

SUBMISSION TO THE REVIEW OF AUSTRALIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

Response to the Bradley discussion paper (June 2008)

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This is personal, partial response to questions raised in the Bradley discussion paper.

Chapter 1 Higher education in modern Australia

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

University education is described in a particularly narrow way in the paper.

The wording indicates that there is a fundamentally important, natural and necessary link between higher education and needs of employers and the economy. This connection is put in such a way that it amounts to a pre-emptive definition of the purpose of the university. This topic (i.e. the purpose of the university) is clearly one about which there has been serious debate involving some of the greatest thinkers of the past two centuries, and it is a topic that still requires serious debate. The assumed link of the higher education sector with “national prosperity” and “human capital”, above other arguable purposes of University education, is dismissive of the essential worthwhileness of universities as important social and cultural institutions within any society. Surely there is a need to seriously consider the broader nature and purpose of universities in contemporary society - not just make such a narrow declaration that relates to the current predominance of economic and industry policy (a phenomenon of the last two to three decades) rather than to any serious educational discussion of educational issues. Any consideration of the nature and purpose of the university should begin with an educational rationale.

One might also have expected in a discussion paper on this topic an up-front declaration that universities are concerned above all with the development of knowledge and understanding in a range of disciplinary fields. These fields would rightly include the major professions but also include artistic and cultural fields that have long been regarded as essential to any civilized society. These latter artistic and cultural endeavours are not directly related to the market but are nonetheless regarded as making vital contributions to civilisation and society for their own sake. Universities are also expected to contribute broadly to the field of ideas and debates about the kind of people we want to be and the kind of society and world that we wish to become. This aspect of the purpose of the university is linked with the promotion of democratic society, tolerance towards innovative ideas and alternative positions, and deep understanding of our multi-cultures and the nature of society. Moreover, universities are expected to enhance our civilization, promote the joy of learning, and enable individuals to reach their own educational potential. This potential may be realized in a dynamic, market-oriented discipline such as merchant banking or in an artistic and cultural endeavour such as developing a love of classical literature. Each is an equally valid outcome of a sound university education.

The poverty of the view of the nature and purpose of universities that seems to pervade the discussion paper is illustrated most starkly in the nine “capacities” that should “mark” Australia’s higher education system listed at the top of section three.

Section 3.1 Meeting labour market and industry needs

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?

Even given that the discussion is couched in terms of “work readiness” it would seem that the major issue confronting Australia’s and the world’s economy and civilization, climate change, is not mentioned. Possibly the major impediment to necessary innovation will be the continuation of the kind of thinking reflected in the discussion paper which puts competition and industry expansion ahead of the kind of considerations of the “good society” that will be required in our precarious future. It would seem almost certain that a major paradigm shift in economic and social policies will be needed urgently to deal with climate change both in the immediate future and long term. Such a shift must be matched by an equivalent paradigm shift in thinking about the kind of innovation that will have to be promoted in institutions of higher education in order to deal with the radical change in mindsets that will be necessary in the near future.

It is not yet clear what particular skills will be needed to address the pressing demands of climate change and sustainability but they will clearly include a wide range of both high-tech and low-tech scientific and engineering skills as well as important social and humanities skills that can link with the promotion of new kinds of social organization, work, greater communal production and organization, and changes to the nature of society. All of these will require extraordinary innovations but not necessarily of the kind that seem to be envisaged in the discussion paper. The role of education and teacher education in developing and implementing the changes in the ways we will live our lives in a more sustainable society will be absolutely critical in this near future. One might anticipate that schools (and also universities) will become the major social institutions in particular districts and communities and will be the hubs for promoting and dealing with issues of local sustainability.

Impediments to innovation also include the intensification of the work of academics and university administrators that tends to push innovation to the side as institutions are forced towards a more conservative middle ground in which conservative practices of teaching and learning are the only ones that are presumed to be cost-efficient. See further comments below.

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?

