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Higher education commentary from Carlton

EMPLOYMENT AND WORK / HISTORY OF EDUCATION / SCHOOLS

The rise and then slight fall of school completion and university participation rates in Australia and Britain, 1870s to 1970s

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LEAVE A COMMENT

A recent reading highlight for me is Peter Mandler's *The Crisis of the Meritocracy: Britain's Transition to Mass Higher Education since the Second World War* (<https://www.booktopia.com.au/the-crisis-of-the-meritocracy-peter-mandler/book/9780198840145.html>). I reviewed it on the GoodReads site. (https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/3615250899?fbclid=IwAR1Vcz_q9RAaIX0CnLzYp_FDx_4sHs4QPloXCorP8eJYKxPh72RWGNxG6bY)

Despite its title, Mandler's book does not neatly belong to either educational merit genre; it neither bemoans the excessive influence of academic ability in allocating social and economic goods, nor laments the decline of academic standards in schools and universities. Instead, its core theme is how changing attitudes, aspirations and expectations drove up British educational participation and attainment after WW2. There are many interesting parallels with Australia.

Demand interacting with supply

No single factor fully explains the observed trends in each country. Quoting the sociologist Diego Gambetta, Mandler argues that a 'dense combination of mechanisms', affecting both demand and supply, explain patterns of educational participation and attainment.

On the supply side, political leaders for various reasons, often economic but also civic or social, sometimes decide to increase educational levels. Young people are coerced if they don't want more education, while incentives and persuasion are used for older potential students. At other times, often for fiscal reasons, but also due to doubts about the value of the education some students receive, political leaders try to moderate student numbers or steer their study choices.

But once any level of education is common, and the schooling behind it becomes a shared experience, it starts becoming an expectation, both economically and socially.

The labour market is shaped by the available workers and the education they have, but also in turn shapes the education system as people feel that they need whatever qualification level has become required or preferred for the jobs they want.

Socially, young people want to be where their friends are. And parents typically expect that their children will get the education they did, and often more.

Mandler argues that these demand-side factors are a powerful force in themselves. Whatever policymakers think they are doing in education policy, and however academics from various disciplines interpret education and its outcomes, students and their parents attach their own meanings and purposes to education.

In democratic countries, these demand-side factors usually create pressure for more education, which eventually leads to a supply-side response, even when policymakers and policy analysts believe that enrolment growth is unnecessary to achieve whatever goals they have for the education system.

But occasionally, as this post explains, student and parent preferences mean less education. After the school leaving age, education systems are always demand constrained; enrolments cannot exceed the number of people prepared to enrol. History suggests that reversals in participation rates don't last, but they can happen.

Compulsory primary school

In the late 19th century supply-side decisions triggered growth in education, by making primary school free and then compulsory, the latter sometimes against the wishes of parents and more often of students. The differences in Australian figures for enrolments and attendance (<https://socialsciences.org.au/library/historical-statistics-chapter-19/>) were striking. Not everyone saw the value of school. Children commonly worked from young ages. Attending school was a cost to the family even when there was no charge for tuition.

In some communities primary school attendance remains below the level policymakers want (<https://ctgreport.niaa.gov.au/school-attendance>). But generally primary school education has been a deeply entrenched expectation for generations.

Secondary school

With primary education near universal by the early 20th century, the basis of secondary education was established and demand for it grew. In Australia, public high schools were established in each state between 1905 and 1915, but a history published by the ABS (<https://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/DetailsPage/1301.02001?OpenDocument>) describes them as 'dysfunctional' until 1945. According to Mandler, the 1940s was also when secondary education expanded in Britain. Despite the apparent weaknesses of public secondary education pre-WW2, at least half of Australians born in the first decade of the 20th century had at least some high school (http://scholar.google.com.au/scholar_url?url=https://openresearch-repository.anu.edu.au/bitstream/1885/114755/2/b13930710.pdf&hl=en&sa=X&ei=5l2eX6aDMoy0ygSO_h6DoDA&scisig=AAGBfm1Cq9zXu1ZQXLNHJlvLLQQSDyMLHQ&nossl=1&oi=scholar).

