

Review of Australian Higher Education

Submission in response to the to the Commonwealth Government's Review of Higher Education Discussion paper

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Responses to questions for discussion

Chapter 1 Higher education in modern Australia

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

At 1.2 the functions of education split between self-fulfillment and value to a society or economy. What is missing here is recognition of the idea that knowledge and understanding may be intrinsically valuable *as well as* extrinsically valuable. In part, we value basic science, or philosophical understanding as an end in itself- and not because it is satisfying to the knower or useful to her society.

Similarly, in 1.3 the characteristics of higher education focus on the application of the knowledge and skills for social or vocational ends, overlooking the value of greater understanding or knowledge independent of its application. (These points are not meant to discount the extrinsic value and use of higher education, rather to ensure that the statement reflects the full range of values of higher education).

Section 3.1 Meeting labour market and industry needs

2. 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?

Three factors stand as impediments to innovation in the development of courses and programs (some of these have been resolved in some institutions, some of the time). First, high levels of government and institutional accountability that have arisen in recent years (eg through AQUA), which have created long lead times between the development of a new idea for a teaching program and its ultimate delivery. Second, the funding structures have created a range of disincentives for creative cooperation between institutions (or even within institutions) to develop novel teaching programs, or novel modes of delivery (outside of offshore programs structured with large profit margins – and open to high levels of risk). Third, most teaching programs have been “run down”

over the past decade, retiring staff have not been replaced and subject- or course-offerings have been trimmed to reduce marginal costs. There are few energetic, enthusiastic academics available with the experience in high quality “niche” curriculum development skills to respond to demand or to take risks.

3. 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?

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

The emphasis in higher education in developing students' generic skills over the past decade has displaced recognition that a skill is only valuable if a person understands what it is for and in what contexts it is applicable. That is, a student needs to learn the substantial ground from which a skill is derived, not just the skill. We need workers with substantive knowledge about relevant areas as well as the capacity to adapt their knowledge, understanding and ability to learn to new problems.

Philosophy is one discipline that can offer both the substantive critical understanding and applicable intellectual skills needed for 2020 and beyond. Philosophy develops linguistic competence and communication, analytic and critical skills and conceptual understanding, all needed to equip citizens for an ideas-based economy and workplaces relying on flexibility. These are integral to developing the citizens for the future needs of the Australian economy. Given the acknowledged shortage of workers with soft skills internationally, the case is only more urgent.

For the success of the ideas/education revolution and associated gains in productivity to be made, it is imperative that the 'soft skills' provided by philosophy, be recognized as valuable and supported, along with the hard skills often associated with the Sciences. This means providing funding, school curricula and work environments to attract people into these areas, as well as to retain specialists in Australasia.

Australia is a net exporter of academics, scientists and intellectuals with PhDs. Over the past decades, Australian universities have expanded their post-graduate programs to service national and international markets for workers with higher qualifications. However, some of the brightest and most promising of these highly trained Australians pursue their careers overseas, because of the limited opportunities to pursue academic or research careers within Australia. The relative stagnation of Commonwealth funding for Australian universities and the paucity of government- or privately- funded research institutions has drained Australia of an important national resource of researchers and excellent teachers. A shift in focus, from viewing education as merely a functional tool or profit-making commodity, to greater recognition of the direct social benefits to be gained from a diverse and well-educated citizenry is over-due to slow the brain-drain.

5. Are there particular examples of good practice where you can demonstrate either rapid response to skill shortages or successful initiatives to improve generic skills? The discipline of Philosophy in Australia has been effective in developing learning units directed towards enhancing students development of skills in critical thinking, understanding and awareness of ethical issues and responsible science across a wide array of disciplines.

Philosophy programs in Australia have implemented generic skills attribution through the introduction of critical skills and critical inquiry courses, within their own discipline and as foundational units. Philosophy programs also play a significant role in the delivery of skills based service teaching (ie the role of “critical thinking” subjects in a wide range of professional courses and the introduction of ethics and professional practice subjects in commerce, nursing, law and engineering degrees). In 2006 37% of Philosophy EFTSL was taught to students outside Society and Culture, in areas such as: Management and Commerce; Creative Arts; Natural and Physical Science; Education; Health; Engineering and Information Technology. Source: Students, Selected Higher Education Statistics (DEEWR).

There is a current Australian Learning and Teaching Council Discipline Based Initiative grant that is (*inter alia*) canvassing the range of such teaching and identifying “best practice” examples of teaching and learning strategies to improve generic skills and the acquisition of substantive skills and understanding, to share across the discipline.

