

Comments on the Review of Australian Higher Education

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The Discussion Paper [1] provided a sound basis for further debates, comments and suggestions. It is reasonable to assume that we have established a solid and quality higher education system. What we need in this Review is to seek refinements that address some of the weaknesses of the system and anticipate innovative solutions for the next decade.

In that spirit, I wish to make cases for several issues: case for equality, case for community engagement, case for funding, and case for not teaching-only university.

Case for equality

I have to take the stand that all students are inherently *different* partly because of their environments, partly because of factors beyond their control. However, difference *does not equate* to inequality.

As an advanced society, collectively we endeavour to provide equal access to opportunities to all. This implies that we aim to create and provide appropriate opportunities for students to do their best regardless of the fields, the circumstance and the economic situations they happen to be in. Clearly (as pointed out in [1]), LSES and Indigenous students have been enjoying less than their fair share of opportunities not because of their own choosing.

To deal with LSES and Indigenous students, I suggest several schemes:

- i) For excellent (LSES & Indigenous) students (academic is just one criteria for excellence): some forms of scholarship for these students and some financial support for their families are necessary for the students to achieve their fullest potential in their field of excellence and in the environments that are worthwhile and beneficial to them and their family. Support for their family is equally important to these students and for the scheme to be successful. In the long term, these successful students are those who can help most effectively their own communities.
- ii) For the majority of these students, the main problems are the lack of information and the isolation of their “closed” environments. The system should provide adequate guidance so that these students are aware of, welcome and appreciate available and reachable opportunities. The system should also equip them with adequate skills to take advantage of those opportunities. This can be done by opening up multiple communication channels such as
 - Providing a comprehensive *information portal* for all. This can be done easily and cost-effectively with the wired and wireless Internet.
 - Organising talks and seminars to direct relevant information to the students in their own environment.
 - Organising field trips to get these students involved.
- iii) The system should also initiate specific developments that emphasize on
 - Engaging students in projects that are relevant to their skills.
 - Engaging students in projects that are beneficial to their communities.
 - Developing projects that bring state-of-the-art technologies to these communities.

Case for community engagement.

I believe this is one of the most important functions of the higher education institutions. After all, people are educated to “serve” their community through advancing the knowledge of the community, through meeting the economic requirements of the community, and through enriching the community socially and culturally.

These cannot be achieved without *active* engagement with the community. However, this engagement has not been realised (as cited in [1]) due to the lack of recognition, encouragement and support by the government and the institutions themselves. I suggest several mechanisms for community engagement.

- i. *Create an environment for engagement.* This environment should encompass many common goals and interests of both the students/higher education workers and the communities involved. The environment must be collaborative and directly beneficial to all parties. Such an environment can be created by getting requirement inputs from all interested groups. For example, “getting people in a particular community involved in the process of learning and creating a Web page and using it as a means for interaction among all people in the community” could be a good model for engagement.
- ii. *Provide funding to support the engagement environment.* Specific funding is essential to acquire human resources, skills and tools for creating the environment. Funding is required to employ people with special skills to initiate and support the engagement. Funding is required for “time taken away from work” for participating in engagement activities or alternatively this time can be considered as one of the components of the normal working load.
- iii. *Provide mechanisms and catalysts for enabling the engagement.* Active engagement will not happen automatically without motivation and worthwhile incentives. There are needs for appropriate catalysts and mechanisms for encouraging and facilitating an engagement. This can be effective through matching rewarding schemes such as
 - Using engagement activity/outcome as one of the criteria for promotion.
 - Using certain appraisal scheme for public recognition for engagement activities.

Case for Funding

To attain the modern Australian higher education system that addresses some of the weaknesses of the current system and anticipate innovative solutions for the next decade, we need to prepare adequate funding for the system to implement needed solutions.

Funding from the government is well intended. However, it does not have a reliable metric for measuring the outcomes hence it is difficult to allocate proper funding. As a result, funding from the government is conservative or plain *inadequate*. For the same reason, without a reliable metric, there is no way the government can distribute its funding to appropriate undertakings.

