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Response to the Review of Higher Education (2008) *The Bradley Review*

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Section One ~ Introduction to Charles Sturt University

Charles Sturt University is unique amongst Australian tertiary institutions, as both a truly regional university and one with a concerted focus on flexible learning and course delivery. It boasts a student population of 34,000 across seven main campuses, across western and southern New South Wales, and through distance education. CSU has significant mature age student enrolment, whilst also maintaining a long-standing tradition of first-generation university students.

Each of the main campuses of Charles Sturt University plays an important role within the communities in which they are based (Bathurst, Albury-Thurgoona, Wagga Wagga, Dubbo, Goulburn, Orange and Canberra), a reflection on the university's firm commitment to community engagement. They do this not only by providing employment and economic growth to their respective communities, but also producing a strong base of graduates, many of whom remain loyal to regional New South Wales, transitioning into employment with the regions that afforded them an education. Recent figures show that 70% of CSU graduates take up employment in regional Australia.

Charles Sturt University provides much more than a degree to their graduates, it provides opportunities for personal growth, preparing students for life. CSU offers more than what is simply taught in the classroom, instead offering a holistic education; well, at least it did prior to the full impact of voluntary student unionism, which has left gaping holes in student's opportunities for wider participation in university and community life.

Charles Sturt University was created from the amalgamation of a number of Colleges of Advanced Education (Mitchell, Riverina, Murray and Goulburn) following the Dawkins Reforms of 1989. The university has grown significantly in its 20-year lifespan, demonstrating two important concepts for higher education in this country: there is a place for flexible delivery for the changing needs of Australian citizens, and there is significant demand for places at regional universities with a need for Commonwealth support.

Section Two ~ Public Funding

At present, the system for funding public universities is significantly flawed. Regional universities are undervalued, and along with the tertiary sector in general, are significantly under-funded. As such, the Student Senate welcomes this review into the higher education sector.

The Student Senate feels that, for the most part, over the last decade changes to the higher education sector have been misdirected. A system of student contribution has steadily been manipulated to something more resembling a user-pays model, and this, in our opinion, is a serious mistake, leaving students in significant debt after graduation. The Student Senate believes the contribution of students has slid out of balance, and that this review should recommend a resolution to this issue.

Collectively students have faced HECS increase after HECS increase since the nineties, and are now the largest contributors to the operating costs of their university, and this trend has not looked like easing. Some consider this to be a perfect solution, continuing to load students up with increasing debt, a debt that apparently doesn't deter students from commencing tertiary studies.

Despite what is said about the dated (you could even say anachronistic) research cited to support this claim, students at Charles Sturt University are seriously concerned about the increasing cost of attending university, and its impact on their future. Students attend university because of a lack of alternatives, and the false assumption that you have to attend in order to become employable. Trades were let slide, conditions were poor, and short-term reward was low within vocational studies and trade.

Putting this aside, the suggestion that debt doesn't deter students is farcical, unless government policy is incorrect. Brendan Nelson introduced National Priority areas in 2006, reducing HECS costs for the study of nursing and teaching. The reason behind the move was to encourage students to take up places in areas of need, and that the reduced debt would foster interest. Julia Gillard replicated the strategy this year cutting HECS costs for the study of Science and Maths. You can't have it both ways, and in this case the government is correct; higher debt is a deterrent to study, and lower debt encourages participation.

Recommendation: The Student Senate recommends reducing the level of HECS charged per subject by 50%. Further, the Federal government should forgive one half of the HECS debt of every student graduate owing money to the Commonwealth under this scheme.

By doing so they should restate the concept of HECS being a student contribution to the higher education sector, and not a hefty transition to a user-pays environment.

One exception to the earlier statement about misguided changes to the sector, has been the introduction of regional loading. Its introduction was a long overdue recognition of the increased costs involved with sustaining a regional campus or university, as well as their value and necessity within the Australian educational spectrum.

