



## **Submission to the Bradley Review of Higher Education**

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## **LIST OF RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **UNIVERSITIES NOT CORPORATIONS**

- Commonwealth funding to public universities be increased
- Any and all statements regarding the function and characteristics of higher education include institutional autonomy, freedom of enquiry and academic freedom.
- Market forces be eliminated from university policy and decision making with particular respect to fee setting.

### **EDUCATION NOT INSTRUCTION**

- That clear pathways into the academic profession be established and that universities be encouraged to redress the creeping casualisation of the workforce
- The student:staff ratios be decreased as a matter of priority
- That considerations of the needs of business and industry be tempered by a broad understanding of vocational training in the higher education context and with a sense of the responsibility of business and industry to contribute to the training of their employees.
- That international students attain access to welfare support, transport concessions and fair, transparent and equitable fee setting.
- That international students' participation in higher education in Australia be reconsidered with pedagogical outcomes as the priority.
- That flexible options for participation in university be made a priority.
- That the important contribution of participation in campus life be acknowledged as integral to developing well rounded graduates.

## **STUDENTS NOT CUSTOMERS**

- That the so-called VSU legislation be repealed and independent, student funded, student controlled, student organisations be returned to Australian campuses.
- That adequate funding is allocated to ensure independent student organisations can be reformed or restored.
- That there be national frameworks and benchmarks established to improve performance of harassment and discrimination and equal opportunity initiatives for staff and students.
- That access to ALL forms of income support be extended to included postgraduate students, including Austudy for research students who are not on scholarships.
- That all postgraduate students have access to rental assistance and health care cards.
- That the rates of income support be improved to adequately reflect the cost of living.
- That the APA and APAI scholarships be extended to the match the length of candidature, that the rate be increased by at least 50% and that they be appropriately indexed to keep pace with the cost of living.
- That the funding model for research higher degrees be reassessed in order to encourage high standards of work rather than submission of theses.
- That universities be required to provide adequate infrastructure for RHD students.
- That there be increased support to ancillary student support services
- That flexible pathways into tertiary and university study be developed improved and expanded.
- That HECS be extended to all postgraduate coursework degrees, that fees are set based on cost recovery and that transparency in fee setting, fee increases be improved.
- That refund policies and procedures be made more transparent and equitable.

## THE ECONOMY ABOVE ALL ELSE?

Over the last decade universities have been moving inexorably towards a more corporate understanding of themselves and their mission. This has been due in part to a shift in the societal understanding of higher education and obsession with economic growth in its narrowest sense and also a response to reductions in commonwealth funding and increased governmental interference in university governance and goals.

This year's 2020 summit placed a focus on the relationship between economic growth and education. This however is only one aspect of the role of higher education and the connection between the two must not cloud our recognition that an integral function and characteristic of universities as public institutions which make an important contribution to the advancement of human rights, social cohesion and social co-operation. In its assessment of the functions and characteristics of higher education the Bradley Review Discussion Paper does not recognise the need for freedom of academic enquiry, nor does it recognise institutional autonomy. Further, the document refers only to the possible uses and exploitation of human capital, presumably for the purposes of economic growth. Surely, universities have a role to play in developing and supporting human and social capital as well as manufacturing it?

It is not a little disconcerting that even at this the review stage, the conceptual framework within which we seem to be working is one that assumes only the narrowest of roles for our tertiary education providers, the staff who work in them and the students who study there.

At its heart this review is inviting us to ask, and perhaps answer, a single key question: what is the purpose of higher education? It is certainly a question worth asking and one worth answering but I suspect for many players in higher education the answers are assumed. There has been little time for self-reflection over the last decade; the face of higher education has changed dramatically, and not, we would argue, for the better.

SUPRA believes that while a simple answer to the question of the purpose of higher education might be to create members of society who can successfully and significantly contribute to that society's economic development, that answer is both too narrow and in fact already a given. Average earnings tend to increase the more education people have while unemployment tends to be lower, therefore virtually everyone with a university degree is contributing to Australia's ongoing economic sustainability on the most basic level.<sup>1</sup>

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<http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/ABS@.nsf/7d12b0f6763c78caca257061001cc588/e1a27d207c960e79ca256e9e00286295!OpenDocument>

We see the function of higher education as a much broader enterprise. We believe that university education has the capacity to create citizen who can contribute to the ongoing sustainability and growth of Australian society, not only through their financial investment but also through commitment to and understanding of the world in which we live and through a desire for life long learning.

There is a grave danger that we will be trapped in tacitly agreed definitions of innovation, vocationalisation and professional practice and that in turn these definitions will reduce the function of tertiary education to an employment certification service and nothing else. We are always concerned about narrow interpretations of university education. Getting a degree is not necessarily about being trained for professional practice, as often as not it is about learning skills that will allow further training and that will have broad vocational outcomes. The same goes for research. We must always be wary that we do not quantify research in ways that assume only the most commodifiable outcomes are worthy of pursuing.

