

Chapter 14. Charles Fenner, the Educational Administrator

Introduction

Charles Fenner made his livelihood, for most of his life, as a senior administrator in the Education Department of South Australia, where he was Superintendent of Technical Education from 1916 to 1939 and Director of Education from 1939 to 1946. During this period he also made important contributions to science, both as a teacher and a science communicator, mainly in the fields of geomorphology and human geography (see Chapter 16). In describing his work as an educational administrator, I have included relevant parts of the entry on his life in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* (Trethewey, 1981). I have also made extensive use of an essay by Hyams (1990) which provides a detailed account of his educational work. As mentioned in the introduction to this book, the diary that he wrote on his trip to North America and Europe in 1937 provides interesting information comparing various aspects of education in Europe and America with the situation in Australia. Chapter 15 consists of extracts selected from this diary. To balance Hyams' interpretation of his contributions to education in South Australia I have added some comments from other sources at the end of that essay.

Extracts from the Australian Dictionary of Biography

On his appointment on 5 November, 1916, a local newspaper, *The Register*, introduced him as 'a leading educational authority...a grand teacher and organizer' with 'fine powers of lucid expression'. However, as Trethewey (1981) points out:

When Fenner was appointed, regret was expressed that no South Australian was considered suitable for the job. Although theoretically in an ideal position to influence the department's activities, he was frustrated by having to work within a pre-established framework, by the financial constraints of a world war and the Depression, by political procrastination, by opposition to his proposed reforms and by ill health. His plans for a unified technical education system were undermined by the autonomous South Australian School of Mines and Industries and by delays, until 1940, in expanding secondary technical education on the model of Thebarton Technical High School (opened 1924).

Fenner encouraged innovation, an example being an individual freedom scheme of learning introduced in 1927 at Thebarton, details of which are outlined in a paper by Fenner and Paull (1930), which was read before the Education Section of the Australasian Association for the

Advancement of Science in Brisbane. Fenner's criticisms of traditional schooling, summarized in his first essay after appointment as Director of Education (Fenner, 1940), were influential in liberalizing the primary school curriculum. He supported the teaching of technical subjects in high schools and liberal subjects in technical schools. He established a vocational guidance and placement scheme and argued for raising the school age. He was also responsible for technical training courses for unemployed youths during the Depression and for reconstruction schemes for troops returning from both world wars. He helped draft the 1917 Technical Education for Apprentices Act which, with its concept for compulsory, part-time, technical study for apprentices, set a precedent for other States.

Fenner was a figure of his time in stressing the views of education for citizenship and technical education as a means of providing skilled labour to develop South Australia's industrial base. In other respects he was forward thinking: his proposals and educational articles were based on research on overseas and interstate trends, appraised in the light of local needs and conditions...His Directorship coincided with World War II. This exacerbated Fenner's impatience at being unable to effect changes that he had advocated for two decades; he increasingly sought refuge in writing. Overall, local prejudice no doubt contributed both to the difficulty in having his ideas accepted and to Adey's appointment to the Directorship in 1929, despite Fenner's broader and longer experience of high-level administration and his superior intellectual standing.

Essay by Hyams (1990): 'Superintendent of Technical Education, 1916 to 1939'

Charles Fenner was appointed as Superintendent of Technical Education in 1916, and was charged with the responsibility of developing Technical Education in South Australia. His initial work was to establish Apprentice Training, consolidate the Art School and develop special schools concerned with technical subjects (Jolly, 2001).

Hyams writes:

In various ways Dr Charles Fenner was typical of the generality of Australian educational administrators: competent, intelligent, but without a distinctive and developed education doctrine. There is even doubt that he attained more than mediocrity in personnel leadership, as distinct from policy making. Yet in other ways he was unique. Most Directors of Education climbed to the bureaucratic summit in education either through the primary or secondary schools sector; Fenner came through the Cinderella division of technical education, and his record in that area

underlines some of the issues with which South Australia (and indeed Australia as a whole) grappled in the somewhat belated realization of potential links between education and the economy. Fenner was also different because he was a scholar; yet his scholarship was in science, not in pedagogy...The context of educational thinking [in 1916, when he was appointed superintendent of the technical education division of the South Australian Education Department] appeared opportune for Fenner in his new role. Technical education had been an increasing focus of the public record of educational leaders in Australia as part of growing economic nationalism and rivalry, a worldwide phenomenon of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The spectacular rise of imperial Germany was often quoted as a model for investment in technical education, reinforced by the crisis of international war. Given the world perspective, there was also the special position of South Australia. Australia as a whole was still very much in the preindustrial phase of industrial development, with South Australia particularly dependent on rural activities. From time to time community leaders in the State had argued that its future economic welfare lay in developing a manufacturing base, and the chief ingredient of this, Fenner urged, was the local availability of a trained workforce. Since South Australia was deficient in the standard industrial resources of coal, iron and timber, there was all the more need to compensate with a vigorous policy to develop a local supply of a trained workforce. This need not be an idle dream: Fenner was able to quote the example of the American provincial town of Worcester, where in spite of a dearth of natural resources 'an atmosphere of mechanical skill creates a supply of good workmen, and this has brought factories of various kinds'. (South Australian Parliamentary Papers, 1917).

