

Review of Australian Higher Education

Submission

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Preface

The Bendigo Student Association (BSA) is an incorporated body operating for the benefit of all students enrolled at La Trobe University's Bendigo (LTUB) Campus located in regional Victoria. For this reason the BSA's response to the review into Higher Education will focus specifically on the issues relevant to regional University students and communities.

The BSA believes strongly in the need for high quality higher education to be available in Australia's regional and rural communities, both from the perspective of community sustainability and social inclusion. Regional campuses and universities provide an important service in both training professionals with a regional focus and reducing the social and financial barriers to higher education.

Higher Education in Modern Australia

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

While the statement of functions and characteristics of higher education appears to encapsulate the manner in which higher education serves industry it appears to overlook the role which higher education plays in social inclusion, justice and change.

In recent times Universities have come to play an increasing role in social justice by providing Individuals from a broad variety of back grounds with opportunities to pursue higher education. BSA (2004) studies have helped to identify factors of education that were of the greatest importance to students enrolled at La Trobe University's Bendigo campus. These core factors were:

- a)** Access- to education in their community, support services, teaching staff, library resources, post graduate studies and a supportive environment
- b)** Value for money- face to face contact with staff, opportunities to develop life long skills within their community, the same learning opportunities as our metropolitan counterparts, and opportunities for overseas exchange study.

The BSA believes that it should be the function of higher education in Australia not only to meet 'the needs and opportunities of the economy and it's component industries and sectors', but also to act as an agent for social inclusion and Justice and change through the provision of education in any given area of study and regardless of economic or geographical status.

The BSA recognises the role which higher education plays in the preparation of a professional labour force, particularly to regional Australia. However, a balance should be sought between serving the needs of industry and the role which higher education plays as a "thought leader" and instigator of social change through critical thought and analysis. As it is stated on the first page of the discussion paper:

'it is higher education with its twin functions of teaching and research which will make a distinct difference between simply adjusting to the forces which press upon us or establishing a new economic, social and environmental order. '

To summarise, higher education facilities and graduates should seek to drive the market, not merely serve it. Furthermore it should be noted that universities

should not exist to simply provide access to education, but to develop the education that is accessed in a socially and culturally significant way.

The BSA recommends that

- 1. The functions of higher education in modern Australia should be amended to include the role of facilitating social inclusion, justice and change.***
- 2. The academic, social and financial support of all students based on a diversity of needs should be a characteristic of higher education in modern Australia.***

Meeting Labour Market and Industry Needs

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?

It is clear that there are many extraneous factors which may impede an institution's ability to provide innovative and sustainable programs, however it appears that the most obvious problem higher education faces today is the limited resourcing of the sector as a whole.

Institutions located in regional areas of Australia often face distinct challenges in providing innovative and sustainable courses and programs to their respective students. Courses which may only appeal to a minority are not economically viable in regional centres where a necessary critical mass of student enrolments may not be reached.

Furthermore, while the number of potential students are lower, regional Australian higher education facilities face similar course establishment, delivery and administration costs to their metropolitan counterparts. This equates to a higher cost per student attending regional campuses as economies of scale are not achievable in this environment. Unfortunately the current funding arrangement favors campuses with a high student volume and does not cater for these costs in Victoria (with the exception of a minor 5% regional loading)

The BSA recommends that

- 3. Appropriate funding be provided to enable the development and sustainability of innovative and comprehensive courses, with an adequate additional loading for small and regional campuses, including regional campuses of metropolitan based universities.***

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?

The appropriate mechanisms to meet the needs of the national and local high level skills labour market may be summarised into two core responsibilities:

- a) To provide access to world class higher education for all Australians.**

Higher education must be accessible to all Australians regardless of socio-economic background or geographical location.

It is notable that regional centres such as Bendigo with a fast growing population must retain the ability to sufficiently provide innovative and

sustainable courses and programs. Bendigo itself is surrounded by five of the lowest socio-economic areas in Victoria and the Bendigo campus of La Trobe plays a significant role in providing access to these areas (2033.0.55.001 Census of Population and Housing: Socio-economic Indexes for Areas, Australia. ABS, 26th March 2008). La Trobe University research shows that the key responses indicated by commencing students as influencing their decision to enrol at the Bendigo campus are *Location*, *Quality of Course*, and *Economic*. If the needs of regional Australia are to be met, higher education facilities must be located within these communities and be adequately financed to ensure the delivery of high quality courses.

b) To provide support to students for the duration of their study.

A lack of financial support for students for the duration of their study is perhaps the most significant factor contributing to a potential student making the decision not to study. Any effort made by a university to create innovative and sustainable programs and courses must be supported by students who are able to be part of these courses. If a person cannot afford the cost of living as a student, they will not choose to study. Universities themselves are generally able to provide access to education for many Australians, but without appropriate support for these students this access becomes almost entirely ineffectual.

