

Review of Australian Higher Education Submission from the Curtin Student Guild

Higher Education in modern Australia

Whilst the Curtin Student Guild agrees with the outlined functions and characteristics of higher education, there needs to be further emphasis on the importance of courses which are not job oriented, such as the arts and philosophy. Similar value also needs to be placed upon blue sky research. The absence of these in higher education will result in a loss that cannot be filled by other parts of society. Potential discoveries that could be made through research that would be deemed too risky or financially unprofitable would be lost. Higher education must be able to provide the study of all subject matter and the opportunity to conduct blue sky research.

Meeting labour market and industry needs

Federal Government needs to ensure that there are sufficient funds available to employ strategies in higher education to meet national skill requirements, such strategies include targeted scholarships and more Commonwealth supported places. The Federal Government also needs to allocate a percentage of their total funding to the State Governments to spend on higher education at their discretion. As each state has differing needs, the State Government needs to be empowered with the finances to provide universities with the required funds. An example of this is the skills shortage of resources engineers in Western Australia, this is a situation where the State Government could provide universities with funds to expand their engineering programs.

It is evident that the mechanisms for aligning supply and demand of graduates is inadequate when we examine the example in WA, where the resources boom needs an additional 42 000 workers by 2012, but last year the WA universities produced only the following number of graduates:

UWA: 34 geologists, 27 process and resource engineers

Murdoch: 4 metallurgists/mineral scientists

Curtin: 27 metallurgists, 23 surveyors, 43 geologists

To contrast this, UWA produced 207 law graduates and 300 arts graduates.

(Taylor, P., 2008, *Mine school's out despite boom*, The Australian, 20 June)

Whilst pricing of education costs and labour market signals do have an influence in student enrolments, there are other more significant factors which need to be considered. The fall in enrolments, particularly from mature age prospective students, is not only influenced by strong labour market demand but the low level of income support provided to those returning to study. A welfare study done by the Guild this year of 226 students showed that 12% skipped meals due to financial constraints. Last year's Guild housing survey of 384 students showed that over 70% of domestic students lived with family. The increasingly high cost of living through increasing national fuel prices and Perth property rent rises has not been balanced by adequate student support. The Guild 2006 welfare survey of 116 students showed that 71% of those who received Centrelink assistance had to work an average of 15 hrs to supplement their income. For many students the choice to study means that they will live in poverty for at least three years.

The situation is not much different for postgraduate students who have to live off \$384 a week if they received an APA.

Opportunities to participate in higher education

There should be a national approach to improving Indigenous and low SES participation so that these students have maximum access to all courses including those which have university specific availability (for example the majority of universities do not offer courses such as veterinary science, podiatry).

Bridging and enabling courses and flexibility in study periods need to be established at all universities. Examples of these can be found at Curtin University which has the highest number of indigenous students compared to others in Australia and a retention rate of 58% in 2007. Curtin offers:

- Aboriginal Bridging Course – prepares students for mainstream studies
- Indigenous Tertiary Enabling Course
- Block release study – students attend four 2 week study blocks per year and program staff visit students in their community. This permits regular access to their community which acts as a support system for retention. It allows them to continue working as the time off at Curtin equates to 5hrs per week that can be taken as study leave.

Flexibility in student intake by allowing enrolments below the advertised cut off rates on a case-by-case basis would boost participation. The Government could offer additional funding to universities for each Indigenous/low SES student enrolment.

To help break the cycle of low participation, it is integral that whilst these students are in high school, they need to be informed and encouraged that university is an option for them. The monitoring and evaluation of these strategies can be done by measuring percentage rates of participation and comparisons of year to year retention rates.

Students' failure to gain income support and the inadequacy of income support is shown in the results of recent Guild surveys:

Curtin Student Guild 2008 Welfare survey of 226 students

33% of students who applied for rent assistance were not successful.

12% of students skipped meals due to financial constraints.

Curtin Student Guild 2007 Housing survey of 384 students

Over 70% of domestic students lived with family.

The majority of domestic independent rent payers earn between \$100-\$400 per week and pay between \$50-\$200 per week for rent.

Curtin Student Guild 2006 Welfare survey of 116 students

66% had to forgo important elements of their life due to lack of money and of these, 61% have forgone textbooks and 53% have forgone food.

Close to half of all students surveyed received Centrelink assistance; however 71% of those students had to work an average of 15 hours to supplement their income.

Curtin Student Guild Student Assist staff report that difficulties balancing work and study is a highly occurring problem in the majority of termination appeals.

The student experience of higher education

After the Guild's involvement in AUQA's review of Curtin, it was observed that the nature of the body would be a successful vehicle for national monitoring, however the processes used are highly subjective and rely on the feelings of a random subset of staff or students. Usage of a definitive check survey would ensure a complete unbiased overview of what the university does and does not do. This would mean that all universities would have to offer specific services or follow certain procedures as a minimum standard.

Declining student staff ratios have eroded the experience of not only students but teachers. Teachers are taking on a greater workload through marking and student queries outside of contact hours. This affects the ability of teachers to identify cases of plagiarism and provide the amount of time which should be devoted to each student enquiry.

The measurement of learning outcomes needs to have greater links with industry. Industries, particularly those which have structured graduate development programs, would be able to assess the level achieved in learning outcomes. This type of reporting would also help ensure that university outcomes are aligned with what the industry expects/requires.

There is currently no measurement of the quality of learning outcomes, hence it is difficult to be internationally competitive. For example, at Curtin University, exchange students receive only pass or fail grades for their overseas study. Australian higher education institutions need a national measurement system in order to be nationally and internationally competitive.

Connecting with other education and training sectors

VET and higher education should have separate missions defined by the qualification level each can award and also by the involvement of research. The recognition of prior learning needs to have a national framework. This would also enable staff from both sectors to know what is being taught where. This would help eliminate competition for students and ensure sector compatibility.

Higher education's role in the national innovation system

There is no place for 'teaching only' universities as the involvement of research is one of the defining factors of higher education. Any specialisation of universities should not be of teaching or research, but fields of study.

Australia's higher education in the international arena

The internationalisation of higher education has resulted in a high dependence on funding from international students. This is volatile and subject to the well being of international countries. For example a large disease outbreak such as SARS would affect the running

of Australian universities. This dependence on funding also puts pressure on academics to lower standards in order to pass substandard student assessments. Instead of aiding the high performing students to excel, classes are tailored to meet the needs of struggling students. There are consistent reports of international students having poor English skills, who manage to continue and graduate from their courses.

Curtin University offers some units which have overseas study tours integrated into the curriculum. This allows students to have a brief taste of what studying overseas entails and would be one of the greatest motivators for interested students to lengthen their experience through a student exchange program. Other universities could use this as a strategy to encourage local students to study in other countries.

Resourcing the system

The current system provides no flexibility in places for course offerings and provides greater incentives for institutions to offer courses in the top tier of funding which do not reflect the areas of skills shortage.