In a future dominated by climate change and the need for sustainability, an emphasis on local needs will have to be strongly asserted. There has been plenty of rhetoric about universities serving local needs for at least a decade, but, at present, any strong sense of higher education meeting local needs appears to be associated mainly with regional universities or with requirements of VET to produce appropriate labour for

local industries. Through government incentives, particularly research incentives, academics must be encouraged to develop both local and global visions within their disciplines. Likewise, in their teaching, academics must be among the first to learn the importance of understanding and keeping up with global trends while particularly emphasizing the kinds of “good practice” that emanate from local institutions. These must be encouraged within local applications in which local issues of culture and environment are major considerations in even the most technical developments. What is being recommended here is, in some ways, nothing different to the traditional purpose of universities of being at the forefront of social and cultural as well as industrial and technological debate and change. Part of such intellectual leadership, of course, requires scholarly analysis of the types of local industries that will be most appropriate in local areas as well as the kinds of skills that will be required to maintain such industry in local contexts. Also required is social analysis, neighbourhood research, and partnerships between universities and communities that will promote sustainable lifestyles and local/global economies. Such local emphasis is absolutely necessary but must not distract from ongoing research into new global patterns and movements and imperatives, and the relationships between these and local situations.

Governments will need to enable universities to quickly adapt to innovations as well as lead innovation, and will need to ensure that bureaucratic requirements for the introduction of new courses and programs are minimized. The level of liaison between higher education providers and government will need to be enhanced and communication must be multidirectional rather than in the form of policy prescriptions which have characterized government control of universities in recent decades.

4. How adequate are the mechanisms for aligning supply and demand of graduates? How do pricing and labour market signals impact on student choices?

It should never be the purpose of higher education institutions, and certainly not universities, to simply respond to market requirements. This is not to say that supply and demand indicators and labour market signals are irrelevant and that universities have not heeded them. However, there are many higher-order responsibilities of the university than this. Moreover, in the future that we are entering, such indicators and signals are likely to be somewhat difficult to read and possibly short term. There will be a much greater need for government planning, in conjunction with communities and industries and educational institutions, and in keeping up with, as well as contributing to, the best of global knowledge and understanding of the changing nature of our global and local environments.

The outcomes of such planning will be that, at times, and by necessity, governments will have to override markets and industry considerations. Again, close liaison between universities and government, and the capacity of higher education to respond quickly to changing circumstances, must be supported including with increased financial support.

5. Are there particular examples of good practice where you can demonstrate either rapid response to skill shortages or successful initiatives to improve generic skills?

The existing VET sector is particularly good at this.

6. How effectively are Australian higher education institutions responding to demographic change, especially in providing lifelong learning to meet the challenge of the ageing population and the need for upgrading of skills and re-training?

Higher education institutions are already doing this. Applications indicate strong increases in the proportion of mature age and adult students who have undertaken university study in particular. Increasingly, given rapidly changing social, environmental, economic and industry changes, there will be an increasing need for “refresher” courses and possibly an imperative for courses in which previously trained specialists can “unlearn” in order to learn afresh what is becoming essential knowledge in their disciplines.

7. What is the relevance and applicability of the findings and approaches proposed in the United Kingdom paper, Higher Education at Work, for increasing skills levels in the workforce to Australia?

The UK paper suffers from the same overarching assumption that I am arguing mars the Australian discussion paper; namely, that higher education is all about workforce participation and skills training. It is much, much more than that.

Section 3.2 Opportunities to participate in higher education

8. Should there be a national approach to improving Indigenous and low SES participation and success in higher education?

Certainly. However, although institutions of higher education would need to be fully involved in such an approach, the approach would have to include school education as well as higher education. Potential Indigenous and low SES HE students must be enabled to get to the starting line of university entrance. Much more needs to be done first to retain indigenous and low SES young people in schools so that they can become sufficiently prepared to enter higher education and universities in particular. For this to happen, schools must reform the way they engage with such students and make their curriculum experience more relevant and meaningful. Likewise, when students from such backgrounds enter university it is not sufficient for the university to support such students only in such ways that help them to adjust somewhat to the *a priori* assumptions and expectations and cultural norms of the university. The university must also change and adjust to a considerable extent to the cultural norms and expectations of young indigenous people and those from low SES backgrounds.

This lesson has already been learned in a number of regional institutions which have seriously and successfully encouraged participation by such students. The University of Ballarat, for instance, takes a very high proportion of students from low SES backgrounds (and with relatively low ENTER scores), most of whom have no extended family experience of universities, and yet these students graduate from the university at about the same rate as students graduate from metropolitan universities, and they commence their careers with starting salaries equivalent to those from other universities. Importantly, employer satisfaction with such graduates has been shown to be very high.

It is also worth noting that entrants to higher education who come through various special/alternative entry programs, even into a 'prestigious' university such as the University of Melbourne, typically perform very well. And at a more general level, research at the University of Melbourne and Monash University, among many others, has consistently demonstrated that young people from government schools tend to perform at a higher level at university, whatever their course, than would have been predicted by their ENTER scores, whereas students from private schools (particularly the non-Catholic, non-government sector) tend to perform considerably worse than their ENTERs would have predicted. Perhaps there is a message here about providing bonus entry points to government schools students, with additional bonuses for those from low SES or Indigenous backgrounds. Likewise for students from rural backgrounds.

