

1. Higher education in modern Australia

1. Do you agree with the discussion paper's statement of functions and characteristics of higher education in Modern Australia?

The UWA Student Guild is supportive of the general principals behind the statement of functions and characteristics of higher education in Modern Australia. The statements are strong and it is good to see that personal growth and development has been placed in equal standing as achieving education for employment. A further strength is the incorporation of research activity of the university sector not only in making needed advances but also in the development of the Australian culture.

However, acceptance of these characteristics also leads to the identification of further issues. For example; if there is a commitment to lifelong learning and personal development, why are there so many limitations on income support and changes to income support are aimed at only one degree and a prevention of the 'perpetual student'? To fully engage the population in other than the gain of professional qualifications for employment, more wide spread approaches are needed.

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 programmes? What are these impediments and how could they be removed?

3. What are the appropriate mechanisms at the national and local level for ensuring that 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?

5. Are there particular examples of good practice where you can demonstrate either rapid response to skill shortages or success initiatives to improve generic skills?

6. How effective 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 skills and re-training?

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

One of the key impediments to the higher education sector's ability to innovate in their development of courses and programmes is the lack of funding to the sector. The increased pressure of lack of funding over the past decade has meant that the focus of higher education has been on providing courses which meet with student demand, which may not align with the needs of the community or industry. Additionally, this student demand is likely to be driven by trend rather than need, meaning that at the end of their degrees students may find that there is a glut of similarly qualified graduates, whilst other areas remain in dire need of qualified graduates.

In being able to offer innovative courses that meet the needs of the nation, the higher education sector needs to feel that there is a degree of freedom and autonomy in being

able to set their courses without a fear of the financial consequences of doing so. This is not to say that universities can afford to ignore the realities of offering quality and accessible courses that are relevant to the needs of the country, rather that there needs to be a better balance in the funding of higher education to allow each institution to draw upon its strengths and develop them further.

Likewise, in the area of research, areas that may not have a commercial application or attract industrial interest have suffered. In the cutbacks across the higher education sector it is these areas that have become smaller or even ceased to exist in some institutions. The Arts and Humanities have been the most effected by this.

Although the discussion paper says that HECS and HELP do not deter people from entering into higher education, there is evidence that there is some pricing influences from HECS and HELP that impact on course choices. A good example of this is the National Priority courses of this and the previous Government, using discounts on course fees in areas of greatest demand, such as teaching and nursing. Likewise the funding of places for Medical students if they agree to a set period of time in regional and rural Australia.

It should also be noted in the UWA Student Guild's experience, through casework, there should also be recognition of the limitations on students in regards to:

- Family funding of the degree, where parental choice associated with a willingness to pay the fees and provide ongoing financial support have an impact – a notable impact arising from our casework where many of our students come from wealthy homes where there are family trends in employment and where the students are not likely to be able to access Centrelink benefits.
- The availability of courses to students in regions. While students may wish to study certain courses, they are often constrained by what their 'local' provider has. In many cities there is not as significant an issue due to public transport and multiple universities. However, even in Perth physical location combined with other considerations, such as caring commitments and work responsibilities do impact on choice. There are also rural areas where the Universities do not offer all the choices.

As mentioned previously, the trends in enrolments in particular courses is another issue that needs to be considered. The basis of students making course selections based on what is perceived to be in demand/ pathways to high earning professions. Western Australia is currently in a mining boom and consequently there is an increase in the numbers of people interested in courses that are associated with this boom. However, when this boom ends and demand for the qualified professionals in this area falls, these students may find themselves in a position where there is no demand for their qualifications.

Additionally, with the boom environment in Western Australia some individuals may wish to pursue their higher degree and move into higher paid work with more longevity. However, other students faced with the choice of perhaps taking up an apprenticeship where they get paid and do not accumulate a debt as opposed to paying for a degree and facing little or no financial impacts. We have also seen students taking up the option of gap years whereby earning an income may enable them to

access a Centrelink payment by achieving 'independent' status. For some students, the exposure to the work place and income earned may mean a delay or non-return to higher education. While this may assist in the increasing of labour market participants in other need areas, may also mean a lower take up in higher education and mean that other targets are not achieved.

Another example of this trending is in Information Technology. In the mid-to-late 1990's this was a boom area for universities with record enrolments. Now, however, the perception of this degree stream is poorer, despite higher demand and many universities are finding it difficult to justify the continued existence of this degree stream.