The role of state and territory governments must be to ensure that both access and support are provided to all potential higher education students. In regard to regional campuses such as La Trobe Bendigo, it is essential that these areas receive satisfactory funding to support their fast growing population and labour market. It has been indicated recently that students who graduate in the regional Australia are much more likely to find work and settle in regional areas, thus adding to the prosperity and sustainability of regional Australia (The Australian, May 1, 2008), .

The BSA Recommends that

- 4. State and federal governments take responsibility to ensure that higher education be available and accessible to all potential students, particularly those located in regional communities.***
- 5. Appropriate reforms are undertaken to ensure that all potential students, regardless of their socioeconomic background or geographical location are supported in the pursuit of higher education***

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

Despite the ongoing debate surrounding the impact of HECS costs on a student's choice to study, the BSA continues to be highly concerned about this issue.

The BSA is concerned that students from backgrounds which do not recognise the future financial benefits of higher education may be deterred by the idea of incurring ever-increasing HECS debts. This includes potential first generation university students. Research has indicated that the perceived cost of higher education was acting as a significant deterrent for students from low SES and rural backgrounds (James et al, 2008)

Furthermore, the BSA is concerned that in the context of existing caring for children and the servicing of house and car loans the added pressure of a HECS debt may be significant enough to deter mature aged students from perusing higher education.

The BSA recognises that this is remains a contentious issue and therefore recommends that

- 6. Further research into the role which increasing HECS debt plays in the decisions of prospective students, with particular attention being paid to the impact such debts have on the decisions made by Mature age students and students from Low and Middle SES groups.**

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?

The provision of higher education to individuals of varying ages brings with it a number of issues particularly in regard to:

Academic support

Individuals returning to study face different challenges to those who recently completed high school. Mature aged students may not have attended formal education for some time, and the modes of learning and institutional expectations and procedures may have differed greatly. This highlights the need to provide such students with the appropriate support programs and bridging courses to facilitate academic success.

The 'Advantage' programme coordinated by La Trobe University's Transition Officer located in Bendigo offers ongoing support for students across a wide range of topics linked to the academic demands of university. Analysis of the preliminary enrolments in the Advantage programme indicate that over half the participants enrolled are mature aged. Such a response indicates that the provision of support programs is vital to higher education in modern Australia.

Financial Support

The financial pressures faced by mature aged students often differ from those faced by school leavers. With a higher likelihood of having dependants there are serious implications for mature aged students forgoing income in the pursuit of higher education.

The current financial support mechanisms do little to encourage the participation of mature aged students, who must remain active in the work force or continue caring for dependants. Students who wish to study part time in order to care for dependants or maintain their position within the workforce will not receive Austudy. The BSA believes that if the higher education sector is to encourage 'life long learning' the financial support for mature age students should be investigated and improved.

The BSA recommends that

- 7. There be sufficient resourcing of support programs designed to assist mature aged students with the transition from the workforce into study.***
- 8. Greater flexibility should be incorporated into the student income support system to provide access to appropriate support for those supporting family members as parents or care-givers, and for those foregoing income in order to return to study on a part-time basis.***

Opportunities to Participate in Higher Education

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

There should indeed be a national approach to improving both indigenous and low SES participation and success in higher education. However, any national approach should be sensitive to the diversity of issues faced by these groups including.

1. Cultural issues.
2. Geographical location of potential students
3. Financial, academic and non academic needs.

In regards to improving the participation and success of Indigenous people in higher education, the BSA believes that it is essential that indigenous people be at the centre of the process. The Australian government should seek to engage indigenous people particularly through partnership with the Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council (IHEAC). It is the view of the BSA that, from the matters addressed in IHEAC's 2006-2008 Strategic Plan, that this is the appropriate body to provide informed guidance on this issue.

Such a national system must also involve an investigation and revision of Centrelink payments, with particular reference to Youth Allowance and Austudy. Currently, these allowances do not cover the cost of living for most students, particularly those living away from home. Many students within the higher education sector are not eligible for Youth Allowance as they are not considered financially independent.

The BSA recommends that

- 9. A national response to the participation and success of low SES and Indigenous groups be undertaken with particular sensitivity paid to differences in cultural issues and geographical location.***
- 10. Any efforts made to improve indigenous participation and success should be undertaken in direct partnership with Indigenous people and the Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council.***

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?

A comprehensive study (James et al 2008) identified many of the issues that need to be addressed in order to increase participation in higher education of low SES and indigenous groups.

- i. Negative attitudes to higher education.
- ii. Financial barriers
- iii. Access to and funding for higher education facilities which are best suited to meet the needs of Low SES students and Indigenous Australians.
- iv. Alternative entry requirements.
- v. Student support – including academic, transition and social.
- vi. Culturally aware higher education.

What institutional initiatives have proved successful in increasing low SES or Indigenous participation and success?

La Trobe University currently provides welcome ceremonies for enrolling indigenous Australians. Students who identify themselves as indigenous when enrolling are also able to participate in ATAS, the Aboriginal Tutorial Assistance Scheme. Regardless of participation in this scheme, indigenous students are contacted three times a year by the Aboriginal liaison officer. There are also cultural awareness programs run by the Aboriginal liaison officer.