What he found in South Australia in 1916 was little more than an educational shell for contributing to any Worcester-type economy. The 1915 Act of the legislature had provided for the divisions of the State educational system into primary, secondary and technical sectors, and Fenner was the first superintendent of the new technical branch. In the following year Donald Clark, Chief Inspector of Technical Schools in Fenner's home state of Victoria, had on invitation visited South Australia and furnished a report recommending vocational training for the bulk of older school children, the establishment of Victorian-type junior technical schools for that purpose, and generally a technical education system fashioned largely on the Victorian scheme. With that foundation it was left to Fenner to build the edifice, and his efforts earned for him in the legislature, a quarter of a century later, acknowledgement as 'the father of our technical education system'. (South Australian Parliamentary Debates, 1940).

Numerous deficiencies confronted Fenner in the existing educational provision and he was quick to condemn them. Already established technical institutions, he believed, had been developed without any relation on the one hand to factory or workshop and on the other to the primary level of schooling. Subjects taught in technical school classes bore little reference to factory requirements, while there was a gap between the highest level of primary school and the lowest classes of the technical school. For children facing that gap there should be some form of junior technical school. He lamented that the proportion of Australian adolescents receiving any form of instruction (including part-time courses while being employed) was so low; whereas over half of the 15–18 age group in America was being schooled, the figure in Australia was only 12 per cent and for South Australia a mere nine per cent. In terms of international economic competition Fenner regarded this as a deplorable waste.

The answer did not lie, he believed, in a simple extension of general secondary education at all. Specialization was very much part of the Australian pedagogical ethos of the early twentieth century. Hence the existing high school was not to be the model of universalization; its academic curriculum and its orientation towards public examinations, university entrance and professional careers should remain the preserve of the privileged minority. For the bulk of schoolgoers Fenner advocated a route which equated modernization with specialization: 'schools must deal with the actualities and activities of life, and will be justified or condemned according to the service they perform for the betterment of the community'. This called for the development of both separate commercial schools for young people destined for clerical occupations and junior trade schools relevant to factory work; it included provision for girls gravitating towards domestic work.

But Fenner was addressing an Australian public which was not yet persuaded of the need for educating any but a minority beyond the age of 12. His was a vision of a network of junior technical schools catering for most young people of ages 12 to 16. Their program would be general education with a nonacademic basis, allowing identification of the pupil's preference and ability for a particular trade, for which there would then follow a further two years of intensive specialized trade training and then an apprenticeship in the selected and available occupation. In this way specialised training, vocational guidance and selection would form an articulated and unified process. Realistically, however, he acknowledged that the upward extension of popular secondary education and expansion of full-time vocational training was not yet politically and financially feasible.

Yet even his concept of extensive part-time continuing education encountered popular resistance. Although the various classes enrolled apparently large numbers of recruits, the actual attendance was far less impressive, with many students drifting away before the year's work was completed. . . . Visits to classes in the country towns left him depressed: 'Boys and girls, freed from the influence of compulsory school attendance at the age of 14, are reluctant to take up evening studies, and are with the greatest difficulty brought to realize the value of such additional training.' Despairing of that arrangement, he was thus strongly inclined towards the notion of compulsory attendance.

The compulsory ideal was not to be realized with part-time training, but it enjoyed some measure of success in the case of the apprenticeship scheme. Fenner, like other leading Australian educationists, clung to the British tradition of apprenticeship as a major element in technical education and was of course influenced by his own youthful experience as an apprentice. This he preferred to the European alternative of incorporating specific trade training in secondary schooling, believing that British practices enduring since Elizabethan times could, with adaptations to modern times, most suitably correlate workshop and schooling.

Comment by FF: The preceding paragraph refers to Charles Fenner's views in 1924. Perusal of the comments in his 1937 diaries, when he examined educational practices in the United States, England and Germany, suggests that when he had an opportunity to compare practices in these countries, he greatly preferred the patterns operating in the United States and Germany to those in England.

Hyams goes on:

Notwithstanding the development of mechanization, mass production and repetitive processes, he believed that the supply of machine operators and skilled tradesmen depended on a sound basic training from ages 16 to 21. He challenged popular views that industrial modernization in fact required less skill, and returned to the theme of South Australian economic self-sufficiency. Even more than before, he argued, there was a need for capable workmen 'with ability in reckoning and in the reading of drawings and prints, and with some resourcefulness and adaptability'.

