

The Review of Higher Education

2008

Submission by the Australian Federation of University Women Inc.



A. F. U. W.

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About the Organization Making the Submission

The Australian Federation of University Women (AFUW Inc) is a not-for-profit incorporated organization open to all women graduates of Australian universities and of accredited universities worldwide. With associations and branches in all States and Territories of Australia, the Federation is one of 79 nations affiliated with the International Federation of University Women (IFUW), one of the five international women's NGO with representative status at the United Nations.

Established in 1922, AFUW has as its aim the advancement of women through access to affordable quality education, so that they can fulfill their personal potential, achieve economic independence and make informed contributions to civil society, especially in the pursuit of human peace and security. AFUW advocates nationally and internationally in support of policies that further these aims.

Through its Australia-wide scholarship program, AFUW and its federated Associations provide almost half a million dollars annually in education scholarships for women, for the most part for postgraduate studies. These scholarships are funded by bequests from past members and the voluntary donations and fundraising activities of members. A limited number of these scholarships and bursaries are reserved for Indigenous students and some make disadvantage an equal criterion with merit.

SUBMISSION TO THE HIGHER EDUCATION REVIEW

In responding to the questions posed by the Discussion Paper, this Submission addresses only those questions where AFUW has existing policy or information adequate for providing an informed opinion.

Question 1:

How adequate is the statement of functions and characteristics of higher education in modern Australia?

AFUW appreciates the extent to which the body of the discussion paper, especially in sections 1.1 and 1.2, recognises the complex functionality of universities as

- discoverers, establishers and disseminators of knowledge in general;
- maintainers of the standards whereby knowledge is properly increased and disseminated in specific disciplines; and
- imparters to individual students of the knowledge, understanding and skills that will enable them to continue learning throughout their lifetime and to be productive contributors to their own and the nation's well-being.

We are, however, disappointed that, in the list of the capacities required of the higher education system in 1.3, the highest priority is given to meeting the needs of the labour market and industry for high level skills. We understand it is not easy to order a list of complex functions, but a numbered list inevitably confers priority on what is listed first and we do not believe that this utilitarian economic function, while important, is the first priority of the university system.

We would argue that there are twin characteristics which are of greater importance, namely those of playing a vital role in the national research and innovation system (No. 5) and providing students with a stimulating and rewarding higher education experience *which will equip them with an understanding of the way to continue acquiring and applying knowledge* (No. 3, with our additional material in italics). If indeed these characteristics are realised, along with the fulfilment of the requirement to provide access for all capable students (No. 2), then the universities will be producing graduates with an education that has given them the capacity to be productive and *flexible* within a labour market that will almost certainly change over their working life, as the model of a lifetime's employment in a single occupation becomes increasingly superseded by more complex patterns of employment.

Recommendations

1: That the ordering of the list of desirable characteristics of the higher education system be revised to give a truer sense of the priority that should be given to these characteristics.

Nonetheless, with this proviso, we consider that it is legitimate to ask the Questions in Section 3, where the list is repeated with the same ordering of desired characteristics.

Question 2

Are there impediments to the higher education sector being able to innovate in the development of courses and programs? What are these impediments and how could they be removed?

The largest single impediment to the higher education sector being able to innovate in the development of courses and programs is the same impediment to its being able to realise any of the specified desirable characteristics, namely inadequate funding. AFUW wishes particularly to draw attention to the effect of this on academic staff, who are the crucial means whereby new courses and programs can be developed.

As the discussion paper acknowledges in Chapter 2 and especially in 2.6 (*Resource pressures and uncertainties*), and as the recent OECD study of Australian education has shown, there has been a considerable reduction in the percentage of total university funding coming from the Commonwealth government (despite the fact that the actual amount of funding provided by the Commonwealth has increased).

One area where this has had a marked effect on the experience of both staff and students is that of teaching. As noted in 2.6 ‘student numbers have outstripped Commonwealth funding for teaching, with Commonwealth funding per place having fallen in real terms from \$11,525 in 1989 to \$9,998 in 2006.’ Or as the Group of Eight Backgrounder No.1, 2007 pointed out, Commonwealth grants for teaching purposes represented 24% of total university operating revenue in 2006, but direct Commonwealth support for teaching purposes over the period 1996–2006 declined by almost 20% per student place, despite substantial productivity increases in teaching since 1986. The Group of Eight warned that ‘higher efficiency gains are unlikely to be sustained without a diminution of quality’ and argued that what is necessary to sustain the universities’ teaching mission is a new system of indexation for Commonwealth Grants for Higher Education in which funding rates for all Higher Education institutions relate to the actual costs of teaching. This has not been achieved by the competitive Learning and Teaching Performance Fund (LTPF) set up as part of the then Minister for Education’s ‘Backing Australia’s Future’ reforms. For a detailed critique of the methodology and outcomes of the LTPF, see Leesa Wheelahan’s ‘How not to fund teaching and learning’, *Australian Universities Review* 49, 1 & 2 (2007).

One result of this has been a substantial increase in student-staff ratios, ‘from 12.9 in 1990 to 20.3 in 2005 (Universities Australia 2007a)’. It would seem that the authors of the Discussion Paper have some doubts as to the benefit of this outcome when they say that universities have met cost pressures in part through ‘productivity gains and increased efficiency (as seen most starkly in the growth of student-staff ratios)’. AFUW submits that this is not ‘efficiency’ but a cause of a detrimental reduction in the job satisfaction of academics and in the value of the students’ educational experience. Academic staff are becoming chronically short of time. It is sometimes argued that it takes no more time to give a seminar or tutorial to 20 students than to 12. This ignores the fact that most of the time spent on individual students is that spent in marking and student interviews, and that these two components are substantially increased with 20 rather than 12 students.