Despite the positive move, the weight of regional loading has been underestimated, reducing the actual benefits gained out of the scheme.

Context- Regional Universities

Regional universities are important to their regional localities across the country, and share commonalities. They are central to regional economies, often being one of the largest employers in their respective regions, they tend to produce graduates more likely to seek employment in regional areas (many opting to remain in the region of their education provider), but beyond this they are often the cultural centre of their regions, acting as a catalyst for social and cultural development. What is consistent across all regional universities is that they provide much more to their communities than simply teaching and research.

Charles Sturt University acknowledges the role it plays in southern and western New South Wales, and embraces it. They encapsulate important functions played within regional communities as one of their four strategic goals, defining this wide spectrum as “regional engagement.”

AUQA stated that the economic benefits Charles Sturt University provided to the communities of Wagga Wagga, Bathurst, Dubbo, Albury and surrounding centres were “readily apparent”¹.

Research conducted by the Wester Research Institute shows that upon graduation, 70% of CSU graduates take up employment in regional Australia, including 20% of those who originated from metropolitan locations prior to their study².

¹ http://auqa.edu.au/gp/search/detail_print.php?gp_id=1882

² *ibid*

Charles Sturt University complies with the general picture provided above. CSU is a major employer within the communities at each of its campuses. Figures from 2003 show that CSU was directly responsible for 12% of employment in Bathurst and 9% in Wagga Wagga³. In total, Charles Sturt University is directly responsible for generating and contributing \$264 million to local economies, \$164 million of which was in the form of household income alone,⁴ considering flow on effects this equates to 3100 jobs.

Regional Loading at CSU

Charles Sturt University, more than most other regional universities, has not benefited from the introduction of regional loading, at least not to the extent it should. The second largest campus, Bathurst, is restricted to a 5% loading, as is the case with the Orange campus. The remainder fall within the 10% category.

A further failure in the regional loading scheme for Charles Sturt University is the devaluation of external students⁵, which make up the vast majority of the total student population at CSU.

Aside from a traditional focus on flexible delivery, Charles Sturt University actively seeks to develop and introduce new initiatives to improve service delivery to external students. Providing high quality external courses, particularly when the costs of such advancements mean there is no net cost saving for the provision of service to such students, should not disadvantage CSU.

Recommendation: The Student Senate recommends that values for regional loading be increased to a level more realistic of the inflated cost pressures incurred at regional universities (between 15 and 25% relative to metropolitan campuses), and that the provision for decreasing the value of external students be removed.

This would flow on to the removal of multimodal provisions.

³ ibid

⁴ Charles Sturt University; Quick Facts, news.csu.edu.au

⁵ Commonwealth Grant Scheme Guidelines No. 1, section 4.5.85

Commonwealth Funding: Teaching and Research

The current model of public funding provides an equal allocation for teaching places, and makes available research grants on a competitive basis. The limited avenues for public funding are a significant problem in the financing of public universities in Australia. The current system benefits a small number of universities, leaving the remainder under-resourced, more regrettable is that the universities that benefit tend to be Go8 universities with an historical reputation in research. This is even more unfortunate as it is these universities that are best placed to be successful in securing alternative funding avenues, including alumni and philanthropic donations.

The system encourages, and even cements, a tiered higher education sector composed of the haves and the have-nots. Regional universities need to be given a chance, with appropriate support to succeed in the wider community aspects they assume in their role.

The 2006 White Paper (Macklin) generated a great deal of excitement, and even hope, that changes would be coming to the sector. Despite this, the discussion of introducing negotiated compacts with individual universities continues to make the Student Senate nervous.

Section Two (a) Compacts

The Student Senate met the initial proposal of a compact funding system for higher education with understandable caution. The exploration of additional funding streams, which gave recognition to the valuable role universities play beyond simply teaching and research, was an admirable inclusion, however the proposal brings, on average, more concerns than it does advantages.

