



REVIEW OF AUSTRALIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

Submission to the Review of Australian Higher Education

Presented by

Phuong Au
President
Student Representative Council

Prepared by

David Loonam, Linda Lombardi and Phuong Au

Arc @ UNSW Limited

The Blockhouse
University of New South Wales
Anzac Parade Kensington NSW 2052

t. +61 2 9385 7700
f. +61 2 9313 8626
w. www.arc.unsw.edu.au

INTRODUCTION

The Student Representative Council (SRC) is a student body within Arc @ UNSW Limited and is the peak student representative body at the University of New South Wales. The SRC represents over 36,000 students at the Kensington and Paddington (College of Fine Arts) campuses who are progressing toward an undergraduate or postgraduate degree. The students at UNSW are very diverse with overseas students making up close to a quarter of the student population and over half of the student population are under 25. The largest faculties in terms of student enrolments are the Australian School of Business, followed by Engineering, Arts and Social Sciences and the Faculty of Science.

We believe universities have become too commercialised with an eroding sense of priority for the important role universities have in education, contributing to society and enhancing communities. Universities seem to have struggled to maintain their core function as a place of higher learning while under the pressure to deliver learning, teaching and research outputs with decreasing government support and financial resources for over the past decade.

Financial pressures have mounted on students as well which has affected the quality of the student experience. It has negatively impacted on our ability to focus on our studies and gain the most we can out of it. For an increasing number of students, the time that would have otherwise been spent reflecting, engaging and doing in depth research into the content presented to us in our courses are now spent in part time work or otherwise struggling to make ends meet in order to continue studying. It is therefore imperative that student income support is reviewed and revised as soon as possible.

For many years students have struggled to have our voices heard by the previous Government and we gladly welcome this opportunity to represent students in the discussions on the challenges that face the higher education sector over the coming years.

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

The statement of functions and characteristics adequately describes our understanding of and vision for the future of higher education in modern Australia. It is important to instil in students that our decisions to obtain a tertiary qualification or to seek higher education is not solely for the purpose of becoming a member of the productive labour force but that by pursuing our interests and aspirations, we will also contribute to our society and communities. The statement not only recognises the changing world we live in through the process of globalisation but places universities in the integral position of facilitating the development of globalised citizens while maintaining the importance of fostering the Australian identity and culture.

The future of the higher education sector and of modern Australia rests in the hands of students; it is therefore encouraging that student participation and the quality of the student experience are identified as characteristics of an effectively functioning higher education sector.

Q. 8. Should there be a national approach to improving Indigenous and low SES participation and success in Higher Education?

A national approach to improving Indigenous and low SES participation and success in Higher Education is needed for the reasons highlighted by the Bradley Review; Indigenous and low SES students are vastly underrepresented in Higher Education¹. These students are not receiving the financial, academic or emotional support they need to succeed in Higher Education.

We submit that there is a direct correlation between income and success in Higher Education. Students simply cannot afford the costs of education. The facts and figures to support this contention are freely available. Students must work to survive which negatively impacts their studies; either they miss classes, take time away from their independent study time, or are just too tired and preoccupied to concentrate. Students face not only the costs of basic necessities such as housing and food but must also face the added costs of travel, and textbooks and other study materials.

An adequate level of income support for students is vital to improve retention rates once enrolled in Higher Education. The issues we have with government income support systems are not new. A call for changes to be made to Austudy and Youth Allowance has long been sounded. And the reasons are very clear. It is far too difficult to establish eligibility for income support; and once students manage to pass that hurdle, the level of support is far too low. The current level of income support offered to students is simply insufficient to meet the costs of living.

While financial factors are important in that they affect students capacity to study successfully, money is still not highly cited as a deterrent to Higher Education. The current system of HECS for local students allows payment for tuition to be deferred until a steady income is achieved. Under-representation in Higher Education can also be attributed to a lack of educational aspirations and declining school completion rates. A national approach must also recognise the broader social, educational and cultural factors involved in promoting participation prior to enrolment in tertiary institutions. Students are simply not receiving the support in secondary school to aspire to Higher Education.

A national approach to these issues is needed to ensure that policies are implemented consistently across the country so that **all** students have the same access to Higher Education. This approach should involve both increased government funding for increased income support and educational programs and targeted policy reform.

Q. 9. 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?

Income Support Reforms

There needs to be a widespread reform made to existing Government income support schemes. There are two basic problems with the current structure of Youth Allowance benefits; too few students are eligible, and for those who are eligible, the amount of the allowance is very low.

Eligibility - Independent vs Dependent

There has been a 6.4 per cent drop in the number of students receiving either Austudy or Youth Allowance since 1998.² This is mainly due to the inability of students to satisfy the income support eligibility requirements.

¹ Review of Australian Higher Education, p29

² Universities Australia, 'Advancing Equity and Participation in Australian Higher Education' (April 2008)

<http://www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au/documents/publications/policy/equity/0408_Equity_Particip_Action_Plan.pdf>

The current age of independence is 25 years.³ Anyone younger than 25 must prove they are independent from their parents (even if they no longer live at home). The test set out for determining whether a student is 'independent' requires that students be out of school and earning money for at least 18 months before lodging a claim. This automatically disqualifies almost all high school leavers from income support, despite the fact that 64 per cent of students go straight into tertiary education.⁴

Unless you are considered to be independent, students are subject to a parental income test to be eligible for Youth Allowance. This automatically affects their rate of pay as the dependant rate is far less than that for independent students. The combined base taxable income is currently set at \$31 400. This is far below the national average weekly earnings. Income support payments are further reduced by \$1 for every \$4 over \$31 400. The base taxable income increases for every additional dependant child before it affects payments, but this amount is still relatively low. There is a complete cut off point around \$60,000.

