THINKING above the horizon is not often evident in government policy.

Blunted by electoral pragmatism and blurred by ideology, government and its bureaucracy tend to develop fragmented views of the world and lack the dynamic models that can anticipate the consequences of particular policy moves, even those made with the best of intentions.

In this case, unintended consequences should be expected and are readily detectable.

Higher education is no exception, and the push for growth and social inclusion accompanied by partial deregulation - uncapping numbers into universities - provides a case in point.

The redeeming feature of the uncapping policy was for the universities to tap into the top end of talent in the low-SES and disadvantaged sectors of society, the bright sparks whose capacities are unrealised for want of opportunity. Great in theory, but perhaps not so in practice.

The jury is still out on this and there is little evidence that growing the sector radically is satisfying what is an admirable objective.
The proportions of low-SES students has risen only marginally in the past five years and there are few signs that uncapping enrolments has made much difference.

If this is so, then universities are filling their rolls by reaching further down the queue of middle-class aspirants, who see university as their way forward, regardless of their capacity for engaging in academic study and ignoring any natural ability they may have for more technical, applied and enterprise-oriented know-how that others in the sector, TAFE and the best of the private providers, may be happy to provide.

This university-centric policy risks a widening of the mismatch between academia and more enterprise-oriented learning. This is not much of a prescription for redefining the industrial base of Australia and preparing for the post-resources era when the nation will need all the smart, globally strategic industries it can get.

The country desperately needs a national strategy to replace its outdated industrial base with a raft of smart new industrial enterprise, based on advanced technologies and different skills to those presently available.

Why risk installing a policy, the unintended consequences of which may be to the detriment of our national economic, social and cultural development?

Why put the university sector at risk by pushing up student numbers, lowering standards, stretching the talent pool of university teachers, increasing student-to-staff ratios and class sizes, reducing contact hours and overblowing the supply of under-prepared graduates. And all this serving a one-sided economy in which even the burgeoning resources sector cannot acquire sufficient talent to fuel the present boom, and little thought is given to the kind of talent needed for the post-resources, multifaceted economy populated by new industries.

There is little evidence of industry or workforce planning that points inexorably to the need to increase university numbers ahead of other sectors. Nor does it point to the need for new institutional forms - hybrids between the academic and the technical or institutions constructed on a new conceptual paradigm.

It is hard to think of the present public institutions transforming themselves in this way, so set are they in their ways.

But the best of the sector, public and private, might - if they could get out from under the layers of bureaucracy and so-called accountability thrust upon them that dampen the full range of their creativity. Few in government or in the bureaucracy have a real handle on the future talent needs of the Australian economy, let alone it's present demands.
Yet the future starts now and the knowledge and skills imparted today are the basis of enterprise tomorrow. Is it too much to ask of government that they have a view of the future, even a plan for it?

And what of Australian business? Beyond the myopic criticism of graduate quality, which seems to be a recurring theme in every generation, there is little by way of indication that business councils and roundtables or Davos lookalikes are awake to what the future might hold, too intent as they are on satiating the desire for short-term dividends, staying afloat in the present and responding to the shifting sands of global finances.

Thinking their way into the future of their own industries, imagining new enterprise and assessing and providing for it's talent base seems beyond the ken and skill of boardrooms and executive cadres.

It may be naive to think that government can think beyond the next election, but it should not be too much to expect all those strategically trained executives and directors to bring forward a real view of Australia’s future business, industry and enterprise.

Such a view, agreed by both the private and public sectors, would be a useful platform on which to develop higher education policy and set an exciting national agenda for universities and other institutions to respond to.

What sort of policy is it that confronts the university sector with the inevitability of growth and, in the absence of real funding increases, induces declining standards. Government has options. It can raise public funding or remove the HECS fee cap, a more market oriented mechanism. Both options are denied, one financially, the other ideologically.

From the university point of view it's damned if you do, damned if you don't.

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