There is also the bigger issue of course structures and how these reflect the current (and future) needs of industry. Universities need to balance between providing courses that are attractive to students whilst also providing the skill sets that industry seeks in graduates. Industry has indicated that there is greater need for more general skills in graduates, whilst student demand is for more specific courses that provide a clear career path. In dealing with this issue, a partnership between the higher education sector, industry, the Commonwealth and State governments needs to establish not only what the current needs are, but how to meet the needs of the future in not only the courses but how they are structured and the skills that are taught. This is not only in the case of commencing students, but also for people currently in the workforce who will need to re-skill to meet future needs. This process is something that needs to be developed in a manner that recognises not only the need for lifelong learning, but also gives adequate support to those engaging in higher learning.

This process has already started at UWA, with the course structure being reviewed internally with a view to marry these competing needs of students and industry. The UWA Student Guild commends the University of Western Australia in involving students in this process, recognising that there is a need to ensure that there is student input in any change to the course structure. UWA has also recently changed its criteria for mature age entry into the University, recognising that there is a need to attract those who are looking to increase their skill levels, but do not necessarily have the time to complete the previous alternate entry methods into the University outside of matriculation. These approaches are similar to those outlined in the United Kingdom report, Higher Education at Work, albeit on a local level.

The report also outlines comments made about the slow response at times by Universities. It is essential though that academic and pedagogical considerations form the key component in course design and delivery. Casework experience again often indicates a level of dissatisfaction with new courses, where courses are reviewed and where they do not meet the expectations of students in regards to their being 'market competitive' upon completion. Many of the complaints assisted in this area have shown that these issues arise where academic and pedagogical considerations have not remained a priority.

There are of course many reasons for this, principle of which is the escalating work load of academic staff. Funding to Universities need to be cognizant of the workload currently experienced by academic staff. From our experience we see many staff of 'good standard' also taking on other roles within the university and many involved in

review and improvement of courses. This however, is work activity often taken on in addition to already full workloads. If the government is keen to have more rapid responses but also to have quality education courses, then increases in funding and addressing shortages in the academic sphere are essential.

3.2 Opportunities to participate in higher education.

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

A national approach to participation and success to Indigenous and low SES groups would be of benefit, however local differences between regions and institutions need to be taken into account with any programmes that are developed. Improving low SES and Indigenous participation will need an approach that considers access into higher education, income support, reasonable accommodation of need and recognition of personal circumstances.

As stated in the previous section, there is recognition that one of the key areas which needs to be addressed is the participation in higher education by people who are already in the workforce to increase skill levels and meet the oncoming needs of the economy. If increasing mature age participation is desired, then the above will need to be considered in addition to making education affordable and supportable by employers.

A major part of this would be income support. The 2007 Guild Poverty Survey revealed that students are working more and find the conditions behind receiving income support interfering with their study commitments. Indeed, more and more students are sacrificing study to meet work commitments in order to meet the increasing cost of living, as well as the increasing costs of education, and this is not taking into account the debts that they are incurring as a result of HELP fees.

Under the apprenticeship scheme there are also key benefits such as bonus payments, top up payments to assist with the purchase of work tools and tax deductibility of what they purchase towards their trade. University students do not have this same access and are often disadvantaged in their studies by not being able to afford the basic tools that they need for their study. Improved income support, be that through a re-evaluation the criteria and limitations, such as age of independence, level of allowable income and rent assistance, would be of particular benefit to Indigenous and low SES groups.

Invisible within reports are those who have chosen not to enter higher education, particularly those who are mature age or who come from low SES backgrounds.

While this is discussed later, it is important to consider them in this question area. When education living payments moved to Centrelink there were some positive changes, however there were also some negative. At the commencement of the next semester we received several phone calls from prospective students who had intended to commence study and worked with a couple of mature age students already enrolled. The change of note was the way in which partner income was assessed. Prior to the shift, a partner's income was assessed and amended based on children within the family. For many, this meant access to a Centrelink benefit for study. The change meant that there was no longer any amendment to the assessed income – some who studied lost their income stream and had to leave study, while others indicated that they would now not apply for university.

However, the UWA Student Guild would like to clearly state that any scheme, where income support is traded for a loan is not the solution. Indigenous and low SES students are amongst the most debt averse groups, who are also the most likely to need the extra support. By hitting these groups with an additional loan on top of the HELP fees would not be supportive once they have graduated. Income support needs to be realistic in the help that it offers, not something that hurts individuals after they have graduated.

