CONFERENCE ABSTRACTS

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What do Australians think about increasing inequality?

Australia’s national income has more than doubled since 1987. However, strong economic growth for much of the last 20 years has been accompanied by increasing inequality. This address will explore how Australians responded to the widening income gap, examining how attitudes to inequality and redistribution have changed over the last two decades.

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University students' interpretations of educational tasks: implications for rethinking educational design

This paper reports some outcomes of research into the ways in which university students interpret the requirements of educational tasks. The research has been taking place in a selection of courses that make use of ‘blended learning’ approaches: in which the course design involves an integration of face-to-face and online activities. The research has adopted a phenomenographic methodology, focusing on students’ conceptions of learning, their intentions and their strategies. Data has been gathered from several hundred students, using a mixture of in-depth interviews, open-ended questionnaires and rating scale instruments. It is clear that, in each course, students vary considerably in the ways they interpret the tasks set by their teachers. The paper summarises the main dimensions of variation in students’ interpretations. It then moves on to consider some of the implications for educational design methodology. Classic models of educational design assume a strong alignment between the tasks that are set and the students’ activity. More recent constructivist models, for the most part, shy away from setting specific tasks. This can leave teachers under-equipped when facing the complexities of designing and managing a supportive learning environment. Our approach simultaneously acknowledges the need for students to exercise autonomy in their learning and for teachers to be provided with appropriate tools and methods for educational design.
This paper will argue that throughout the twentieth century the Australian state served the Australia middle class through the provision of public secondary schools. A system of differentiated secondary education at the beginning of the twentieth century had created state academic high schools which supported a middle class meritocracy. By the mid-twentieth century the growing extension of the public comprehensive school was seen as catering to the interests of all social classes while being based on the needs of local communities. For a brief period of about 20 years this ideal continued to serve the interests of the middle class particularly as the curriculum of the Australian public comprehensive school was overwhelmingly academic in nature. Despite this, by the early twenty-first century, the middle class was increasingly abandoning both the local comprehensive school as well as public education. How this has occurred relates to social, economic and public policy change in Australia over the past half a century.

At the end of the Second World War, the Australian middle class was united by common economic interests but also divided by issues of religious faith. An ‘old middle class’ of small businessmen and independently employed professionals constituted what the prime minister Robert Menzies described as Australia’s ‘forgotten people’. A ‘new middle class’ composed of white collar employees had been created often out of the extension of the public sector and government agencies. What united each of these groups was an attachment to the values of liberalism and Protestantism and thereby support for public education. This was the basis of a ‘moral middle class’ who supported the post-war Liberal Party, believing in the extension of state provided services. But there was also a growing Catholic middle class, more associated with the Australian Labor Party, and determined to reverse the educational settlements of the nineteenth century which had removed state financial support for Catholic schools.

The idea of the comprehensive high school in Australia emerged from a number of international and national influences. From the 1930s there the general consensus within the educational bureaucracies and in parts of the political system that the comprehensive school was the ‘wave of the future’ following in the wake of the United States and moving in a progressive and democratic direction. There was also the growing pressure of demography and the ‘baby boom’ generation. As elsewhere, for example in Britain, a differentiated and selective system of high schools, could not cater for the pressure for extended education that was becoming more universal but
was particularly noted amongst middle children remaining longer at school. Private education remained expensive and out of reach of many middle class families. Selective state schooling as well as the private sector could thus not meet the post-war demands for extended education. By the late 1960s the comprehensive school had been established throughout Australia (with the exception of Victoria and South Australia where technical high schools held on for another decade). The introduction of the comprehensive school seemed to mark the apogee of Australian public education – the culmination of the process which had begun in the nineteenth century when the colonial state had intervened to ensure that all received an education which would be the basis of Australian citizenship.

Just as national and international events helped to create the Australian comprehensive school so they participated its decline. The challenge of the state provided comprehensive high school helped to mobilise the Catholic middle class who now urged that they could only establish similar schools if they received the ‘justice’ and ‘aid’ due to them. While public schools remained the responsibility of the individual Australian states the nation state in the guise of the Whitlam Labor Government intervened to provide a compromise of ensuring that all schools, whether public or ‘non-public’ would be funded on the basis of need. From the perspective of the early 1970s it still seemed that this would ensure a universal provision based on equity. In effect, the new national policy had created the principle of state support for religious schools so abandoning a principle that had been maintained for almost a century. And almost simultaneously the ‘oil shock’ of the mid 1970s led to the economic crisis which would cripple these hopes of social and cultural equity based on this new principle. Growing youth unemployment and the ensuring economic recession led to disenchantment with the comprehensive school ideal coupled with beginnings of a new anxiety about schooling and labour market entry. More generally, the whole move towards universal services and the growth of the post-war welfare state came under question. The new focus on ‘neo-liberalism’ as espoused by Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan in the 1980s would have its supporters in Australia. Such policies affected policy directions of Labor and non-Labor governments from the 1980s, but comprehensive enactment awaited the election of the Howard Government in 1996 with its policy of school choice and a funding system that favoured the private sector.

These new economic and political circumstances have had a profound impact on the nature of the Australian middle class and the fate of the public comprehensive school. The erosion of the public and semi-government sector has meant that the publicly employed middle class has declined. In contrast, the self-employed middle class, including contractors who would have been previously been in employment, and those employed in the private sector in general, is growing. Of most significance, is the changing values and division with the Australian middle class which is more fractured than ever before. There is an ‘old’ middle class with its roots in the 1950s principally attached to conservative values in education and comprised now of those
of different religious faith including Catholic and Protestant. There is also a ‘new’ middle class, often the products of the comprehensive school revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, ‘cosmopolitan’ in outlook and concerned principally for the social adjustment and success of their own children rather than the collectivist concerns of the ‘moral middle class’ which previously supported the old Liberal Party. There is also an ‘entrepreneurial’ middle class who have emerged out of what our current Prime Minister sees as the ‘aspirationalists’ in the outer suburbs of Australian cities. Finally, there is a ‘marginal’ middle class, many of whom are anxious to gain or preserve middle class status.

For almost all of these groups, the local comprehensive high school has little appeal unless it is embedded in a middle class community and suburb. The choice has come down principally to a selective academic high school or, if one can afford it, a ‘private school’. The Australian public comprehensive school is increasingly seen as the domain of the ‘other’ – a place where no middle class parents would wish to be seen to send their children.

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ISSUES in SOUTH EAST ASIAN HIGHER EDUCATION:
Finance, Devolution and Transparency in the Global Era

Systems of higher education in many parts of SE Asia are facing something of a dilemma. On the one hand, a young demographic profile, combined with rising aspirations for higher education, is leading to unprecedented demand. On the other, public sector education systems cannot meet these sharp increases in demand. Hence the private sector, both domestic and international, is growing in many parts of SE Asia, including communist Viet Nam. At the same time, public sector institutions, also facing the tensions of rising demand, and falling public support (at least in per student terms), are also resorting to privatisation.

These twin phenomena raise several concerns, including key issues of governance. While all of the five states treated in this article (Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Thailand, and Viet Nam) share the goal of extending access to higher education, as part of their wider social and economic development goals, few if any have extensive systems of quality control, and the growth of both domestic and trans-national private higher education, is stretching their capacity still further. A further problem is that of quality, which is highly differentiated within all of the higher education systems surveyed.
Against this backdrop of a potent mix of issues (quantity, quality, access and equity, governance and finance), the paper examines the dilemmas and options faced by SE Asian higher education systems in the first decade of the 21st. century.