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Lecturer Attitudes Towards Teacher Trainees in a New South Wales College - 1955 and 1985.

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All who have worked in teacher education institutions for any length of time will know that significant changes have occurred in the way in which lecturers relate to their students and the sorts of behaviour which they expect from them. One hears lecturers speak of "the good old days", especially when irritated by some particularly liberal student behaviour or some seemingly cavalier student attitude, but it would be unusual to find someone who genuinely believes that the "old days" were better than the "new".

It occurred to us that it would be an interesting exercise to look at some of the changes which have taken place in lecturer-student relationships over the years. We have chosen Armidale College of Advanced Education as the subject of our discussion, simply because of our long association with it. No doubt, peculiarities of this College, especially in its residential aspects, would not apply to some other institutions but we feel that the general trends and directions we discuss will be common to all teacher education institutions in New South Wales and, quite possibly, to others throughout Australia. The year 1955, apart from being a neat thirty years (or one generation) from the present, also has a special significance. Both of us were at the College in that year, one as a lecturer and the other as a student. We have both been closely associated with it in one way or another ever since and the observations we make are based on first hand experience.

In our discussion, we concentrate on four aspects of the past and present functioning of Armidale College. We examine each of these aspects in turn and then try to offer some possible explanations for the changes that have taken place over the last thirty years.

1. The Student Image

Long standing residents of Armidale occasionally complain that "you can't recognise the students anymore". This is undoubtedly true. In 1955 the dress, appearance and social behaviour of students were regulated and constantly supervised. A few examples of the general Regulations issued to new students in the College Calendar in 1955 will bear this out:

"Tidy dress, in compliance with dress regulations, is essential both in the College and in the town".

"Students, unless living at home or with relatives, are required to reside in premises approved by the Principal".

"Any student who gives evidence of being under the influence of intoxicating liquor at any time will be suspended".

As a consequence of regulations such as these and of the fact that they were enforced, students of the College presented themselves well and were readily recognised for what they were. Men wore ties, coats or blazers with long trousers and shoes, and women's skirts were expected to be whatever was the conventional length at the time. In a sense, it was an offence to be different and conspicuous and, because of this, garb such as slacks for women or sandals for men was frowned upon.

The reason given for insistence on a fairly restricted range of dress was that standards were to be "professional". Men students were advised that while they had a choice of clothing, they should select the most "professional" type available. This was particularly important during practice teaching, but at all times College dress was seen as a rehearsal for school.

The regulation concerning alcohol consumption was rather rigidly enforced. This did not prevent students from drinking, but it did teach them to do so discreetly. It was not uncommon, however, for students to be suspended, with loss of scholarship benefits, or even expelled for "being under the influence".

Current students do not have to live by such rules and regulations as even a casual observer of the scene would quickly conclude. Choice of clothing and personal appearance is completely at the discretion of the students, although special requests are still made for them to dress "as others in the school do" when on practice teaching. College principals no longer have to concern themselves with "approving" the places where students live, and the consumption of alcohol is regarded by many as an essential feature of College life. The Armidale C.A.E. students' most recent orientation week handbook, for instance, gives a concise summary of the merits of all hotels, clubs and other drinking places in the town in which students might find themselves.

When trying to explain these significant changes in the "student image" over the last thirty years, it is too simplistic to say that today's students simply would not tolerate the restrictions that were placed on their 1955 counterparts. While there is no doubt that public attitudes towards one's rights with regard to personal appearance and behaviour have undergone

a transformation since the early 1970s, other factors have also been involved. The increased levels of maturity of students on entry to the College, the separation of training institutions from employing authorities, changes in living standards and life styles, together with greater personal mobility, all contribute to a greater independence of students and a lessened need for attempts to regulate their behaviour. We look at some of these points in more detail below.

2. Student Maturity

In 1955 Armidale College, like its counterparts, was a fairly uncomplicated institution. Its sole purpose was to prepare teachers for appointment to the New South Wales Department of Education, of which it was an integral part. Its students were drawn each year, in all but exceptional circumstances, from the cohort of high school students who had completed their Leaving Certificate examinations in the preceding year and who, on the basis of their performance, were considered to have potential as teachers. If chosen, they received a scholarship which paid their way through College and which, on successful completion of their studies, guaranteed their employment with the Department.

This selection procedure produced an intake of students each year whose average age was about seventeen. All but the handful who lived in Armidale and those who came from boarding schools faced, for the first time, the prospect of living away from their families. Because they were so young, the College had to act in loco parentis, and this helps to explain some of the seemingly rigorous rules and regulations that governed student life. In addition, the College was the "employer" of the students. Student scholarship allowances were "pay", in the sense that failure to comply with the College's prescription could mean immediate loss of allowance and, perhaps, exclusion from the teaching service. In a very real sense, students were employed by the Department of Education from the first day they entered the College. The staff were not only teachers; they were watchdogs checking that public money was not squandered on lazy or non-conforming people.