The burden of increased staff student ratios is intensified by the fact that, in most departments and faculties, staff numbers have shrunk over the past decade as a measure of economy. To cite only a very few of numerous examples: the Faculty of Arts at Monash University lost 1 in 6 staff members in 1998, with the Faculty of Science also severely affected, notably the Departments of Physics and Mathematics. The Faculty of Arts at the University of Melbourne is currently (2008) facing a second round major staff reductions.

Under these circumstances, staff may well find it difficult to maintain existing courses, let alone to find time and energy to develop new ones, especially with the increased pressure on staff to perform non-stop and competitively as researchers.

Economic factors play a role in this, because many academics have come to see their worth as being judged *primarily* on their capacity to bring in grants from external sources such as the NHMRC, ARC, industrial, professional and philanthropic sources – grants increasingly

necessary to the budgetary needs of the academic unit. Applicants for university appointments are now routinely asked to state what external grant funding they have obtained.

AFUW believes that research is indeed central to the activities of a university, but it needs to be realised that the specialisation required for research may limit the capacity of staff to read widely within the scholarship of their discipline and hence to reflect on its general state, to make new connections within its elements and to perceive its capacity for new developments. There needs to be a balance of activity within the different roles required of academics as teachers and researchers.

Casualisation is sometimes justified as offering opportunities to introduce new programs on an exploratory basis or to bring in someone with specialised skills to meet a demand not otherwise provided for. While there will always be a role for some casual appointments to deal with staffing emergencies, and there may be some people for whom a casual appointment offers a preferred employment mode, too many casual appointments are made on the grounds of budgetary exigency, and are experienced by the staff concerned as exploitative and a dead end. In general, casual staff are the work-horses of academia and unlikely to be a major source of the development of new courses and programs. They are also a source of student dissatisfaction over staff availability for interviews. Casual staff, whose pay is determined by preparation, class time and marking, and who may be employed at more than one university in a given city, cannot reasonably be expected to have more than very limited office hours but in many cases these fail to meet the needs of students whose patterns of work and study increasingly mean that they do not attend university on a daily basis.

What should be done to remove some of these impediments?

Recommendations

- 2. That Commonwealth funding be increased. Education is a national investment, and it should be prioritised over things such as individual tax cuts. In particular, increase funding per student place to improve staff student ratios and reduce pressure on the teaching component of an academic career.***
- 3. That universities be encouraged to give proposals for the development of new courses and programs equal recognition with research projects for the purposes of academic leave programs such as Outside Studies Programs.***
- 4. That academic units should be encouraged to capitalise on the enthusiasm of early career staff by giving them responsibility, with adequate workload adjustment, for developing new programs.***
- 5. That universities be required to ensure that economies are not achieved in central administration by the process of devolving tasks to academic units, unless the unit is given appropriate administrative support for fulfilling the task.***

Questions 3 and 4:

- 3. What are the appropriate mechanisms at the national and local level for ensuring higher education meets national and local needs for high level skills? What is the role of state and territory governments in this area?**
- 4. How adequate are the mechanisms for aligning supply and demand of graduates? How do pricing and labour market signals impact on student choices?**

Better collection, dissemination and analysis of data indicating the long-term need for particular professions and skills is needed to assist both higher education institutions and students to plan for the future. It would help to guard against the sort of crisis lurch that over

the past 50 years has produced gluts (and subsequent shortages) of physicists, geologists, engineers and, in prospect, Masters of Business Administration.

Commonwealth, State and Territory governments can all play a role in designating and acquiring the necessary data and also making it freely accessible. Cutting the funding of the Australian Bureau of Statistics is not a clever move. Nor ought it to be the case that the Universities Australia website offers more comprehensible statistics on higher education than that of the DEEWR site.

Commonwealth, State and Territory governments can also play a role in allocating research funding to support analysis of such data and its particular implications for higher education

AFUW submits, nonetheless, that there is no simple, or even desirable, mechanism for having universities meet skills that have reached a stage of serious shortage. University courses are of their nature long-term. There is scope within universities for diploma courses which build on earlier qualifications in order to develop or update skills to meet professional demands: the Diploma of Education as an addition to an Arts or Science degree is a long-standing example, and many academic units respond to skills demands by offering post-degree diploma courses in their disciplinary area. It should be noted, however, that there are professions, for instance, medicine and law, that consider the development of specific professional skills to meet workforce needs to be better done by training provided within the practice of the profession itself. These professions have a realistic view of the need to combine a university degree with on-the-job experience, one that should be shared by the business world, which sometimes seems to have unreasonable expectations that the universities will produce workers exactly fitted for their quite specific needs.

Training to meet short-term labour market needs is better done within the VET sector (also inadequately funded). However, those who enter the labour market in this way should be protected from the limited opportunities offered when they are trained in a very narrow range of skills. They must be given opportunities to return to adult and further education courses that will enable them to adapt to changing market demands. Adult education is a neglected area and tends to depend on random (and often prohibitively expensive) individual choices.

The choices made by individual students are of course influenced by 'labour market signals' (Question 4), although the experience of those acting as advisers on university Open Days indicates that it is quite often the parents who are interested in possible employment outcomes, while students want to know about the nature of the course in question. That is, the choices made by many students are still dictated by their interest in, and liking for, disciplinary areas as well as by the attraction of particular careers.

In this respect, the experience of secondary education is crucial. In the absence of enthusiastic and well-qualified teachers, or in the absence of a subject altogether from the curriculum (as sometimes happens), students are likely to be unwilling or unable to choose certain areas of study, however much these are defined as a skills-shortage area. Mathematics and foreign languages are currently identified as crisis areas in secondary education (see, for instance: the *National Report on Schooling* 2006; DEST statistics on the Top Ten Languages other than English; articles such as 'Maths Still out for the Count', the *Education Age*, 7 April 2008; 'The Language Barrier', the *Education Age*, 14 March 2005).

Until this situation is remedied students, especially girls in the case of maths, will be denied access to the career possibilities opened up by these disciplines and Australians will continue to be all too often monolingual and mathematically (and hence often financially) illiterate.

