

## Review of Australian Higher Education Submission to the Discussion Paper, June 2008

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

The statement defines the role of higher education through the “twin functions of teaching and research” (section 1.1). One characteristic is perpetuated (*VET alongside HE*) and one major function is missing (*civilising function*), although both are addressed in other sections of the report.

*Immediately from the outset, the characteristics of higher education are positioned alongside, rather than integrated with, vocational training (section 1.2)*

Such pre-emptive distinction perpetuates a rigid framework and stifles the subsequent review. It reflects current practice (HE versus VET), current grouping of responsibilities (universities versus TAFE), current funding (Federal versus State), and historic pragmatism (Australia’s 39 universities are a legacy of the Dawkin’s reform).

The National Protocols clearly disentangle courses from institutions. The Australian Qualifications Framework defines course-outcomes and relates these to a hierarchy of qualifications. For Australia to prepare itself for a leading role in a global, knowledge-based economy, the nation’s workforce needs to work towards a position higher-up within the value chain. This requires higher-level skills and, while the Australian Qualifications Framework does provide some guidance for such upward trajectory, the current discontinuity in the system, separating academic from vocational education, is proving to become an impediment.

The larger TAFE institutions have been utilising their clout with the professions and industries and have developed higher education programs that train graduates beyond vocational skills to include the acquisition of general academic skills. These graduates then are best positioned to lead their vocations to the next rung in the knowledge-based global economy. Interestingly, various universities, particularly the dual sector institutions, now are mandating vocational skills in their academic curricula (e.g. VU 25% of curriculum vocational, Swinburne industry-based project). Hence there appears to be some agreement that leadership in the profession is more effective when linked to first-hand appreciation of the underlying vocation. Moreover, to raise vocations to a professional level, students in vocational training should be exposed to academic methodology and have access to acquisition of academic skills.

This trend for a continuous and seamlessly-blended model for tertiary education would serve the needs for Australia’s future workforce better than the current, arbitrarily-binary system that puts barriers, real or perceived, between vocations and academia. Accordingly, the review of the higher education should aspire to blend higher education with vocational training and hence be conducted in the context of overall tertiary training – any review of the higher education component alone misses the challenges and opportunities inherent to preparing Australia’s workforce to lift itself from vocation to profession.

*Alongside utilitarian functions, higher education has a civilising role (section 1.2)*

In a competitive, knowledge-based, global economy, the participant societies need to be aware of, respect, and be able to operate fluently with a range of cultures, norms and customs. These values and behavioural characteristics can only be acquired, and challenged, in an independent, free-thinking environment. The utilitarian institutions, such as government and industries, should be subject to critical scrutiny re their civilising activities – hence higher education cannot be driven solely by the agenda of the current government or the needs of current industries.

Inclusion of a civilising role in the set of primary functions of higher education has immediate, major implications for the more practical aspects of the management of higher education:

1. funding – funding models that have shifted higher education from public good towards private gain do not provide for the civilising role of higher education. Civilising attributes are absorbed not learned, and mostly acquired outside a employment-targeted curriculum. Their value does not run in parallel with industry need or student demand, and a competitive funding model based on those needs and demands would fail to fund the civilising role of higher education.
2. community engagement – civilising activities are relevant only in a community setting, including local communities. Accordingly, a concentration of higher education in few major centres would fail short in building human capital across and for the Nation.

3. free enquiry – independent, critical and informed reflection, without fear for recrimination, can only develop outside primarily-utilitarian institutions. Accepting the importance of civilising component in higher education thus requires academic freedom to be enshrined in institutions that deliver tertiary education and training.
4. mission – civilising attributes are developed through immersion in the total learning environment rather than through specific course objectives. Institutions need to acknowledge this in their vision and mission, and will be required to address this at the level of the institution rather than assuming that this will emerge automatically from the mere bundling of a range of academic disciplines under one roof.
5. scope – it could be argued that single-course institutions, while financially lucrative, cannot provide a civilising experience hence do not fulfil the role of tertiary education.
6. system universities – following from 2-5 above, neither a few comprehensive research-intensive universities nor a splattering of almost 200 competing institutions, would enact the three core functions of tertiary education: developing human capital, creating knowledge and civilising tomorrow's workforce.

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

The distinction is outdated and, if perpetuated, would become an impediment in the provision of the type of training and education that is required to develop a workforce with the attributes necessary to lift Australian industries and professions to the next level in the added-value chain. The two activities are interrelated, and add purpose and perspective to each other. Institutions can have distinctive missions on basis of breadth and depth, and some may seek to specialise and position themselves at the extremes of the vocational-academic continuum. An imposed distinction between vocational and academic education would impede the effective development at the interface – exactly there where old vocations are being developed into new academic disciplines and where academia is reinfused with applied thinking and reconnected with practical application.

### **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?**

The concept of a 'teaching only university' is an oxymoron. Universities are defined by breadth and depth (National Protocols) with research a necessity for research-qualifications and research-qualifications a proxy for 'depth'. Hence without research the institution would not have the depth to be regarded a university, irrespective how broad, or good, their teaching is.

Independent of the way institutions have gained the title 'university', and in accord with the true spirit of a review, inheriting the title should not replace a regular, rigorous assessment against the criteria as agreed in the National Protocols. An inherited title 'university' dilutes the prestige associated with it, confuses a competitive market, and gives those institutions an unfair advantage whilst at the same time interfering with the competitive drive for continuous quality improvement.

It would be more sensible for a nation the size of Australia to invest in a few (handful) internationally competitive universities, supplemented and affiliated with a good spread of university-colleges and single-discipline / special-purpose institutions. Courses would still need to meet nationally-agreed criteria, such as those defined by the Australian Qualification Framework and managed through the National Protocols. Of course, while those few universities would lead with the research agenda, the higher education agenda would be the province of the total of tertiary education sector.

30 July 2008

Meeuwis Boelen, PhD  
Associate Professor  
Academic Head Higher Education  
Northern Melbourne Institute of TAFE