In order for Australia to ensure it maintains its position in the global knowledge economy and in order for us to maintain our innovation, universities need long term goals not short terms strategies. Tertiary education must be about setting our society up for the future not being bogged down in the present. Innovation comes from having flexible and adaptive graduates with strong skills, skills that can be applied and built on long after those students have moved into a careers no doubt fundamentally different from the one they thought they would have when they came to university. Innovation comes too from building a commitment to life long learning and from increasing the capacity for all people to train and retrain as their life evolves. The best service we can do ourselves is to create the conditions for innovation. The worst we can do is to get caught up in attempting to predict the future.

We must also remember that students do not necessarily make rational choices when choosing programmes of study. Moreover, we must consider that there are many aspects that contribute to those decisions and many are beyond the control of universities. How many of the next great cancer researchers are instead pursuing careers in law in order to make their university investment financially practical? How many maths teachers turn to accounting because teaching is undervalued and poorly remunerated? Government and universities have only the power to create the conditions for opportunity and let desire and aptitude do the rest.

The coalition government's introduction of the VSU legislation was one of the clearest statements of their vision for higher education, that is, a degree factory with no student voice and no student experience outside of the classroom. Students and staff, however, understand that a great deal of what happens at university happens outside of the classroom and that our universities must provide an education, not simply instruction.

As the coalition government went through its process of stripping more and more public funding from universities, universities have had to find alternative sources of revenue. These have come in two ways, the private sector or industry investment, and student fees. The end result of this ideological push has been far greater than costing students a great deal of money, we have seen a vast shift in cultural and societal attitudes to higher Education in the broadest sense and to what are its aims and its purpose. More and more we look at higher education as something that dutifully serves industry and the economy and more and more we move away from consideration of the less commodifiable, the less marketable the abstract in both our research and our teaching.

The shift towards a market driven conception of education, particularly postgraduate coursework delivery, has had some pernicious results. Increasingly students are thought of as consumers at best, as customers at worst; increasingly the blowout of student/staff ratios is seen as an “efficiency”; increasingly the exploitation of students and staff is seen not as a necessity but as a right given the conditions of the market. It is an anathema to the project of education to allow the market to drive the conditions on our campuses and it is well beyond time that this changed. The government and universities need to think about higher education in a way that is appropriate to higher education, not to business.

Our submission is divided into three broad section with recommendations appended to each. These sections are:

- Universities not Corporations, which will deal both with universities relationships with business and other third parties and also the models of universities themselves.
- Education not Instruction, looking at the essential characteristics of tertiary education
- Students not Customers, looking at what might most broadly be considered student support.

SUPRA welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Bradley Review of Higher Education and we hope that this will finally be a chance to return some vision both to higher education and to Australia as a whole.

# UNIVERSITIES NOT CORPORATIONS

## Partnership and Investment

In the discussion of the Function and Characteristics of Higher Education in the *Bradley Review Discussion Paper*, SUPRA notes that some fundamental principles central to tertiary education are omitted.<sup>2</sup> It is essential that any statement reflect some of the core ideals of the sector including institutional autonomy, academic freedom and freedom of enquiry. It is equally important that the models used to fund our universities reflect these core aims rather than conflict with them. It is also important that we understand that universities are ‘public’ in the sense of being funded primarily by government and so the taxpayer, their function is and should remain one of public service. That is to say that both the teaching and learning work done serves a public function, as does the research most universities undertake.

While we do not want to enter into a debate about whether universities such as the University of Sydney are in fact “not for profit” entities in the way that they may have been understood to be in the past, it is certainly true that our institutions are not yet accountable to shareholders (despite the evidence that most seek to create more revenue than they spend). The question must be asked: to whom are these institutions accountable?

Despite the fact that public funding for our universities has decreased over the last ten years governmental interference in universities has not and funding overall risen due to increased student contributions and greater input from the private sector. Increased private sector funding is not necessarily a bad thing and in fact some public private partnerships (PPPs) can be beneficial. It is essential, however, that this funding be both transparent and be in keeping with the aims and aspirations of higher education. Further there are often contingent ethical considerations based on the nature of the party wishing to invest and the type of research being undertaken. Universities must always be in a position to make decisions about funding and policy based on their own transparent processes and not have them dictated by financial hardship.

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<sup>2</sup> *Bradley Review Discussion Paper* 2008, pp. 1-3 (hereafter all references to this paper will be in the text)

One example of the potential danger inherent in third party funding occurred in 2007 when the Catholic Church agreed to release land to the University of Sydney to use as a medical research centre but stipulated that stem cell research or any other research involving the termination or artificial creation of life could not be carried out in facilities built on that land.<sup>3</sup> This is clearly unwarranted and unacceptable interference on the part of the Church into the freedom of enquiry and academic freedom that should form the foundation of all university research enterprises. While the argument could be made that this stipulation by the church does not affect research done in any other laboratory at the university the precedent set is dangerous and antithetical to the broader social function of universities.

It also essential that any potential unintended consequences be examined before relationships with the private sector are established and that universities are both accountable for their decisions and in a financial position to make any resolutions about private sector funding with appropriate consideration.