There needs to be a better understanding of how to teach maths and languages so as to make them attractive to students from primary school onwards, including their incorporation into the curriculum of other disciplines by team teaching. Apart from their responsibilities for establishing the school curriculum, State governments need to support universities to conduct

research and make changes to their education degrees to this end. Incentives in the form of Commonwealth and State scholarships could be offered, not only for students taking Diploma or Bachelor of Education courses, but also for students undertaking initial degrees with a high component of maths or languages. Their skills are not only needed in teaching.

An example of a State government initiative of this kind is the Queensland Department of Education's move to call for public input to its 2007 the STEM Plan: *Towards a 10-year plan for science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) education and skills in Queensland* (See <http://education.qld.gov.au/projects/stemplan/>)

The role of career advisers in schools needs to extend beyond Years 11 and 12. By that time subject options are already limited by earlier choices and preferences are established. It is particularly important that well-informed career advisers be available in schools with a high component of Indigenous students or students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, as such students are those whose home background often does not provide the stimulus to consider entering university that more advantaged students receive at home – those capable of benefiting from university studies need to be identified and encouraged.

Recommendations:

- 6. That Commonwealth and State governments implement better collection and dissemination of data indicating the long-term need for particular professions and skills and provide research funding for analytic studies to underpin policy decisions.***
- 7. That most training to meet short-term skills shortages should be a function of an adequately funded VET sector.***
- 8. That attention should be given to the role of adult and further education in ensuring that those whose initial skills training is in a narrow range have opportunities to upgrade and widen them in order to improve their employment options***
- 9. That State governments provide support to universities to conduct research and adapt their education degrees so that there is a better understanding of how to teach mathematics and languages other than English so as to make them attractive to students from primary school onwards; in particular attention should be given to making mathematics and information technology attractive to girls.***
- 10. That incentives in the form of Commonwealth and State scholarships and grants be offered, not only for students taking Diploma or Bachelor of Education courses, but also for students undertaking initial degrees with a high component of maths or language.***
- 11. That the role of school career advisers be taken seriously and extended beyond Years 11 and 12, and that State governments give special attention to allocating well-informed career advisers to schools with a high component of Indigenous students and students from low socio-economic status groups.***

No comment is offered on Questions 5 through 7

Questions 8 and 9

- 8. Should there be a national approach to improving Indigenous and low SES participation and success in higher education?**
- 9. If you support a national approach to improving Indigenous and low SES participation and success how do you see it being structured, resourced, monitored and evaluated?**

AFUW believes that it is a matter of social justice, as well as being in the national interest, that every person, throughout their life, should be able to benefit from the full amount and type of education for which they have aptitude. Australia cannot afford to waste its human capital by failing to invest in its development. AFUW therefore believes that there should indeed be a national approach to ensuring that higher education is available to all those capable of undertaking it, and that specific attention should be given to identifying and remedying factors of disadvantage that prevent certain groups from appropriate levels of participation.

Question 9: So much of the higher education disadvantage suffered by these groups is related to their schooling that, under the present system, it requires close collaboration between Commonwealth and State and Territory governments to develop programs of action that will mean that capable students from these groups are prepared by their schooling to enter university. Relying on picking up these students as ‘special’ entrants at tertiary level is not good enough. They require the preparation of schools that are well-resourced and staffed by competent teachers. AFUW agrees with education policy experts such as Professor Simon Marginson that: ‘Education policy should pay special attention to lifting the quality of low-achieving schools in socio-economically depressed area, for example using incentive payments to attract the best teachers’ (Education Forum in *The Sunday Age*, 15 August 2004).

With regard to Indigenous students, the situation is so severe (see the National report on Schooling) that AFUW submits that the Minister for Indigenous Affairs should have the oversight of appropriate Indigenous participation in education at all levels as part of her/ his brief. It will be very important that such a brief recognises that there are very real differences in the situation of urbanised Aborigines and those living in remote communities. To some extent the situation of all Indigenous students shares characteristics with those from other low socio-economic status groups, while there are specific features of those in remote communities that relate closely to the disadvantages experienced by other students in remote areas. Nonetheless there are specific strategies that will be needed to address the cultural backgrounds of Indigenous students, especially the low rate of expectation that they will participate in higher education. A fast-tracking program to get more Indigenous teaching aides and teachers in classrooms would be a major step forward. The University of Notre Dame at Broome seemed to be a good example of how to work towards this. Curtin University has also developed useful programs. Universities will need to continue to monitor the progress of those Indigenous students who do reach them and to ensure that they have cultural as well as academic support. This may require supplying the kind of bridging preparation supplied, for example by the Flinders University Foundation Year.

All Education Faculties should be encouraged to include in their teacher-training courses a unit that familiarises non-Indigenous teachers-to-be with the history, current circumstances and culture of Aborigines. The Victorian Institute of Teachers has recommended this in Victoria, but on an optional basis. AFUW believes that it should be mandated as paid professional development for any teacher posted to a school with a substantial enrolment of Indigenous students.

Question 10: AFUW offers no further response to Question 10.

Some recommendations relating to Questions 8 and 9 are incorporated into the Recommendations that follow a discussion of Question 11.

Question 11

What evidence is available from institutions about the impact on individuals or groups of either failure to gain income support or the inadequacy of income support?

AFUW submits that the crucial factors limiting successful participation in higher education are the student's preparedness, which includes social factors as well as academic, and the student's economic capacity to cope with the increasing cost (whether immediate or deferred) of higher education. Economic concerns obviously bear most heavily on students from low socio-economic backgrounds, which include Indigenous students and many students from non-English speaking backgrounds, but student poverty is a phenomenon affecting students with home backgrounds that are by no means low SES ones.