Teenagers remained in school for more years in the first few decades after WW2, but not typically until Year 12. In the mid-1960s less than 25 per cent (<https://andrewnorton573582329.files.wordpress.com/2020/03/school-retention-1.png>) of students remained enrolled until the final possible year of school. An ANU Poll in 1965 (http://scholar.google.com.au/scholar_url?url=https://openresearch-repository.anu.edu.au/bitstream/1885/114755/2/b13930710.pdf&hl=en&sa=X&ei=5l2eX6aDMoy0ygSO_h6DoDA&scisig=AAGBfm1Cq9zXu1ZQXLNHJlvLLQQSDyMLHQ&nossl=1&oi=scholar), asked

about how much education a young man/woman needed to 'get along in Australia today'. Respondents typically thought that men needed more education than women, but after averaging the responses 34 per cent thought that 'some secondary' education was needed and 54 per cent said 'secondary' education (I think this might have meant Year 11 or 12). Only 11 per cent thought that tertiary education was needed.

A surprising reversal in educational participation

In the late 1960s and early 1970s school retention steadily increased (<https://andrewnorton573582329.files.wordpress.com/2020/03/school-retention-1.png>), but then for young men the trend reversed itself, not fully recovering until 1983. I learn from Mandler that something similar happened in the UK and the US at the same time.

Australian higher education participation rates also fell in the second half of the 1970s (<https://andrewnorton573582329.files.wordpress.com/2019/04/19-year-old-participation.jpg>). I previously put this down to supply-side constraints (<https://andrewnorton.net.au/2019/04/29/young-people-were-less-likely-to-enter-higher-education-in-the-years-after-whitlam-than-before-demography-and-deficits-were-against-them/>). Funding limits were definitely there, and policymakers were, in a theme that recurs in later years, trying to better align the supply of graduates with perceived needs. But although I have not found 1970s applications data, I am persuaded that demand-side factors held enrolments down.

In 1978, for example, thirteen of the then nineteen universities were 'under-enrolled' relative to their quota (<https://www.jstor.org/stable/3446657?seq=1>), with the system as a whole two per cent below the national quota on a full-time equivalent basis.

The Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission looked into why demand might be falling (<https://www.voced.edu.au/content/ngv%3A40406>). What we now call the graduate premium, the additional earnings of higher education graduates over other workers, was in decline. Policymakers focused more on TAFE; participation rates in TAFE grew while those in higher education fell. It adds another complexity to the failure of free higher education to achieve its goals.

Part of the explanation in higher education was declining enrolments in teaching, where after years of teacher shortages an over-supply had emerged. We tend to think of demand for education at the qualification level, but different courses at the same level are not necessarily substitutes for each other. If teaching is the only university-qualified occupation that interests some prospective higher education students, they won't enrol in a different higher education course just because teaching work has become harder to find.

Mandler points to many possible reasons for the stalling and in some cases decline of education levels in 1970s Britain. One has parallels with Australia, a shift in the relative returns of some manual compared to degree-qualification occupations. But he is not really sure why it happened.

Possible birth cohort factors

Mandler elsewhere notes the inter-generational nature of education. Parent and child education levels always correlate. I wonder if there is something unexplored in his book and the Australian material I read about the socio-economic composition of the post-WW2 baby boom.

In the analysis above, we are not talking about absolute enrolments falling. The numbers of students in Year 12 and higher education (universities plus colleges) increased. But they declined as a percentage of the baby boom cohort moving into the relevant age groups. If births in the late 1950s and early 1960s had skewed towards families with less education or manual occupations it would help explain why demand weakened for a while in the 1970s.

The decline did not last

But as has so far always been the case, the 1970s educational reversal was temporary, in both Australia and Britain. The next post (<https://andrewnorton.net.au/2020/11/16/the-social-and-political-causes-of-increasing-educational-participation-from-the-1980s/>) looks at what happened in the 1980s and 1990s.

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