Two examples of the unintended disadvantage to students through PPP partnerships here at the University of Sydney have involved different kinds of private sector investments. The first was a relationship with a private provider to build Sydney University Village (SUV), a much-needed project to increase housing for University of Sydney students. Many issues have arisen not the least being students being forced to pay above market rents and being forced to spend money in overpriced on site businesses like catering outlets and a convenience store. These problems arose largely because the needs of the corporate investor to make money took priority and this meant that many students were in fact worse off because of their engagement with this PPP enterprise.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.news.com.au/story/0,23599,21175990-2,00.html>

<http://www.news.com.au/perthnow/story/0,21598,21188595-5005361,00.html>

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2007/feb/06/highereducation.uk6>

Another consequence of third party funding can be seen if the disparity in student conditions is considered. In a case dealt with by a SUPRA Student Advice and Advocacy Officer (SAAO) a PhD student mentioned that as part of a privately funded project he was working on he had received a scholarship. This scholarship offered no sick leave, maternity leave, bereavement leave or indeed any of the other standard conditions offered either in the workplace or in the terms and conditions of the Australian Postgraduate Award (APA) or the Australian Postgraduate Award Industry (APAI).

While we understand that it is primarily the responsibility of the universities themselves to ensure that they do not enter into relationships that jeopardise their mission and they will not intentionally or unintentionally disadvantage students it is also clear that if and when universities negotiate from positions of weakness that disadvantage will trickle down.

The larger questions that must be asked about private sector investment in higher education are upon what principles is the investment predicated and to whose advantage does it work. We are not proposing to answer these questions nor are we sure that these answers are readily available however what is clear is that these are questions that must be asked. It would be to no advantage to higher education or to Australia as a whole if it were to become little more than lab space for hire for Australia's most lucrative industries or influential businesses. The ultimate result is that this would radically curtail Australia's potential for innovation, not only because it would limit the types of research undertaken but also because it could result in the privileging of certain types of easily applied and highly commodifiable research. But more than simply the potentially serendipitous nature of research and therefore its capacity to innovate it may also prove to impact our non-applied research capacity, the kind of research that has results or significance that may not be immediately visible but which are no less significant. We simply cannot allow business and industry be the sole drivers of our research output.

A decade of closed doors and tight fists in Canberra has resulted in a pernicious culture of compliance in the corridors of power of Australian universities. Told to think more like businesses university administrations countrywide have dutifully obeyed. It seems more and more that universities no longer garner money in order to provide education but rather increasingly provide education in order to make money.

This has, in no small part, been necessitated by reductions in university funding. It is, however, difficult to account for the cultural shift that makes market forces the key factors in decision-making including course delivery and teaching and learning outcomes. How else can we make sense of the vast expansion of expensive full fee postgraduate coursework degrees? How else can we make sense of the influx of international students? How else can we make sense of HECS increases and how else can we make sense of ever increasing student: staff ratios, increased teaching workloads and decreasing research output and the casualisation of the academic workforce creating one of the most serious skills crises in Australia today? How else can we account for many of these changes being seen as efficiencies and not as cut backs and cut rate.

SUPRA finds it extremely problematic that participation in higher education is predicated on how much universities can get away with charging for their courses. It is essential that the exploitation of postgraduate coursework and international students be ended and the only way to do this is to remove the mechanism by which they are taken advantage. University fees for postgraduate coursework must be HECS liable. At the very least course fees for all postgraduate coursework degrees need to be transparent and based on cost recovery.

Essentially SUPRA believes that it is critical that Commonwealth funding to our public universities be increased. We feel strongly that many of the unwelcome cultural and academic shifts in our tertiary education system have come as the direct result of the reductions in Commonwealth funding. SUPRA does not believe that there is no place for private sector or third party investment, in fact we feel that properly managed this can be of benefit to our institutions. We do feel however that unless universities are in a position to always remember their core functions there is also potential those core functions are laid under threat. Adequate resourcing of our universities that maintains their institutional autonomy is essential to protect the aims of academic freedom, and the core aims of research teaching and learning.

### **Recommendations:**

- That Commonwealth funding to public universities be increased
- That any and all statements regarding the function and characteristics of higher education include institutional autonomy, freedom of enquiry and academic freedom.
- That the market be eliminated as the basis of university policy and decision-making with particular respect to fee setting.

## **EDUCATION NOT INSTRUCTION**

### **In The Classroom**

SUPRA is the first to concede that a university education is about much more than what happens in the classroom. However it is important to consider changes in students' experience in the classroom in order to understand the broader experience of university.

In the Universities Australia submission to the current inquiry into research training and research workforce issues they note that the student: staff ratio on Australian campuses has risen from 12:1 in 1990 to 20:1 in 2006.<sup>4</sup> In our experience this ratio is in many cases far greater. This increase in student: staff ratio has implications not only for the quality of the learning and teaching on our campuses but also for research and for workforce retention.

One example of what occurs when “efficiency” trumps pedagogy in course delivery is that bane of students' existence, group work. Some may argue that the rationale for group work is to encourage and facilitate teamwork and to replicate a workplace environment. For the most part the students we encounter say that the assignments are not structured in a way that values group participation and others find them useless in readying them for the work environment. Our caseworkers regularly support students in appeals in faculties where there are high volumes of students with a relatively small number of academic staff. These students are often appealing grades received in group work assignments. For the most part they feel that these assignments are offered not because they are effective in assessing aptitude nor because they contribute to generic attributes but rather because they make the marking load lighter for the already overstretched academic teaching staff. The maths is simple, either academics mark 200 (or 300 or 400) individual assignments or they mark a fifth of that number.