This year has seen the employment of a First Year Transition Officer at La Trobe Bendigo. This officer has devised a transition program for at 'risk students' which will help ease them into the pressures of university level education. The program consists of a series of information sessions and workshops on note taking, time management, effective presentations, etc., and is designed to increase the chances of participants succeeding at University.

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?

In December 2007a, the Equity and Access Unit at La Trobe University compiled a report on student finances, the results of which were taken from the Australian University Finances Survey. The results of this survey were quite alarming. It reported the following:

41.6% of La Trobe University students receive under \$10, 000 P.A

and

43.0% of La Trobe University students receive between \$10,000 and \$19,999 PA

The cost of living for students is particularly high in recent times especially for students who are forced to move away from home in order to study at a tertiary level.

The new cost calculator, available for use online at www.asq.com.au, suggests that the cost of living for students does not fall below \$25,000 P.A. One could assume that some of the costs income support does not take into account include the following:

- i)** travel expenses – petrol, public transport expenses
- ii)** text books
- iii)** loans
- iv)** insurance
- v)** childcare expenses
- vi)** health expenses

All these extra expenses that go hand in hand with tertiary education are clearly not accounted for in regard to income support for students. Often students are left with no choice but to miss meals so that they able to cover these extra costs. La Trobe University reported that 1 in 8 students were regularly missing meals to cover the costs associated with studying at a tertiary level.

The same survey report stated that undergraduates missed classes for the following reasons:

- a)** 6.9% could not afford the transport to make it to their class
- b)** 11.8% could not afford child care for the days they had classes
- c)** 25% were forced to undertake paid work while their classes were in session

It is arguable that in some cases students may gain valuable work experience from undertaking paid work while studying, but more often than not this work is not associated in any way with their field of study. Paid work can often prove detrimental to a student's academic performance. As stated above, 25% of La Trobe students undertake paid work while their classes are in session. This need to work also damages the supportive environment that students of the past were able to provide for one another on campus through both friendship groups and student organisations.

The report also suggests that the main reason post graduate students miss classes was to undertake paid work. Post graduates in Australian higher education institutions face great difficulty acquiring income support. These students have only the scholarships they are forced to compete for to provide income support while studying. This is not satisfactory treatment for our future leaders of academia and the business, public and community sectors.

Furthermore, the BSA believes that the much of this financial pressure and the low participation of students from low SES groups is due to the eligibility criteria for income support. The current age of independence does not reflect the degree of costs incurred by students living away from home. Additionally, the need for individuals to earn a substantial amount in order to achieve independence creates another barrier to those not fortunate enough to be able to be supported by their families.

The BSA recommends that

- 11. The provision of student financial support be increased to meet the actual financial costs incurred by students with the aim of removing the barriers to success/participation of all students.***
- 12. The age of independence for Centrelink purposes be reduced from 25 to 18 for those who are required to live away from home and be financially independent in order to pursue higher education.***

The Student Experience of Higher Education

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?

Whilst La Trobe Students are frequently asked to complete quality assurance questionnaires for each unit the University has chosen not to release that data from these surveys to students or the community. For this reason we cannot comment on the effect of declining student: Staff ratios. The BSA would highlight this issue as one of concern which would need to be dealt with if a national quality assessment system was to be introduced.

The BSA believes that the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE) provides a useful framework for the measurement of the quality of the student experience. However despite including the following scales,

- 1) Academic challenge
- 2) Active Learning
- 3) Student and staff interactions
- 4) Enriching Educational Experiences
- 5) Supportive Learning Environment
- 6) Work integrated Learning,

the BSA believes that the AUSSE overlooks several issues of significant importance, particularly to the experience of regional students, viz,

- i) the utilisation of Information Technology systems in the delivery of material and courses,
- ii) Access to courses and units of choice and,
- iii) the impact of paid employment on the quality of the student experience.

1) The utilisation of information technology systems in the delivery of material and courses.

The use of technology for both delivery of and interaction with material is now a central component of any university experience, particularly for regional students. Almost all students are now required to interact with peers and lecturers, access lectures, submit assignments and undertake group work online.

Furthermore, many lectures are now being delivered to regional campuses through the use of video conferencing. This method of delivery provides potentially isolated campuses with access to courses offered at metropolitan courses. However it appears that in some instances such technologies have

come to replace regionally based, face to face delivery. Where students attending courses in Bendigo in the past may have had 100% face to face contact with lecturers, many now have to attend up to 8 hours of Video conferenced lecture material every week.

The experiences of several students enrolled at La Trobe University's Bendigo campus illustrate this issue.