Because he held that apprenticeship should properly include some formal technical education as well as workshop guidance, Fenner strongly urged the introduction of compulsory courses for apprentices. Not surprisingly, therefore, he was influential in the drafting of legislation which in the Apprentice Act of 1917 gave the government the power to compel technical education in proclaimed trades. Indentured apprentices could

thereby be required to attend classes for six hours per week, 40 hours per year, partly during working time and partly in their free time. As chairman of the Apprentices Advisory Board, Fenner was strategically placed to encourage the development of apprenticeship. But he had to proceed cautiously, finding that the application of compulsory classes had to be made gradually and according to varying conditions of the market and differences between individual trades.

By the end of the 1920s there were patent signs of economic recession; in the 1930s the demand for apprentices slumped, employers attempted to extricate themselves from indenture-committed formal courses of instruction. The system, he submitted, had survived four centuries of developing industrial conditions in British countries and the economic depression was just one more crisis which it could be expected to survive. The shortage of supply of skilled young workers and the industrial pressure of international war brought the realization of Fenner's goal and in 1940 the Technical Education Bill was passed, extending the provisions of the Apprentice Act to unindentured learners.

Apprenticeship had been one of the linchpins of Fenner's concept of a comprehensive technical education system; the other was the junior technical school. This took much longer to develop. A single Education Department junior technical school was established in the Adelaide inner suburb of Thebarton in 1924 (initially known as the Thebarton Technical High School) but it was not the immediate forerunner of a system of such institutions. A nonacademic schooling network began in the following year in the form of Central Schools, in reality a number of post-primary annexes in existing large primary schools and offering commercial, junior technical or homemaking courses. This was not in effect the Fenner concept of junior technical education, but something of a compromise between the utilitarianism of vocational training and the academic emphasis of the contemporary Australian high school.

Comment by FF: Father encouraged innovation, an example being an individual-freedom scheme of learning (Dalton Plan) introduced in 1927 at Thebarton, details of which are outlined in a paper by Fenner and Paull (1930). His confidence in this school was demonstrated by the fact that the three sons who were then eligible for secondary education, Frank, Tom and Bill, all attended that school. I obtained both my Intermediate and Leaving certificates there, and found the independence provided by the Dalton Plan excellent as an introduction to study at the university.

W. J. Adey, who succeeded McCoy as Director of Education in 1929, held fast against early specialization, quoting both American practices and the renowned 1926 Hadow Report in Britain in supporting universal

secondary schooling, but commencing with a general education. Fenner's moment, however, was near at hand. By 1936 he was able to report that the boys' Central schools (which were not separate schools, but upper divisions of large primary schools) were waning. Some improvement in employment conditions as the worst of the depression receded meant a drift of adolescents into unskilled, deadend, but now more obtainable jobs. One solution to the situation would be to raise the school-leaving age from 14 to 15; this extended schooling, Fenner believed, should be in the direction of a junior technical type of education. Yet as time progressed he appears to have modified his stance on the nature and timing of specialization; by the end of the 1930s he was calling for a junior technical school which would simply have a general education program with some manual craft and science work.

It had long been Fenner's belief that vocational training carried with it an obligation to provide vocational guidance. The idea was never encouraged during McCoy's regime in the department, and it was only at the end of his directorship that he was inclined to concede the need for specialist guidance services to assist school-leavers with employment matters. Shortly before his death in office in 1929 he allowed the establishment of a modest system of guidance, generally under Fenner's supervision. Here Fenner was in his element, with his usual propensity for surveys, statistics and carefully constructed graphs, looking at the relationship between schooling and the job market. Through interviews of pupils and a system of stored information he arranged for the compilation of profiles of school leavers to indicate the employment potential of each of them. But even when Director, Fenner still had to counter traditional prejudices against professionalism in these areas of concern, and secured the appointment of the first vocational guidance officer for departmental schools in 1940, 'only after much representation' on his part.

There was, of course, more than a single dimension to his view of the role of technical education. Just as he saw it as the mainspring for economic advancement for the community, he also shared with other champions of technical education that fervent belief in its pedagogical value. Such faith was largely expressed in his emphasis on manual training as part of the primary school curriculum. It was not, as he had asserted in 1917, when he first joined the department, just something which happened to be useful, such as skill in carpentry, ironwork or bookbinding. It also had mental and even moral qualities, allowing scope for developing habits of neatness, accuracy, and perseverance as well as taste. He was still extolling these virtues of handicraft activity in general schooling 20 years later. He reiterated its contribution to good habit

formation—order, exactness, cleanliness and neatness. And he lauded its role in inducing respect for work of all kinds and in developing the quality of self-reliance in the individual child.