This is not efficient except in the most basic economic sense, and it is not doing staff, students, or indeed employers any great benefit.

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<sup>4</sup> Universities Australia submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Industry, Science and Innovation Inquiry into research training and research workforce issues in universities (June 2008) p.1

It would also be interesting to compare changes in the ratios of administrative and student support staff to students. These general staff often proved essential support to academics but also deal with a variety of students' concerns, complaints and issues. While we do not have these statistics our feeling is that these ratios have also changed markedly, contributing both to pressure on academic staff and on students who have not only have less contact with teachers and tutors in the classroom but also fewer opportunities to contact them outside of class.

This can have the effect of creating an environment where students do not feel part of a learning community. In a recent Sydney University Student Coursework Experience Questionnaire, only 54% of respondents on average feel as if they are members of a learning community.

The other change that we have seen in the last ten years or so is a significant increase in the numbers of casual academics and academics on short term contracts. Again this has occurred primarily in response to economic necessity but has the unfortunate consequences of creating an academic workforce facing a significant skills crisis. This is not only because future academics are unable to get even relatively secure ongoing work and are forced to seek employment in other industries but also because increases in workload cause many to suffer huge levels of stress. Moreover this contributes to increases in workload more generally as there are fewer experienced staff in each department, meaning more of the administrative work devolves on them.

Again there is little efficient about this situation. We may not have enough staff to run our universities and the staff we do have do not have enough time or capacity either to teach as well as they can or to contribute their own research output. While there are short-term savings to be made in terms of salaries and wages we have not taken care to warehouse the academic talent of the future. Given the competitive nature of the global knowledge economy we need to make it viable for our brightest academics to stay in Australia. It is the only way we will maintain the strength of our higher education system and our future graduates.

SUPRA is concerned that there is a misapprehension of what vocational training actually is in the university context. That is to say Universities certainly provide accredited course with direct professional practice outcomes: teaching, nursing, medicine for example. Universities also provide vocational degree programmes that may not result in professional practice, law for example and many other degrees that while they do have direct professional practice outcomes certainly result in graduates who have employable skills, critical thinking, research, oral and written communication to name a few.

The Bradley Review Discussion Paper notes that some employer groups doubt the adequacy of the generic graduate attributes of recent graduates (BRDP p. 24). In a recent study in the United Kingdom that looked at the success rates of medical students attempting to pass examinations for membership of the Royal College of Physicians it has been found that students from Oxford perform consistently better than graduates from other medical schools.<sup>5</sup> This is primarily attributed to the kind of teaching received at the Oxford Medical School rather than the content (since we can be reasonably assured that the content required to receive accreditation as a doctor would remain fairly stable across universities). What this means, therefore, is that it is not content but teaching methodology that needs to be the focus of improving graduate skills and outcomes. Further many of the skills highlighted in the Discussion Paper are not skills easily translatable to classroom but may be better developed through participation in extra-curricular activities or through the workplace itself.

Universities are not job accreditation factories and industry must take some responsibility for the role it has to play in ensuring adequate and appropriate training for employees. It is perhaps not unreasonable to expect that in this environment, where jobs are more diverse, that single programmes of study will no longer be adequate training for placement. It is apparent that if students are equipped with critical and communications skills, aptitude and love of learning they will be more readily adaptive in the workforce.

### **International students**

Around 50% of the students enrolled in postgraduate masters degrees in Australia are international students. In fact Australia has the highest proportion of international students in the OECD.

The issues that are raised around these statistics are usually largely to do with protecting the 'industry' if the market 'goes soft'. That is to say, we have spent so much time developing this revenue stream what will we do if we lose it. SUPRA understands that as federal funding as a percentage of total funding has dropped universities have needed to find alternative revenue streams to make up the shortfalls. Our concern lies not in the fact that we have so many international students but rather whether or not we can offer them what they are paying for.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.medsci.ox.ac.uk/oma/medschbest08/>

International students themselves are becoming more vocal about their inequitable treatment. It is significant that many identify language as one of the primary inhibitors of a positive student experience both in and out of the classroom.<sup>6</sup> While The Bradley Review Discussion Paper may wish to characterise Australian Universities as cosmopolitan (BRDP p. 9) the truth is that in many instances international and domestic students are increasingly ghettoised and the opportunities for interactions are few and far between. Surely this is not a successful expression of internationalisation? Not only are international students not getting the experiences they hoped for in studying in Australia but also domestic students aren't either.

This may in part be the result of universities having inadequate entry requirements in order to maintain maximum international enrolments. At SUPRA we have certainly had cases where students have been failed on their expression in English and told it is their own responsibility to ensure they can keep up with the language requirements of the course. We feel that this is a gross breach of responsibility to students who truly are more and more obviously little more than cash cows propping up our tertiary education system.