Case Study (1)

A student of Psychological science has had ongoing experiences with the use of technology. Now in her third year, she receives almost 95% of her core lecture material via video conferencing and is required to obtain course material and interact with lecturers online on a daily basis. Whilst this does provide her with access to some leading lecturers, it has not been a simple, trouble free experience. Over her three years of interacting with ITC and video conferencing she has experienced the following issues:

- i)** poor audio links between campuses
- ii)** time delays
- iii)** Difficulty of asking lecturers questions in real time
- iv)** Inability to develop any form of rapport with Bundoora (the site of La Trobe University's main campus) based lecturers.
- v)** audio and visual drop-outs mid lecture
- vi)** Difficulty in accessing staff who are not on campus
- vii)** Disengagement with material and or lecturer.
- viii)** Poor staff training and therefore inappropriate/incompetent application of technology.

Case Study (2)

A second year Arts student, has experienced similar issues with the use of technology. In his case, his class was required to engage with an entire unit of work through by means of a DVD recording of a class delivered in Bundoora and sent via post to the Campus at Bendigo. Often the DVD's arrived late, were often inaccessible and obviously provided no opportunity for real time interaction with the lecturer.

In both instances these regionally based students are required to incur the equivalent amount of HECS for what would appear in many instances as a second rate service.

The BSA is highly concerned about these issues and believes that the use of technology should be monitored nationally to ensure the best quality education for all Australian students.

2) Access to courses and units of choice.

It is often the case that the choices of courses and units presented to regional students are greatly reduced in comparison to their metropolitan counterparts. Regional students, particularly on small campuses, are often offered only core subjects with little opportunity for specialisation. It is imperative that any monitoring of the student experience should take into account the degree to which students feel they are satisfied with the choice and availability.

3) The impact of work

As indicated by La Trobe University's (2007b) report into student finances a significant proportion of students are forced to pursue paid work and even more alarmingly 25% of students reported skipping classes in order to support themselves. Further studies have indicated that the demands of work are having detrimental effects upon students' academic success and the quality of their university experience (McInnis & Hartley, 2002).

In this context the BSA believes it is incredibly important to evaluate the impact which the need to seek employment has upon the student experience, both from an academic perspective but also from the perspective of the impact which it has upon the functioning of the university community.

Therefore the BSA Recommends that,

13. Any monitoring of quality of the student experience be concise, accessible and transparent and show distinctions between different learning centres within each university and their respective campuses. Students should also be involved in the development of questions, and results of surveys should be made openly available to both current and potential students.

14. That the monitoring of the quality of the student experience should primarily include the engagement of students on the issues identified within the AUSSE with inclusion of the additional issues of

- i. The utilisation of Information Technology systems in the delivery of material and courses,***
- ii. Access to courses and units of choice and***
- iii. The impact of paid employment on academic pursuits and the quality of the student experience.***

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

Whilst it is essential for higher education should act as an agent for social change and critical analysis the BSA recognises the role which higher education plays in the preparation of graduates for the work force (particularly within the health sciences and education).

For this reason the BSA believes that the measurement of the learning outcomes in Australian higher education should be undertaken in partnership with the relevant industry. In doing so the dual roles of higher education as an agents for social change and skills transfer should be acknowledged and accepted.

The BSA recommends that

15. There should be an engaged relationship between industry and Universities in the measurement of learning outcomes which respects the universities dual roles in both social change and skills transfer.

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

Currently, La Trobe University requests that graduates participate in the Australian Graduate satisfaction survey.

International rankings are also of importance due to the widespread media comment that they attract on release.

Connecting With Other Education and Training Sectors

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

There are various similarities and differences between TAFE Institutes and Universities. Perhaps the main similarity comes with the use of the word 'vocation'. The term 'vocation' refers to a path of learning that a student feels impelled to take which will lead to a career of their choosing. Through an understanding of this term we may see that the training that both TAFE institutes and Australian Universities offer are in fact vocational. They both offer pathways to a career of the student's choosing.

The BSA feels that any definition of these areas of the higher education sector must include the importance of all universities to be able to offer both high quality teaching of courses and opportunities to participate in world class research.

It is also important to note a link between these areas of the education sector must continue to exist in order to create multiple pathways for students. Universities and TAFE Institutes work well together in the way students may articulate from TAFE to university. The purpose of these institutes working together in this fashion is to mold students into the best possible graduates they can be.

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

The transition of students from TAFE institutes into university is one that could use a good deal of improvement. Currently, many students find it difficult to adjust to the standard of work expected of them when they enter university. Many students are not familiar with many of the guidelines associated with university assignments. Another significant challenge faced by these students is the transition into a new community and a seeming lack of support provided by universities.

La Trobe Bendigo has recently hired a First Year Transition Officer whose job entails the creation of a program to support first year students who have trouble adjusting to the assignment/class related expectations of the university. This kind of program would be extremely useful to students with credit who articulate into university from TAFE.

The BSA feels that more support should be offered to students with credit who are articulating from TAFE to university, in regard to both challenges faced in academia and feeling welcome and supported in their new learning community.

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?

Both universities and TAFE colleges should recognise their responsibilities to respond to demand and market needs.