Students who cannot meet the requirements for the independent rate of Youth Allowance receive a payment that is substantially reduced. The dependant base rate for 18 year olds is currently \$116.95 a week. This system assumes that parents will continue to financially support students who live at home. This is in direct contrast to the accepted school of thought that a person is legally an adult at 18 years (given that this is the age of voting, legalised drinking, and marriage). Many students are required to pay some form of board while living at home; students who must pay this type of rent are also not eligible for Rent Assistance.

Inadequate Support - Amount of Allowance

Those students who do receive income support are living well below the poverty line. As at December 2007, the poverty line for single full-time students aged 16 and over was \$303.35 per week.⁵ In comparison, the weekly payment made to full-time students on Youth Allowance at the maximum away from home rate of pay is only \$177.70 per week.

To receive the full payment, independent students cannot earn more than \$118 per week, in extra income unless there is credit in Income Bank. Even with the base supplemented income, students are still living below the poverty line and are forced to take time away from their studies in order to survive. Any attempt to earn above the base level of supplemental income results in a reduction in payment of 50 cents in the dollar (for earnings between \$236 and \$316 per fortnight), or 60 cents in the dollar (for earnings above \$316 per fortnight). The total amount students are allowed to earn through paid work is under \$6000. This amount has not been indexed since 1993.

More importantly, the inequality between allowances needs to be addressed. Youth Allowance payments are not in line with other income support allowances, of a similar kind. The Disability Support pension is for anyone over the age of 16 who has been assessed as not being able to work for at least 15 hours per week within two years because of illness, injury or disability. The current independent rate for an 18 year old on a Disability Support Pension is \$456 per fortnight. The Newstart Allowance is available for those over 21 who are looking for paid work. The current Newstart Allowance for single people, with no children is \$437.10 per fortnight. Recipients of the Newstart Allowance would have similar expenses to students yet this rate is far exceeds the Youth Allowance. Student income support must be effective in reducing the need for students to engage in paid work to the extent that it negatively impacts academic performance and provide incentive for unemployed and/or unskilled people to gain skills through education.

Recommendations:

- That the age of independence for all student income support payments be lowered from 25 to 18 years of age so that students are not assessed on the basis of parental income.

³ *Social Security Act 1991* (Commonwealth), s1067A

⁴ Review of Australian Higher Education Discussion Paper, p27.

⁵ Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research, *Poverty Lines*, December 2007

<<http://www.melbourneinstitute.com/labour/inequality/poverty/Poverty%20lines%20Australia%20Dec%202007.pdf>>

- That the current rate of pay for Youth Allowance and Austudy be increased to be in line with today's costs of living, or set at an equivalent to the Newstart Allowance or the Disability Support Pension independent rate.
- That the income free-area for students be raised to be in line with today's costs of living, and indexed every year against inflation.

Ancillary Costs of Education

The ancillary costs of Higher Education must be addressed. Students are faced with a never ending litany of expenses for photocopying, field trips, course materials, lab equipment, to name a few. However, there are two main costs which we believe require a national approach: textbooks and travel.

Textbooks

Textbooks are essential to successful study. They are also an expensive up front cost of education. The Educational Textbook Subsidy Scheme (ETSS) was introduced specifically to subsidise the increased cost of textbooks as a result of the Goods and Services Tax (GST). Bookshops would be compensated for the GST payable on textbooks directly by the Government, and the extra cost was not passed on to students. However, the Government withdrew funding for this scheme in 2004, forcing this cost of textbooks up by 8 per cent.

The average cost of prescribed textbooks is over \$100. This cost is even higher for medicine, science based subjects and law. Given that full-time students generally study up to 8 courses per year, this is no insignificant amount. According to the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee report *Paying Their Way*, textbooks account for a quarter of course costs.⁶ However, this cost cannot be deferred in the way that HECS fees can. The re-introduction of the ETSS would relieve some of the financial burden placed on students of the ancillary costs of studying.

Travel Concessions

International Students

In NSW and Victoria, international full fee paying international students are not eligible for travel concessions on public transport. This is despite having the largest individual intakes of international students every year than any other Australian state or territory. In 2007, international student enrolments accounted for 183 099 enrolments NSW and 133 454 in Victoria, according to the *International Student Enrolment Data 2007*.⁷ NSW has almost 3 times the number of international enrolments than Queensland, the next highest intake state (at 68 284 international students). These students inject billions of dollars into the economy annually through spending on rent, food, transport and goods⁸.

In 2006, the Administrative Decisions Tribunal in NSW held that full fee paying international students were entitled to the same travel concessions as local Australian students.⁹ By refusing international students these travel concessions the responsible transit authorities had engaged in racial discrimination. The NSW State Government continues to deny full fee paying international students equal treatment as students.

Part-time students

Currently, no Australian states offer travel concessions for part-time tertiary students. While the SRC recognises that part-time students are generally considered to be in a better financial position than full-time students, this is not always the case. Part-time students are often forced to study part-time only because they cannot afford not to work. Part-time students are also ineligible for the

⁶ Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee *Paying Their Way - A Survey of Australian Undergraduate University Student Finances, 2000* (September 2001) Final Report

<http://www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au/documents/publications/policy/statements/final_report_rev_22_oct_01.pdf>

⁷ *International Student Enrolment Data 2007* (published by DEEWR, Australian Education International)

<http://aei.dest.gov.au/AEI/MIP/Statistics/StudentEnrolmentAndVisaStatistics/2007/taled_pdf.pdf>

⁸ Hansard, Second Reading Speech of the Transport Administration Amendment (Travel Concession) Bill, (September 2006) <<http://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/Prod/Parliament/HansArt.nsf/V3Key/LC20060920038>>.

