

Commonwealth Economic Policy and Education

Simon Marginson, Educating Australia: Government, Economy and Citizen since 1960, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1997

Reviewed by Alan Barcan

THIS book is the product of a doctoral thesis on 'Markets in Education'. Its strengths include its wealth of statistics and its thorough scrutiny of documents, Australian and foreign, on economics and educational policy. But the scope is not as comprehensive as the title implies. It is a survey of Commonwealth government policies only. The neglect of policies in the States and Territories, the major providers of school education, obscures the varying patterns across Australia. Failure to consider the curriculum, examinations and assessment obscures the effectiveness of educational policy.

Though the son of two Old Left Melbourne University Labour Club personalities, to whom he dedicates his book, Marginson adopts neither the interlinking of economic, social, political and intellectual arenas (with an emphasis on the first) popular with the Old Left of the 1940s and 1950s nor the more simplistic yet pretentious interpretations of the New Left of the 1970s and 1980s, with its heavy theory, relativism, anti-humanism, and advocacy of white-collar and minority causes. This is a post-1987, post-Marxist radicalism. Yet one cannot call it post-modern, for Marginson has a consistent set of beliefs: he leans towards the critical theorists, the heirs of neo-Marxism. Fortunately, he avoids their educational jargon.

His views were shaped by a career as a research officer for the Australian Union of Students, the Victorian Secondary Teachers' Association and the Federated Australia University Staff Association. Since 1993 he has been Senior Lecturer at the Centre for the Study of Higher Education at The University of Melbourne. Marginson is one of a new breed of educational commentators. They have little or no expertise in teaching in schools or in writing history or sociology. Their strengths lie in economics or political science. Bowles and Gintis applied such skills for the New Left in *Schooling in Capitalist America* (1976), Chubb and Moe for the New Right in *Politics, Markets, and America's Schools* (1990). Marginson first analysed the political economy of education in his 1993 book, *Education and Public Policy in Australia*. This latest book, like the earlier one, is hostile to the New Right and economic rationalism. Since Labor is as enthusiastic as the Liberals in applying economic rationalism to education, the book presents an impression of objectivity.

The new analysts of educational policy bring a new interpretation and a new terminology. Social class is no longer a dominant concept. In his Preface, Marginson identifies some major themes: modernisation (a neutered substitute for 'reform'); the educational relevance of changing forms of citizenship; 'the growing sophistication of liberal government' (presumably this means the use of a bureaucratic intelligentsia in decision-making); a political economy of competition and markets (bringing a shift from public provision to market systems); and the impact

of this change on 'participation' and 'equity' (thus accommodating the special interest groups or 'disadvantaged minorities'). He makes the politically correct genuflection to 'insights derived from Foucault' but happily the French savant is thereafter almost invisible.

The introduction takes a sour look at current Coalition education programmes and briefly discusses the concept of citizenship. It could well have been omitted. Chapter 2 ('The Expansion of Education to 1975') examines the growth of Commonwealth financial commitment with the support of eleven statistical tables (the book has 51 such tables; only Chapter 9 has more than Chapter 2).

Chapter 3 ('The Karmel Report and Educational Quality') contains some good material. Marginson identifies the report as the most influential of all education reports in the postwar period. It 'connected to the radical egalitarian and progressivist values of the time' (p. 54). Chapters 4 ('The New Right and Public Policy' and 5 ('Individual and Government') are heavy with political economy. They present in a complicated way the challenge of monetarism to Keynesian theory, the rise of the New Right, the translation of these new economic theories into policies in the 1980s, fiscal policy after 1975, and the growth of market liberalism. Chapter 6 ('The New Right and Education') provides a critique of the New Right's view of education in the 1970s and 1980s. Marginson gives two paragraphs to the new education of the late 1960s and early 1970s which 'made the work of educational institutions more ambiguous and difficult, problematising the notion of singular academic and behavioural standards' (p. 129). He looks into the abyss and sees merely ambiguity and difficulty.

Chapter 7 ('Education and National Economic Reconstruction') brings us to the reconstruction of education which started about 1987-88 (Dawkins in Canberra, Metherell in Sydney). The rise of the service industries is identified through overseas analyses and confirmed by Australian statistics (Table 7.3, p. 170). The growth of the service industries is seen in economic and vocational terms, not in terms of changes in social class. After considering overseas documents on economic rationalism and education, Marginson effectively discusses the Dawkins revolution in higher education. But he makes no criticism of the destruction of the Colleges of Advanced Education in 1989. He treats changes in school systems in a very general way; his failure to consider events in at least some of the States deprives the book of the benefits of comparison. He discusses the new vocationalism (p. 167) without mention of the National Curriculum. 'Ministerialisation' is mentioned almost in passing but the explanation is myopic. Yes, it was 'associated with the imposition of economic agendas and the displacement of the role of the directors-general of education by generic managers ...' (p. 163). But Ministerial intervention was also provoked by the inability of the State Departments of Education to regain the controls they had lost in 1967-74 and by resentment of their close affiliation with teachers' unions. Marginson ably examines the growth of vocationalism, but does not mention that an important reason why the key competencies were embraced was to provide an alternative to external assessment, which teachers' unions opposed. They also provided employment for the educational bureaucracy.