Planning by these institutions should recognise the diversity of the student market and skills shortages, and should meet these needs through maximising opportunities for participation and through the creation of articulation pathways enabling students to pursue appropriate courses which recognise the value of their prior learning.

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

The Faculty of Health at La Trobe University's Bendigo campus has been very successful in addressing a regional skill shortage of Division One qualified nurses through development of a "conversion" course. This program enables TAFE qualified Division Two nurses to undertake a two year course leading to a Bachelor of Nursing. Through recognition of prior learning, the university has been able to increase the qualifications of a group of highly motivated, mature and experienced students who have demonstrated a commitment to their vocation, and who bring existing practical skills and knowledge to their professional nursing practice.

The BSA recommends that

16. That Australian Higher Education institutions be encouraged to recognise the academic credit of prior learning at other institutions, and to develop programs that serve the needs of the community through the creation of qualification pathways that promote skill development and life-long learning.

Higher Education's Role in the National Innovation System

By what mechanisms should research activity in Australian universities be supported?

Research should continue to be predominantly publicly funded, through a combination of universities core funding, as well as through a competitive grants system that requires universities to pursue knowledge creation and innovation based on their established research strengths.

Universities must also be encouraged to pursue funding for applied research opportunities with industry, since future economic prosperity is linked to the ability to rapidly develop the ability to commercially exploit innovation.

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

University research should recognise the skills and strengths of their operations, in determining the scope of their research activity.

In regional areas, where a university is the major repository of knowledge in the community, research activity should also respond to local needs and opportunities if it is to maximise its economic and social impact.

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

BSA believes that all universities must continue to pursue both research and teaching within their structures.

It is vital that teaching remains informed by current research and practice to ensure that graduates possess the skills and knowledge required for their future careers.

If teaching only universities and campuses were permitted, we expect that research activity would be concentrated at metropolitan campuses, with regional campuses most likely to lose their research function. This would reduce their ability to create new knowledge and innovation in their communities, and would also reduce their opportunity to attract high-achieving staff and students, causing a rapid diminution in the standing and reputation of the campus.

The BSA recommends that

17. That Australian universities continue to be funded and required to undertake teaching and research programs within their core operations.

Australia's Higher Education Sector in the International Arena

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

As a consequence of the insufficient funding available for universities in Australia to operate on a sustainable basis, most have approached internationalisation as a means of supplementing their income from full-fee paying international students, rather than as a means of developing and supporting the globalisation of knowledge as a means of advancing the community of nations.

In many cases, this has resulted in a high dependence on the continuation of international student revenue to fund the core operations of universities.

There are well documented cases demonstrating that many universities have not paid sufficient regard to the provision of assistance and support networks to assist these students to successfully complete their transition into the Australian community and their new university environment.

The reliance on income flows also has implications for academic standards. There are often instances where a student's lack of proficiency in spoken and written English raises queries about their suitability for entry to a course of study, and this leads inevitably to increasing pressure on academics in some areas to ensure that international students continue to progress through courses at a rate that does not reflect an objective assessment of their achievement.

In treating internationalisation as a race to achieve market share of inbound students, we believe that many universities have neglected to ensure that there is adequate promotion and support for domestic students receiving the benefits of the opportunity to study offshore in order to broaden their education and understanding.

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 purpose should it serve?

Internationalisation should be seen as a means of promoting global progress and development, and should promote reciprocity of experience as an essential component of enhancing understanding. It should not be seen as a panacea for the funding shortfall in Australia's Higher Education sector.

Government can most ably assist this process by ensuring that universities receive sufficient funding to operate in a sustainable manner. There exists within universities a commitment to fellowship and academic co-operation that transcends international boundaries and those values can be readily

promulgated within student bodies to encourage internationalisation of the quest for knowledge and understanding.

It is the desperation in universities caused by the absence of sufficient funding that has led to distortion of an otherwise admirable process.

The BSA recommends that

18. That Australian Higher Education institutions be adequately funded so as to enable internationalisation to be pursued for legitimate goals and benefits, and at a level that will enable the provision of adequate support services.

Higher Education's Contribution to Australia's Economic, Social and Cultural Capital

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

Knowledge Transfer and Community Engagement are the processes whereby the university interacts with society.

Knowledge from research can be transmitted to society directly through publications, etc, or, perhaps more importantly, through the teaching to professionals of the new knowledge to enhance their professional practice, and bring benefits to the community.

Community engagement is multi-directional. It is a process that allows the University to advise the community of its work, and to provide intellectual leadership that brings benefits to society. Community engagement is also an essential component of the university discovering the concerns, issues and priorities of its communities, allowing the university to determine in what areas its efforts may best be applied to serve its communities.

Community engagement, in a regional context, is often the source for the development of important research partnerships, and makes an important contribution to the ongoing development of civil society.

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?

Using the above as a working definition, we consider that knowledge transfer and community engagement remain essential features of contemporary higher education institutions.

Nowhere is the role of Higher Education institutions in this process more important than in our Regional communities, where the University is the major knowledge resource for the community.