Compact Funded Community Engagement Plan

Recommendation: The Student Senate believes, at this time that a compact system for higher education should not be brought in across the board. Instead, the Student Senate proposes a limited introduction of compact funding measures for important niche activities undertaken by universities, particularly those relating to a deeper learning experience for students, many of which would fall into a category of community engagement.

Examples of such initiatives at Charles Sturt University include:

- The 2MCE community radio station/National Radio News. These programs were developed to provide students studying a Commercial Radio and Broadcast Journalism at Bathurst campus with industry experience. National Radio News has expanded to become one of the larger radio news services in the country, with 97 community radio station subscribers, and reaching a substantial audience every hour.

- Summersault Productions. This is a production group made up of third year Theatre Media students each year. They perform large stage productions in the Bathurst community each year, and on occasion tour the region. Bathurst enjoys a strong presence of culture in the community (partly attributed to Theatre Media students and graduates), however Summersault often turns out the only productions many other communities in the region can access each year.

- Health Clinics. This is another potential area that could be established with Commonwealth support. Charles Sturt University offers degrees in nursing, podiatry, social work and many other health disciplines, and soon will offer dentistry. This provides the opportunity to establish community health clinics, staffed by CSU students. This has been considered in the past, however the Student Senates understands that finance wasn't available to get the initiative off the ground, however Commonwealth support could be the difference is helping such a plan to succeed. This would be a fantastic regional health initiative.

Additional Areas for Public Funding (Possible Compacts)

Regional Universities are undervalued in this country, and evidence has begun to be released demonstrating the neglect of past governments. Despite the increase in students undertaking higher education in the last decade, this progression has not been spread equitably across the country. Whilst the number of people from metropolitan areas holding an undergraduate degree increased to 57% in the decade to 2006, the figure sits just over 33% for Australians from remote areas.⁶

This demonstrated an unfortunate fact in Australia, that is the further you live from a city, the less likely you are to have access to higher education.

⁶ <http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0,,24065274-12332,00.html>

The concept of compacts could provide an avenue to address the inequities in the higher education sector, and the Student Senate supports limited introduction of a compact designed funding arrangement.

Recommendation: The Student Senate proposes that an additional Commonwealth funding stream be established, in the form of individually negotiated compacts, for the purpose of community engagement and support for low SES, indigenous and remote area access to higher education.

In Return for Public Funding Increases

With this proposed boost in public funding should also come increased responsibilities for individual universities.

Recommendation: The Student Senate gives conditional support to the concept of universities complying with a set of minimum standards, as determined by the Federal government.

Ideally an independent “buffer” body would make recommendations, from time to time, about inclusions and amendments to the set of minimum standards.

In drafting a set of minimum standards that incoming students can expect from their chosen university, the Student Senate believes the following should be included:

- Indigenous support
- Maximum class sizes/staff student ratios
- Independent student organisations
- Independent student advocacy
- Elected representation (staff and student) on university governing boards
- Scholarships (non-government) offered at certain percentage of total enrolments (ie one for every tenth student)

Despite having in-principle support for the introduction of a set of minimum university standards, it must be clearly stated that such standards must not impact on academic freedom, course offerings, or any other such internal university matter. The excessive powers a previous Federal Education Minister afforded himself, following the Higher Education Support Act, should be wound back; it is not the place of the Federal government to interfere with university decisions on academic matters.

The Case for Student Organisations Inclusion in Minimum Standards

The negative impact voluntary student unionism's introduction has had has been evident, particularly at small and regional universities. Charles Sturt University no longer has an independent student organisation, nor can students access independent student advocacy.

Without repeating the Student Senates submission to the VSU review earlier this year, some compelling new information has come to light, which further shows the necessity for independent student organisations.

It has become known that enrolment has decreased this year, and that attrition has increased. This means that fewer students are coming to CSU, and less of these students are staying at university to graduate.⁷

It is not surprising to the Student Senate that this has occurred at a time when students have significantly less confidence in the makeshift, university-run appeals advice staff, compared to the independent student advocacy offered up until the student organisations were forced to dissolve.

