

## **Discussion paper – Higher Education in Australia**

Dear Colleague

This response may be somewhat disjointed, colloquial and not exactly on point dependent on your view. I appreciate that this response is late but I ask you to consider including it in your discussions.

My situation:

- PhD Student - ~7 years (commenced 2000), 'fee free' place supported by RTS, ~ 2 years part time on EFTSL 'clock'
- Commenced my PhD with Curtin University of Technology, recently (March 08) moved my project to University of WA
- Clinician - .5FTE – Senior Physiotherapist, Royal Perth Hospital
- Researcher – .5FTE - funding supported by McComb Foundation of WA (at usual substantive salary)
  
- Professional representations – President Australian and New Zealand Burns Association (ANZBA); ANZBA National Database Steering and Reference Committees; Allied Health Representative, SQuIRE Pressure Area Group, WA Health; Allied Health Representative, National Burns Network – Aust. Health Protection Committee (AHPC) subgroup; Expert Reference Group for the Burn Care node of Joanna Briggs Institute CONNECT; Panel member – Andre Zagame Rehabilitation Specialist Award – International Society for Burn Injuries (ISBI)
- Prof Fiona Wood is a mentor, clinical colleague and, co-supervisor of my PhD

I look forward to hearing more about this review.

Regards

**Dale Edgar**

## **How adequate is the statement of functions and characteristics of higher education in modern Australia?**

While it may be implied, there should be an articulation of the issues of future proofing the system. A tangible link between planning infrastructure and accessible funding made up front to underpin all ongoing discussion. How do we make the system flexible enough to respond in <5 years to a proposed or real shortage in skills in a sector or to be on the front of the wave in 20 years? Higher degree students need time to think while still exposed to a clinical or work environment such that new skills generate innovation and challenge boundaries and evidence (Holmes et al, 2006, International Journal of Evidence Based Healthcare: 4: 180-186).

### **Solutions:**

- To offset the impact of decreased workforce participation after 55yo (and therefore reduction in Government tax revenue) – schemes must target / engage 40 – 50 yo's to further their education and skills – easier access, subsidized funding for this age group in particular to generate the work and life-long education habit.
- Welfare payments linked to quarterly 'compulsory' attendance ('learn for the dole') at single day VET courses targeted to prevention, improving health status and 'life long learning' strategies. Examples include – 1. first aid / emergency survival strategies; 2. nutrition and eating habits; 3. parenting; 4. typing skills; 5. how to search the internet; 6. how to email / keep in contact; 7. car maintenance; 8. strategies to save water / power; 9. gardening; 10. exercising safely - the list goes on.

## **Are there impediments to the higher education sector being able to innovate in the development of courses and programs? What are these impediments and how could they be removed?**

- Lack of planned replacement or upgrade of equipment / technology / infrastructure. Currently, without private funding, keeping up with cutting edge facilities limits innovation and flexibility and is often a political battle rather than a needs or future focus basis. One example, a fund could be allocated to match seats of education dollar for dollar where a well governed programme is set up to upgrade all computers or replace all superseded lab equipment every 2 years. Surety in such programmes reduces the need for academics / teachers to have to focus on retaining students in substandard facilities or seeking private funding (which is time consuming!) and opens options for flexible curriculae desired. This type of scheme obviously addresses a number of issues.
- Renovation capital funds which are linked to completions of higher degree study.
- Tapping into industries that have money and time – eg mining. Fly in, fly out miners are young, have \$ but need incentives to spend it on education. For instance, **working with**

the mining **industry**, offering and **coordinating** 2 days of lectures / contact time with the week off (providing adequate break post week on) and non-contact learning for the week-on. The cycle could be repeated in reverse for the opposite crew. Economies of scale may be achieved with collaboration across all or a number of companies. Modular courses could focus on numerous topics but it would be wise to incentivize adult teaching for those miners who are reaching that 50 yo mark and haven't got any external qualifications to go on with – the cycle is complete, they become the teachers....

#### **Other issues in current system:**

- Higher Degree and Post-graduate Research Scholarships – vast majority available are underfunded and not conducive to supporting researchers in my situation – How does Australia expect to keep researchers who have a mortgage/family? How are you supposed to view the fact that you can work in a job to achieve a pay level of \$70-80K pa to have suggested that your time is worth <\$25K if you wish to take time to perform complex research (which could only be developed by working in a system and understanding the areas which require investigation or improvement)?
- NHMRC – ‘non-speculative’ and punitive – without an extensive track record, researchers cannot approach this group to apply for funding. If they do they are clearly ‘reprimanded’. The application is cumbersome, prescriptive and somewhat self serving. The system surrounding NHMRC could be viewed as ‘innovation quashing’ because of the lack of funds to support young researchers. This is a real impediment to innovation.
- Flexibility of university course structure and in particular, time taken to make changes to course structure(s).
- Lack of incentive for the corporate sector to be involved in university and vocational education.
- Lack of work readiness and work hardening.

#### **Possible solutions:**

- All clinical and higher degree researchers must be paid at their substantive salary or market equivalent to provide them with time to perform research.
- Increase flexibility and encourage part-time appointments between academic and clinical/business environments.
- NHMRC needs to be overhauled. It also needs a ‘speculation’ / ‘higher risk’ research funding stream to encourage young researchers combined with the provision of infrastructure and support to develop research

methodology rather than 'go away and come back when you have a track record'. Consider, a new Government supported model of health research which seems to be working to increase clinical health research in Britain (supporting health research in the NHS): National Institute of Health Research (<http://www.nihr.ac.uk/>).