Fenner may have been ahead of many of his contemporaries in his thinking on technical education and his efforts to force the pace of its development. But in one other respect, that of the vocational education of women, he does not emerge as a progressive. Here he reflected current middle-class conservative views; his view of the female half of the community was one mainly of married women and few females in careers. Evincing no desire to change that situation, he postulated a form of technical education for girls that was essentially domestic training; it was to take account of the fact that most young women would cease paid employment before the age of 30 and would establish homes of their own. The type of training he had in mind involved not merely cooking and cleaning, but also such matters as household accounts, hygiene, child care, needlework and the 'power of taste and expression' as exemplified by language and drawing. But competence and motivation for women's chores were also the means to a further goal with which Fenner identified himself—the supply of paid domestic service. The chronic shortage of domestic labor was a continuing and even increasing problem for middle-class Australia and Fenner was sympathetic to its cause. He saw the shortage of supply as a revolt against harsh and unpleasant conditions in domestic service, but he believed that a system of education in household 'arts' would increase the skill, reduce the hours of employment needed and hence enhance the status of domestic help. What Fenner failed to appreciate sufficiently was the way in which the issue reflected both changing labor market conditions and the dialectic of social class. Women were increasingly diverted from paid domestic service by a gradual expansion of alternative employment opportunities, including those in the former domains of men. Calls for domestic training were often interpreted by working-class representatives as part of middle-class labor exploitation.

Fenner's identification with technical education in Australia was in part due to his long administrative association with that field. He remained for 23 years as superintendent before promotion to Director of Education

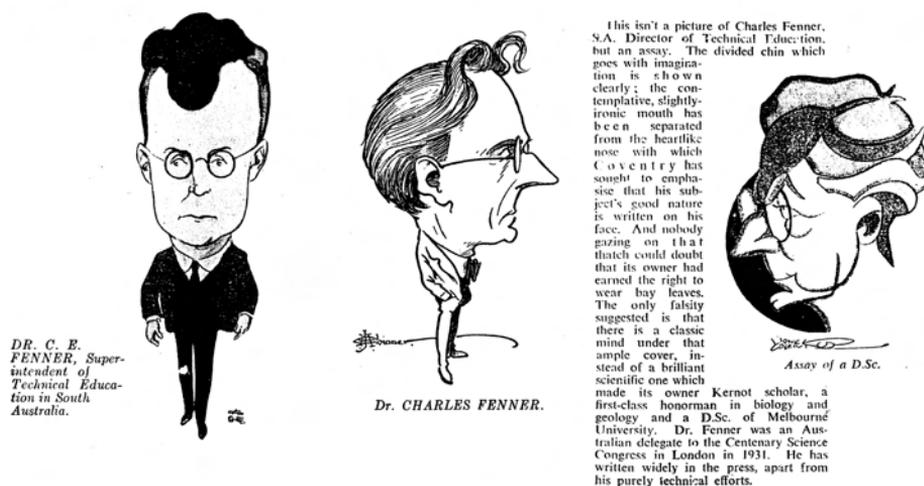
The Bulletin, 24 April 1929*The Bulletin*, 29 October 1930*The Bulletin*, 25 December 1935

Figure 14.1. Cartoons of Charles Fenner published in *The Bulletin*, 1929, 1930 and 1935

in South Australia. For a decade he had served McCoy well and with considerable admiration, even though his Director had not been an easy man to deal with and at times had appeared to have little concern for Fenner and for technical education. On McCoy's death in 1929 Fenner was the senior superintendent in the department and might well have expected the top post, but the succession went instead to William James Adey, Superintendent of Secondary Education. Fenner's wife did not hide her bitter disappointment at the result, and the family could not help but note that Adey was a cousin of the Chief Secretary, one of the government ministers, and that he was a South Australian, and not like Fenner an import from another State. But it was not in Fenner's nature to make an issue of the affair. In any case nepotism and favouritism would have been difficult charges to substantiate; certainly extant Cabinet records do very little to confirm the family's views. The recommendation of the Public Service Commission quite deliberately asserted in 1929 that 'it is known that there is no person available in the service who is as capable of filling the position in question as the person recommended'.



Figure 14.2. Charles Fenner, Director of Education, at his desk

Director of Education, 1939 to 1946

In May 1939, W. J. Adey retired after 52 years of service in the department. Fenner was appointed Acting Director and his appointment as Director was confirmed on 1 June, 1939. He retired, because of ill-health, on 16 May, 1946.

Hyams' essay continues:

His previous appointment had been at the time of World War I and now elevation to the directorship coincided with the outbreak of World War II, a conflict which ended less than a year before his premature retirement in 1946. He was able to proceed immediately with a scheme he had long favoured, replacement of the boys' Central Schools by junior technical schools. The Central Schools...were not physically separate schools, but merely the upper divisions of large primary schools and under the mixed supervision of the superintendents of technical, secondary and primary divisions of the State Education Department. What was needed were separate entities, and these emerged in 1940 as junior technical schools, acknowledged secondary establishments. To help them along, Fenner secured government acceptance of the principle of housing them in separate buildings, of inclusion of machine shops in their facilities and

of an eventual extension of schooling, compulsory and non-fee paying, to the age of 16.