A Monash University report published in *People and Place* by Bob Birrell and Ernest Healy titled "How are skilled migrants doing?" has shown that international students who graduate from Australian Universities are unlikely to find employment related to their qualifications in Australia.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, these ex-students were not contributing to the skilled workforce in Australia although they are contributing to housing pressure and population growth. Only 22% of 20-29 year old non-English speaking background students who studied at Australian universities found employment related to their qualifications. Rather, these students from non-English speaking backgrounds are working in sales and administration rather than the IT, engineering, accounting and education fields they are trained in.

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.theage.com.au/opinion/fees-drive-the-cultural-divide-that-splits-our-universities-20080724-3kh8.html?page=-1>

<http://www.theage.com.au/national/mixing-tough-for-overseas-students-20080722-3jcl.html>

<http://www.theage.com.au/national/backlash-feared-over-uni-students-cultural-divide-20080722-3jck.html>

<sup>7</sup> Bob Birrell and Ernest Healy, "How are skilled migrants doing?" *People and Place*, Volume 16, Number 1, 2008

By any standard, this is de-skilling and extremely inefficient. A Deakin University professor, Tony Burch, in *People and Place* said that international students were ill prepared for learning in Australian universities and were failing more.<sup>8</sup> Chris Evans (Minister for Immigration) was quoted in the SMH 29 April 08 as saying he thought more international student work experience and employer-sponsored visas would help. While this may be a solution to a skills crisis it is certainly not going to help international students.

Universities have been applauded for speculating (financially and structurally) with using overseas students to fill in the revenue gaps created by the deregulation of universities. SUPRA would argue that in fact this is a textbook case of the economic leading the pedagogic resulting in losses for all. We find the assumption that internationalisation, as it is somewhat dubiously known, combined with a national industry or market driven approach to higher education will automatically lead to higher skill levels and innovation in the Australian economy questionable. We certainly do not believe that the evidence is proving us wrong.

This situation is made significantly worse when we consider that international students have limited welfare and support options either provided through universities or by governments, in some states they are even ineligible for transport concessions, despite the multiple contributions they make to the economy both through subsidising local student enrolment with their higher fees and their higher rates of taxation. International students pay extraordinarily high fees and are often exploited at work and by landlords and other accommodation providers. If we wish to continue encouraging students to study in Australian institutions we must redress the astonishing exploitation and inequity of these experiences here. SUPRA would go so far as to say that this is a moral imperative, it is unconscionable that universities and the government would continue to exploit international students desire to study here in order to make money.

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<sup>8</sup> Tony Burch, "Teaching and learning accounting with overseas students", *People and Place*, Volume 16, Number 1, 2008

**International Enrolments as Proportion of Level of Course 2001 - 2006**

capa	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
Doctorate by Research	14.10%	15.75%	16.32%	17.08%	17.80%	18.90%
Masters by Research	10.12%	11.12%	11.89%	13.08%	14.34%	14.77%
Doctorate by Coursework	42.70%	52.34%	49.02%	48.43%	47.91%	44.68%
Masters by Coursework	37.89%	43.69%	45.86%	47.89%	49.71%	50.07%
Graduate Certificate	7.18%	11.55%	11.36%	10.61%	10.10%	11.25%
Graduate Diploma	14.36%	16.40%	14.91%	14.19%	13.67%	13.53%
Postgrad Qualifying	14.97%	22.92%	19.27%	17.13%	18.28%	24.44%
Bachelor Honours	6.06%	7.48%	7.18%	7.62%	7.44%	8.69%
Bachelor Graduate Entry	5.15%	7.02%	7.95%	8.13%	9.21%	10.86%
Bachelor Pass	13.44%	17.76%	19.44%	20.83%	21.00%	21.54%
Associate Degree	2.35%	2.78%	2.18%	3.58%	1.96%	3.19%
Advanced Diploma	4.29%	3.18%	3.56%	4.81%	22.69%	18.22%
Diploma	0.33%	1.34%	4.54%	9.81%	15.60%	22.52%
Other Undergrad Award	16.65%	21.96%	32.96%	27.05%	55.85%	46.76%
Enabling Course	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	2.10%	0.88%
Non-Award Course	33.35%	42.62%	45.36%	48.38%	56.14%	60.63%
Overall	15.47%	20.64%	22.62%	24.19%	25.02%	25.48%

Compiled by CAPA based on *Selected Higher Education Statistics (2006)* Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR)

In order to address this problem we need to break our dependency on the international student market. Students from the rest of the world do not exist to be exploited by Australian higher education providers. We also need to ensure that we are realistic in our assessments of the cost of living in Australia and improve the quality of the student experience both inside and outside of the classroom. Finally more equitable support and conditions need to be created between local and international students because international students should be students first and international second.

**Outside the classroom**

University education is not only the experience of the classroom, assignments, tutorials and the library, it is also the life on campus, the opportunities students have to meet and interact with each other, play sport, get involved and feel a part of a community that will in many ways help prepare them for involvement in their broader community when they graduate.

These opportunities are becoming increasingly limited. One reason for this is the introduction of the Voluntary student unionism legislation (VSU) which has had on many campuses a catastrophic impact on services and amenities not to mention representation and welfare services. VSU will be addressed in more detail below but suffice it to say that some of Australia's luminaries have spent their time involved in clubs and societies formerly funded by universal student subscriptions.