⁹ *Sydney University Postgraduate Representative Association (SUPRA) & ors v Minister for Transport Services & ors* [2006] NSWADT 83.

traditional income support benefits of Youth Allowance and Austudy, and their degrees take twice as long to complete so they must delay full-time employment.

Rather than adopting a blanket policy of free travel concessions for part-time students, we recommend that part-time students be given access to travel concessions if they can demonstrate financial hardship. This would go towards resolving some of the equality between full-time and part-time students, especially given that at the end of their degrees, both students have paid the same amount of fees.

Recommendations

- That the Federal Government restore the Educational Textbook Subsidy Scheme.
- That travel concessions be made nationally available to full fee paying international students.
- That travel concessions be made nationally available to eligible part-time students (on the basis of financial hardship).

Beyond Direct Financial Assistance

A national approach to improving Indigenous and low SES participation and success needs to go beyond financial assistance. It has been accepted that students are not greatly deterred from further study by tuition fees. There needs to be recognition of the broader social, educational and cultural factors involved in promoting participation and success, and a better understanding of the relationship between secondary and Higher Education.

Secondary School Participation Rates

According to Universities Australia, lower participation rates in Higher Education are more an issue of access than success once enrolled.¹⁰ Under-representation is the result of lower levels of educational achievement at school, lower educational aspirations and lower school completion rates. If this is true, part of the focus needs to be shifted away from Higher Education and directed to secondary education.

The States should be urged to align their policies regarding compulsory participation in secondary education – currently high school students in NSW, NT and the ACT can elect to leave school at 15. This initiative may go towards improving access to Higher Education. In 2006, only 42.9 per cent of Indigenous students nationally completed Year 12, compared with 75 per cent of non-Indigenous students.¹¹ Except for Victoria, there are participation requirements in the other States until the age of 17. This participation must either be continuing with their secondary education, training or full-time employment. While this will not guarantee participation in tertiary study, it will increase a student's opportunity to explore further education options, and hopefully make students more academically prepared for University.

Raise Aspirations

We need, as a nation, to raise the confidence and aspirations of high school students and present Higher Education as an option for their future. Such policies would need to be implemented on a national level to ensure consistent compliance and performance. This would require cooperation by the Federal Government, universities across Australia, secondary schools, and other pre-Higher Education institutions.

Any initiatives to increase participation would need to address the issues prior to tertiary enrolment for both low SES and Indigenous students to raise levels of confidence, educational aspirations and academic achievement in students.

¹⁰ Universities Australia, 'Advancing Equity and Participation in Australian Higher Education' (April 2008) <http://www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au/documents/publications/policy/equity/0408_Equity_Particip_Action_Plan.pdf>.

¹¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics, "The Health and Welfare of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples 2008," <[http://www.ausstats.abs.gov.au/Ausstats/subscriber.nsf/0/51B575E133A75C6DCA2574390014EDFE/\\$File/47040_2008.pdf](http://www.ausstats.abs.gov.au/Ausstats/subscriber.nsf/0/51B575E133A75C6DCA2574390014EDFE/$File/47040_2008.pdf)>.

The Government should build on the successes of current institutional initiatives for improving access and retention and implement them nationwide. There needs to be increased public funding for the expansion of such initiatives so that Higher Education providers can stop campaigning for private funding and focus on improving campus life for all students.

Outreach programs

Universities should be encouraged to offer outreach programs (in cooperation with high schools) designed to actively inform students of their future possibilities beyond the completion of high school, and promote the attainability of Higher Education. Further education after high school is simply not an option for some students because they believe it is unachievable. Outreach programs of this kind would require long-term annual funding. Similar initiatives that have been taken by UNSW are discussed in the next section.

This may also involve educational partnerships with specific industries, for example, teaching, nursing, engineering and private businesses, to provide training, work experience or preparatory programs for students during senior high school or in the first year of University. These programs would enable students to decide whether they would enjoy a career in a particular field, thereby improving retention rates.

Transitional programs

There needs to be adequate funding and support for transitional programs to ease the changeover between secondary and Higher Education –these programs should equip students with academic and social skills to fully prepare them for university life. This may involve adding academic skills and learning programs to high school curricula, or offering such programs as elective subjects. Similar programs should also be offered to first year undergraduates.

Enrolled Students

There also needs to be increased support for students once they are enrolled in Higher Education. Students need greater access to academic resources, tuition, skills workshops, and other services such as Counselling or academic advising. There should be national standards across all Higher Education providers for these facilities in the way that they are funded, structured and provided to students, including appropriate training for staff providing tuition and advice, and an adequate measure of resources in reference to the student population.

There are already many institutional initiatives aimed at improving Indigenous and low SES participation across Australia. The Government should focus on the successes of these programs and find a way to replicate and implement these in all Higher Education providers.

Recommendations:

- That it be made compulsory across all States for students to be either enrolled in school, training, or other further education until 18 years (or equivalent Year 12).
- That the Government offer specific funding to Universities to participate in outreach programs to raise the aspirations of high school students.
- That the Government in conjunction with Universities research possible educational partnerships with specific industries to encourage high school students to consider careers in specific fields of study.
- That the Government in conjunction with Universities engage in greater research into non-traditional support systems (targeted at Indigenous and low SES students) for ensuring participation, for example transitional learning programs.
- That the Government give Incentives for universities to institute greater support programs for enrolled students, and actively regulate this support.
- That the Government undertake extensive and comprehensive research into successful existing initiatives and implement ways to develop them further across all relevant educational institutions.