As such, it must be an integral part of the development and success of businesses within the region, whether it be as a supplier of research to the business community, or by providing the graduate and post-graduate courses vital to the increased knowledge requirements that must be satisfied if our regional businesses are to remain sustainable into the future.

Of equal importance, however, is the role of the University as a "thought leader" in the community. As a repository of expert knowledge, it has a vital role in ensuring that issues that impact the community are analysed, and that this information is made available to the community in which it operates. The *Centre for Sustainable Regional Communities*, based at La Trobe University, Bendigo, is a prime example of how a University's Research functions can not only contribute significantly to the understanding of our communities, but can be applied in a way which will also generate significant, on-going economic benefits.

The wider social benefits of high-quality tertiary institutions located in regional Australia include the encouragement of the celebration of cultural and ideological diversity, and the forging of strong networks between those who will be leading our country into the future, whether it is as teachers, community leaders, or primary producers. Regional tertiary institutions are unique in that they are able to practically address the current widespread lack of connectedness between city and rural/regional Australia. By initiating a mixing of ideas, knowledge and aspirations from a myriad of origins, and being placed in a regional context, regional institutions have a great deal to offer to the future of this country.

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?

Recognition of these vital functions should be provided within the core funding of universities.

We would argue that there should, in fact, be additional funding provided to those universities operating in regional areas, since they have a more central role as a source of community and cultural enrichment than their metropolitan counterparts.

Irrespective of their location, however, there must be recognition that universities have a role in society that goes beyond providing research and operating as a training provider, and they should be funded specifically to ensure that they are able to fulfil that role.

The BSA recommends that

19. That Australian Higher Education institutions be adequately funded so as to enable them to fulfil their important role in advancing society through economic and social development.

This will require funding levels that recognise the importance of knowledge transfer and community engagement as important contributors to such development.

Resourcing the System

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

The current funding arrangements provide an imperative for universities to maximize economies of scale.

Accordingly, course and operations tend to be heavily skewed toward those where high volumes of students can be attracted. This benefits students attending metropolitan campuses, as it has directly caused a contraction in the range of courses and electives available at regional campuses (often eliminating elective units – an entire course can consist of “core units”, simply because no others are offered).

A further consequence of the current funding arrangements, directly related to the scale issue elucidated above, has been the adoption of technology by some universities as a means of cutting “delivery costs” to regional campuses. In our experience the technology deployed is often second-rate or obsolete and its deployment inept, having no regard for pedagogical needs. This creates a serious inequity issue for regional students who continue to pay the same level of HECS as their metropolitan counter-parts.

A further consequence of the endemic under-funding of higher education has been the deterioration of infrastructure, both physical and technological, as universities have diverted funding in an attempt to maintain their teaching and research activities.

Many students find themselves being taught in facilities that are desperately in need of renovation, and which are not suited to current pedagogical approaches to teaching and learning practices. In many cases, students coming to university are surprised by the fact that facilities and use of technology has often been more advanced at the secondary schools they attended.

The legislation preventing universities from collecting amenities and services fees further exacerbated the funding issue, since the resources needed to provide these essential support services have frequently been diverted from the universities’ already over-stretched teaching and research budgets.

To date, La Trobe University has been generous in providing financial and in-kind support for the provision of student support services and amenities including those provided by the BSA. Under Victorian legislation this funding had once been provided through the charging of a General Service Fee (GSF), however under the current model these funds have been diverted from an already stretched teaching and research budget.

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?

If we are to secure the future of Australia's higher education sector, the absolute imperative is that more money be available throughout the sector.

By all objective comparisons, we continue to fall on OECD rankings for expenditure on education, at a time when it is almost universally accepted that our future depends on us embracing the requirements of a knowledge economy.

One of the frequently cited factors holding development back is the "skills shortage". International thinking now says that in order to overcome the world-wide shortage of skills in the developed world, we must provide the means to bring the previously marginalised into the skilled workforce; and to provide the means and incentives for existing workers to re-skill and up-skill.

We will only achieve this in higher education in Australia if funding is provided.

In regional areas, where participation rates in higher education across all socio-economic groups are lower than in metropolitan areas, we need to increase participation rates significantly. As well as the issues of providing courses and access pathways to attract such students into higher education, many of them will require provision of additional and more extensive academic and other support programs to assist with their transition. This will require that universities devote considerable additional resources to their regional operations. As already indicated, this is counter to their prevailing action, which is to reduce programs and attempt to minimise the costs of their "unprofitable" regional operations.

Thus, if we are to promote equity and achieve our potential as a nation, it is incumbent on government to provide the necessary funding to achieve these aims.

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

As indicated above, the current funding arrangements have given rise to significant problems, and have not addressed equity issues that prevent full participation by many of those who would benefit from higher education.

Accordingly, we believe that in addition to a significant increase in the overall quantum of funding, additional funding must be made available for those

institutions seeking to address equity issues in terms of the provision of university courses in regional areas, and in providing access and support for under-represented groups (including indigenous, rural and low socio-economic status).