However, his final years of high office were scarcely opportune for the fulfilment of any comprehensive educational philosophy that he might have developed. As Director he was immediately beset by shortages of physical resources for education, by loss of personnel to the military services and by a necessary preoccupation with patriotic exercises and voluntary fund-raising campaigns in the schools. Yet even given such extenuating circumstances, it cannot be said with confidence that he had developed any distinctive educational credo, apart from his strong bias towards technical education. In effect, then, his stance and role on educational directions and educational reforms was not remarkable; he appears to have been neither much ahead nor much behind most Australian educational administrators of that era.

For example, leading educationalists across Australia had been pleading for an upward extension of the school age, and Fenner was one of a number of them. As a consistently enthusiastic advocate of that reform, he was not particularly influential in its local realization. Late in 1939 he urged Shirley Jeffries, South Australian Minister of Education, to make a gesture towards raising the school-leaving age by dropping fees at the end of the term in which children reached the age of 15. This, he felt, would particularly stimulate attendance at the vocational type schools. The ministerial reply came promptly and in terms of the prevailing philosophy of a conservative government: 'To approve of the above recommendation would involve a complete reversal of all that I have stood for in connection with these matters: namely that where State services may be availed of by citizens and they can afford to pay some portion of the cost and take advantage of the service, they should be required to do so according to their financial resources.'

Fenner let the matter rest there. Nearly six years later he was able to secure acceptance in principle of 16 as the school-leaving age. But this was a pipe dream; the government had decided in 1942 to raise it to 15 in two stages, and even this modest goal would take years to realize. The move was simply part of a nationwide drive towards extended schooling, and South Australia in this respect was in advance of some States and behind others.

Talk of educational reform in general was very much in the air at that stage, especially in terms of its anticipated pivotal role in the forthcoming era of postwar reconstruction. Fenner moved very much with the times by arguing in 1941 that the moment had arrived for South Australia to adjust to the needs of an increasingly complex civilization, especially

by overhauling its old educational structure. His sense of the intellectual and political climate for such an issue was accurate; in the next year as a result of some pressures within the legislature the government established a commission of enquiry into the State's educational system. Although it yielded few immediate important and practical results, the enquiry canvassed vital educational issues in its lengthy existence to 1949, most of them addressed in later times. Asked in 1945 to respond to some of the recommendations of the committee, Fenner lent support to many of its arguments directed towards raising the quality of the State's teaching service, and especially the case for improved salary structures. But he demurred on some of the proposals affecting criteria for recruitment. These included the notion of intelligence tests for entrants and the suggestion that all teacher recruits should reach the level of university matriculation in their general education. Both provisions, he countered, would unduly emphasize intellectual aspects at the expense of the natural talent for teaching. In this stance he reflected the conventional thinking of the education hierarchy. Such a conservative policy on teacher recruitment was consistent with his earlier view on the appropriate priorities in teacher preparation. In his disapproval of some of the training directions favoured by the Principal of the Adelaide Teachers College, in 1941 he had pronounced that too much emphasis was being placed on the university aspect of student teacher training and ordered removal of that emphasis from the departmental circular.

He strongly supported Area Schools. Not only were they the product of the now much favoured rural consolidation of schools, but for him they had the added attraction of offering secondary education not based on the traditional model of the state high schools. Even these later institutions were the target of his attention and he was able to secure for them curricular modifications to temper their academic emphasis; their programs were to include art, craft and manual training 'without loss of their present prestige as gathering grounds for potential university students'. While diluting a little the academic schools, he was able to raise the status of the junior technical schools by supporting the claim to bring their teachers' salaries into line with the levels paid to high school staff.

Staunch technical education advocates such as Fenner were obliged in Australia to come to terms with the increasingly fashionable case against early specialization. His attitude was put to the test in 1941 in the concern which had arisen over secondary school students commencing commercial courses in their first year. Fenner argued that sound educational practice required the delay of specialization until after the first two years of secondary schooling. If this was not practicably possible in all cases,

then the department should stand firm at least on delaying subjects such as shorthand, typing and bookkeeping until after the first year. These subjects he regarded as purely vocational training. Such a category did not include, in his opinion, domestic arts, manual work and art and craft, all of which, he had always maintained, possessed pedagogical rather than merely vocational merit.

The decision accordingly to drop the avowedly vocational subjects at the early secondary school stage met with opposition. The Superintendent of Secondary Education argued against the change and representatives of school parent committees gave it a hostile reaction. Their principal objection to the move was that it would tempt parents to transfer them to non-government commercial colleges to secure the two years of vocational training they wanted. The alternative, to spend more than two years at secondary schools to include such training, would impose an unfair burden on poorer families. Fenner stood firm in resisting all counter contentions. Nor did he flinch at the irony of rejecting the argument of the Superintendent of Secondary Education that the commercial subjects in question could be regarded as having intrinsic educational value—a case strikingly similar to his own much reiterated view of technical subjects. In his stance he cited the worldwide trend to postpone specialization in education. But he also addressed the socioeconomic issue underlying the dispute. The financial burden on parents, he insisted, would now be greatly alleviated by the federal government's scheme of child endowment, thus making it economically possible for parents to keep children longer at school. Moreover, the children themselves had to be protected; it was 'little more than exploitation on the part of parents and employers to subject children of such tender age to vocational subjects in order that they may commence to earn money at an early date'. In his resolve not to be diverted from the change Fenner had the strongest encouragement from his minister, who had frequently discussed the policy with him, had independent and firm views on the matter, and took the sole responsibility for its implementation.