The burden of the cost of education has come to fall increasingly on private income: by 2005 Australia had become the 4th most expensive developed nation in which to study (*The Australian* April 16-17, 2005, p. 4). While it is possible to defer payment of tuition costs, students must have resources to cover study-related costs such as text-books and equipment, as well as accommodation and general living expenses. The need to provide income support for students has been recognized over the past 50 years by a variety of means-tested schemes, from the Living Allowances of Commonwealth Scholarships through others enumerated in the Discussion Paper. In the past decade however a tightening of the eligibility criteria and a failure to increase the monetary value in line with cost-of-living increases has meant a considerable degree of student poverty, for which there is substantial evidence not only from institutions but also from other relevant sources deserving of attention (See Appendix A: Sources of information on student finances).

Poverty does not merely impede access to higher education, it has a variety of adverse effects on student performance: poor students often skimp not only on buying educational material, but also on study time, as this must be shared with the part-time work needed to provide food, accommodation and transport. They are more likely to live in substandard accommodation and in cheaper areas more remote from campuses, something which, ironically, means that they incur expenses in traveling costs and time. Their dental health, and to some extent their general health, is likely to be poor, and poor health is an impediment to performing at one's intellectual best.

One of the Fact Sheets issued by the Australian Vice-Chancellor's Committee (AVCC: now Universities Australia) in 2007 compared a number of the key indicators on undergraduate student finances from their 2000 *Paying their Way* study with their equivalents in the 2006 survey of student finances. The Fact Sheet noted, *inter alia*, the following:

- the percentage of students obtaining a repayable loan in order to complete their studies in 2006 was 24.4% as against 10.7% in 2000, although the average amount borrowed had not increased in a comparable way;
- full-time students obtained on average 65.9% of their total income from paid employment in 2006 as against 51% in 2000;
- the percentage of students receiving some form of government income support had fallen to 35.2% in 2006 from 38.7% in 2000;
- the percentage of students receiving Austudy had fallen to 4.8% from 12.7%;
- the percentage of students whose choice of course, university and mode of study had been affected by financial stringency had risen, with 67.3% of part-time students reporting they would study full-time if finances permitted;
- in 2006, 6.8% of full-time students and 7.0% of part-time students reported they regularly missed classes or other study commitments because they could not afford to travel to the university, whereas the 2000 figures had 1% of all students reporting this as the reason why they 'frequently' missed classes and 9% 'sometimes' doing so.

In the same year (2000) as the AVCC's *Paying their Way*, La Trobe University in Victoria published its *Report on the Student Experiences of Poverty at La Trobe University*. By 2004 public concern over levels of student poverty had become sufficient to provoke a Senate Inquiry into Student Income Support. 140 submissions were received from a wide range of

universities, student organizations, education unions, NGOs and other respondents and the Report was finalised in 2005. Given that Government senators disagreed with 8 of the 15 Recommendations, especially those with immediate financial implications, it is hardly surprising that very few had been implemented by late 2007, even though it could be shown that students in 2004 on the maximum Youth Allowance plus Rent Assistance (not available to those over 25) were \$100 below the Henderson poverty line, then \$302 per week. Student experience of poverty in 2008 still remains very close to that outlined in the lengthy report published in 2004 by the University of Queensland: 'Student Poverty: The Lived Experience of Undergraduate Students Attending the University of Queensland'.

Even an agreed Recommendation from the Senate Inquiry – that DEST 'undertake an analysis of the costs and benefits associated with exempting university-funded scholarships and scholarships funded by benefactors and philanthropists from the social security personal income test' – has not produced the implied outcome, so that the Group of Eight was still arguing in a Press Release of 4 November 2007: 'A student who is awarded a private or university scholarship can lose most of his or her Youth Allowance, because income above a certain point cuts the payment by up to 60 cents in the dollar. This makes the scholarship almost worthless and was the reason behind the Go8's recent decision to discontinue its equity and merit scholarship scheme. The Government exempts its own equity scholarships from the income test but there are simply not enough to go around . . . Exempting all equity scholarships from treatment as income would provide an incentive for universities and other non-government organizations to provide more scholarships.' It is not only students on Youth Allowance who are affected, but also all students on any form of welfare payment. The Northern Territory Association of AFUW had a student who was obliged to decline an offered award because its effect on her overall income would actually have been negative.

AFUW strongly opposes reported suggestions from the Victorian Vice-Chancellors (*The Age*, 12 July, 2008) to address students' financial difficulties by extending the HECS scheme to provide income-contingent loans to cover expenses such as accommodation, transport and books. AFUW believes that this would merely mean a deferment of disadvantage for students from lower socio-economic groups. HECS debt alone means that many graduates (including some not originally from low socio-economic backgrounds) are already struggling to finance long-term housing or establish families. This is part of the reason for the lower than average birth-rate among tertiary-educated women, an outcome that AFUW believes undesirable if imposed by financial necessity rather than free and informed choice.

Increased dependence on loans could also possibly act as a further disincentive to participation for those students from backgrounds culturally resistant to acquiring major indebtedness.

Key Groups under financial pressure

The AVCC Fact Sheet on Student Finances 2006 Final Report summarised key findings of a national survey of the financial circumstances of students in public universities. The three groups identified as under most financial pressure were Indigenous students, female students and full-time postgraduate coursework students

Among things noted were the following:

Female students were more likely to have a budget deficit, less likely to have savings for an emergency, more reliant on free or subsidised services provided by universities of student association, more likely to have taken out a repayable loan in order to study than male students (but borrowing smaller amounts than those males who had borrowed). The connection of this to a decline in HECS funded places is not made by Universities Australia, but it is foreshadowed in the 1998 study *Access to Postgraduate Studies: Opportunities and*

Obstacles, prepared for the National Board of Employment, Education and Training. Women's dependence on HECS emerges from its finding that 'the proportion of women on HECS has exceeded the proportion of men on HECS in every year and the gap is increasing' and also found 'convincing evidence that fees constitute a disadvantage for women, students of lower socio-economic background and rural students' (p. 18).