By and large, students accepted this relationship without question, although there were occasional grumbings about being "treated like children". The reality of the situation, of course, was that many of them were children, at least in the eyes of the law.

The need to police the students' whole College time had a rather unfortunate effect on relations between them and staff. Lecturers were compelled to be suspicious and to question the motives of students. There were many cases when simple misdemeanours were subjected to intensive investigation.

This contributed, in turn, to what could only be described as a "deficit" approach to students and which manifested itself in a general reluctance on the part of staff to accept evidence of student ability and experience. Students who had been highly respected as school captains, cadet group leaders, debating champions and the like were somehow transformed into foolish irresponsibles in the eyes of the College staff.

A strange feature of the deficit syndrome was that, in order to emphasise the adult status of students, they were addressed as "Mr X" or "Miss Y". There was no occasion when a student was called "Mrs", because there were no married women. Marriage, for a woman, automatically cancelled the scholarship. Furthermore, at practice teaching and on other formal occasions, students were encouraged to address each other in such terms. The underlying assumption was that this would also increase their "professionalism" and prepare them the more effectively for the classroom. It did not, however, prevent occasional cutting comments from lecturers which somehow seemed more deflating when prefaced by a formal title - "Mr X, how can you expect me to accept work like that"! For their part, students respected their lecturers, liked most of them, idolised a few, and did as they were told.

There is no doubt that lecturers' attitudes towards students underwent a significant change with the advent of mature-age students. For some time the belief persisted that married women, especially those with families, would not be able to cope with study as well as could single students in supervised residences. This myth was exploded at Armidale College in one year during the mid-1960s, when two such women gained first and second places on the merit list and looked after their families as well. As time went by, lecturers found it more and more difficult to ignore the experience of mature-age students, especially as they tended to approach their studies with a motivation lacking in their junior peers. Gradually students who fitted a mould other than that of the standard high school scholarship holder gained in acceptance until they are now fully accepted, if not preferred, by lecturing staff. It is considered that they add "experience" to the "young ones", who take a lot of notice of what they have to say.

The other significant development in this regard is that the "young ones" are now not as young as they used to be. The combination of later entry ages, because of six years of secondary schooling and three years of training instead of two, means that even the youngest students are 21 before they finish their studies. This greater maturity obviously has a significant effect on relations between staff and students.

We are not sure when students at Armidale College ceased to be regularly

referred to as "Mr X" or "Miss Y", but it was probably during the early 1970s when the hallowed practice of lecturing in black academic gowns also perished and avant-garde lecturers began to encourage the now widespread practice of exchanging first names with their students.

3. The Program of Study

Of all the differences between 1955 and 1985 in Armidale's approach to teacher education, the most important would certainly be the programme of studies undertaken by the students and the way in which it is presented. In 1955, students took a two-year programme with twelve separate subjects each year. The two years involved 74 weeks of lectures and 12 weeks of practice teaching. All College time was allocated, from 9.00 a.m. to 4.30 p.m., five days a week, with an hour for lunch. There was no free time for students and time allocated to "library" had to be spent there. The timetable included an afternoon's sport and this was compulsory, regardless of the students' inclinations. It was possible to fail in Physical Education if it could be proved that participation in sport had been evaded.

Lecturers were expected to enforce the general regulation, again from the 1955 College Handbook:

"Attendance at lectures is compulsory; students are to be punctual for lectures and all College functions and sporting fixtures".

Each section of students had a lecturer who was their "adviser" and this person, in addition to acting as a very necessary and useful counsellor, was required, on instruction from the Principal, to keep a record of student absences. These interesting documents remain in the College records and they show that, by and large, lecturers attended to this duty assiduously. The books were personally checked and initialled by the Principal at the end of each year.

Such careful enforcement of attendance regulations had the effect of stretching student ingenuity to the utmost to devise legitimate reasons for being away. Very few were prepared to try to beat the system, but occasionally it became necessary. On such occasions, it was the duty of the lecturer to investigate the matter most thoroughly and this process often involved intensive probing of an individual's personal affairs. Junior lecturers could well find themselves on the receiving end of criticism for their senior colleagues if they treated student absences lightly.

Attendance was checked by the most meticulous marking of rolls and this had to be done because Department of Education regulations required that students attend all scheduled sessions unless due cause for their absence

could be demonstrated. Students who could not provide due cause ran the risk of losing scholarship payments and this was a very strong deterrent to the would-be truant. As a result of this provision, student absence was very much the exception and something which attracted comment.

Such comment would not be forthcoming today. While students are asked to advise the College of absences, this is usually interpreted to mean extended absences. Students are expected to run their own lives and to make their own decisions about the consequences of missing scheduled lectures and workshops. If they choose to ignore attendance requirements when such are stipulated, they run the risk of failure - and this is not uncommon.

