

Professional military

education and the ADF

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The distinction between education and training has never been well understood in the Australian Defence Force. There have always been advocates (often powerful and well placed, though not necessarily effective) of the need for a better educated officer corps, but efforts to create a comprehensive, sophisticated and relevant system of professional military education (PME), or indeed even to articulate a coherent statement of policy, have frequently floundered, especially in recent times, on opposition and white-anting by lower levels of the uniformed bureaucracy.

A proportion of the latter has felt challenged, at best, and more frequently threatened, by the notion that a commission is a licence, nay a requirement, to actually think, and, moreover, to think creatively. Midway through the first decade of the 21st century, the officer PME system in Australia is in profound disarray, and is fundamentally failing the organisation of which it should be the intellectual gatekeeper and guiding beacon.

In a time when we are frequently admonished about the importance of the 'strategic corporal' (or even private), the critical requirement to produce men and women at all levels capable of complex problem solving in difficult and pressured circumstances should be self-evident. (This short commentary will concentrate on officer PME for space reasons and because that is the area in which the author has greatest experience, but the implications for PME in the non-commissioned and enlisted ranks is taken as given, and undoubtedly demands further investigation.)

The best shorthand definition this author knows of the distinction between training and education posits that training prepares the individual to respond to a predictable situation or circumstance, while education prepares them for unpredictable ones. The ADF takes training very seriously, and is often very

good at it. It does not accord education the same level of importance.

Education within the army, at least, has been reviewed to death for generations, and the organisation has no excuse for claiming to be unaware of the issues. As far back as 1944 a committee chaired by Major General George Vasey, then recuperating in Australia from arduous service in New Guinea, recommended university accreditation and standards for the course at RMC Duntroon. The recommendation was not acted upon (despite subsequent renewed recommendations to this end) until the late 1960s. Where previously there was a slowness in moving towards enhancing PME through direct association with university-level standards, the reverse has applied more recently with the ADF embracing a crude credentialism. Anything and seemingly everything is now accredited to tertiary level, whether it merits it or not, and whether the 'service provider' (to use the managerialist jargon beloved in some quarters) is credible in terms of the service provided, or not.

For a long time the rather adolescent approach to PME was explained by organisational immaturity. We sent handfuls of officers to British institutions for validation and further development. Over time we broadened the range of these affiliations, and developed indigenous institutions, some—like the late lamented Joint Services Staff College—fulfilling really useful functions at a number of levels. We introduced requirements for tertiary qualification among at least a proportion of the officer corps at entry level, fitfully and inconsistently. We moved slowly, and again fitfully, towards a formal process of PME for those destined for positions at one-star rank and above. The system spends large sums on the education of the commissioned ranks, from pre-commissioning to preparation for senior appointment, but whether the system gets full value for the

(considerable) dollar expenditure must be wondered.

There are several fundamental failings in officer PME at present. The most important is that the system has no continuity, no alignment between different stages or progression and no central coherent philosophy that unifies the whole. The second is the mad drive to outsourcing to universities (any university) for the provision of curriculum and course content and delivery. It's as if the churches had decided to hand the training of the clergy to McDonald's. The third, and related, failing is the credentialist trap: Why is a university qualification, relevant (or often not), needed in validating the process of professional enhancement in a military context? The fourth is the maintenance of an older structural model no longer utilised in comparable systems in Britain or the United States, and almost certainly past its shelf life here as well but retained on grounds of narrow parsimony.

The first problem is the hardest to fix, especially in a tri-Service environment where there is no practical agreement on the form, nature or function of PME between the three Services. While all three have produced advocates for improved PME systems, it is generally the case that the Army, historically, has been most receptive to formal non-technical education and its benefits, the RAN the least so, with the RAAF occupying an equivocal and fluctuating position in between. If it goes whirr and you can oil it, the latter two Services are in favour of it, but usually not otherwise.

At present, the degree studies undertaken by a proportion of officer candidates at ADFA (and by a smaller proportion of direct entry candidates) are undertaken largely without rhyme or reason at least insofar as subsequent professional development is concerned. The mantra at ADFA of a 'balanced and liberal education' (a phrase derived from the original charter accorded to RMC Duntroon in 1911 rather than being the product of pointy-headed academics in the 1960s) is used by both sides in the contract to disguise the fact that no serious and disinterested investigation of what undergraduate education for officer aspirants should look like has been undertaken for a generation (the politically inspired investigations successively in the course of the mid-1990s fail to qualify on all grounds, not least intellectual honesty).

There is no question in my mind, after more than 20 years working in and observing various officer undergraduate education systems, that providing a sound basic degree at pre-commissioning stage is the best way to go. Those who talk about a US ROTC-type 'solution' generally reveal deep ignorance of that system, and ignore some very important differences between the US and Australian university cultures. Increasingly, however, I question whether a 'hands off' and laissez-faire approach to subject matter at

this level is appropriate. It is also the case that such PME (as opposed to training) that is delivered in the post-ADFA, pre-commissioning courses is inadequate both in content and delivery. And the question of PME delivery at this level to the Reserves is almost entirely ignored or avoided.