This reflects the 2006 survey's finding that female students had fewer economic resources to draw on than male students, from which it follows that they are more likely to depend on HECS and to suffer from the decline in HECS places as against fee-paying places.

Indigenous students: Although there has been some improvement, Indigenous students remain notoriously under-represented in higher education. Theirs is particularly a case of lack of preparedness, both socially and scholastically. Socially, community expectation of higher education participation is low. Scholastically, completion rates of Year 12 study are very low: indeed in remote communities some Indigenous children fail to attend school almost entirely, while those who do attend often experience poorly resourced schools with a very high turnover rate of teaching staff. Without major improvements in school education for Indigenous students, whether they are in remote or urban communities, their participation rate in higher education will remain low, and the experience of some of those who do enter higher education will be fraught with difficulties – certainly it is likely to be financially difficult. In the AVCC survey cited, a very large number (72.5%) of Indigenous students identified their finances as a source of anxiety and a higher proportion of Indigenous students, especially postgraduates (40.3%), reported that they regularly missed classes or other study activities because of their paid work commitments.

The full Fact Sheet can be viewed on the Universities Australia website www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au

Postgraduate students: While the AVCC's 2007 study identified postgraduate coursework students as under the most severe financial pressure of all groups, the inadequacy of the prestigious Commonwealth-funded Australian Postgraduate Awards for research degrees was demonstrated in the following year by CAPA (the Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations) in the media release 'APAs to Break Poverty Line', 30 April, 2008. It is difficult to determine which is the dominant factor in the 30% decline from 1995 to 2006 in the number of students starting higher degrees in research: the costliness of postgraduate study; problems of accessing funding for research; belief that coursework postgraduate degrees lead more directly to employment; or disaffection with the idea of pursuing an academic career thanks to factors outlined in the discussion of staffing above. Whatever the cause, a decline in postgraduate research numbers is not good for either educational institutions or the workforce in general.

Rural and Remote Students: While these are not singled out for comment in the AVCC 2007 document, attention is drawn to the effect of financial difficulties on their access to, and completion of, higher education in the 2007 project *Regional Young People and Youth Allowance: Access to Tertiary Education*, undertaken by a consortium of Charles Sturt University (Centre for Rural Social Research), Monash University and the University of Western Australia. The recommendations of this document should be put into effect.

Poverty and student performance: Not enough attention is given to the fact that poverty has equity implications not only for access to higher education, but also for performance and hence to future prospects for further study or employment.

The Go8 Press Release cited earlier also reports: 'Forty per cent of full-time undergraduate students say that paid work adversely affects their studies.' The Australian Universities Fact Sheet cited above shows that this also applies to postgraduate students, and at that level particularly affects Indigenous students. Since hours earning income for living expenses

cannot be spent on study and research, academic performance is highly likely to be impaired. And performance determines future outcomes, whether the student wants to proceed to employment or to further study (it is difficult to gain an Australian Postgraduate Award with a result below a First Class Honour).

Poverty as a reason for slow completion and discontinuation?

Considerable attention has been given to studies that suggest that the imposition of tuition fees and the consequent HECS system has not markedly changed the participation rate of students from lower socio-economic groups; there seems to be less discussion of the effect of financial pressure on completion rates.

There is evidence in the AVCC 2006 study that financial pressure causes students to complete their degrees as part-time students. This slowing down of their completion rate has long-term implications for their economic futures, as it means a longer deferment of the economic benefits that flow from the higher salaries (and superannuation contributions) that graduates do still continue to enjoy as an overall category. More generous rates of income support, and more generous terms of eligibility for income support, might well enable a number of part-time students to complete their courses more rapidly.

It is also known that there are students who defer their acceptance of a place in order to acquire income to support themselves once enrolled. AFUW is unaware, however, of how much attention has been given to examining and quantifying whether financial reasons are a major cause for student attrition—i.e. for students discontinuing for a period or dropping out altogether. Attrition rates waste the time and resources of both students and universities. Policies to prevent their occurrence on non-academic grounds need to be based on a better understanding of their causes.

Recommendations to improve the capacity of all students, but especially those from Indigenous and lower SES groups, to participate successfully in higher education.

12. That the Commonwealth and State and Territory governments collaborate to improve the public school education offered to Indigenous and low SES students to a standard that will prepare them to enter higher education.

13. That such schools be funded for the provision of special teaching assistance to students with learning difficulties, especially at the primary school level.

14. That a joint Commonwealth, State and Territory inquiry be instituted into the desirability and feasibility of providing bi-lingual education, at least at primary level, for Indigenous students in remote communities.

15. That all schools, private and public, be required to report annually to State and Territory Departments of Education the successful completion rates at each year level of those students identified as low SES or Indigenous students, and that these statistics be made available to DEEWR, the ABS and the general public.

16. That incentive payments of additional funding be made to schools demonstrating an improvement in successful completion rates of such identified students at each year level.

17. That the rate of Abstudy for students eligible to receive it in their later years of schooling be raised.

18. That the Commonwealth and State and Territory governments conduct a campaign to recruit more Indigenous teachers, including offering special scholarships and grants as an incentive to undertake education to become teaching aides or fully qualified teacher and thus raise the expectations of participating in higher education within Indigenous families and communities.

19. That the Minister for Indigenous Affairs encourage all Faculties of Education to include within their teacher training courses a unit dealing with the history, current circumstances and cultural heritage of Indigenous students and that the Minister work with State Departments of Education to make such a unit mandatory as paid professional development for any teacher posted to a school with a substantial enrolment of Indigenous students.

20. That the cost borne by students undertaking tertiary education be reined in by restoring levels of Commonwealth government funding to OECD benchmark.

21. That the Commonwealth government consult institutions and student organizations in order to identify those higher education services lost or diminished through Voluntary Student Unionism that have had most impact on student finances and find a way to re-fund them.