Q. 10. What institutional initiatives have proved successful in increasing low SES or indigenous participation and success?

UNSW has several initiatives aimed at increasing low SES or indigenous participation and success. These initiatives are offered at no cost to the students and are aimed at both potential and current students.

Indigenous Participation

UNSW is home to the Nura Gili Indigenous Programs Centre created in 2004 (it was previously known as the Aboriginal Education Program). This Centre offers/provides pathways to learning opportunities education for Indigenous students through Preparatory Programs, the Indigenous Winter School, the Indigenous Admission Scheme (through UAC) and the Indigenous Tutorial Admission Scheme.

Pre-Programs

Nura Gili runs four week intensive Preparatory Programs for Indigenous pathways into the areas of Business, Social Work, Law or Medicine in conjunction with the relevant Faculties. Applications are open Australia wide to all Indigenous students who are seeking university entry into these areas. Successful completion of a pre-program can lead to entry in an undergraduate program at UNSW. In 2007, 120 students participated in the various pre-programs offered by the Nura Gili Indigenous Programs Centre.

Commerce and Economics Preparation Program

The CEPP preparation program which started in 2003 incorporates core business subjects with academic workshops on learning and study skills. High school students undertake intensive studies over 4 weeks in business related subjects, and are introduced to University life. Successful graduates of the program are offered a place in either a Bachelor of Commerce or Economics at UNSW.

Pre-Social Work Program

The Pre- Social Work program was introduced in 2004, and provides Indigenous students with an alternative entry into the Bachelor of Social Work. It is run in conjunction with School of Social Work in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences.

This program assists Indigenous students to gain entry into the Bachelor of Social Work. Admission into UNSW is based on the successful completion of the four-week program and an interview with Nura Gili and a faculty staff member related to the students application.

Pre-Law Program

The 4 week pre-law program is aimed at students who have been offered a place to study law or who wish to study law in the future by introducing students to legal subjects and academic skills. It is a joint initiative of the Nura Gili Indigenous Programs Centre and the UNSW Faculty of Law. The Pre-Law Program acts as a special entry scheme for Indigenous students. After its successful completion, students may be offered entry into the Bachelor of Laws or in some circumstances a non-law Bachelor degree (with the possibility of transferring to LLB after their first year). It is a nationally recognised program and successful students may gain entry into other Australian Universities. The Kingsford Legal Centre's Guide to Indigenous Legal Education reported that between 1991 and 2000, 25 of the 66 Indigenous students who graduated in law were students at UNSW. The Pre-Law Program has been offered for more than 10 years.

Pre-Medicine Program

This course began in 1998 and is designed to provide support and training to better prepare Indigenous students for study in the field of medicine. It is jointly managed by Nura Gili and the Faculty of Medicine, and is open to applicants from all over Australia.

The Pre Medicine Program works in conjunction with the Indigenous Entry into Medicine Scheme. The Entry Scheme is run by the Sydney Campus of the Rural Clinical School as an alternate entry program for Indigenous students. Students who apply for entry via the Entry Scheme must successfully complete the Pre- Program to be considered. There were 8 new Indigenous enrolments in undergraduate Medicine at UNSW in 2008. This is one of the largest intakes in the country.

Indigenous Australian Engineering Summer School

There is also the Indigenous Australian Engineering Summer School which was launched in 1997. It is a residential program designed to help encourage senior high school students (Years 10-12) to consider engineering as a tertiary study option. The 5 day live in school is offered to 20 students annually from across Australia, and is fully sponsored; accommodation, travel costs to Sydney and tuition fees are funded by Engineering Aid (a not-for profit organisation).

Indigenous Winter School

The Nura Gili Indigenous Programs Centre offers an Indigenous Winter School Program for high school students across Australia. This week long program encourages students from Years 10-12 to complete their secondary studies by presenting options for further education.

Winter School Programs are offered in Social Work, Education, Medicine, Engineering, Law, Architecture and Design, Commerce and Economics, Visual Arts and Performing Arts. All of these programs are designed to give Indigenous students a chance to experience University student life first hand and gain an insight as to what it would be like to study a particular course of interest.

2008 saw the largest intake of students ever at Indigenous Winter School. There were 135 participants from across Australia. This number is hoped to increase to 150 students annually with the recent \$1 million dollar investment by financial firm USB to support the program over the next three years. Nura Gili has found that the majority of students who attend the Winter School subsequently applying for the various Pre-Programs also on offer.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Admissions Scheme (Access)

In addition to entry via the Pre-Programs, Nura Gili assists Indigenous students with alternative access to UNSW through the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Admissions Scheme. The Access Scheme helps Indigenous students gain entry into UNSW without the prerequisite of having to complete the HSC or its equivalent; or the need to have received a minimum UAI for entry into a particular degree. It is run in conjunction with Nura Gili and the Universities Admission Centre (UAC) and is available for all undergraduate courses offered by UNSW. In addition to the submission of the UNSW Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Admissions Scheme Form and an application with UAC, admission through the Access scheme is based on the applicant's interview with Nura Gili and academic staff of the relevant Faculty. Students must demonstrate that they have the capacity to undertake study at the tertiary level in their chosen field of study, and are suitable for such study. Consideration is also given to previous relevant experience, gained through employment, training or other qualifications from educational institutions. In 2005, one third of the applicants to the ACCESS Scheme had previously completed programs through Nura Gili Indigenous Programs Centre.

Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme (ITAS)

The Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme offers students of UNSW tutorial assistance once they have enrolled. Students are able to receive an allocated number of hours of subject-specific tutoring throughout the semester at no cost. It is administered by Nura Gili in conjunction with the Department of Education, Science and Training, and is aimed at improving Indigenous retention rates.

Low SES Participation

ASPIRE is a new outreach initiative run by the UNSW Student Equity and Disabilities Unit (SEADU) to encourage secondary students from Years 8-10 to pursue Higher Education. The Program is specifically aimed at raising the aspirations of high school students from low socio-economic backgrounds. Current UNSW student volunteers co-ordinate a range of activities both at the participating schools and on-campus to build awareness for those students who may never have considered Higher Education. It aims to raise awareness of university, student aspirations, achievements and university applications.

SEADU currently works with around 400 students in 5 schools and has 50 ASPIRE ambassadors (current UNSW student volunteers). The project is a cumulative program which includes campus

visits and in school workshops. Activities range from a Year 9 Courses and Careers in-school workshop facilitated ASPIRE Ambassadors to a Year 10 on campus Taster Day where students visit a range of faculties and take part in subject taster sessions.

The pilot program began in 2008 with five local high schools. As this is a new initiative, no concrete information about its success is yet available. However, so far all activities have had extremely positive feedback from all stakeholders. Initial indicators suggest activities successfully raise awareness of and interest in university. During the first half of 2008, 56% of students who participated in the project had no awareness of university or actively did not want to go to university before the project began, after being involved in the project this dropped to only 2% of students.

Q.11. 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?

Information about the impact on individuals of the failure to gain income support or the inadequacy of income support is not readily available from UNSW. It is also very hard to find current statistics regarding students.

There is a wealth of information about the quality of particular courses and teaching available through the Division of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor. Yearly surveys are conducted about the quality of education, but no information is collected regarding the adequacy of income support and its affect on learning.

The SRC also conducts student surveys and some interesting statistics were collected regarding the recent introduction of the 12 week semester at UNSW. 86 per cent of students who are engaged in paid employment while studying said they are finding it harder to balance study and work. To cope with the 12 week semester, 10.5 per cent of students had to drop units of credit and 8.2 per cent said they had to drop units for other reasons. While these figures do not speak directly to the issue of income support, they do provide a more meaningful insight into the increasing pressures on students and the detrimental affects these are having on their studies.

Students are experiencing less face-to-face contact hours with lecturers and tutors. Students are under mounting strain to study on their own, without vital academic support. They are now paying for an education based on less teaching time, and as a result, 66.2 per cent of UNSW students want a reduction in fees.

Casework from the Student Support Department shows that underlying almost all academic problems is the constant need to juggle study with paid work. Problems relating to academic misconduct stem from missing classes or incomplete assignments because students are forced to put paid work before their studies.

Any initiatives taken by the Government to address these issues would require a better understanding of the needs of students beyond the 'quality of teaching.' All universities should be required to actively gather information about the inadequacy of student income support, and other relevant factors, to effectively respond to these challenges. This information is highly underestimated as to its negative impact on a student's ability to successfully participate in Higher Education.

Section 3.3 The Student Experience of Higher Education

Q. 12. How can the quality of the student experience within Australia's higher education institutions be monitored nationally?

The learning and teaching aspect of individual universities greatly impacts on the student experience as it may be the core component of their experience if they chose not to or are unable to participate in extracurricular activities. As mentioned previously, UNSW runs a number of surveys and questionnaires designed to monitor the student experience. Each survey has a different purpose and is used in different forums.

The Course and Teaching Evaluation and Improvement (CATEI) Process gathers student feedback to facilitate the improvement of learning and teaching within individual courses¹². The CATEI surveys are voluntary and are completed by students at the end of each semester across all faculties. It is the responsibility of the course co-ordinators to make changes or improvements to the course with the feedback.

The CATEI surveys ask students to rate how much they agree or disagree with statements regarding their course such as: "The aims of the course were clear to me", "The course was challenging and interesting", or "I was provided with clear information about the assessment requirements for this course" as well as provide statements regarding their experience of the course.

There are also a number of other student surveys that obtain feedback on overall student satisfaction with the university, the quality of the educational experience and the quality of facilities and services that support teaching and learning. These surveys include the UNSW Survey of Student Engagement 2006, UNSW Student Experience Survey 2005, and UNSW Survey of First Year Student Engagement 2004¹³. UNSW graduates are also asked to participate in the Graduate Destinations Survey and the Course Experience Questionnaire.

Each of the surveys provides some valuable overviews of strategic components of the student experience but all have major limitations for thorough insight into the student experience. There are time delays between the collection of the data and the publication of a report of the feedback, which might dilute the usefulness of the feedback. The surveys are also unable to catalogue feedback from students about issues at the forefront of the student experience, which include things like resourcing, access, the impact of class sizes on the quality of learning and other dynamic elements of the student experience both internally at the university and externally with income support and the work/study balance.

The UNSW SRC has recognised these limitations of university surveys and have started running our own surveys to catalogue and monitor student experiences that affect students on a day to day basis. The first survey conducted by the SRC was in response to recent calendar changes at the university. The results of this survey are being communicated to the university and address some student concerns that the university does not have or is unable to attain hard evidence for.

We were able to gather student responses to specific but widespread practices within the university, such as whether students thought introductory sessions were beneficial, the accessibility of course outlines and students' attitudes towards weekend exams.