Participating in the life of the university is about more than simply belonging, although that aspect is significant. Participation also provides students with the opportunity to develop skills and talents that are complementary to those developed in the classroom, many of which may contribute more significantly to work readiness and broader social participation than simply attending classes and completing assignments. As noted above the Bradley Review Discussion Paper mentions criticism from employer groups about the lack of “generic skills like interpersonal and problem solving skills, entrepreneurial skills, creativity or capacity to work in a team” (BRDP p. 24). SUPRA believes that participation in activities outside of the classroom plays a vital role in developing skills like these for students and the universities are uniquely positioned to offer them. It is imperative we reflect most carefully on implications of the expectation that higher education exists primarily to provide graduates who are ready to slot perfectly into business or industry and that neither business nor industry have themselves any role to play in ensuring graduates are able to work successfully. Higher Education must be much more than simply job certification even in the most vocational of courses.

Some examples from Sydney University include: Sydney University is home to the Sydney University Dramatic Society (SUDS) the country’s longest continually running theatre company. Germaine Greer, Clive James and John Bell are all alumni of that society. Sydney’s student newspaper can count Clive James, Laurie Oakes and members of the Chaser on its roll of past editors and Justice Michael Kirby, Joe Hockey and Tony Abbott have all been presidents of the SRC. Many of these opportunities for participation still exist at the University of Sydney; many do not exist at all elsewhere.

The other factor limiting potential participation is the work-study balance. As the fees for university become more expensive and as the cost of living get higher students are finding it increasingly difficult to balance work and study. Many study part-time in order to maximise full time work, and others attempt to manage on part-time wages. In the 2007 AVCC report on student finances, it was noted that around 30% of postgraduate students regularly skip classes in order to attend paid work. Further 52% of part-time postgraduate students said that their paid work interfered adversely with their study.<sup>9</sup> It was also noted that 53.1% of part-time coursework students and 74.7% of part-time RHD students would prefer to study full time but could not afford to do so.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Richard James, Emmaline Bexley, Marcia Devlin and Simon Marginson, *Australian University Student Finances 2006 A summary of findings from a national survey of students in public universities*, Centre for the Study of Higher Education, The University of Melbourne, February 2007, p. 35

<sup>10</sup> *ibid* p. 41

While we may be happy to make assumptions about the kind of course delivery students would prefer it is clear that these decisions are complex and yet frequently dictated by financial necessity. In order to create a vibrant learning environment, flexible course delivery options need to be explored making it easier for students to study either full time or part-time as suits their needs. This will mean changes to the Australian Postgraduate Award conditions as well as ensuring that part-time stipends are tax-free. It will also mean improving student income support and reassessing fee structures.

### **Recommendations:**

- That clear pathways into the academic profession be established and that universities be encouraged to redress the creeping casualisation of the workforce
- The student:staff ratios be decreased as a matter of priority
- That considerations of the needs of business and industry be tempered by a broad understanding of vocational training in the higher education context and with a sense of the responsibility of business and industry to contribute to the training of their employees.
- That international students attain access to welfare support, transport concessions and fair, transparent and equitable fee setting.
- That international students' participation in higher education in Australia be reconsidered with pedagogical outcomes as the priority.
- That flexible options for participation in university be made a priority.
- That the important contribution of participation in campus life be acknowledged as integral to developing well rounded graduates.

## **STUDENTS NOT CUSTOMERS**

### **The “Voluntary Student Unionism” Legislation (VSU)**

It is with some regret and not a little disappointment that SUPRA finds itself needing to comment on VSU as part of this review. Despite the assurances of the Labor government we have yet to see any kind of proposal to rectify the problem of VSU and we are currently facing a crisis in student services and representation across the country. While we concede that this is not currently the case at the University of Sydney it is essential that VSU be addressed and specifically that the legislation be repealed and independent, student controlled organisations be restored as an integral part of Australian University campuses.

The VSU legislation has had a devastating impact on student services across Australia. Representative student organisations play a vital role in the quality assurance cycle. When funded properly student organisations are in a unique position to make universities aware of systemic and ongoing problems and failures in all levels of course delivery, administration and student welfare. Further, they are able to ensure that independence is maintained in grievance resolution procedures.

Student organisations offer universities the opportunity to be able to provide a complete student experience and enhance the breadth of graduate attributes students take away from their time at university. There is a great deal more to education than what happens in the classroom. Given that employers are increasingly looking for graduate attributes that are difficult to provide in the context of the classroom, such as entrepreneurialism, leadership and interactive skills, it is important for universities and for the quality of the education that they offer, that avenues for garnering a broad range of skills are made available.

It is important to note too that this legislation has had a significant impact on many equity groups. Traditionally student organisations have provided and protected women’s rooms and queer spaces. They have provided subsidised childcare. They have campaigned around issues like sexism, homophobia, racism and safety. Student organisations have offered welfare support like legal services and caseworkers to help student disadvantaged by the university system through caring responsibilities, being from non-English speaking backgrounds or who experience discrimination in classrooms or on campus either at the hands of staff or other students.

Prior to the introduction of VSU student organisations were also responsible for the provision of after hours catering services, cheaper sporting and recreational facilities and in some cases low cost medical and dental services. As student organisations struggle for survival their capacity to provide essential support for some of the most marginalised and vulnerable students is diminished if not completely eradicated. Even at the University of Sydney, home of perhaps the most well supported Student organisations in the country, we have seen the reduction of childcare subsidies and both the queer space and women's room have reportedly been under threat.