At the higher level institutions, the Australian Command and Staff College course has become infected with heavy doses of managerialism, fails to live up to the claim that it deals seriously with a warfighting agenda, and despite being nominally or partially joint sends the different Service streams off to consider their own institutional navels at crucial points where a real joint approach would seem particularly called for. The senior schooling program, while better, has been criticised for preparing graduates for work in Defence Headquarters and the higher policy interface, where only a proportion of them will actually serve, and basically for nothing else.

Privatisation and outsourcing, like the 'Defence of Australia' dogma, demonstrates the pitfalls when process is elevated to the status of theology—as commercialisation has been under the Howard government (though they are not uniquely sinning in this regard). The problem here is tied to the related one of credentialism, since if the latter did not exist the pressure from the former would be considerably diminished at least in this area. Why is it that the venerable post-nominal 'psc' is no longer sufficient? Why is a 'Masters in Strategic Divination' from 'Inconsequential U' deemed a necessary and requisite benchmark of successful attendance? Does no one in the Australian Defence Organisation think it peculiar when the same institution offers no programs in strategic divining at its own campus, and possesses neither a department nor recognised faculty in the field in which it claims expertise for service provision to the ADF? At least it knows why it does so, and the answers are all dollars.

Credentialism is equally at fault. The idea that higher education should be an important component in preparation for higher rank is a good one, but the basic test ought to be, surely, that the qualification acquired is both relevant and worth having (and generates professional respect for being so). There are two problems here. One is the willingness to countenance, and support, outside study in any field, especially at coursework postgraduate level, regardless of its professional application (and there are plenty of cases of people, quite understandably, pursuing qualifications to equip them for life after separation from service). The system should actively encourage and support study in areas of professional application—strategic studies, international relations, military history—rather than MBAs or IT degrees, which are acquired for unrelated reasons (however understandable these may be).

If the career and professional development system is going to offer similar qualifications as part of the formal PME process, then these have to be credible and worth having. All graduates of recent classes of the new joint staff college to whom I have talked (many of them former students of mine) have stated unequivocally that they know a fraud is being perpetrated in academic terms, and that the accredited degree qualification is a joke. What does this do for the integrity of the PME process as a whole, especially in the eyes of those on the receiving end?

Coupled to both of these is the way in which we structure the schools charged with educating our best and brightest. The posting cycle is part of the problem here, but there is a deeper systemic failing. In both the United Kingdom and the United States the PME schooling systems utilise a highly effective mixture of qualified and appropriate civilian faculty and uniformed personnel to reinforce the strengths that each brings to the process. Given that a two to three year attachment on the directing staff is as much as a uniformed service member can expect, the absence of civilian faculty in our PME institutions robs them of institutional continuity. In addition, because historically uniformed personnel have not generally been encouraged or supported in pursuing higher research degrees, unlike in the United States, the uniformed staff are not sufficiently trained intellectually for the roles they are increasingly assigned, no matter how able they are as individuals or committed they are to their role. The mix of academic faculty with relevant PhDs and uniformed faculty who are credible in military terms (at Marine Corps Command and Staff College the latter are recent War College graduates and have recently come from unit command), is one of the keys to the current success of the PME system in the US military.

The ADF appears to suffer from a fundamental problem of professional self-confidence regarding the more intellectual facets of the profession of arms. This is caused, and compounded, by the undoubted practical excellence the Services bring to their operational tasking and the unhealthy focus on practical excellence alone this brings. The move to outsource tertiary-level PME self-perpetuates the sad situation where intellectual excellence is subordinated to its practical cousin instead of being accepted as the other half of the well-rounded professional coin.

One reason for outsourcing was the perceived lack of sufficient numbers of qualified ADF officers to teach at tertiary-level PME institutions. But the outsourcing itself only makes this problem worse and with serious implications in terms of long-term professionalism. If such teaching is not seen as vital in itself, or as a professionally useful, personally rewarding and career enhancing duty for middle-level and more senior officers, then it will not attract those required to teach it. The ADF therefore remains one

of the few technologically advanced Western defence forces that consistently undervalues intellectual attainment among its wider officer corps and its leadership. The obsession with weighting command postings as a key differentiator for promotion, and the relative de-weighting of academic qualifications, are further symptoms of this detrimental trend.

So as Lenin once famously asked, what is to be done? Better use of available financial resources to build a civilian faculty would be a good first step. From this could flow a root and branch reform of curriculum (some of this is going on now, especially with the program at the Centre for Defence and Strategic Studies, but much more needs to be done). Fundamentally, the ADF needs to take back ownership of and responsibility for its own professional education, using both civilian academic and uniformed teaching staff. The creation of an Australian Defence University, building on existing facilities available within the current Australian Defence College structure, would be a very good start. ♦

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