Universities need to make provision for indigenous students, in particular, by providing sufficient flexibility so that their wider family connection can be maintained, including duties related to family deaths and grieving. Indigenous students often cite issues related to family as reasons for withdrawal. As educational and supposedly socially responsible institutions, universities need to take this kind of feedback seriously so we can work out how to respond and actively support indigenous students

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?

This is a huge question. There is now a substantial literature produced by education researchers in Australia that addresses this issue at the school level, which is the level at which the problem must initially be tackled. A reference group or working party including such researchers should be formed immediately to inform the Review and advise government. Such expertise is available, for instance, at the University of Ballarat. A starting point is that young people from these kinds of backgrounds must not be made to feel alienated in higher education environments. They need to be able to see and recognize that people like themselves are respected and understood within higher education, and that their lecturers and administrative staff will make sincere efforts to welcome them, engage with them, take them seriously, and do what they can to assist them.

10. What institutional initiatives have proved successful in increasing low SES or Indigenous participation and success? (Please provide information about outcomes as well as activities.)

See comments above. Transition programs, in which the university demonstrates its desire to "meet half way" low SES and indigenous people, are essential. By that I mean that representatives of the university must demonstrate that they are trying to adjust to backgrounds of, and meet the needs of, the people coming into the university rather than simply expecting those people to "fit in" to the standard norms and cultural expectations that characterize contemporary universities.

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?

There is already a large research literature on this topic. There is an enormous body of evidence which points to the impact being very severe and, indeed, increasing in its scope and severity. Some of the best work has been conducted by the Centre for the Economics of Education and Training at Monash University, members of which should be, and presumably will be, consulted by the Review. A number of other universities, including regional universities like the University of Ballarat, also have extensive data on this issue.

Section 3.3 The student experience of higher education

12. How can the quality of the student experience within Australia's higher education institutions be monitored nationally? Is there evidence that declining student: staff ratios have impacted on the quality of the student experience?

Too much time, money, and effort is put into monitoring quality rather than doing quality. Compliance regimes in higher education are already crippling creative efforts and are contributing to the perpetuation of the most conservative forms of teaching and learning. If such monitoring is necessary at all, it would be better done by using representative samples, probably conducted by ABS, rather than imposing more compliance on the system.

In relation to student:staff ratios, there is already substantial research on this issue which will no doubt be consulted by the review. In short, the answer is, yes, declining ratios have de-personalized the student experience to a considerable extent which has had a deleterious effect. Less obviously, however, large class sizes, particularly tutorial classes, have restricted the more innovative teaching approaches because they do not work as well with relatively large numbers. Tutors, therefore, would seem to increasingly rely on more conservative and less innovative educational methods. Such conservative teaching methods are often deadly dull and boring.

13. How can the quality of learning outcomes in Australian higher education be measured more effectively?

Trust in the professionalism of higher education teachers. Again, if measuring is deemed to be necessary it can be done through well-designed surveys of appropriate samples of graduates. Please, no more whole cohort measuring and monitoring that is only a distraction to innovation and creativity and leads to minimalist conformity.

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

The way in which the word "competitive" is used here is extremely problematic. In what sense "competitive"? The quality of university teaching and learning and assessment will improve dramatically, and in interesting and exciting ways, once it has become an important issue for professional debate and discussion within universities. It is highly unlikely to improve as a direct result of various government-imposed 'quality' initiatives. However, the design and implementation of appropriate assessment tasks that match course goals and intended outcomes is an extraordinarily

complex and sophisticated matter. Professional development in this area is sorely needed across the higher education sector.

Section 3.4 Connecting with other education and training sectors

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

This is one of the more difficult questions raised within the discussion paper. It would seem that there should be strong connections between universities and VET institutions insofar as the legitimate mission and purpose of both is to prepare people adequately for participation in the professions and trades. However, the point cannot be stressed too much that the purposes of a university are much greater and far more extensive than just this.

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

Yes. Again there is considerable research on this from Griffith and CEET and CSU, among others.

17. To what extent should relative provision between the sectors be planned or demand driven. What are the effects of current differences on funding, governance and regulation in limiting planning or influencing choice between the sectors?