22. That the Commonwealth government institute a separate Student Income Support payment for students in tertiary education (including TAFE) as recommended in the AVCC in their Submission to the 2004 Senate Student Income Support Inquiry. The scheme should

- *Review the parental income means test on students under 25;*
- *Drop the age of 'independence' to 18;*
- *Adjust payments in line with average weekly earnings;*
- *Adjust payments to recognise the special needs of rural and remote students;*

23. That, failing introduction of a single scheme as in Recommendation 22, the amounts payable under Abstudy, Austudy and Youth Allowance be increased, and also that the amount of income that can be earned without penalty be increased.

24. That the Commonwealth government legislate to exempt all tertiary scholarships and bursaries, whether government or community funded, from inclusion as assessable income for the purposes of income tax or for receipt of any other income support benefits.

25. That the number of Commonwealth Australian Postgraduate Awards be increased and that they be maintained at a level of payment above the poverty line appropriate to the fact that postgraduate study is skilled work.

26. That student poverty be addressed by the measures in Recommendation 20 through 25, rather than by proposals to offer income-contingent loans against non-tuition expenses, such as books, accommodation, transport.

Questions 12, 13 and 14

12. How can the quality of the student experience within Australia's higher education institutions be monitored nationally?

13. Is there evidence that declining staff-student ratios have impacted on the quality of the student experience?

14. How do institutions measure the quality of their learning outcomes and how do they know they are nationally and internationally competitive?

On that part of Question 12 that asks about possible effects of declining student staff ration, we point to material in the response to Question 2 that indicates our belief that declining student staff ratios have impacted adversely on the quality of the student's experience, both with respect to the acquisition of knowledge and the skills for extending knowledge. This is a belief based not on quantitative statistical information, but largely on the experience of those members active in tertiary education reporting a diminution in the knowledge, skills and volume of work that they could reasonably expect from undergraduates in the later years of their degree courses. They have also commented on the need to reduce both the amount and the nature of assessable work required from students in order to be able to cope with this while also meeting research and administrative requirements.

On Questions 13 and 14 we would like to comment that the measurement of the quality of learning outcomes/ teaching effectiveness through course questionnaires has some serious drawbacks. The course assessment questionnaires that students are asked to complete must routinely be completed before the end of semester, before the students have had a chance to understand the overall purpose and shape of the course and when they have often received an amount of corrected assessment work that is inadequate for them to be able to give an informed opinion as to whether they are receiving appropriate assistance in their intellectual development. When relevant to the same course, or the same lecturer or tutor, over several occasions, such questionnaires can acquire a degree of reliability, but they are blunt instruments and can be lead to unfair assessments of staff performance.

Surveying students when they have had time to understand what was valuable in their degree course would be a useful counterbalancing method of evaluation if universities could establish the practice of questionnaires for graduating students and alumnae.

Questions 15, 16 and 21

15. To what extent should vocational education and training and higher education continue to have distinctive missions and how should these missions be defined?

16. Does the movement between the sectors of students with credit need to be improved? If so, in what ways?

21. Do you believe there is a place in Australia's higher education system for universities that are predominantly 'teaching only' universities?

AFUW submits that the missions of these sectors should continue to be distinctive, and that the essence of the distinction lies in the universities' combination of research and teaching responsibilities to advance knowledge as well as communicate it. AFUW maintains the positions stated in

(a) its Submission to the Senate Inquiry into Higher Education Funding and Regulatory Legislation (2003):

- that the prime function of the university system is to produce highly trained minds, skilled in both communicating knowledge and extending its boundaries beyond contemporary and contingent market demands and able to analyse and develop social and economic policy for both present and future; and

(b) its Submission to Building University Diversity: Future Approval and Accreditation Processes for Australian Higher Education (2002):

- On the definition of a university, AFUW submits that the requirement for all universities to undertake research as well as teaching is central to the concept of a university and that this, along with the requirement to include a range of disciplinary areas, should remain part of the requirement for the title.
- While advanced-level research-only and teaching-only institutions, along with those devoted to a single knowledge field, can have a role in the higher education sector, it would be better if they were not called universities, but known by terms such as Institute or College.

While the AFUW position supports in a broad sense the idea of a ‘research-teaching nexus’, despite the fact that this has come under considerable attack, we do not intend this to mean that there can be no research-only or teaching-only staff within a university; nor to suggest that the proportion of time spent on the two functions should be identical for every staff member, nor that the ratio between the two should be constant over time for individual staff. What we contend is that the university *as an entity* must have this as a distinguishing characteristic.

Vocational education and training has, and should continue to have, a mission to prepare its students more immediately for employability in specific areas or, in its adult education aspect, to compensate for deficiencies in their earlier school education and in some cases enable them to bridge the gap into higher education. VET courses can be quite as rigorous in their demands for knowledge acquisition as university courses and it is important that they not be undervalued. VET staff should have a thorough and up to date grasp of the existing knowledge base in their area, but not be required to undertake research to extend that knowledge base.

While a substantial proportion of courses in this sector prepare students for entry into trades, there are also a substantial number of VET courses that prepare students to enter into professions in ancillary ways that could well be articulated to university courses that would enable such students to advance further in professions such as, for example, teaching, nursing, accountancy.

Selection courses for entry into post-secondary education are not perfect, and cannot take account of different rates of maturity in students or of the numerous personal and social factors which may lead a student to realise that their talents would thrive better in the sector other than the one they’ve entered. Education should not be a conveyor belt process that forbids change of direction. Therefore AFUW does believe that the process of finding better ways of articulating courses between institutions such as TAFE and universities should be speeded up. It has, after all, been identified as something to be desired almost since TAFEs were established.

While the opinions and co-operation of the institutions themselves would clearly be crucial, it might be preferable to establish an independent accrediting body, possibly within the

Australian Qualifications Framework, to determine the credits to be given towards a qualification in either sector on the basis of courses successfully completed in the other one.