The BSA recommends that

20. That Australian Higher Education institutions be adequately funded so as to ensure that all people who may benefit from Higher Education are provided with the means and opportunity to realise their potential.

This will require that funding levels recognise and be designed to overcome barriers to entry caused by geographic and socio-economic circumstances, including the provision of adequate support services that recognise the difficulties faced by particular equity groups.

21. VSU legislation be reviewed in order to allow Universities and/or Student Associations to charge a compulsory fee for the provision of student services.

Governance and Regulation

Is the level of regulation in the sector appropriate? If not, why not, and what should be done to reduce the level of regulation?

Whilst regulation of universities is an important matter, we are concerned that much of the additional regulation applied to universities in recent years has been at the wrong level.

Rather than focus on the global issue of quality of research and teaching, much of the regulation has targeted management and administrative practices at the operational (and often micro) level. The increased costs that attend to this compliance burden have caused considerable diversion of resources from the core functions of universities.

As major social institutions, recognised for the contribution they make to economic development and civil society, the governance of universities must allow for adequate representation of all stakeholders.

This requires that there be fair representation on university Governing Boards of Academics (representing both teaching and research activity), Community leaders (including representation of disparate equity groups), Business leaders and Students (both undergraduate and postgraduate).

As recipients of very significant public funding, the Governing Boards of universities should be charged with the responsibility to ensure that the university uses its resources in an efficient manner to maximise the economic and social benefits accruing to the community, and to operate in a publicly transparent manner.

The BSA recommends that

22. That Australian Higher Education institutions be regulated to ensure that they maximise opportunity of access to all those who may benefit from Higher Education, and that appropriate measures are in place to ensure systemic integrity, protecting the quality of education and rights of consumers (students).

Within these broad parameters, Higher Education institutions should have institutional freedom to determine their operational scope and internal processes.

Summary of recommendations.

- 1. The functions of higher education in modern Australia should be amended to include the role of facilitating social inclusion, justice and change.**
- 2. The academic, social and financial support of all students based on a diversity of needs should be a characteristic of higher education in modern Australia.**
- 3. Appropriate funding be provided to enable the development and sustainability of innovative and comprehensive courses, with an adequate additional loading for small and regional campuses, including regional campuses of metropolitan based universities.**
- 4. State and federal governments take responsibility to ensure that higher education be available and accessible to all potential students, particularly those located in regional communities.**
- 5. Appropriate reforms are undertaken to ensure that all potential students, regardless of their socioeconomic background or geographical location are supported in the pursuit of higher education.**
- 6. Further research into the role which increasing HECS debts plays in the decisions of prospective students with particular attention being paid to the impacts such debts have on the decisions made by Mature age students and students from Low and Middle SES groups.**
- 7. There be sufficient resourcing of support programs designed to assist mature aged students with the transition from the workforce and vocational sector into tertiary study.**
- 8. Greater flexibility should be incorporated into the student income support system to provide access to appropriate support for those supporting family members as parents or care-givers, and for those foregoing income in order to return to study on a part-time basis.**
- 9. A national response to the participation and success of low SES and Indigenous groups be undertaken with particular sensitivity paid to differences in cultural issues and geographical location.**

- 10. That any efforts made to improve indigenous participation and success should be undertaken in direct partnership with the Indigenous people and the Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council.**
- 11. The provision of student financial support be increased to meet the actual financial costs incurred by students with the aim of removing the barriers to success/participation of all students.**
- 12. The age of independence for Centrelink purposes be reduced from 25 to 18 for those who are required to live away from home and be financially independent in order to pursue higher education.**
- 13. Any monitoring of quality of the student experience be concise, accessible and transparent and show distinctions between different learning centres within each university and their respective campuses. Students should also be involved in the development of questions, and results of surveys should be made openly available to both current and potential students.**
- 14. That the monitoring of the quality of the student experience should primarily include the engagement of students on the issues identified within the AUSSE with inclusion of the additional issues of**
 - i. The utilisation of Information Technology systems in the delivery of material and courses,**
 - ii. Access to courses and units of choice and**
 - iii. The impact of paid employment on academic pursuits and the quality of the student experience.**
- 15. There should be an engaged relationship between industry and Universities in the measurement of learning outcomes which respects the universities' dual roles in both social change and skills transfer.**
- 16. That Australian Higher Education institutions be encouraged to recognise the academic credit of prior learning at other institutions, and to develop programs that serve the needs of the community through the creation of qualification pathways that promote skill development and life-long learning.**
- 17. That Australian universities continue to be funded and required to undertake teaching and research programs within their core operations.**

18. That Australian Higher Education institutions be adequately funded so as to enable internationalisation to be pursued for legitimate goals and benefits, and at a level that will enable the provision of adequate support services.

19. That Australian Higher Education institutions be adequately funded so as to enable them to fulfil their important role in advancing society through economic and social development.

This will require funding levels that recognise the importance of knowledge transfer and community engagement as important contributors to such development.