Such victories were not frequent during Fenner's directorship. As far as administrative leadership there was added to successes a mix of frustration and failure. In terms of organizational affairs he made some advances, especially with the inspectorate, a body which was the key element in operating all the Australian State educational bureaucracies. Fenner concentrated on ushering his school inspectors into a role of inspirers rather than examiners, as in the past. He led them on a deeper and wider thrust into professional reading to suit this preferred emphasis, and utilized their talents to a unprecedented extent by including them

on newly created departmental curriculum boards. Yet there were flaws and contradictions in the changes. He involved inspectors in examination of school financial accounts, thus emphasizing their police role in another direction. He also failed to delegate to them sufficient authority to assume effectively the function of local district leadership in education.

Obviously he did not greatly relish much of the administrative burden thrust upon him. He was oppressed by the multiplicity of routine duties which could not be delegated even though they encroached severely on his scope for planning and broader policy making. He was also restricted in doing what he liked most in the job, visiting schools and discussing with teachers matters of everyday conduct of their affairs; only half a dozen such visits could be managed in his first two years as Director. Compared with his counterparts in other States and countries, Fenner felt clearly disadvantaged; they had, he complained, considerable freedom for reading, discussion, visiting schools and planning developments. This was because many school systems, unlike that in South Australia, had the added position of a Deputy Director, to handle in general numerous administrative chores and to manage affairs during the Director's overseas visits. At first the government was not prepared to accede to Fenner's plea for help. It finally listened when the Public Service Commissioner commented that the burden on the Director was too great to enable him sufficient opportunity to study educational developments, especially those occurring overseas, and that this handicap would best be eliminated by creating a Deputy Director's post. The government acquiesced and made provision for it in an Education Act in 1946, unfortunately too late to be of any benefit to Fenner.

Fenner had complained that the burden was so onerous as to absorb much of his time at home, both evenings and weekends. This, it was claimed, was also detrimental to his health. Indeed he had never been particularly robust, and his doctor was able to certify that he had suffered from a 'deficiency' since childhood [now, in 2006, I (FF) believe that his illness was due to infection with *Helicobacter pylori*]. The strains of office from 1940 onwards had adversely affected his nerves and his blood pressure. In 1945 he had required hospitalization and a three-month period of leave from work. Hence it was hardly surprising that in May 1946 he should request and receive early retirement. Ill health was a major determinant in his decision to quit, but unhappiness also figured in the resignation. The cordial relationship with his political master which Fenner had enjoyed during the Jeffries regime was not to be repeated with R. J. Rudall as Minister of Education at the end of Fenner's administration. Rudall was inclined to want a more direct hand in running the Education Department and asserted his inclination strongly. The

result was that the two men often crossed swords. Fenner finally concluded that it was better to retire at 62 than to carry on in that way for a further three years.

In summary, this brief account of the career of Charles Fenner [as an educational administrator] tells us a little about public life in an era in Australian history. In the dichotomous control of government departments shared by the political head and chief professional officer, there was always considerable potential for the professional to exert an important influence on the evolution of policy...He occupied the top position only briefly and during an international war; he was neither shrewd nor charismatic; and this was not a period in which South Australia could be characterised as a progressive State in matters of public schooling. More than in administration, more than in technical education policy, Fenner enjoyed success and satisfaction in the scholarly world of science. Perhaps the final judgement should be that fate had dealt him an unkind hand; he was a public figure who missed his true vocation.

Other Aspects of Charles Fenner's Career in the Education Department

Comments on Secondary Education on Return from Europe, 1932

In an interview with *The Mail*, Fenner commented:

The extent of our debt to England and Scotland for the system [of secondary education] we have in this State was apparent on a visit to schools in those countries. We have not been slow in learning, and it will be readily admitted that we have done our educational work even better than those from whom we have learned. It is difficult to compare the systems of Britain with those of our own State, because of essential differences in organization. In Britain each school is practically independent except for small monetary grants and a system of Government inspection which is not very rigid, and quite in contrast to the centralized system in South Australia. There are some advantages in the British system, but there are more both from the point of view of efficiency and of promotion in ours. Vocational guidance is facing the same setbacks as it is here. More is being done in the way of part-time education on the Continent than elsewhere. There one finds lift boys and hotel attendants, 16 to 18 years of age, going to school two or three days a week and working for the rest of the time.