The programme followed in 1985 involves students in three years of study, with six semesters. The total number of lecture weeks is 78, and 15 weeks are spent in practice teaching. Each student's timetable varies, depending on courses and options offered and when they are not required at scheduled sessions students are free to do as they wish. The maximum time in such sessions ranges up to 18 hours per week.

The compacted, skills-intensive teacher education courses of 1955, designed to fit future employees into guaranteed teaching positions with the Department of Education, have been replaced by (generally) more academic courses, taken by those wishing to prepare themselves for teaching in a range of different educational systems, without a guarantee of employment. It is our contention - though a difficult one to prove - that the current shortage of teaching employment opportunities in New South Wales has produced students who are more motivated to do well at College so that they will be more eligible than some of their colleagues when employment time arrives. A side effect of this is that those who cannot keep up the pace fall by the wayside and withdraw, perhaps to try again at some other time.

4. The Students' Lifestyle

In 1955, all Armidale College students had to live in residences unless there were not enough places available. If this happened, board was arranged in private homes and those who found themselves in this situation (while very well treated) considered themselves to be at a disadvantage. From the students' point of view, living in residence with the other students was definitely preferable to boarding.

The lecturers who ran the residences did so capably and compassionately but, especially in the case of the women's residence, according to strict rules. Curfews were applied at night and checks were made of rooms to see that all students were in. Leave to stay out later than the specified time or to leave Armidale at weekends had to be approved by the warden on

duty. It is perhaps not surprising that the students occasionally referred to these hard-working wardens as "warders"; but, in general, the rules of residence life were accepted with good grace.

Very few students at the time possessed motor vehicles and travel to and from Armidale at vacation time was chiefly by train, bus or some family arrangement. The general lack of mobility of students meant that they were all in Armidale when the College was in session. Because of this, the corporate life of the student body was rich and varied. The College produced impressive musical and dramatic productions; sporting competitions within the town were dominated by well trained College teams; choral competitions, athletic carnivals, swimming carnivals and competitions with visiting teams from other Colleges were assured of success because of the captive student group, which had limited opportunity to find its own entertainment. Visits to hotels for private drinking were officially prohibited, there was no television and few places to go to except the cinema. Regular Saturday night dances in the College gymnasium, open to College students, were the highlight of the social week. Lecturers were required to supervise these to make sure that there were no intruders, that the fabric of the College building was not harmed, and that student behaviour did not step outside the bounds of good taste.

The strict control exercised over student behaviour was resented by a few but accepted by all. Again, any student who deliberately flouted the rules could be suspended and, with a guaranteed career at stake, few were prepared to take unnecessary risks. One interesting side effect of the close control of students and their confinement to residential living was the development of an impressive collegiate spirit. The students thought a great deal of their institution, were very proud to be part of it and were a highly cohesive group with excellent morale.

The student lifestyle in 1985 bears little resemblance to that of thirty years ago. The one residence, now co-educational, holds approximately half of the internal students, the rest being accommodated in flats, private homes and residences of the nearby University of New England. Such is the mobility of today's students that reduced services are provided in the residence during weekends, the assumption being that many students will go away from town at these times - to their homes, to the coast, to Sydney or wherever. No restrictions apply to their coming or going and their behaviour in the residence is largely self-regulated. During recent years, practice teaching has occurred at different times of the year for different groups of students and this has contributed to a situation where the College no longer has the same collegiate spirit of the earlier days. Sporting teams are few and far between, musical and dramatic productions are no longer

mounted and apart from a few officially organised functions, the students themselves provide what entertainment there is. Drinking is a popular pastime, but so too is serious work on the part of many. Students still leave the College having identified very strongly with it, but perhaps in different ways.

Conclusion

While the age and maturity of students and changes in public attitudes towards behaviour contribute to the differences in student-lecturer relations between 1955 and the present, the main factor is that students are no longer employees. Whereas the staff used to be agents of the New South Wales Department of Education and, as such, able to exercise direct control over student behaviour and over the future direction of each individual student's career, they now serve a role more like that traditionally attributed to lecturers in universities. Their function, while retaining an interest in individual students, is to present what is considered, in its wisdom, by the College to be the most useful and up-to-date information that students will need to help them develop their own approaches to teaching and their own prospects for employment.

Relations between lecturers and their students have certainly been freed of many former constraints and are much more open and personal than could ever have been possible in 1955. The most significant difference, however, is that because most students now finance their own progress through College in some way or other, and because their decisions to undertake teacher education are made in the knowledge that the College can play little or no part in securing their future employment, lecturer accountability is of a different and more academic nature. Students now accept greater responsibility for their own academic preparation and for their own professional effectiveness as beginning teachers.

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