6. 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?

Historically, Australia has held a functional attitude towards education and has valued education that developed directly applicable vocational skills as preparation for participation in the workforce. This approach served Australia well during periods of economic growth based on primary production. It is less clear that this functionalist approach will serve Australia as well into the future. It has become clear that neither the planet nor the nation can afford to rely on resource extraction as a long-term source of wealth, and that young Australians will need a different kind of education as preparation for the future. It is unlikely that vocational skills or professional accreditation will be sufficient. Workers will need to have acquired substantive knowledge and to have developed analytical skills that will ensure that they can continue to adapt, learn and re-skill throughout their work-lives. An education that introduces students to the conceptual structures that support science, mathematics, history, language, social institutions and values can help us to grapple with the challenges of climate change, support for refugees, economic reform and cultural recognition.

The Higher Education sector has an important role to play in responding to demographic change: first we need to recognise the need to mentor and develop new academics, to provide continuity in the higher education (and primary and secondary education) sector. We are currently producing more PhDs than ever before, but those who are employed in Universities (more often than not on casual or short term contract basis) are expected to take on high teaching loads with little research opportunities and negligible support for substantive curriculum development. At best we provide these academics with support for classroom teaching (use of the multimedia technologies, advice on structuring a class), but less on subject design or revision. With the anticipated loss of a substantial cohort of senior academics there will be a vacuum in expertise and experience which new staff will be poorly prepared to meet (this despite the obvious fact that the competition

amongst academic job seekers is such that level B recruits in continuing positions are often much better qualified at the time of appointment than academics appointed 15 years ago were at the time of their promotion to level C), The second demographic shift that the Higher Education sector needs to respond to is the changing demands in work and education in light of the post-boom demand for citizens with the ability to participate in the work force for a longer period (as there will be less access to government support in retirement), who are adaptable to a much more volatile employment market and who will retain their intellectual and physical capacities to change employment and to juggle the demands on their time between caring for parents and children, maintaining educational qualifications and participating in the workforce. As a society we have created high demands for future generations: it is not clear that the Higher Education sector is best placed to address all of these!

7. What is the relevance and applicability of the findings and approaches proposed in the United Kingdom paper, Higher Education at Work, for increasing skills levels in the workforce to Australia?

Section 3.2 Opportunities to participate in higher education

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

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?

10. What institutional initiatives have proved successful in increasing low SES or Indigenous participation and success? (Please provide information about outcomes as well as activities.)

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?

Section 3.3 The student experience of higher education

12. 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?

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

In some areas of higher education there will be uniform disciplinary content and generic skills that can be assessed nationally (similar to assessment in primary and secondary schools). However, many areas of university study are more particular-- students' educational experience is either developed within a holistic course of study (at a year

level or across a degree) or skills are developed in relation to a curriculum specific to an institution. In these cases evaluation of learning outcomes will need to be more particularistic and specific to the institution. In a discipline like philosophy, measurement of some learning outcomes may be relatively generic, but others (such as development of a student's ability to critically read and independently evaluate a specific theorist's argument) will prove more tricky as there are a number of variables to take into account including the philosophical approach being used, the context within which the theoretical argument has been introduced and the philosophical inclinations of the assessor. Review of criteria based assessment within a particular subject may well prove a more defensible approach to evaluating quality of student's learning outcomes than some form of standardized testing of skills, given the perverse incentives that such testing may create.

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

Section 3.4 Connecting with other education and training sectors

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

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

17. 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?

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

Section 3.5 Higher education's role in the national innovation system

19. By what mechanisms should research activities in Australian universities be supported?

Clearly adequate funding of research activities is necessary to avoid the cross subsidization of research by teaching, if Australia hopes to retain high quality researchers and to sustain the research effort.

Research recognition and/or rewards should in the final instance be granted to the individual researcher (or team where appropriate). It is vital that rewarding is acknowledged by way of those who actually drive the research and 'discover' things in the arts and sciences. There are extant models of this overseas which we would do well to follow.

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

It appears that in small disciplines we have created artificial competition between institutions that discourages cross-institutional research. The rewards structures for institutions to be “lead” institutions for national competitive grants means that even where research does not depend on expensive equipment or access to specialist labs, researchers are discouraged from working collaboratively. There is evidence that successful researchers are more likely to develop collaborations with researchers overseas rather than to foster concentration of research within Australia. Greater emphasis on the fitness of a team of researchers for a research project, rather than institutional competition for research grants would foster productive research collaboration.