This level of detail that the SRC is able to provide the university about what students are experiencing is important to monitoring and improving the student experience. All students, regardless of whether their mode of study is on campus or external, online or face to face, need an

¹² UNSW Learning and Teaching, <www.unsw.edu.au/learning/pve/catei.html>

¹³ Published by UNSW Institutional Analysis and Reporting – Reports, restricted access to UNSW only. <www.planning.unsw.edu.au>

independent, democratic and well resourced student representative body to push their university to improve the student experience, learning and teaching and other policies and procedures for students.

Student organisations are essential to the self regulation of the higher education sector for the continual improvement of universities in innovative ways that cater to the dynamic expectations of students. The importance of these services as well as the many others provided by student organisations has already been highlighted in the discussion paper where the impact of the previous Government's legislation on voluntary student unionism was discussed¹⁴.

Information and Communication Technology

Most students have embraced online tools for learning for its convenience and on-demand nature as it allows students the ability to manage their time and assist in balancing study and work commitments. This is reiterated in results from the SRC survey that found that 65.3 per cent of students want lecture notes to be provided online before class and 54.1 per cent want lectures to be podcasted. 31.3 per cent of students also wanted better use of online teaching (e.g. online discussion groups) to improve their educational experience. It must be noted, however, that a vast majority of UNSW students study on campus and not by distance education.

As the discussion paper has outlined, there is an increasing amount of interest in flexible study options that have been facilitated by ICT software¹⁵. A simple look at the demographic of students that enrol into universities with a focus on distance education or online learning shows that mature students are more attracted to these forms of learning and teaching and the type of student experience these universities offer. To elaborate more clearly, UNSW offers mostly courses that are delivered on campus and over 50% of UNSW students are under 25. Over 50% of students at universities such as the University of New England or Open Universities Australia are over 25 with a much higher percentage of students over 40 (Table. 1).

Students are not a homogenous mass. If the student experience were to be monitored at the national level, the expectations and needs of students from different age groups, mode of study and stages in their career must be taken into consideration and implemented into a system that adequately provides direction for services and support for each of the different types of students.

Is there evidence that declining student staff ratios have impacted the quality of the student experience?

Despite student expectations for an online element to their education, many students still consider face to face interactions as an essential component of their student experience. As the HER discussion paper already asserts, there is little hard evidence of the impact on the quality of learning that rising student:staff ratios has had on the student experience¹⁶. However, the recent SRC survey found that 40.7 percent of students want smaller class sizes, which suggests that a large portion of students do not feel that their expectations are being met in this regard.

Table.1 Percentage of students per age group for 2007 enrolments

Age Group	UNSW ¹⁷ (%)	OUA ¹⁸ (%)	UNE ¹⁹ (External) (%)
<20	27	5	1
20-24	40	28	14
25-29	13	24	18
30-39	13	26	32
40+	7	16	35

¹⁴ Review of Australian Higher Education, p36

¹⁵ Review of Australian Higher Education, p36

¹⁶ Review of Australian Higher Education, p35

¹⁷ UNSW Institutional Analysis and Reporting Office <www.planning.unsw.edu.au>

¹⁸ Open Universities Australia Annual Report 2007

¹⁹ UNE Planning and Institutional Research <<http://planning.une.edu.au>>

SECTION 3.7 HIGHER EDUCATION'S CONTRIBUTION TO AUSTRALIA'S ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CAPITAL

Q. 25. How would you define knowledge transfer and community engagement in an Australian context?

The SRC defines "knowledge transfer" in an Australian context to mean the following:

- the use of education and skills in non-traditional areas
- use of knowledge gained through formal education in areas outside the usual scope of a degree
- use of knowledge for social good/welfare purposes

As such, knowledge transfer involves the use of skills developed within a tertiary learning environment for purposes beyond the vocational boundaries of a course or degree.

The SRC defines "community engagement" in a higher education context as (a) philanthropic and voluntary use of time and skills outside the professional workforce, and (b) the use of knowledge and experience to foster community benefit, whether in matters of public interest or elsewhere.

Q. 26. 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?

Knowledge transfer and community engagement are extremely valuable roles for contemporary higher education institutions. Universities have always been sources of community engagement: students begin to develop skills which they can employ on a voluntary basis during their non-study time and continue to use post-education.

University study develops organisation skills which can be used in a huge variety of ways in the community. Education builds these skills which are used in families, local community organisations and other arenas outside the traditional paid work arena. To some extent these are not "additional roles" blending with a university's traditional role if the above is accepted. Rather, the roles are carried out within the existing university services, in particular the student organisations. These roles should be identified more clearly by universities and the community which funds them. They could become a more visible demonstration of the value of the tertiary sector to the wider community.

The UNSW model of a Supplementary Transcript is an ideal one for other institutions to follow. This is a formal record of community engagement by students whilst enrolled at UNSW, and can be presented to an employer along with a traditional transcript and CV. The intention of the Supplementary Transcript is to promote voluntary and community involvement and recognise the extent of a student's involvement and participation in their community and campus life.

Active student unions or societies need to maintain a secure presence on university campuses if the potential community engagement is to be fully developed. Examples from the Arc @ UNSW student organisation indicate the capacity for community engagement to be harnessed from the volunteer interest in the student body. As of December 2007 the UNSW campus has 39,067 enrolled students, including 23,624 full-time students. This is an enormous population to draw upon for non-academic community engagement.