The South Australian School of Arts and Crafts

The School of Arts and Crafts, which had been long established, was taken over by the Education Department in 1909, and suffered from poor teaching facilities, which were made worse by the fact that the Exhibition Building, where it was housed, was taken over in 1919 as a temporary hospital to cope with the influenza epidemic. The situation did not return to normal until September 1920. Fenner stressed the need for a permanent and more suitable building, a dream which did not eventuate until it moved to Stanley Street, North Adelaide, in the late 1950s. In 1924, he established a Girls Central Arts School as a branch of the School of Arts and Crafts, as a school where the general education of girls along with their arts subjects, a school that, with Thebarton Technical High School, receives extensive coverage in *A Broader Vision* (Jolly, 2001). Fenner had a special interest in art and was a close friend of Hans Heysen, and he had a special interest in promoting the work of Ivor Hele when he was a student at the School of Arts. As G. S. Macdonald said in obituary notes in the Education Gazette: 'Hans Heysen was one of his oldest friends, Ivor Hele one of his most loved young protégés.' Ivor Hele painted a portrait of him in his DSc gown, which is currently in the foyer of the State Education Office. Ivor also gave him several fine paintings, one of which I inherited.

Appreciation by Australian Broadcasting Commission (S.A. Division)

It is impossible to think of the progress of Educational Broadcasts in South Australia without becoming deeply appreciative of the efforts and interest of its first liaison officer, Dr C. Fenner. Taking office towards the end of 1933, Dr Fenner gathered together a small team of eight enthusiasts and inaugurated a modest series of experimental broadcasts, the details of which are recorded in the first educational broadcast pamphlet ever published in Australia.

Most of the original broadcasters are still actively engaged, and the findings they derived from a variety of experiments tried in the early stages have been confirmed and consolidated into the present high standard performance. Difficulties were encountered and criticism was sometimes vigorous, but the enthusiasm of our leader was unfaltering, and his cheery optimism never failed. He was a constant source of encouragement to everyone concerned, and throughout the whole of his six years of office he has been a tower of strength, fathering the growing activity to its present breadth and complexity.

There are now 13 different topics organized by South Australian leaders in addition to those undertaken by Federal authorities, and about 50 teachers and other speakers and three dramatic companies are engaged

every term broadcasting the fruits of their experience in schools. This booklet, indicative of the general progress, has steadily increased in both size and value, and is now distributed to more than 4,000 teachers and scholars in approximately 300 listening schools.

An Appreciation by J. S. Walker, Director-General of Education, 1967

Talking about notable events reminds me of something that happened 60 years ago which I believe was of outstanding importance and significance for our State—the establishment of Government High Schools. Adelaide High was the first, and W. J. Adey was its founder and the architect of the State system of secondary education...A second landmark in the history of secondary education in South Australia was the establishment of Junior Technical Schools (now called Technical High Schools) and Area Schools by a very forward-looking Director of Education, Dr Charles Fenner. That was in 1940, more than a quarter of a century ago. Dr Fenner foresaw the time when nearly every boy and girl would go to secondary school because primary school would no longer be a sufficient preparation for life. He also realized that children differ widely in interests, needs and aptitudes as well as academic ability, and only a fraction of those who passed through secondary schools would go on to tertiary study.

At the time our High School courses were directed towards gaining a Public Examination Board certificate at the Intermediate or Leaving level. The Leaving was the matriculation for University entrance so the courses were essentially a preparation for University study. Dr Fenner thought it was unreasonable to suppose that these University-oriented courses would be appropriate for all secondary students. And so the curriculum in the Junior Technical and Area Schools was custom-built to suit the needs of the majority who would leave school after the third year.

The courses in English, mathematics, science, social studies, art and craft, music and physical education in these new secondary schools were not soft options. Every student was stretched to do his best so that with few exceptions each of them left school with a sense of achievement and fulfilment; and surely every boy and girl is entitled to this. The examinations were conducted by the schools themselves with guidance from senior officers in the Education Department. After some years of trial, most employers were glad to accept boys and girls from these schools on the Head's recommendation. They judged the schools by their reputation—and by the worth of the young people who passed through them (reproduced in Jolly, 2001).

Tribute from the Hon S. W. Jeffries, *S.A. Hansard*, July 1947

Members will realize that I am very interested in education, having held the portfolio of Minister for Education for 11 years. I am pleased indeed to see the progress of education since I vacated office and that the prospects for further progress are so bright. During my absence from this House the late Director of Education, Dr Chas Fenner, resigned on account of ill-health. I should like to say how greatly I appreciated him as Director of Education. He possessed outstanding educational qualifications. He had great foresight and was a man of ideals, and from the day he came from Victoria, 20 or 25 years ago to inaugurate technical education in South Australia, to the day of his resignation, he gave himself unreservedly to the cause of education. Dr Fenner was respected by the Ministers and Directors of Education in other States because of his knowledge and character. When I attended interstate meetings of Directors and Ministers I observed that they looked to him for guidance and I think that it is only fair that I should pay tribute to him for the work he has rendered to education for so many years. His foresight in the matter of technical education proved to be of inestimable value to this State when war broke out, because, but for the technical schools and the men trained in those subjects, we would have been in a sorry state. I do not suggest that he alone did all this. He was ably seconded by his superintendents and inspectors and by the great majority of teachers, most of whom give their services without stint for the welfare of the boys and girls.