Recommendations:

27. That there continue to be distinctive missions for higher education and vocational education and training.

28. That the movement of students with credits between the sectors be facilitated through the mediation of an independent accrediting body such as the AQAF.

29. That there be no 'teaching-only' universities in the Australian Higher education system.

Questions 25, 26 and 27

25. How would you define knowledge transfer and community engagement in an Australian context?

26. Do you believe that knowledge transfer and community engagement are legitimate and appropriate roles for contemporary higher education institutions? If so, how do you see this additional role for the higher education sector blending with its traditional roles and are there limits to these additional roles?

27. If you think that knowledge transfer and community engagement are appropriate roles for higher education institutions, how do you believe these functions should be funded?

AFUW believes that the Discussion Paper provides a useful perspective on knowledge transfer and community engagement. It particularly endorses the cited view that:

Universities make contributions to government and civil society as well as the private sector, assisting not only with economic performance but also helping to improve quality of life and the effectiveness of public services. Any approach to university Third Stream activities that focuses purely on university commercial activities is likely to miss large and important parts of the picture. (Molas-Gallart J et al. 2002, p. iv)

AFUW strongly supports community engagement, with the proviso that commercial activities must not be allowed to impinge on the need for intellectual integrity in research activities. AFUW believes that, while engagements with industry have grown, engagement with community organizations and the general public have declined in recent years. Apart from the fact that feelings of community ownership on the one hand and responsibility to the community on the other have been eroded by the proportional decline of public money in the public universities, a major factor in the decline of engagement in the areas of the social sciences and the humanities communities has been to do with the undervaluing of such engagement in assessing staff performance for purposes such as confirmation of appointment or promotion.

Community engagement now cuts very little ice in such procedures as against the capacity to generate research funds and to publish in prestigious academic journals, especially international ones, which are rarely available to the general public in Australia. Articles, opinion pieces or reviews in newspapers and general interest periodicals count for nothing in research reports and yet they may be of great importance in bridging the gap between ideas as they exist in academic discourse and as they are best conveyed to non-specialists, and convincing the general public of the value of universities as disseminators of the knowledge they create. Staff who are pressed for time and energy in the way described in the AFUW

response above to Question 2 may very reasonably decide that community engagement is the thing that has to go. In fact, the extent to which academics remain prepared to honour their commitment to disseminating what is new and important in their field is what is surprising. There needs to be a change of culture in the university system, and the Commonwealth government can encourage this by requiring that activity in this area be reported on with the detail and seriousness currently given to research statistics (vital as these indeed are).

On the question of specifically targeting funding for 'knowledge transfer and community engagement' AFUW feels some uneasiness. Targeted funding always needs to be done with extreme care if it is not to distort and constrict institutional activities. AFUW would prefer to see the Commonwealth take the route of providing an operational budget that would allow each university to develop its own distinctive forms of community engagement and encouraging them to do so by its reporting requirements.

Recommendations

30. That the Commonwealth government provide universities with an overall budget that will enable them to pursue both commercial and non-commercial forms of knowledge transfer and community engagement.

31. That universities be required to report on their activities in knowledge transfer and community engagement and on the value placed on this in assessing the performance of individual staff in relation to procedures such as confirmation of appointment or promotion.

Appendix A: Selected Sources of Information on Student Finances

Submissions, Surveys and Academic Articles

- 'National Union of Students Student Welfare Policy Briefing', 2008.
- Submission to Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations Review: 'The Impact of Voluntary Student Unionism on Services, Amenities and Representation for Australian University Students', National Union of Students, February, 2008.
- 'Australian University Student Finances 2006', AVCC, 2007.
- Fact Sheet: Undergraduate Student Finances in 2006
 - Fact Sheet: Postgraduate Student Finances in 2006
 - Fact Sheet: Indigenous Students Finances and Welfare in 2006
 - Fact Sheet: Comparisons with Key Indicators from the 2000 *Paying Their Way* Study.
- 'Regional Young People and Youth Allowance: Access to Tertiary Education', Naomi Godden with the Centre for Rural Social Research and Monash University Department of Social Work, 2007
- 'Student Poverty: The Lived Experience of Undergraduate Students Attending the University of Queensland', University of Queensland, October 2004.
- 'Fundamental Change: the way forward for Student Income Support', AVCC Submission to the Senate Student Income Support Inquiry, 2004.
- 'Forward from the Crossroads; pathways to effective and diverse Australian universities', AVCC Submission to the Higher Education Review, 2002 (pp. 39-47).
- 'New Conceptions of Student Neediness and Directions for Better Responses', Doug Lloyd & Sue Turale, AARE 2001.
- 'Report on the Student Experiences of Poverty at La Trobe University', La Trobe University, 2000.
- 'Access to Postgraduate Studies: Opportunities and Obstacles', National Board of Employment, Education and Training, 1998.

Media releases:

- Universities Australia: 'Financial Support for Research Students Now on the Innovation Agenda', 30 April, 2008.
- CAPA (Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations): 'APAs to Break Poverty Line', 30 April, 2008.
- Group of Eight: 'New Scholarship Rules Would Boost Equity Outcomes', 4 November 2007.
- Group of Eight: 'Students the Losers from Outdated Funding Policy', 28 October 2007.
- National Tertiary education Union: 'NTEU Supports Calls for Greater Action on Student Poverty', April 12, 2005.