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

While there may be good reasons for discouraging all universities to cover the same undergraduate terrain (while still providing students with adequate skills to pursue their discipline at advanced levels), it is less obvious that bifurcation of universities into teaching only or research universities would be a benefit to the overall higher education sector and the quality of research within it. There is some evidence from the Australasian Association of Philosophy’s data collection that research focused departments do not necessarily produce more research publications or HDR completions than those that do not include research only staff. However, those programs where there are very heavy teaching loads, small numbers of continuing academics and few senior appointments do suffer low publication rates, low numbers of grant successes and few HDR completions. It is also likely that over-burdened teachers who focus exclusively on undergraduate teaching will lack incentives or opportunities to improve their teaching by reading current research. On the other hand, researchers who also teach are likely to be better able to connect current debates with their teaching material, providing students with better learning experiences while also honing their research in light of teaching experience.

Section 3.6 Australia’s higher education sector in the international arena

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

23. 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 purposes should it serve?

24. Can you provide any examples of good practice in encouraging local students to undertake study in other countries?

Section 3.7 Higher education's contribution to Australia's economic, social and cultural capital

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

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?

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?

Section 3.8 Resourcing the system

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

The Higher Education Review has an opportunity to expound an education vision beyond the parameters of problem-steering and gap-filling. Once technical training as an issue is stabilized, the question of what kind of National Intellectual Capability could we and should we possess ought to be at the forefront of an 'education revolution'. To this end, the federal government could strategize ways in which to

- i) Raise the degree entry standards nationally.
- ii) Induce much greater collaboration between institutions, thus increasing our international standing through less internal competition over status and resources.
- iii) Dissolve the strategy of only 'teaching' or research institutions.
- iv) Decouple the link between research resources and teaching resources in so far as universities do not have to raise (either) one at the cost of the other. Evidence currently shows research can be accelerated through expropriating resources derived from teaching faculties.
- v) Stop increases to HECS and adjust thresholds for Youth allowance and Austudy because students' working hours are deteriorating the level of higher learning.
- vi) Give faculty/academics a rejuvenated status in the nation's eye akin to how nurses and teachers were raised in their professional standing. This will also allow better retention of academic staff who will increasingly be difficult to retain given the deterioration of pay levels etcetera.
- vii) International students should be better assimilated into the culture of learning so that quality is enhanced and 'cash-cow' imperatives no longer impinge upon standards of examination.

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? Vouchers should not be included in the new higher education system as they will impact

upon the system in such a way that 'smart states' and intensive hubs will not get the sort of impetus they require. An education revolution should aim at raising the overall standard, and not concentrate intellectual effort.

30. Are the current institutional arrangements for determining relative funding between higher education institutions appropriate? If not, what changes should be considered? An overall raising of the standard of higher education in Australia will most be effectively achieved if the Federal Government raises the depleted fundamental grant index and continues its maintenance through CPI indexation.

Section 3.9 Governance and regulation

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?

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?

While there should be clear regulation to determine whether or not an entity can be deemed a university in Australia (so as to preserve the status of an Australian university qualification and to require institutions granting such awards meet some level of tertiary standards), there is also room to free up the potential for universities to focus and develop strength in specific areas, to avoid excessive duplication of research and teaching effort (while recognising the need for access to a reasonable range of areas of study across the country).

The regulation and quality control mechanisms governing universities, currently, emphasizes risk-minimisation and accountability, while stifling creativity and flexibility. Currently the cost of pursuing innovation within and beyond University structures is very high as Universities are forced to "go it alone" bearing significant risk, while the government reporting mechanisms place high opportunity costs on such developments. As a result smaller and regional universities are poorly placed to attempt innovation and productive partnerships to avoid possible penalties.

33. Does Australia's Quality Assurance Framework need revision? If so, why? What changes would you make?

As indicated above AQUA has focused on process and risk-minimisation, without evaluating quality of programs offered through universities. In this sense AQUA has served as the "policeman at the elbow" of Universities; compelling compliance for the sake of compliance, rather than substantive engagement with issues of quality. Greater emphasis on the substance of learning and specific educational outcomes may improve AQUA's capacity to promote quality in Australian universities.

34. Are changes required to the Australian Qualifications Framework?

35. Is there more that could be done to improve university governance? How should this be done?