Comments by Thiele and Gibbs (1975)

W. J. Adey's successor, as Director of Education, was Charles Fenner. The appointment was announced on 1 June, 1939, first as an acting brief and then permanently when Adey's long service leave expired. As a whole the appointment was expected and approved. Fenner's background was quite exceptional; a science degree with first class honours at the University of Melbourne, followed later by a doctorate, an impressive list of publications and scientific research papers on geography, geology, anthropology and natural history, a reputation as a world authority on glass meteorites, overseas experience as a delegate at scientific conferences and as an educational observer and guest speaker, ten years experience as a part-time lecturer at the University of Adelaide and a constant stream of newspaper articles, reports, conference addresses and public comment...

23 years in the position of Superintendent of Technical Education had made Fenner very well known throughout the State. He had pioneered

the compulsory education of apprentices, supervised the post-war reconstruction scheme, developed technical courses of many kinds and established widespread contacts with industry. He was also keenly interested in art, in the development of art and craft in schools, in the work of the Art School and in audio-visual education. If ever there was a Director with personal experience and interests at all levels of education, from small outback schools to the University, it was Charles Fenner.

The remaining months of 1939 were very busy ones, the most important single action being the decision to close down the Central Schools. Their attachment to primary schools had always mitigated against public recognition of their work; Fenner therefore announced that they would 'reappear in 1940 as junior technical boys schools and junior technical girls schools, each with a separate entity, and with the status of a secondary school within the technical division.' His penchant for good public relations was immediately apparent: well-attended meetings of parents were called to explain the move, exhibitions of student work were held and illustrative graphs and diagrams began to appear in official documents and newspapers, as they had been doing for two decades in his own reports.

In September the war that had been looming for so long finally broke out and the Schools Patriotic Fund (SPF) was established to coordinate the efforts of all schools. It proved to be an astonishing enterprise... The impact of the war on technical education was enormous. From early 1940 G. S. McDonald, the newly appointed Superintendent, and J. S. Walker, the youngest inspector in the State, were busy organizing facilities and services for wartime use. By May more than 400 RAAF fitters were being given courses at the Grenfell Street Trades School, and training in machining, fitting, welding and tool-making were getting under way for munitions and aircraft construction... By September the Grenfell Street Trades School, the Adelaide Technical College and the School of Mines went on to a three-shift roster, working 24 hours a day. Specialist teachers and instructors assumed heavy workloads...

Despite the war, the struggle for professional improvement went on... Fenner himself was constantly involved, writing on the cultural value of technical education, on the school leaving age, and on the 'stuffing versus stimulating' approach to teaching... In Adelaide in 1942 there was angry criticism of the Education Department and the Civil Defence authorities because the schools were utterly unprepared for war, there were no air raid shelters, no medical supplies and no emergency plans... And so the city became pockmarked with mounds of earth and zig-zag trenches, black-out hoods and paint went on windows and car

head-lights and adhesive strips crossed bare panes of glass to give shatter-proof protection.

In November 1942 Executive Council approved a new set of Regulations which revised the scholarship system, reduced the age of entry into secondary schools, required students to take three year's study before attempting the Intermediate examination, enlarged the authority of inspectors...Above all, machinery was introduced for the continuous revision of the curriculum. There was to be a Curriculum Board for each of the main areas—primary, secondary, technical and rural—with the superintendent as chairman in each case and places for male and female nominees of the teachers themselves. The Minister said the new regulations were 'a great step forward' and praised the Director and his officers for their organizing skill...Meanwhile the squeeze in the schoolrooms had begun, and there was only one solution, temporary accommodation. In 1943 Fenner announced the Department's large scale commitment to 'portable schools'. These, he said, consisted of a single room about 24 feet square, and were being turned out as fast as the Architect-in Chief's Department could build them...

On 17 April 1946 C. L. Abbott resigned from the Ministry, giving as his reasons the extreme workload of three portfolios...Exactly a month later, on 16 May 1946, Fenner retired because of ill health at the age of 62. He, too, had fallen victim to what Abbott called 'the almost insupportable burden...of administering this huge undertaking', which was what the Education Department had become. In casting about for a successor, the commentators were at no pains to disguise the burden.

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The *Education Gazette*, between 1917 and 1946, had short articles on *Adventures in Art*, *Ernabella—a Freedom School*, *What is the Aim of Our Schools?*, *Village Surveys*, and *the Australia Language*. There were also Introductory Notes to a number of educational works, extracts from several addresses, and reviews of 23 books covering many aspects of education.

Reports to the Minister of Education were submitted by Charles Fenner as Superintendent of Technical Education from 1917 to 1938, and as Director of Education from 1939 to 1946. All were published in *South Australian Parliamentary Papers* each year.