Recommendation: The Student Senate advocates, in the strongest terms, that any introduction of minimum university standards must include the requirement of an independent student organisation, which must be offering, at the very least, advocacy and welfare services.

Commonwealth Response to a Failure to Meet Minimum Standards

Recommendation: The Student Senate further recommends that the Commonwealth response to a university failing to meet the proposed minimum standards should be to withhold any public funding beyond that provided for Commonwealth supported places and in research grants.

Therefore this includes any regional loading grants, priority placement grants and all other aspects outlined in the Commonwealth Grant Scheme Guidelines No. 1.

⁷ www.csu.edu.au/division/plandev/student/

Section Three ~ Student Income Support

Context- Students are Struggling

Figures taken from the first semester to 2008 paint a stark picture of the financial worries students of Charles Sturt University currently face. On the Bathurst campus alone, students took out nineteen emergency loans from Student Services in the four-month period to June this year. Records of the Division of Student Services identify the cost of textbooks, food and household bills as the most common reasons students take out emergency loans.

Charles Sturt University is seen as an affordable option for students wanting to go into tertiary education, being out of a metropolitan centre, rent and some other living expenses are lower comparatively. With the hardship faced by CSU students, evidenced through their utilisation rate of the emergency loans scheme, the Student Senate can only begin to imagine just how difficult meeting the cost of living expenses in the centre of Sydney is for students at the universities of New South Wales, Sydney and the University of Technology.

The Food Vouchers Scheme

The Equity Unit within the Division of Student Services has implemented a Coles food vouchers scheme in an attempt to alleviate serious cases of student poverty, where students don't have the money to eat. The vouchers are not a loan, but rather just granted to students in dire need.

The program is run out of the Equity Unit's budget, without external funding. Scant resources of the university are forced into providing such services because support isn't available to students elsewhere. Students and universities have been let down by the previous government, in its lack of support.

Having seen the financial hardship students were facing the university became conscious of the need for the program, recognising that action was required to prevent increases to student attrition rates, which naturally follows on from students slipping into poverty. This was a reason identified in the establishment of the program.

Scholarships

Scholarships are not the solution to the problem described. Whilst they provide a small amount of relief, they cannot work without being in conjunction with wider student income support measures.

Scholarships are too restricted in access, and do not provide consistent payments. Lump sum payment impacts the viability to live off scholarships alone, without even having to look at the insufficient amounts.

Additionally there is no consistency in payment times, other than following the HECS census date. Charles Sturt University paid the equity scholarships a month after the date, compared to the University of New South Wales, which did so the day after the HECS census date. Whilst the UNSW approach is preferred, neither is particularly useful for paying rent; landlords tend not to ask for payments based on the academic calendar.

Student Income Support

Recommendation: It's clear that Commonwealth scholarships do not provide the necessary support, and must be delivered alongside a supportive student welfare scheme.

The minimum level of reforms necessary include lowering the age of independence to 18, increasing student income support payments to meet the cost of living, reintroduction of the JET childcare scheme, make rent assistance available to all Austudy recipients and indexing the parental wage allowed to a level consistent with other policy, such as the Medicare Surcharge Levy waiver.

After Graduation

Currently graduates must begin repaying HECS once earning above \$39,825.⁸ The failure to adequately index this level left the repayment start on the poverty line. The Student Senate hopes that under the new government this situation will be rectified, and believes precedent has been set in measures delivered in the 2008/09 budget.

Exemption to paying the Medicare Levy Surcharge was dramatically increased in the recent budget, providing relief for potentially hundreds of thousands of families across the country. Beyond this though, the changes signalled the government's definition for having the financial capacity to contribute to such programs. Their definition should be made to stand for HECS repayments.