- Flexible, rapid, modular (mix and match) courses must continue to be developed – particularly in the high demand areas and for mature age students. Expansion of rapid up-skilling eg post-grad certificates with short, condensed practical / onsite attendance can be designed to respond to workplace requirements and be provided in 'bursts' (pg22). In this way, workplace shortages can be addressed in 1 -2 years rather than 5-10 years as is currently the case. There is a huge potential for expansion the tier of vocations in the 'professional's assistant' spectrum (with consequent bridging courses) in line with this. On-line study options are imperative but I agree, they are not the complete answer as they have inherent problems for vocational or practical study (pg34). Mature age students, particularly those requiring skill upgrade or update will find the short courses very appealing. Further, incentive for corporations to be involved (develop and fund courses or faculties) is not mutually exclusive from the flexibility and short course issue. Development of technical and professional assistant courses have the potential to reduce labour costs for corporations (safety and quality being the opposing issues). Practical issues – consider significant accommodation support for students who travel to attend. These courses are particularly appealing for international students.
- Work hardening and work readiness courses could be developed in the same manner as above in response to industry / corporate / public sector demand. Offsite study with a short intensive contact timeframe.
- Commonwealth responsibility - Increase tax incentives for businesses to support higher education.

Miscellaneous points:

- HECS – This is a good system as people understand the value of education to a certain extent. However, it needs to change to ‘pay back a proportion of net salary regardless of income’ after failing or finishing a course / degree. The % to be paid back is relative to the salary but there should not be a threshold to start paying back. This encourages the development of perpetual students who fail, or are unwilling to translate their skills into society or the workforce. The up-front payment discount relatively disadvantages the poorer students and increases the chasm between SES classes. There must be a fairer way to apply it (pg29).
- ABStudy – should be means tested similar to Austudy. I think it is an insult to the Indigenous collectivity and a cause of inter-racial tension that this distinction has been made. In truth it may not change the number of supported applicants by a great number but the ‘PR’ associated with such a change may assist the cultural change that is required. In that, I agree with the sentiments on pg 28 as to the need for cultural change at seats of higher learning to facilitate Indigenous excellence in that environment.
- The public services – health, education, policing and government must work more closely develop a level of synchronicity. School and TAFE holidays and ‘pupil free days’ significantly affect productivity in the health sector for instance due to reduced availability of nurses and allied health (noted by the OECD statement p 20/21), particularly in surgical disciplines. The reductions in productivity would be similar in other sectors. Pay teachers more and place ‘pupil free days’ during holiday periods to reduce their impact. Increase child care access, particularly for health professionals and police.
- The UK *Higher Education at Work: Higher skills, higher value* concepts are certainly applicable in the Australian context. However, to what extent is the question? Australia, in contrast to Britain, at least for the next generation or more, looks to require an expanding practical, hands-on occupation workbase. The higher education system must take more responsibility to feed this need as already pointed out. The idea of secondments and part-time joint appointments across academic / industry / public sectors is sensible and will provide a rapid feedback system within the local education / workforce environment (pg 38). Why is progression from vocational training onto higher degree not a positive outcome? The pressure and incentive of industry and corporate sector markets will continue to accept those with the vocational skills required. A collaborative approach is required across all sectors. This will require a culture change and new respect for the skills of respective education sectors. Not something that will change quickly. I completely disagree that university is the only site for innovation. The collaboration of practical, vocational and academic minds can only lead to new translational research and respect. This is evident in multidisciplinary research development within universities for instance. Taking this idea one step further or from another view point, would be to ensure that high school and TAFE students have regular contact with other seats of higher education. The unlocking

of the mystery of university or TAFE could change the view of the increasing number of school leavers by 2020 (Fig 8). Such contact could be simply sport challenges, for instance. A cultural change is required and this will take time.

- I don't think there is a place for 'teaching only' facilities. A focus of higher learning is skill development – practical or communicative, therefore there is need for industry / end user of the learning outcomes to have some input into the teaching. Thus, there is no practical way for learning only facilities to survive because they quickly become obsolete or non-current.
- The Government must review visa requirements to facilitate internationalism. Also, there is a need to nationalise the registration of professionals to assist with movement and effectiveness of teachers and higher degree / short course educators. The added value to this will be the optimal enactment of AUSBURNPLAN (DoHA, 2005), for instance, in the event that trauma teams are required to cross state boundaries (pg 67 – extension of the AQF).
- As to the issues of SES students discussed on pg 28: Consider re-introducing State and, or Commonwealth full scholarships for financially disadvantaged students for Years **10**, 11 and 12. Couple this with an observational visits and practical contact with local and interstate higher education facilities starting in Year 10. Plant the seed and provide financial stability to allow these students to excel and gain good study habits in order to progress onto university / higher education – life-long habits.
- Student unionism – it is intriguing to me that low SES students are not exempt in compulsory unionism. I disagree with the compulsory concept but appreciate that the union support of extra-curricular activities is an integral part of higher degree study and it is negatively affected without it.
- Quality of students – in the profession of physiotherapy, there is an anecdotal but noticeable drop of entry level work readiness, in recent years, with the explosion of student intake and 'required knowledge'. This is particularly true of the established physiotherapy facility outcomes in WA. The scientific publication rate has skyrocketed and higher degree courses are struggling to translate or assimilate this knowledge effectively. There is pressure to keep the course length the same or shorter leading to more areas of once 'core' skills and knowledge becoming optional or completely left out of the undergraduate course altogether. One of the issues related to poorer quality graduates is the use of pass/fail outcome measures rather than a scale rating. It stunts the initiative and drive of students and limits the employment opportunities in that facilities are less likely to employ a new graduate 'sight unseen' because all have similar grades. Thus, employment can be purely based on whether the student was fortunate enough to have a practical placement at a facility or not.
- Make it mandatory that all higher education students have a first aid certificate if not gained prior to starting their course / higher study. Preventative medicine....