18. Can institutions provide examples of good practices which have led to movement between the sectors with high levels of credit and good learning outcomes?

Section 3.5 Higher education's role in the national innovation system

19. By what mechanisms should research activities in Australian universities be supported?

The funding of research in the majority of universities is primarily through "normal" academic positions, funded mainly through Commonwealth load. These positions generally perform both teaching and research duties. It would seem that the norm in Australia remains that the essential work of academics is both teaching and research (although academics also perform many different kinds of work including community and professional engagement and various kinds of service). The most productive researchers in education typically are also excellent teachers of undergraduates and are also often engaged with their profession and the broader community in professional development activities. This would seem to be the case for all faculties. However, it is clear that, because of the growth of teaching loads (as indicated by student:staff ratios), many academics are finding it increasingly difficult find the time to conduct research of good quality.

The best solution would be a combination of increased per student Commonwealth funding and increased pools of money allocated to support research, such as that allocated to the Australian Research Council, for which competitive funding will apply. Increased amounts of specific research funding are necessary to turn around the growing perception amongst many academics that the chances of competing

successfully for ARC grants are so small that it is unrealistic for them even to apply. The success rate must be higher to encourage greater research activity and participation.

20. On what principles and for what purposes should research activity be concentrated in particular universities or types of universities?

It should not be concentrated in this way. However, increased opportunities should be provided for particular research centres to obtain sufficient funding to enable concentration on research in particular sections of universities. Such funding would apply, as now, to teams of researchers who have demonstrated their research ability and productivity. This current process is appropriate but increased funding is required to enable more excellent research teams to receive the benefits of such funds.

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

Definitely not.

Section 3.6 Australia's higher education sector in the international arena

22. Are there any unintended consequences of the current approach to internationalisation of higher education in Australia?

The enormous reliance on international student fees is a huge concern. Almost all universities are now heavily dependent on a market that is volatile and, while still growing, is predicted to peak and then decline as the countries from which the students are coming will have developed their own university infrastructure. Moreover, the enormous efforts in Australian universities that have been required to pursue the international student market and conduct teaching of the international students has, to a large extent, intensified other pressures on universities to turn themselves into competitive, corporate entities rather than scholarly institutions of higher learning. This effect has snowballed as university lecturers have less and less time to devote to their traditional local students because they must devote large amounts of time trying to develop courses that might be appropriate for international students, recruiting the students, and working with the students to try and get them through. Staff have to do this because it is the only way to secure the additional necessary funds to keep the University going.

23. What is an appropriate role for government in assisting the Australian higher education system to internationalise? On what principles should this role rest and what purposes should it serve?

The government should support reasonable student exchanges and enable a provision of courses to international students on a financial basis that international students can afford and which the universities can also afford to deliver. Either it is worthwhile for the purposes of the nation to develop appropriate international relations through higher education or it is not. The principles involved should be, first and foremost, educational principles associated with promoting international understanding, harmony, and the respectful exchange of knowledge.

24. Can you provide any examples of good practice in encouraging local students to undertake study in other countries?

Section 3.7 Higher education's contribution to Australia's economic, social and cultural capital

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?

It surprises me that each of the questions in this section refers to knowledge transfer as if that is all engagement with community is about.

Section 3.8 Resourcing the system

28. What incentives or unintended consequences are there in the current arrangements for higher education funding?

The funding is too low. Australia has gone far beyond other countries in requiring public universities to generate such a high proportion of their own funding. As a result, as stated above, universities have become different kinds of institutions and may already have lost aspects of their educational and research mission.

29. To what extent are the current funding models adequate to secure the future of Australia's higher education sector? If there are better models, what are they?

More generous government funding. Reduce the contribution required from students.

30. Are the current institutional arrangements for determining relative funding between higher education institutions appropriate? If not, what changes should be considered?

Section 3.9 Governance and regulation

31. Is it time to reshape tertiary education in Australia and streamline financing and regulatory arrangements? If so, what structural changes would you make and why?
32. Is the level of regulation in the sector appropriate? If not, why not, and what should be done to reduce the level of regulation?

University staff are professionals and should be regarded as professionals. Of course, use of funds should be monitored and reported. But the huge structure of so-called 'quality assurance' is far too unwieldy and time consuming. It has become a truism that academic staff have to spend so much time measuring quality that they have no time to do any quality.

33. Does Australia's Quality Assurance Framework need revision? If so, why? What changes would you make?
34. Are changes required to the Australian Qualifications Framework?
35. Is there more that could be done to improve university governance? How should this be done?