The volunteer courses run by Arc @ UNSW are recognised by the University on its Supplementary Transcript. Examples of student community engagement include the Volunteer School Tutoring Program, the Walamamuru regional community development project run in conjunction with the Nuru Gili Indigenous Resource Centre on campus, and the Mosaic Fusion Forums exploring issues of cultural identity with local school students and run in conjunction with the Department of Education. Such programs could not exist without the support of the university and the cross-subsidisation of student services through retail and sponsorship. UNSW is a large and well-resourced campus, and is capable of sustaining community engagement activities in a post-VSU environment. The extent and reach of programs would be far greater if there was more formal

recognition of a university's role in community engagement, and resourcing made available on this basis. Smaller universities, particularly in regional areas, would be even less equipped to carry on such a role in the post-VSU climate.

Several Australian universities have extensive involvement through individual faculties in community engagement projects or services they operate. The Discussion Paper details some examples of these (for example at page 64), and points to overseas studies which argue for the development of community engagement through the tertiary education sector. A key point is the alignment of the academic services with non-academic, welfare or needs-based services which a university may be well-equipped to provide or resource.

The University of NSW Law Faculty has operated Kingsford Legal Centre for over 25 years. Its community outreach program is an example of how an academic role within a university has developed a "community engagement" function. All law students are required to spend time at the Centre, and many graduates of the faculty who are practicing solicitors volunteer at the Centre, assisting members of the community with legal problems. This service could not operate without volunteers.

There is a highly active Engineers Without Borders Chapter on the UNSW campus, promoted by the Faculty. Its activities are flagged by the student community as a means to alternative career paths and community development through skills acquired during academic study. Students may work on development projects as part of overseas aid work.

These examples of university-based activities indicate that community engagement and knowledge transfer are easily accommodated within the tertiary education sector, and identify natural alignments with academic units. These are analogous to the "Third Stream" activities referred to in the Discussion Paper²⁰ which are recognised as the key arena in which universities interact with the rest of society.

The Discussion Paper notes the difficulty of identifying performance measures relating to knowledge transfer and community engagement. We suggest that community engagement becomes a factor which each university identifies as part of its AUQA Review, and opportunities for increased community engagement be identified as part of this process.

Q. 27. 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?

Any funding model needs to take account of the non-academic services and activities which contribute to knowledge transfer and community engagement. As an example, university clubs and societies have been extremely valuable sources of training, connection with peers, skill building and non-classroom learning. These activities can also be formative in a student's career path. It is not in doubt that knowledge transfer and community engagement are legitimate and appropriate roles for higher education institutions. Such institutions need to provide for non-academic services which promote knowledge transfer and community engagement.

The Arc@ UNSW model provides for the cross-subsidisation of non-academic services by income-generating services such as retail and corporate sponsorship. This model allows a great number of services to be provided by one organisation.

It is recommended that a new system of compulsory subscriptions for basic services be introduced to guarantee provision of activities and facilities which promote non-academic student life. Reports from campuses significantly affected by Voluntary Student Unionism highlight the loss of non-academic services such as volunteer programs and training, student societies and welfare programs. These services are the most direct way that knowledge transfer and community engagement have been provided through the university sector previously.

²⁰ Review of Australian Higher Education, p54

Q. 28. What incentives or unintended consequences are there in the current arrangements for higher education funding?

Students frequently report increasing financial hardship as a result of deferral of HECS loans and very large FEE-HELP loans, and that repayment of these amounts coincides with their entry into the graduate workforce when they also may seek to purchase a home or start a family. Significant rises in fees for most degrees has probably led to diminished capacity to enter the housing market, leading to longer rental periods and consideration of delaying marriage and children. Students leave tertiary education with more substantial debts than ever before, and find it much harder to establish a savings base. Extra contributions to superannuation are far more difficult for most people new to the full-time workforce when a significant debt must also be paid off.

It is also noted that the 25% upfront discount for HECS payments may unintentionally advantage wealthier students at the expense of those from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Course fees which can already be paid off in full by well-resourced families are able to be significantly reduced by an upfront payment. The 25% discount may represent an incentive, but it is one only accessible to a small percentage of the student body.

Universities have been pressured to reduce numbers of teaching staff, shorten academic semesters and increase class sizes. Online learning has also been strongly promoted, and while this is often a practical and preferred means of study for part-time postgraduates, it is not a substitute for in-class engagement for undergraduate students.

One unintended consequence of these changes is likely to be a sense that the educational experience is devalued, and this will impact on universities' capacity to attract alumni donors and develop a philanthropic culture. Campus life and activities, and the community engagement which is connected to a well developed campus life, may suffer as students occupy less time at their university.

Q. 29. 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?

We would agree with the Discussion Paper's position that the current funding arrangements are at best complex and at worst anomalous and irrational²¹.

Current funding models place excessive reliance on full-fee paying international students, encourages the expansion of less costly degree courses to the possible detriment of more expensive programs such as health sciences and engineering, and lessens the ability of universities to fund capital expenditure as resources are diverted to cross-subsidise courses. It is also noted that Voluntary Student Unionism has resulted in most universities having to find additional funds to provide the services previously provided by student organisations, resulting in a further diversion of resources. Current funding models are unlikely to be adequate to secure the future of the higher education sector.

Options and policy considerations:

The Discussion Paper notes that while Australia's overall spending on higher education is relatively high as a proportion of GDP, the percentage increase in the last decade has been relatively low, and low by comparison to other OECD countries²². We would argue for an overall rise in the higher education budget, with particular targeting of areas of skill shortage such as mathematics and biomedical engineering. From a policy standpoint it is not in dispute that development of workforce

²¹ Review of Australian Higher Education, p65

²² Review of Australian Higher Education, p57

skills in these areas will make a substantial contribution to Australia's technological and economic advancement.

