



REVIEW OF AUSTRALIAN HIGHER EDUCATION: DISCUSSION PAPER

Submission from Edith Cowan University Student Guild

Introduction

We have chosen to focus this submission largely on the student experience at Edith Cowan University, and the problems students face in regards to accessibility and inclusion. We strongly support the content of the submission made by Edith Cowan University, and in particular would like to express our support for more funding and support for social capital and community engagement in our Universities. Students at Universities will one day be our world leaders, and it is imperative that these students are instilled with an understanding of our society and communities, and a social conscience and experience they can bring to any profession.

Item 1: Student Welfare and Support

Questions 8 & 9

One of the biggest issues facing students today is the quality of support they have in studying and achieving the completion of their higher learning experience. Students are facing higher living, accommodation, food and fuel costs than any generation before, while receiving welfare support well below the poverty line.

ECU Student Guild has a significantly high intake of students who cannot afford the \$400 they need to spend on books every semester, who are homeless or living on couches, and who need emergency loans and food vouchers to cover the costs of food and living. More than 50% of students accessing this service from the ECU Guild never pay off their loans, although no interest is charged.

HECS hinders most low SES students than it assists, and has served much to widen the class gap. Students from wealthy backgrounds who can pay their fees up front are able to move straight into high paying jobs and secure property, assets and security straight away. Meanwhile, students who are coming from low SES backgrounds have to spend the next ten years paying off their debts and surviving in poor living situations, assuming they have a job which earns enough to meet the repayment threshold. For students studying humanities or social science, they may never pay off their debt, while doing more than many others to contribute in addressing the increasing problems our society is producing.

As a result of this prospect, most young students attempt to work full time in addition to their full time studies, in an attempt to finish their degree as quickly as possible and to allow themselves enough time to pay of their debts and secure a stable lifestyle. Students then perform poorly in their studies, have neither the energy or the capability of dealing with problems that arise, and in many cases end up failing their studies or dropping out of University. At ECU in particular we are facing an attrition rate which grows with each passing year.



Item 2: Student Organisations and Support Services

Questions 8, 9, 12

Crucial to students more than ever before is the support and assistance they receive from their Universities and their Student Organisations on campus. Over the past 5 years ECU Student Guild has had a consistent rise in students taking up welfare and support services, with a consistent decrease in the number of students able to repay their loan debts. In direct contrast, as a result of the Howard Government's Voluntary Student Unionism legislation, we have had to reduce our staff load from a full time Education & Welfare Support Officer on each campus, to two part time officers servicing 3 campuses. The ECU Student Guild has lost our free legal and tenancy advice services, and is no longer able to provide cheap on campus services, food and supplies to students. At a time when students are struggling to meet their own needs, they certainly can't afford the vastly risen cost of food and services on campus, due to the need of external businesses to make a profit and pay for lease of space.

Item 3: Indigenous Student Inclusion

Questions 8, 9, 10

Time and time again the question is asked, "Why are indigenous students not getting involved in Higher Education?". At ECU in particular, we host less than 30 total indigenous students, of a 16,000 Student EFTSL. The number of indigenous students has in fact decreased, despite ECU's focus on engagement and social inclusion.

The main concern here is not whether the opportunity for education is made available to indigenous communities, as ECU and many other Universities have sunk significant amounts of resources into engaging these communities. The main concern, as expressed at the recent Indigenous Students Conference held in Sydney, is the content of the courses.

Current University courses are tailored entirely to a white, western and capitalist viewpoint, and engage little in Indigenous culture and values. It is simply put, we are not engaging indigenous people in guiding our development, innovation and culture, nor seeking to learn from them and engaging in their culture. We are essentially asking them to come and be a part of OUR system, the culture of which has damaged their land and destroyed their families.

To make a University culture and system that attracts and engages indigenous students, we have to be doing more to tailor our Universities to be attractive and useful to indigenous peoples. We need to embed indigenous viewpoints and considerations into our units and courses, debate indigenous and western values and systems together and begin making use of the increasingly large pool of academic indigenous literature. We need to stop asking them to come and be a part of our system, and rather ask them to come and engage in designing a more equitable, sustainable and socially conscious system for all Australians.



Item 4: Quality of Education

Questions 31, 32, 33

Of concern specifically to the ECU Student Guild, and those consulted in the preparation of this submission; is the lack of attention to the Quality of Education being delivered in today's Universities, At ECU, for example, there has not been a minimum standard of quality and service expectation that student can expect from their degrees. Quality and content of courses depends heavily on the views and design of biased lecturers and unit coordinators, and on our regional campus in particular students are being delivered a mix of units from various education streams, under the guise of being relevant to their career pathway. One student's experience involved being taught engineering math in a Primary Education degree, and being told not to worry, they would be passed anyway.

It is strongly the opinion of the ECU Student Guild that people accessing higher education should be guaranteed a minimum standard and quality of education. There should be a National Standard for University Education, and it should be monitored and governed by a National Body, separate from the government. Arguments for a similar body to monitor the allocation of funding and support can also be made.

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