20. That Australian Higher Education institutions be adequately funded so as to ensure that all people who may benefit from Higher Education are provided with the means and opportunity to realise their potential.

This will require that funding levels recognise and be designed to overcome barriers to entry caused by geographic and socio-economic circumstances, including the provision of adequate support services that recognise the difficulties faced by particular equity groups.

21. VSU legislation be reviewed in order to allow Universities and/or Student Associations to charge a compulsory fee for the provision of student services.

22. That Australian Higher Education institutions be regulated to ensure that they maximise opportunity of access to all those who may benefit from Higher Education, and that appropriate measures are in place to ensure systemic integrity, protecting the quality of education and rights of consumers (students).

Within these broad parameters, Higher Education institutions should have institutional freedom to determine their operational scope and internal processes.

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APPENDIX

Bendigo Student Association Incorporated.

The Role of the BSA:

Motto: 'Making Student Life Better'

Bendigo Student Association Inc (BSA) is the major on-campus provider of non-academic services to students at La Trobe University's campus in Bendigo.

BSA is an incorporated body operating for the benefit of all students at La Trobe University's Bendigo (LTUB) Campus, and is the sole student organisation operating on this campus.

Mission Statement:

Separately incorporated in 1988, the primary objectives of the BSA are outlined within its mission statement:

"The Bendigo Student Association Inc strives to improve the quality of student life by providing services and facilities, promoting diverse student activities and representing student interests to the University and broader community. The BSA seeks to provide students with opportunities to develop a diverse range of skills and experiences which contribute to a holistic university experience"

The purposes of the Bendigo Student Association are:

- To advance student interests and welfare
- To represent of La Trobe University Bendigo, to the University and broader community
- To provide amenities services, principally for students and other members of the community, but also to the public to ensure their viability

Visions and Values:

Our Vision as an organisation is to:

- Provide effective representation of student interests
- Offer quality services, facilities and a diverse range of activities primarily to students and where appropriate, to the university and broader communities

-Anticipate and respond quickly and effectively to student needs, to new demands and environments

-Serve as the preferred supplier of student amenities within the University

-Act as the primary catalyst for community life within the university

-Facilitate effective communication with and between the student body at all levels

-To foster educational and training opportunities, within the organization, for student representatives and volunteers

In pursuing our Mission and Visions, we are committed to:

-Being open in our decision-making and responsive to input from students and other stakeholders

-Striving to achieve the highest standard in all our activities

-Upholding appropriate ethical standards in all our dealings

-Supporting a participative organizational and workplace culture, which values staff and student effort and empowers leadership and teamwork to function to the benefit of all

-Acting in a manner consistent with principles of equity and social justice

-Fostering a culture that builds trust and a sense of community within the student body and the university.

Services Provided By Bendigo Student Association Inc.

Financial:

- "Sweeney's" Cafe and On-Campus Catering Service supplying to students and university community at best possible prices
- "Runes - The Student Association Shop" - Stationery, L TU Merchandise, Art Supplies and Store providing goods to students and university community at best possible prices
- Discount Newspaper Subscriptions
- Discount Movie Tickets
- On-line Student Market Place Service
- Scholarships & Awards
- Student Accident Insurance administration

- Second Hand Book Sales
- Off-campus Accommodation Listings
- Free Tax Return Preparation
- Printing Service
- Photocopying Service
- Binding Service
- Fax Service
- Stamp Sales & Postal Service

Recreation:

- Activities and Entertainment
- Trips and Tours
- Student Radio Facilities
- Campus Sport
- "Evolution" Sport & Fitness Centre
- Gymnasium
- Group Fitness Classes
- Graduation Ball
- Orientation Week Events
- Mature Age Student Activities
- Post-Graduate Student Activities

Academic & Representation:

- Student Hub Information Centre
 - Information & Referral Service
 - Student Advice and Support
 - Liaison between students and University
 - Student representation in Academic and other disputes with University
 - Student Representation on University Committees
 - Representation of Student Interests on Higher Education Issues
-
- Student Diary
 - Mature Age Return to Study Guide
 - International Students' Guide
 - A-Z of Students' Rights
 - Women's Room

Clubs and Professional Development:

- Social Clubs
- Interest Based Clubs
- Course Based Clubs
- Skills enhancement and training
- Volunteer Development Programme

These services are funded by a combination of self-generated income and direct funding support from La Trobe University.

We see that a very important part of our role within the University is to build "community".

- Between students in different areas of the University
- Between staff and students within Course disciplines
- Between University students and the wider community
 - Contribution to providing a youth voice to community, via support for Bendigo Advertiser *UniNews*
 - Involvement with La Trobe University Bendigo Community Bank Steering Committee
 - Building links with local businesses to enhance student employment opportunities
 - Representation on Bendigo Chapter Committee of La Trobe University Alumni
 - Create interactive Professional Development and Networking opportunities
 - Encourage excellence by showcasing and rewarding student activities / work