

High stakes in higher ed? Campus evolution more likely than revolution

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Writing books on fast-evolving topics is a hazardous business. The news can easily overtake a slow-moving publisher's schedule.

Fortunately for Peter Coaldrake and Lawrence Stedman's new book on higher education, "*Raising the Stakes*", this hasn't happened to them. Indeed, their subtitle "Gambling with the future of universities" captures the mood after a big new round of [higher education funding cuts](#).

Although the title reflects the melodrama of the moment, the book itself is a level-headed and readable survey of Australian higher education history, issues and policy.

Drawing on long experience of higher education – Coaldrake is the [Vice-Chancellor of QUT](#), Stedman his principal [policy adviser](#) – both authors are well aware of the sector's strengths and opportunities, as well as its weaknesses and vulnerabilities. This is not one of the "curmudgeonly polemics produced by disgruntled academics" they accuse others of writing.

"*Raising the Stakes*" begins with the contemporary role of universities, showing how economic developments affect higher education globally, discussing higher education's role when information is abundant and often free, and acknowledging "serious questions about purpose and structure". Given the goals we have, are our universities well-positioned for pursuing them?

A common answer to that question in recent years has been "no". Many people think that we need more institutional diversity to meet different needs and goals. Coaldrake and Stedman support institutional innovation, saying that "bold moves are to be encouraged".

But they tend to be sceptical of diversity efforts to date, such as the [Melbourne Model](#) and the [foreign universities](#) that have established campuses in Adelaide. They welcome Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) but doubt that they are an alternative to current university provision.

They support non-university higher education providers filling market gaps left by the public universities, but wonder how often they do. They warn that care needs to be taken with the entrepreneurs who will rush in if eligibility for public higher education subsidies is expanded.

For fiscal more than prudential reasons, unrestricted public tuition subsidies are unlikely to be extended outside the public university sector anytime soon. The consequent inability of non-university higher education providers to compete on price will limit growth in their student numbers.

There are also [strict standards](#) regulating the start-up of higher education providers and the [business models they can pursue](#). These standards are described by Coaldrake and Stedman as "an important but inevitably imperfect framework for weeding out obviously low-quality activity." They admit that defining quality is inherently difficult. Paraphrasing Justice Potter Stewart's [famous definition of pornography](#), they say we know quality when we see it.

Whether or not the standards define quality, they certainly generate a lot of paperwork for higher education providers. Coaldrake and Stedman point to overlapping regulatory provisions that they believe need rationalising. But discontent around compliance costs has not yet translated into a policy consensus on which rules need changing or abolishing.

"Game changing" higher education reforms seem unlikely. The main players in Australian higher education are going to be the public universities for the foreseeable future, probably operating under similar regulatory and funding systems to now.

In a prediction proved right before their book's release, Coaldrake and Stedman say that public funding is likely to become tighter rather than more generous. They see problems with deregulating student contributions, the most likely alternative source of income. They have hopes of philanthropy. They acknowledge issues around costs as well as revenues; despite limited scope these will have to be controlled.

The big question is whether overall costs can be kept down without loss of quality, hard to define as that is. "*Raising the Stakes*" could have offered more analysis of the 1996-2011 period. There are potential lessons from a time when universities often faced real annual reductions in per Commonwealth-supported student income but increased student satisfaction with teaching.

Coaldrake and Stedman point out that a government teaching performance scheme was poorly designed, and in any case short-lived. So that was not the cause. I believe that new technology combined with better staff training and performance management explain improved outcomes. Can universities do it again?

I share Coaldrake and Stedman's view that we are in a promising period of technological change, but also that this means **evolution rather than revolution** for campus-based universities.

Maybe there is no online "killer app", but adaptive learning software comes close. **Australians are involved** in developing this software, and they are getting excellent results in reduced fail rates and higher grades. At least in some disciplines, significant increases in learning productivity – the amount learned by effort and resources invested – look possible.

I would recommend "*Raising the Stakes*" to anyone looking for an overview of Australian higher education in a global context. Its careful and balanced analysis is a welcome alternative to the negativity common among academics, the unrealistic expectations of some politicians, and the internet hype surrounding MOOCs.

Andrew Norton is the higher education program director at [Grattan Institute](http://GrattanInstitute).