Another area of inclusion are those with disabilities. While there has been considerable progress, the link between teaching and practicum experience where there are professional degrees will also need to be considered and industry will have to be included. There is little value in being accommodated to study part time if the employing body does not recognise part time work as legitimate – or where a part time status can only be achieved after many years of mastery.

Those on disability support also need different accommodations in regards to income support and there is significant work that could be done on this at a national level. The specific example being the PES and mobility allowance and how going into and out of these supports where study level is impacted by disability has long ranging financial implications.

The impact of HELP and the differential amounts charged for different courses should also be considered. As stated before, low SES and Indigenous groups are debt averse. When considering what courses and degree streams they are can enter, the increase level of cost of some courses may make them less attractive than others. Likewise, the discounts in some courses, such as the National Priority courses, would be more attractive, but not for the right reasons. If tuition fees are to be charges, these should be applied in an accessible and equitable manner so that the options available to students are based on ability and academic merit, not the comfort of the individual in incurring debt.

One final consideration is the prohibitive costs attached to postgraduate study. Again, this is linked to the conditions attached to income support and scholarships. Innovation and up-skilling is likely to be accessed by most through postgraduate work, be that research or coursework based. Postgraduate study needs to be an attractive proposition to individuals and current situation is provides little incentive, with high costs, red tape and little prospect of career progression within academia.

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 the declining student:staff ratios have impacted on the quality of the student experience?

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

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

There has been an increase in the level ratio of student:staff nationally, from 12.9 in 1990 to 20.3 in 2005. Facilities at UWA are of a reasonable standard but access to minimum resources for postgraduate research students still of concern. Ratio of staff and overcrowding has been seen with several complaints from students to the Guild, where they have been required to stand in corridors or who have taken to using web based services due to overcrowding.

The quality of the student experience is also significantly enhanced where there is a vibrant student community – both in terms of representation and issue work, and in developing an environment that assists students to engage and be part of the community. Obviously then ensuring that Guild's are well funded and have a recognizable place within universities is essential. As for how this funding is sourced and monitored, it is the belief of the UWA Student Guild that the Western Australian model of an amenities and services fee negotiated between institutions and student organizations provides the best balance between checks and balances, and the ability for student organizations to meet the individual and specific needs of that campus. More detail of this is in the UWA Student Guild submission to the Impact of Voluntary Student Unionism on Services, Amenities and Representation for Australian University Students Discussion Paper in February of this year.

Despite the funding limitations in place as a result of the national Voluntary Student Unionism legislation, the UWA Student Guild has managed to maintain a vibrant and dynamic student environment that is the envy of many other institutions. This is through careful planning, strategic use of available resources and recognition by the University of the pivotal role that a vibrant student life has in maintaining an enriching student experience. Further, it is through this that well rounded graduates are developed, having the social and cultural skills as well as the academic qualifications when they enter the workforce.

As for the monitoring of learning outcomes, outside of the AUQA process UWA actively seeks student input into teaching and learning. The SPOT programme, where students are asked to assess not only the content of their courses, but also the teaching abilities of the academic staff, are recognised by the University as a significant indicator of the students own experiences. This recognition by UWA extends to SPOT assessments being applicable in teaching Staff applications for advancement.

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 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?

The UWA Student Guild believes that there should be closer links between vocational education and training and higher education. This is in line with the stated commitment in the paper to lifelong learning. Alternative entry and recognition of skills and abilities will become increasingly necessary as a means of access to higher education with the increased need to have a workforce with higher level skills.

However, this transition into higher education needs to be balanced between the demand for these higher skills and abilities and the need for careful planning to ensure a maximisation of success and completion of any courses of study undertaken. Furthermore, the principles of equitable access need to be applied, as well as provisions for adequate income and other support mechanisms for individuals. This additional support, especially academic support is important for individuals who may not have had exposure to the expectation and standards of a higher education institution previously.

The UWA Student Guild provides some of these supports through its representational and advocacy work, as well as working in conjunctions with the University in programmes designed to support these non-standard entry students. The University has also set up schemes, such as the Transition Support Programme and the Mentor Scheme to provide a level of support for commencing students. Programmes such as these have proven to be useful in retaining and helping students from non-standard entry or backgrounds settle into the University community.

3.5 Higher education's role in the national innovation system

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

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

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?