Commentary and News Items

- 'Cheating and the Art of Survival: Some uni students say they have no choice but to defraud welfare' (*Education Age* 14 July 2008).
- 'Let students take out living-cost loans, unis urge' (*The Age*, 12 July 2008).
- 'Hard Lessons: Why Life is a struggle for So Many Students' (*Education Age* 19 May 2008).
- 'A battle we must not lose' *The Australian Higher Education* 23 April 2008).
- 'High Rents a Burden for Students' (*Education Age* 21 April, 2008).
- 'Students Feel the Financial Pinch' (*Sunday Age* 7 October 2007).
- 'Struggling Students Borrow to Fund Degrees' (*The Age* 9 March 2007).
- 'Students Debt on the Increase' (*The Age* 22 March 2006).
- 'Tertiary hurdles getting higher for poor in west: low-income families shut out of uni' (*The Age* 15 March 2006).
- 'Lack of Funds Hits Part-Timers' (*The Australian Higher Education* 8 February 2006).
- 'Life on the tuna pasta line' (*Education Age* 7 June 2004).
- 'Uni Blues' (*Education Age* 22 March 2004).

Summary of Recommendations

- 1. That the ordering of the list of desirable characteristics of the higher education system be revised to give a truer sense of the priority that should be given to these characteristics.*
- 2. That Commonwealth funding be increased. Education is a national investment, and it should be prioritised over things such as individual tax cuts. In particular, increase funding per student place to improve staff student ratios and reduce pressure on the teaching component of an academic career.*
- 3. That universities be encouraged to give proposals for the development of new courses and programs equal recognition with research projects for the purposes of academic leave programs such as Outside Studies Programs.*
- 4. That academic units should be encouraged to capitalise on the enthusiasm of early career staff by giving them responsibility, with adequate workload adjustment, for developing new programs.*
- 5. That universities be required to ensure that economies are not achieved in central administration by the process of devolving tasks to academic units, unless the unit is given appropriate administrative support for fulfilling the task.*
- 6. That Commonwealth and State governments implement better collection and dissemination of data indicating the long-term need for particular professions and skills and provide research funding for analytic studies to underpin policy decisions.*
- 7. That most training to meet short-term skills shortages should be a function of an adequately funded VET sector.*
- 8. That attention should be given to the role of adult and further education in ensuring that those whose initial skills training is in a narrow range have opportunities to upgrade and widen them in order to improve their employment options.*
- 9. That State governments provide support to universities to conduct research and adapt their education degrees so that there is a better understanding of how to teach mathematics and languages other than English so as to make them attractive to students from primary school onwards; in particular attention should be given to making mathematics and information technology attractive to girls.*
- 10. That incentives in the form of Commonwealth and State scholarships and grants be offered, not only for students taking Diploma or Bachelor of Education courses, but also for students undertaking initial degrees with a high component of maths or language.*
- 11. That the role of school career advisers be taken seriously and extended beyond Years 11 and 12, and that State governments give special attention to allocating*

well-informed career advisers to schools with a high component of Indigenous students and students from low socio-economic status groups.

12. That the Commonwealth and State and Territory governments collaborate to improve the public school education offered to Indigenous and low SES students to a standard that will prepare them to enter higher education.

13. That such schools be funded for the provision of special teaching assistance to students with learning difficulties, especially at the primary school level.

14. That a joint Commonwealth, State and Territory inquiry be instituted into the desirability and feasibility of providing bi-lingual education, at least at primary level, for Indigenous students in remote communities.

15. That all schools, private and public, be required to report annually to State and Territory Departments of Education the successful completion rates at each year level of those students identified as low SES or Indigenous students, and that these statistics be made available to DEEWR, the ABS and the general public.

16. That incentive payments of additional funding be made to schools demonstrating an improvement in successful completion rates of such identified students at each year level.

17. That the rate of Abstudy for students eligible to receive it in their later years of schooling be raised.

18. That the Commonwealth and State and Territory governments conduct a campaign to recruit more Indigenous teachers, including offering special scholarships and grants as an incentive to undertake education to become teaching aides or fully qualified teacher and thus raise the expectations of participating in higher education within Indigenous families and communities.

19. That the Minister for Indigenous Affairs encourage all Faculties of Education to include within their teacher training courses a unit dealing with the history, current circumstances and cultural heritage of Indigenous students and that the Minister work with State Departments of Education to make such a unit mandatory as paid professional development for any teacher posted to a school with a substantial enrolment of Indigenous students.

20. That the cost borne by students undertaking tertiary education be reined in by restoring levels of Commonwealth government funding to OECD benchmark.

21. That the Commonwealth government consult institutions and student organizations in order to identify those higher education services lost or diminished through Voluntary Student Unionism that have had most impact on student finances and find a way to re-fund them.

22. That the Commonwealth government institute a separate Student Income Support payment for students in tertiary education (including TAFE) as

recommended in the AVCC in their Submission to the 2004 Senate Student Income Support Inquiry. The scheme should

- *Review the parental income means test on students under 25;*
- *Drop the age of 'independence' to 18;*
- *Adjust payments in line with average weekly earnings;*
- *Adjust payments to recognise the special needs of rural and remote students.*

23. That, failing introduction of a single scheme as in Recommendation 22, the amounts payable under Abstudy, Austudy and Youth Allowance be increased, and also that the amount of income that can be earned without penalty be increased.

24. That the Commonwealth government legislate to exempt all tertiary scholarships and bursaries, whether government or community funded, from inclusion as assessable income for the purposes of income tax or for receipt of any other income support benefits.

25. That the number of Commonwealth Australian Postgraduate Awards be increased and that they be maintained at a level of payment above the poverty line appropriate to the fact that postgraduate study is skilled work.

26. That student poverty be addressed by the measures in Recommendation 20 through 25, rather than by proposals to offer income-contingent loans against non-tuition expenses, such as books, accommodation, transport;

27. That there continue to be distinctive missions for higher education and vocational education and training.

28. That the movement of students with credits between the sectors be facilitated through the mediation of an independent accrediting body such as the AQF.

29. That there be no 'teaching-only' universities in the Australian Higher education system.

30. That the Commonwealth government provide universities with an overall budget that will enable them to pursue both commercial and non-commercial forms of knowledge transfer and community engagement.

31. That universities be required to report on their activities in knowledge transfer and community engagement and on the value placed on this in assessing the performance of individual staff in relation to procedures such as confirmation of appointment or promotion.