For our higher education, it is clear from [1] that the sector represents an industry that is extremely important to our economy and our society. It provides human resources with knowledge and skills for our workforce. It generates incomes for the nation. It provides quality of life for its people and for international communities. The question is how to fund the sector adequately if we want to achieve the most effective and

beneficial education system for its people in terms of scope, quality, and equality. I suggest an initial approach where it helps to determine the appropriate amount of funding and the proper distribution of funding.

To arrive at a comprehensive funding scheme we need to collect proper data (the government and/or the universities may have already possessed the data)

- We need to take a close look at the current staff profile of all Australian universities in terms of workloads, strengths and weaknesses (teaching, research, resources and management).
- We need to take a close look at the student profile of all Australian universities in terms of the number and the composition of students across all teaching and research fields and their achievements (employment, living and working environment).
- We need to clearly define a vision for the country.

With that proper data set and the grand vision, the path where our country is heading is clear and the government will be able to establish a sound guiding structure for funding to fulfil the vision.

Specific Suggestions:

- 1) With the Staff:Student ratio of 20:1 [1], universities can not achieve an “acceptable” quality measure (whatever measures one uses to measure) of teaching, learning, experience or research outcome. The government can do a lot for higher education by providing funds for employing adequate level of staff to reduce this ratio.
- 2) A portion of the income from “international students” should be reserved for building long term infrastructure for quality education. That may mean establishing programs that benefit *both* international and domestic students, and that allow them to learn/interact with each other and to contribute more to the Australian society.

Case for not returning to “teaching-only universities”

It has been generally agreed that people are different. Their needs are different. Their environments are different. Their patterns of consumption are different.

Is it possible to create different universities for different needs? Certainly, this can be done. However, the question is whether there is a need for “teaching only universities.”

What would be the reasons for such segregation? Does our system fail in teaching? Does our system fail in research? Does our system fail in community engagement? From the data provided in the Discussion Paper [1], there are some weaknesses that need to be addressed, but we do not see such a major failure. In fact, we find our system solid, with quality and able to attract healthy number international students.

As mentioned in [1], there may be a case for “teaching-only” university because it was found that many of our academics are not “active” in research? Or our students are not equipped with adequate skills for the labour force? At a closer scrutiny, these issues can be addressed more wisely and directly with a more adaptive structure, appropriate incentives, awareness and anticipation of the future rather than returning to the old binary system.

I believe the weaknesses of our higher education system stem from the way we operate and manage our universities, the lack of funding and the poor distribution of funding from the government, and the poor perception of the general public.

For start, our universities are pressured to operate like business enterprises, but their missions, their teaching, learning and research cultures are different from those of enterprises. Business decisions do not always produce best education systems.

Matching graduate outputs and industry needs, upgrading skills or retraining, responsive to skills needs require adequate funding, strategic planning, and flexible and adaptive university structure and academic workforce, not “teaching-only” universities. Often the case, no funding is available for special teaching needs and inadequate support comes from the government.

Perception of the general public in this country does not help. Teaching is judged to be a least desirable profession because of low pay and no prestige. The main reason is that the general public does not see education as one of the most important investments for future. It is seen as a charitable service provided by the government! Fortunately, this perception is being changed slowly with more and more people are willing to invest in their education. Until this perception changes, our education system will always be disadvantaged.

In brief, I believe that it is not in our best interest to return to teaching-only universities.

- It is divisive without compelling reasons for being divisive.
- Our system is strong and healthy with some weaknesses that can be addressed by strategic refinements.
- Teaching-only universities policy may be inflexible in dealing with rapid changes in education and research environments.
- Designated teaching-only universities have very limited reachability in terms of the people as well as the geographical areas they serve. People have to come to universities rather than universities come to people.

With refinements, universities will have rooms for new initiatives, for teaching excellence, for research excellence.

References

1. Bradley, D., Noonan, P., Nugent, H., and Scales, B., Review of Australian Higher Education – Discussion Paper, Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, June 2008.