Chapter 8 ('Participation and Equity') surveys the rising retention rate in schools from 1981 (in some cases from 1975) and the growth of higher education. Marginson records some important tendencies (for example, the vast growth in the number of postgraduate students) with very little comment. He provides a useful tabulated summary comparing the expansion of the 1960s to mid-1970s with that of the 1980s to early 1990s. He describes the shift from 'equality of opportunity' to 'participation and equity' and identifies a related shift in expectations among young people: 'official policies designed to transfer students' ambitions from the labour market to further education had achieved significant success' (p. 204).

In the title of Chapter 9, 'Economic Government in Education', the word 'economic' is used in the sense of 'cheap' or 'efficient'. Reductions in state expenditure was part of the crisis of the welfare state. The chapter roams across the years since 1975, disrupting the sense of historical progression and encouraging a sense of repetition. It would have been wiser to focus on 1987-93. Marginson examines Commonwealth expenditure on higher education, the abolition of free higher education and the spread of fee-based courses. After noting the widespread popular preference for private schooling, Marginson states that this encouraged the 1993 'Schools of the Future' programme of the Kennett Government in Victoria. He suggests the programme was 'partly modelled on the Thatcher reforms in Britain' (p. 240). In fact, Victoria owed a great deal to Metherell's example in New South Wales.

The final chapter, 'Civics, Citizenship and Difference', attempts to breathe life into the theme supposedly permeating the book. A social rationale is abruptly introduced. Disadvantaged minorities, republicanism, the national flag, land rights for Aborigines enter the discourse. Marginson attempts to trace the development of civics education in the schools; he does not mention the rejection of citizenship by neo-Marxist and neo-progressive educationists in the late 1960s. He presents a sketchy history of multiculturalism in the schools: 'Educators were required to renegotiate the balance between difference and unity' (p. 254). Some task! But it seems the schools have adopted official ideology. Marginson cites a study of Year 7 and Year 11 students in Western Australia who, presented with 26 possible attributes of a good citizen, ranked being well-informed about Australia's constitution and Australia's political system 24th and 25th. Highest support was given to respecting the rights of others and treating people equally regardless of gender, disabilities and race. Marginson comments: 'Given the growing recognition of diversity, it could be argued that the WA students had their priorities right' (p. 255).

Marginson identifies three unresolved issues in citizenship education: the role of history in the curriculum (which provides a chance to condemn John Howard's complaints about 'black armband' history); the possibility of a variety of specialised state secondary schools (Marginson sees no good reason why community groups should not sponsor specialised state schools); and the role of the media in education. 'Media, consumption and multi-media had now become the main source of civic identity and of understandings of difference'. They encourage a 'passive construction of a globalised self'. But formal education has the potential to provide

'technological literacy and critical skills enabling students to retain, enhance and construct their own chosen identities' (p. 258). The question (says Marginson) is whether these attributes will be monopolised by some students or would be available to all. But personal character, identity, is surely an ideological product based on a variety of social forces, such as family, social class, peer group, media, religion as well as formal schooling. Let us not overestimate what schools can do.

Marginson touches on the relationship of government and private schools at several places. He believes the 1973 Karmel Report 'enabled private schools to consolidate and strengthen, and pursue their social projects with growing success' (p. 60). As a result, government schools faced 'increasing pressure from a growing range of low cost alternatives' (p. 65). In fact, the shift of enrolments from state to non-state schools which started in 1977 continued despite rising fees. Funding may have kept fees a little lower than otherwise. A variety of factors encouraged the drift to private schools, including religious loyalties.

Marginson cites Karmel, who sent his own children to private schools: 'We won't sacrifice our kids to our principles' (p. 70). He mentions without comment that many parents had 'a desire for elite schooling' (p. 238). The eagerness of Labor politicians and state school teachers who could afford it to send their children to private schools suggests they were concerned about the quality of state schools.

According to Marginson, policies primarily intended for the renovation of Catholic schools 'were to be used by the Seventh-day Adventists and the Lutherans to set up school systems of their own' (p. 65). He chose bad examples. The Seventh-day Adventists already had a school system. They initially rejected state aid, yet their schools increased in number. In 1968 they reluctantly accepted funding for capital works, but only in 1983 for salaries. The Lutherans also had a school system. This benefited from state aid, but even more from ethnic funding, which first started in South Australia. In 1981 the Commonwealth set up its Ethnic Schools Program. Many of these ethnic schools were also religious schools.

The half-hearted incursion into the area of private schooling is matched by an equally hesitant approach to the curriculum. Marginson identifies three educational currents in the New Right in education. Employers wanted a more vocational curriculum; 'cultural conservatives' wanted more discipline, tougher selection and traditional values; and 'market liberals' wanted economic reforms — the application of private enterprise and free competition between educational institutions. Marginson does not discuss the curriculum changes which had so alarmed the 'cultural conservatives'; he merely provides a succession of New Right complaints torn out of context. He expects the reader to accept his assurance that these complaints are reactionary, anti-democratic, anti-egalitarian.

Preparing this book, says Marginson, was a labour of love but 'a labour that makes no financial sense' (p. xv). It is not, I imagine, for undergraduates; the content is too complex and demanding. But as a scholarly book it will be of use to some postgraduate researchers and academics.

Alan Barcan is an Honorary Associate of the Faculty of Education in The University of Newcastle.