The previous government sought to concentrate the level of research in a small number of institutions, in order to create world class research institutions. This benefited the more established universities, rather than the new institutions which did not have the same established culture of research.

One of the foundations of good teaching is the basis of good scholarship backed by research. This underlying principle is behind the unified model of universities, which provide both teaching and research. It is a belief of the UWA Student Guild that it is of benefit of students to be exposed to this culture of research, as well as teaching. For students to realise their potential exposure to high quality research is essential.

Further, the level of interference by the prior government in research resulted in a politicisation of research. Universities themselves have checks and balances in place to ensure that research conducted is of merit. For innovation and advancement of knowledge there needs to be independence in research.

It is also important for post-graduate students to be supported in their endeavours. Much research is conducted in this post-graduate and post-doctoral level, however, as mentioned previously in this submission, the lack of clear career structures, income support, high costs and institutional funding means that engaging in a career in research is not an attractive proposition. This clearly needs to change if there is desire for advancement in innovation in research

3.6 Australia's higher education system in the international arena

22. Are there any unintended consequences to 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 purpose should it serve?

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

The approach of the former government to concentrate research in order to create centres of international research excellence fails in that it creates a paucity within the rest of the Australian higher education system. As stated in the section previously, teaching needs to be backed by a sound foundation of research.

Another consequence of the current system is the massive growth in seeking International students. This in turn has sparked growth in specific areas of demand, and presented problems in terms of resourcing to adequately meet this demand. If a focus on attracting International students is to be maintained, then adequate provision to continue to provide the high quality education that Australia has an established reputation for.

International trends in higher education are also a concern. Australia's higher education system is currently in a state of flux. Decisions and international protocols, such as the Bologna model are being pursued overseas, and without a clear direction, Australia risks being left behind. However, the clear question is not whether we follow these trends, but rather is there a need to conform to these international standards, or do we need to define the Australian identity within the international sphere of higher education?

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

25. How do 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 that these functions should be funded?

Universities need to engage with the wider community for the full benefit of their role within society to be felt. It is often a criticism of higher education institutions that they are not engaged with the wider community. As centres for not only learning, but also as centres of culture the contributions of higher education to the shaping and understanding of Australia cultural, social and economic capital are immense. The wider implications of the discourse stimulated by universities and what they do shape who we are and where we are going.

Further, it is through a more highly skilled workforce, and through innovation that Australia can remain competitive in the globalised economy. As such the engagement of higher education with wider society is not only a good thing, but a necessary one.

3.8 Resourcing the system

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

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?

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

Since 1995 the levels of funding to higher education can be described as inadequate at best. The result of this has been a degrading of facilities and resources to the extent that Australia now seriously lags behind the rest of the OECD. The result of this is that universities have needed to seek income instead of seeking wisdom. This in itself has resulted in institutions trying to increase their funding through a variety of other means, rather than focus on their main mission of providing high quality research and teaching. This has resulted in spectacular failures, be it through the closure of international based campuses that are unsustainable, or through the collapse of business ventures, such as the case of Melbourne IT.

One of the areas of particular concern is that students are seen as a cash cow to fund these shortfalls in income. This is either through the pursuit of full fee paying International students, or through the increases in fees to domestic students. This in itself has proven to be problematic. There have been accusations of soft marking and ignoring significant difficulties faced by International students, as well the general mess that is the domestic student fee structure.

In order for the higher education system to be sustainable there needs to be rethink across the board, in which areas of institutional and student needs drive decision making rather than political or economic expediency.

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?

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

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?

Given the level of changes that are needed within the higher education sector to make up the lost ground in the last decade, there is a need for reforming regulatory and financing arrangements. This said- there should not be wholesale changes for change sake. There are elements within the current regulatory and financial frameworks that have worked well and will continue to do so.

One of the key elements of governance is the composition of the university governance structures. These have been changed over the past decade, tilting towards engaging more industrial and business interests, at the expense of other key stakeholders of university staff, students and alumni. Using the principles behind the establishment of the University of Western Australia's governing body, the UWA Senate, representation was from all of the key stakeholders within the University's community: the Administration, the Staff, students, alumni, business and the wider community as designated by government appointments. As is suggested by the Report, that there needs to be a balance between all of these interests for the long term benefit of not only higher education, but for the country itself. Any reforms should reflect this balance, with input from these stakeholders at the highest levels of university governance.