⁸ <http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0,20867,21428426-1702,00.html>

Whilst definitions have become less clear in recent history, HECS was designed to be a system of contribution, not user pays. The idea was to give back to the government that supported you through your education, but only after you could afford to do so. If the new threshold level for the Medicare Levy is anything to go by, then a threshold of \$39,825 is far too low. At present the threshold is a cruel policy designed to take money away from amongst those who can least afford to give it up.

Recommendation: The Student Senate recommends significantly increasing the threshold for HECS repayment. Whilst consistency would suggest the figure should be increased to \$100,000 per year for singles and \$150,000 per year for couples, the Student Senate advocates an immediate 90% increase in the contribution payment threshold to \$75,000.

Section Four ~ Other

Student Concessions- National

The increasing role of the Federal government has left the system of State government issuing of student concessions defunct. The Student Senate believes the Federal government should now step in, developing a national student concession program.

Universities service broader communities, with students travelling further to undertake their studies. Approximately one quarter of domestic students at Charles Sturt University come from outside New South Wales (6,300). This figure does not include international students.

Students travelling across state boundaries for education are not well supported through student concessions; only allowed to use concession within the state of issue, and if travelling across a state border must pay full fare.

This is a particular concern for students at Charles Sturt University, as the university has two campuses within close proximity to state borders (Albury-Thurgoona and Canberra), and where a high percentage of their students cross the borders travelling to and from university, as well as having a high number of interstate students at the universities other campuses.

Recommendation: The Student Senate proposes the establishment of a National student concession system, reflecting the greater role the Federal government plays in the sector, and acknowledging the inequity created from a program restricted by state boundaries.

The simplest way to achieve this goal would be Federal government intervention, and compensation, for state governments recognising each other's concession stickers.

Student Concessions- External Students

At present, full-time external students miss out on student concession benefits. This is an unusual situation, as costs incurred by travel to residential schools are significant, and external student workload is comparable to that of internal students.

Charles Sturt University is the largest provider of external studies in the country, and as such is all too aware of the discrepancies faced by their external student population, compared to internal students.

The origins of this disparity may lie with issues of living across borders, or misconceptions of external students all being in full-time employment. The latter is irrelevant and, more importantly, incorrect. Full-time students, whether in internal or external study modes, are first and foremost students, and it is the position of the Student Senate that the current arrangement is inequitable.

Recommendation: The Student Senate believes full-time external students should have access to student travel concessions, and urges the review to consider this as a recommendation.

The Student Senate believes this is vital at time when more and more students are looking toward flexible delivery in higher education.

Effective Governance

Recommendation: The Student Senate supports and recognises the value of student members on university governing boards.

Students significantly contribute to the university environment, both financially (as the largest fiscal source of university funds) and culturally. It is imperative that two-way communication channels exist between the university and its students, and the most effective method for this is through student members on university boards.

Voluntary Student Unionism legislation has dramatically impacted the effectiveness of student members on university committees at Charles Sturt University. Student members no longer have any research support that was previously offered by the students' associations. The impact of the legislation has been a muffling of the student voice.

Recommendation: The Student Senate maintains a firm position on the need to repeal VSU, and either through legislation or support, independent student advocacy must exist at all universities.

Affordable Accommodation

On campus student accommodation has become unaffordable for many students across the country. Charles Sturt University is no different.

Non-premium catered accommodation, such as Towers on Bathurst campus, and Boronia on Wagga Wagga campus, currently charge \$242 per week,⁹ which is well out of reach for most students, particularly those who do not have the support of their parents. Centrelink just won't cover this amount. But there are other alternatives.

In discussions with the university the reason offered for the high cost of student accommodation was this level was needed to cover repayment costs on the loans taken up for accommodation construction.

Recommendation: The Student Senate proposes the introduction of a low (or zero) interest Commonwealth College Construction Support Fund, where universities could apply to the government to finance the construction of student residences, under a reasonable repayment scheme.

This will keep costs down, and open up halls of residence to students from low SES and indigenous backgrounds, which could increase participation rates in higher education for this section of the Australian community.

⁹ www.csu.edu.au/division/studserv/residences