The integral role of student organisations on university campuses becomes even more striking when we consider that at present there is no Australian standard for the minimum number of staff employed by universities to manage discrimination and harassment prevention (including sexual harassment) and to advise on broad policy and program directions to achieve inclusive cultures inside universities. Nor is there any national Social Justice framework for Equity interventions and programmes in higher education.

Benchmarking surveys show that the number of staff employed inside EEO Units can vary from 3 to 13 with no relationship between the size and resources available to the university and the level of staff provided to these areas. Sydney University consistently employs around 3 staff in this area as opposed to other universities with up to 12 staff for the same areas

Many student associations, when faced with these low staffing levels, report actions for non-discrimination are either ineffective or unavailable. Self-regulation in social justice and equity areas is generally unsuccessful particularly where there is evidence of institutional characteristics of embedded inequity (see equity data). This is the case with Sydney University where interpretations of the statutory requirements made by staff in this area favour a 'no action' approach with reasons primarily given as unit staff having insufficient resources or authority to act which can leave students unsupported on concerns about discrimination or harassment.

Sydney University has demonstrated its commitment to student organisations and to the student experience. However it is integral for the quality of Higher Education as a whole in Australia that the VSU legislation be repealed and that independent, student controlled, and student funded student organisations are restored to the Higher Education landscape. It is essential to note that the amendments to the Higher Education Support Act (HESA), commonly called the VSU legislation, were passed when the Coalition had control of both Houses of Parliament. This legislation was not passed based on students' demands since there were no on campus referenda, nor is reflective of or responsive to the needs of students.

## **Supporting Students**

In the experience of our Student Advice and Advocacy Officers when students present to SUPRA with an issue regarding their candidature there are usually contingent matters to do with health, tenancy or other welfare issues that occur in conjunction with, and contribute to, a student's capacity to fulfil the requirements of their course. It is essential that we recognise that there are a nexus of issues that affect students and that those issues often have, at their heart, student poverty.

The greatest expansion in course delivery and numbers of students at the University of Sydney has been in the area of postgraduate coursework. SUPRA believes that it is likely that this is an area where there will be continued growth, both on this campus and in higher education as a whole, particularly if predictions of increased enrolment of mature aged students wishing to re-skill or upgrade vocational qualifications prove accurate. Further, with the roll back of domestic undergraduate full fee paying places, it is likely that the university will seek ways to circumvent the cap on fees by increasing graduate and postgraduate entry into courses.

Given this, it is essential that attention be paid to support available for postgraduate students. Most postgraduate coursework students pay full fees, have little or no access to HECS places, and have little to no access to any form of income support at all. According to the 2006 AVCC Report on Student Finance, postgraduate coursework students were identified as some of the most financially disadvantaged of all students on Australian university campuses. This must be remedied. We recommend that income support be made available to all Australian students regardless of whether they are postgraduates or undergraduates.

It should also be noted that the AVCC report does not include any information regarding international students. It is well known that the amount of money required to live in Australia is generally under quoted and international students have very strict regulations on how many hours they can work. This creates a situation where those students are often working illegally and being exploited. Over 40 international students have died in Australia since June 2007. Changes need to be made in order to adequately support international students. At the very least they should arrive with more accurate expectations regarding the costs of living in Australia.

For too long research students have been treated as trainee researchers. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) estimates that around 60% of all research and development in Australia is undertaken by postgraduate students.<sup>11</sup> While postgraduate research students may be trainee academics they are certainly not trainee researchers, they contribute significantly to the nation's knowledge economy. To that end it is critical that the number of APA scholarships be increased, that the rate be increased by at least 50% and that the scholarship be appropriately indexed to ensure it keeps pace with increases in the cost of living.

The current method of funding universities creates serious issues with regards to PhD study in particular. PhD students are increasingly expected to complete their candidature in 3.5 – 4 years. This is at odds with the current length of time for which scholarships are offered. Further, current Australian Postgraduate Award scholarships have not kept pace with the cost of living and the APA will fall below the poverty line at the end of 2008. This is primarily driven not by pedagogy but by the government's funding model.

This issue is further exacerbated by the disparity of infrastructure resources available to postgraduate students in general and research students in particular. While many universities have minimum resources policies for research higher degree (RHD) students it is unclear how many are actually following them. The Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations (CAPA) has developed a minimum resources policy upon which many university policies are based, SUPRA also has an entitlements policy.<sup>12</sup> Certainly at the University of Sydney many research students are unable to secure even a designated desk with a computer in order to work on their research projects. Universities require adequate designated infrastructure funding to provide the appropriate resources to allow students the best possibility of completing their research within the prescribed time constraints. At our most cynical SUPRA feels that at times research students are being exploited by Universities incapable of adequately supporting them but still eager to utilise their research output.

It is also problematic that emphasis is placed on submission rather than the conferral of the degree, thus there is real potential for students to be expected to submit theses that are not ready in order to ensure that funding will be received. It is time that the model for funding universities to support PhD research be reconsidered.

