (Department of Education Science and Training, 1997), A\$4.1 billion in 2001 (Department of Education Science and Training, 2003) and A\$4.3 billion in 2004 (Department of Education Science and Training, 2004). This represents a significant drop in real income for universities. Furthermore, from 2005 private higher education organisations will be able to apply to become providers of higher education courses. Students at such private institutions would be able to be eligible to access the FEE-HELP scheme (a government sponsored loan scheme for full fee-paying students) and/or National Priority Places (government-identified areas of labour shortage – eg nursing and the educational needs of indigenous people). This will give access to overseas universities wishing to recruit local and overseas students and allow relatively low-cost institutions without the public service obligations, administrative overheads, and broad research and teaching responsibilities of universities to offer cheaper fees to overseas students residing in Australia. This would compromise the financial viability of universities who are (with government encouragement) dependent on income from these students.

The planned changes under the Nelson reforms are a significant threat to the financial viability of Australian universities. This threat will be particularly acute for smaller universities located in the larger cities that are already struggling financially and those universities that rely heavily on income from international fee-paying students. The chances of serious damage being done to the public higher education as a result of increased competition within the sector are high as decreasing government support for universities exposes them to the grim reality of competition. As a result, they are becoming more anxious and unstable institutions who are responding to risk with a 'combination of managerial aggression, academic falter, and plastic imitation' (Marginson and Considine, 2000, p.24). In short, the Nelson reforms are a challenge to the long-term sustainability of publicly funded higher education in Australia marking the reinforcement of the shift towards the neo-liberal induced extreme case which Marginson and Considine (2000) call the 'enterprise university'.

## **REFLEXIVITY IN AUSTRALIAN HIGHER EDUCATION**

Included in the reflexive modernisation thesis is the notion that institutions are becoming more reflexive. Lash (1994a; 1994b) maintains that as they become more reflexive, institutions are increasingly required to monitor and control their own performance, adjusting their practices repeatedly in response to changed circumstances or information (Lash, 1994a; 1994b). As institutions make such continual adjustments, in spite of the efforts of those within institutions to plan and achieve outcomes, what transpires is not necessarily what was intended, nor is there necessarily an awareness of what is *actually* taking place and its consequences. The uncertainty and insecurity arising from institutional reflexivity dissipates the collective power of organisations and undermines their capacity exert control as the environment becomes more fragmented, more dynamic and increasingly complex.

In terms of Australian higher education policy, the Nelson reforms include 'accountability' under the 'Institutional Assessment Framework' that will determine the funding of each university on a biennial basis. This increasing emphasis on 'quality assurance' involving the increased collection of performance information is producing a short-term approach within the sector as individual universities constantly self-monitor and self-adapt in response to government requirements, rather than developing a clear long-term vision for the whole higher education sector. At the institutional level, there will be constant, reflexive

adaptation and change in order to survive and prosper in an uncertain environment of limited public funding and increased international competition. Universities and their stakeholders will continue to be in the grip of a debate about the nature and future of higher education in Australia (Coady, 2000). However, universities will be less able to make their own futures as they are locked into a constant cycle of being forced to respond in a reflexive way to policy reforms and market pressures.

## **CONCLUSION**

The macro-level of changes in national higher educational policy since the mid-1980s have been largely catalysed by the influences of economic globalisation. In this analysis, the key theoretical framework of 'reflexive modernisation' has been employed to interpret the effects of globalisation within the particular site of Australian higher education.

Fundamentally, the Nelson Reforms are intensifying the reflexively modernising effects of globalisation on the Australian higher education system through the employment of neo-liberal policies that emphasise individualism, marketisation and increased competition. As higher education policy forces Australian universities to change their form, culture, role, and relationships there is also evidence that they are developing new disembedded forms of life. These are characterised by increased vulnerability through operating in an increasingly risk-dominated marketised environment, more individualised working conditions for employees, and decreasing government support for students. Higher education policy in Australia is creating a situation where universities must behave more like private corporations, emphasising accountability to stakeholders, customer focus, and profit and loss. The resulting focus of the new university 'boards of directors' on self-monitoring practices, review and reporting may mark the transition to full reflexive modernity as universities become entirely different institutions.



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