We would argue in favour of a distribution of funding in a way which encourages excellence in all institutions and supports centres of excellence in "fields of demonstrated international competitiveness, regardless of institution"²³. We do not support moves to reduce the overall number of universities, and would note that any move to reduce the number of institutions is likely to have a disproportionately negative effect on regional centres, in which a university is a major source of income and employment and a benefit to the culture of a smaller city. We argue for the development of greater specialisations within campuses, with a view to building these to the highest standards of international competitiveness both in terms of teaching and research.

We note the comments in the Discussion Paper regarding the philanthropic culture in countries like the United States which enables universities to be exceptionally well resourced. It is most likely that Australia has never developed a similar culture due to (a) most university students living off campus and not establishing the strong college culture evident in the United States, and (b) as the Discussion Paper notes, there has been an expectation that tertiary education is and will remain publicly funded.

Universities, including UNSW go to great lengths to encourage alumni donations and promote centres of research for targeted philanthropy. However as previously discussed, the changes to the delivery of education and reduction in services diminish the university experience and may discourage graduates from donating or maintaining a supportive relationship with their institution. Improving the university experience is necessarily linked to maintaining an alumni relationship and sourcing assistance from the alumnus. A more extensive promotion of the higher education sector in the Australian community will improve the national view of the sector. Critically, Australia needs to adopt a new view of its higher education sector to establish such a culture.

Greater incentives to contribute to higher education through the tax system should be considered. This may be arranged by amending the existing HECS repayment system to directly connect repayments with an individual university, or making tax concessions for direct donations to higher education institutions more attractive.

A means test could be introduced along the lines of differential HECS to make some determination of the relative contributions students are required to make towards their education. Currently there is no connection between the cost of a degree and a student's capacity to pay or actual means.

If a "compact"²⁴ model is considered, any policy must recognise the potential danger that smaller and newer higher education institutions may face greater difficulties securing funding in competition with larger (in particular Group of Eight universities).

²³ Review of Australian Higher Education, p60

²⁴ Gallagher, M, 2008, Investing in the Future: Renewing Australian Tertiary Education Policy, Presentation at University of Melbourne, 21 July,
<http://www.go8.edu.au/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=161&Itemid=164>

Q. 31. Is it time to reshape tertiary education in Australia and streamline financing and regulatory arrangements? If so, what structural changes would you make and why?

Universities are created under state law yet funded federally. We believe a national approach to higher education funding is necessary. This would streamline the funding and regulatory arrangements and allow one tier of government to be accountable.

As an example, rules about what by-laws universities can make should be consistent nationally. There should be consideration of national standards for university complaints and grievance processes, similar in approach to the guidance in the 2007 Education Services for Overseas Students National Code of Practice.

Currently university decisions may be appealed in various tribunals established under state law, and each state Ombudsman has jurisdiction to receive complaints about universities.

For self-regulating institutions, a national framework, consistent applicable laws across all states and affirmation of the status of universities as corporations for the purposes of the Trade Practices Act would assist in the maintenance of standards, and reduce the current regulation and “red tape” identified by institutions²⁵.

Federal coverage of all other higher education providers would give a framework to protect student rights as consumers, ensuring standards are applied more rigorously. If a Commonwealth “takeover” of the sector was initiated, extreme caution would need to be maintained to ensure existing funding levels were not jeopardised, nor that there was significant pressure placed upon smaller institutions to amalgamate or close.

The preferred policy outcome would be the creation of an ‘Independent “Buffer” Body’²⁶ (at p69) that may function as both a funding council and quality assurance agency. The reasons for this preference include the likely removal or inhibition of political interference into the higher education sector through any potential ‘pork barrelling’ of any kind and it would still allow governments to induce or make improvements or changes to higher education by setting high level policy frameworks. The body would need to have well defined terms of reference and scope and be comprised of stakeholders and experts in higher education. The Discussion Paper’s statement of function and characteristics of higher education in modern Australia²⁷ would be suitable objectives for the Body.

Since students are at the core of higher education and participation and the student experience are key characteristics of the vision of higher education, it would be pertinent that students are part of the Independent ‘Buffer’ Body. The National Union of Students and the Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations would be the recommended organisations to provide the input needed for students to be represented.

If an Independent ‘Buffer’ Body were created, its goals must be to improve higher education as a whole and not favour the advancement of certain institutions over others. It is for this reason that there are reservations to creating the Body for the purpose of adjudicating or negotiating mission specific compact funding for universities.

Smaller, regional or less established universities will not have the same bargaining power as larger, more prestigious universities to negotiate for compact funding to improve their campuses. This may widen the gap between the accessibility of rural, indigenous and low SES students to universities that are large enough or resourced enough to provide the additional support these students might need. Universities may eventually unintentionally or intentionally exclude such

²⁵ Review of Australian Higher Education, p67

²⁶ Review of Australian Higher Education, p69

²⁷ Review of Australian Higher Education, p1-3

students if they do not have programs or the intention to increase the participation rates of indigenous or low SES students in their missions. This may be seen as a step backward if a national approach to improving indigenous and low SES participation and success in higher education unless all universities are given funding for initiatives that achieve this outcome.

Q. 32. Is the level of regulation in the sector appropriate? If not, why not, and what should be done to reduce the level of regulation?

There is merit in maintaining the existing self-accrediting process and AUQA monitoring. However, we suggest that all higher education institutions should be required to comply with some key standards in relation to provision of student information, complaints and appeals processes, access to key support and welfare services. The current ESOS National Code of Practice sets out standards which must currently be maintained for providers to overseas students, and these same standards should be adhered to for the entire student body. If students are identified as “consumers” by Commonwealth courts, rigorous consumer protection standards must be developed and maintained in the sector.

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