To take into account the massive hikes in rent, mortgage rates and other associated costs of living we recommend that all students be eligible for rental assistance and health care cards.

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<http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Latestproducts/8111.0Main%20Features32006?opendocument&tabname=Summary&prodno=8111.0&issue=2006&num=&view=>

12 <http://www.capa.edu.au/briefing-papers/2004/statement-minimum-resources>  
<http://www.supra.usyd.edu.au/entitlements.html>

SUPRA would also like to stress that it is essential that not only is access to income support improved but also that the rates and levels of that support are increased. Currently the levels of income support that are available are too low and the threshold at which income affects Austudy, Abstudy and Youth Allowance is punitive; the income threshold that makes some ineligible for the health care card is too low; and rental assistance needs to be expanded to take into account the rental crisis.

Finally it is essential that there is improved funding to all areas of student support, in particular learning centres and student services like counselling and health. As pressure on students increases (both financial and otherwise) it is vital that students have access to any and all ancillary services that may mitigate the impacts of difficulties balancing work and study.

### **Equity and Participation**

Encouraging and facilitating the participation of low SES and indigenous students must be a priority. SURPA would also include students from regional and rural areas into this equation as well as students from non-English speaking backgrounds. While it is clear that there are a nexus of issues that impede the participation of these demographics in higher education including performance at primary and secondary education, aspiration, familial expectation to name a few, it is also true that these cannot be used as an excuse for inaction by higher education providers. SUPRA believes that there are three ways universities can contribute to expanding the participation of these students. The first is to ensure both that there are flexible pathways into higher education including modes of conversion from VET training and recognition of prior learning that takes into account work experience and other qualifications or study. To this end we are advocating for a more readily integrated tertiary education system where VET providers and universities work more closely to ensure that maximum flexibility is achieved. SUPRA does not want to see a situation where a single mode of tertiary training is privileged over another, indeed there may in fact be a great deal of benefit for flexible entry into VET providers for holders of university qualifications.

The second is to improve income support for students and the third is to deal with the issue of fees and fee setting.

As we have mentioned above, at postgraduate level fees are deregulated and are primarily set based on demand for the course rather than the cost of its delivery. This is hugely problematic and creates a fee structure that discourages rather than encourages participation. This issue will become more acute as it becomes increasingly necessary for people to have tertiary degrees to be competitive in the labour market. At SUPRA we feel it is likely that there will be a continued expansion in the area of postgraduate coursework rather than undergraduate enrolment for mature age students and that universities will encourage this expansion due in no small part to the rolling back of domestic undergraduate full fee paying places, making universities eager to focus on the unregulated full fee market that is postgraduate coursework.

At SUPRA we believe fervently in the principle of free education, we believe that the only impediments to participation in higher education should be aptitude and desire. When it comes to postgraduate coursework we believe that as imperfect as the system is, HECS should be extended to cover all degrees. We believe too that course fees, and especially fees for international students must be regulated and based not on how much people are willing to pay but rather on a cost recovery basis. Finally it is essential that transparency be introduced to the process of fee setting and fee increases and that refund processes be made open and equitable.

By addressing the key areas of student support, flexibility and fees universities and the government can go a long way towards encouraging the participation of all students in higher education.

More Indigenous students had taken out a loan in order to study than non- Indigenous students (undergraduates 33.8 per cent compared with 24.4 per cent; postgraduates 34.4 per cent compared with 20.2 per cent);

The loans taken out by Indigenous postgraduates in order to study (average \$8250) were larger than the loans taken out by non-Indigenous postgraduates in order to study (average \$6250); and

More part-time Indigenous students indicated that they would prefer to study full-time if their financial circumstances permitted it (76.7 per cent) than non- Indigenous part-time students (62.2 per cent), especially postgraduates (78.9 per cent compared with 57.6 per cent).

Richard James, Emmaline Bexley, Marcia Devlin and Simon Marginson, *A summary of findings from a national survey of students in public universities*, Centre for the Study of Higher Education The University of Melbourne, February 2007

### **Recommendations:**

- That the so-called VSU legislation be repealed and independent, student funded, student controlled, student organisations be returned to Australian campuses.
- That adequate funding is allocated to ensure independent student organisations can be reformed or restored.
- That there be national frameworks and benchmarks established to improve performance of harassment and discrimination and equal opportunity initiatives for staff and students.
- That access to ALL forms of income support be extended to included postgraduate students, including Austudy for research students who are not on scholarships.

- That all postgraduate students have access to rental assistance and health care cards.
- That the rates of income support be improved to adequately reflect the cost of living.
- That the APA and APAI scholarships be extended to match the length of candidature, that the rate be increased by at least 50% and that they be appropriately indexed to keep pace with the cost of living.
- That the funding model for research higher degrees be reassessed in order to encourage high standards of work rather than submission of theses.
- That universities be required to provide adequate infrastructure for RHD students.
- That there be increased support to ancillary student support services
- That flexible pathways into tertiary and university study be developed improved and expanded.
- That HECS be extended to all postgraduate coursework degrees, that fees are set based on cost recovery and that transparency in fee setting, fee increases be improved.
- That refund policies and procedures be made more transparent and equitable.