

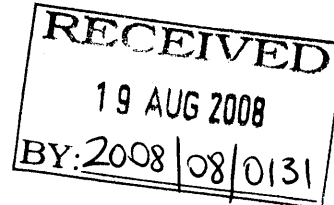


Education and Training

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Professor Denise Bradley AC
Chair of Panel of the Higher Education Review
Location 023
GPO Box 9880
CANBERRA ACT 2601



Dear Professor Bradley

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a response to the Review of Higher Education conducted by the Review Panel on behalf of the Australian Government.

Thank you also for the recent Review Panel consultations with Mr Andrew Barr MLA, the ACT Minister for Education and Training, and departmental officers.

I am pleased to provide this submission to assist you and your Panel with the review process. The submission picks up on issues from the discussion paper released in June and the recent panel consultations. In preparing the submission, the Department convened a meeting of ACT higher education stakeholders in order to canvas common issues. The Department's submission reflects a number of issues in common with ACT stakeholders as a result of that process.

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide input to the Review.

Yours sincerely

Michele Bruniges

Michele Bruniges
Chief Executive
14 August 2008



Response to the Review of Australian Higher Education
Australian Capital Territory Department of Education and Training
4 August 2008

Introduction – the ACT context

Higher education contributes significantly to the culture of the ACT and the wellbeing of its citizens through employment, education opportunities, community engagement and the attraction of students from interstate and overseas. Investment in higher education, training and lifelong learning provides choice and opportunity for all to reach their potential, make a contribution and share the benefits of the community. The quality of higher education is therefore a high priority, to create Canberra as a learning city for the 21st Century.

The ACT is home to the University of Canberra (UC), the Australian National University (ANU), the Signadou campus of the Australian Catholic University (ACU), the St Mark's National Theological Centre (partnered with Charles Sturt University), and UNSW@ADFA, a college of the University of New South Wales established within the Australian Defence Force Academy. In addition, the ACT has five non self-accrediting higher education providers¹, including the Canberra Institute of Technology (CIT). These are diverse, high-performing institutions with a global, as well as a local focus, producing professionals and skilled specialists for both the national and local labour market needs.

The ACT Department of Education and Training (“the Department”) has, as one of its responsibilities, the overall management of vocational education and training and higher education in the ACT. This involves managing requirements under national registration, monitoring and auditing processes for vocational education and higher education. The Department acknowledges that higher education forms a base for building intellectual assets and related professional skills.

¹ Canberra Institute of Technology, NSW College of Law, Blue Mountains International Hotel Management School Pty Ltd trading as Australian International Hotel School, Australian Defence College, and the Institute of Chartered Accountants in Australia.

As a relatively small jurisdiction geographically and demographically, the ACT offers a unique perspective on education, including tertiary education. The size of the ACT also facilitates cooperation and collaboration in making the most of what the Territory has to offer. Relative to other parts of Australia, it offers a high level of opportunity for participation in higher education, and it is supported by a government which values and supports such opportunity. The ACT Government believes that this cooperation and collaboration should complement, not replace, healthy competition between institutions. The ACT, therefore, provides a microcosm case study of potential links and relationships which promote quality tertiary education. An ACT case study can provide valuable lessons for the provision of tertiary education nationally.

This paper will outline the Department's perspective on issues from the Terms of Reference and the Discussion Paper which are relevant to tertiary education in the ACT. It is expected that other ACT stakeholders will respond separately presenting their own perspective on review issues. Where appropriate and consistent with the Department's own perspective, some of these are reiterated in this paper.

Higher education in modern Australia

The Department supports the Discussion Paper's emphasis on the development of high-level knowledge and skills as well as generation of new knowledge and applications, particularly related to workforce development.

The Department considers that the synergies created by acknowledging and promoting the relationships between the higher education and VET sectors can have positive outcomes for students and workforce development. The Department's sees higher education in modern Australia as part of a "tertiary education" sector, which includes both the traditional "higher education" notion and the "vocational education and training" (VET) sector. Over the past ten years, there has been an increasing blurring of the distinctions between the two sectors as students move between them and providers deliver in both sectors. The provision of higher education has expanded extensively through the participation of a range of non-university providers who are both self-accrediting, such as the Australian Maritime College, and non self-

accrediting, such as the Canberra Institute of Technology. Many of these are also providers of VET.

Diversity

The Department values diversity in tertiary education both in institutions and student population. Providers want the capacity to diversify into activities which respond to local, regional and institutional priorities. Recent comments by Professor Parker, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Canberra, in the media indicate a strong valuing of diversity. He has suggested that a restructuring of the higher education sector into a tertiary sector with other providers, rather than discriminating between VET and higher education, could better meet changed patterns of demand for tertiary education.

There is compelling evidence that there are gaps between access and participation rates of some social groups and the rates for the Australian population generally. Diversity of student population is critical to promote access and participation of groups not well represented in tertiary education, such as Indigenous and low socio-economic groups, and people living in regional and remote areas. Increasing access to higher education for mature aged students will promote diversity as well as upskilling the existing workforce. There is also evidence that people from geographically rural and remote areas also have lower rates of access and participation. As target groups for provision of education, each present separate challenges.

Implicit in student diversification is the concept of 'lifelong learning' through:

- catering for diverse learners with different skills sets and life experiences
- delivery modes which permit a mix of study/employment
- partnerships with employers and industry to offer specific industry qualifications, and
- responsiveness to local imperatives and priorities for skills shortages.

Promoting a mix of study and workforce participation provides added benefits, such as: encouraging greater workplace learning; providing additional capacity for the

workforce; and a two-way transfer between industry and academia. Students who undertake paid employment in the field in which they are being trained, however, can be penalised if their earnings reach the benefit limit of grants and allowances, such as Youth Allowance. Exemption for these students would be warranted in the current labour market.

Opportunities to participate in higher education

There must be some funding provided to research and showcase models which are working well with target groups, to determine the features promoting successful outcomes. Longitudinal research studies are required to provide evidence bases for policy.

Models for Indigenous groups will also need to analyse cultural elements of both pedagogy and delivery mode and how these correlate with successful outcomes. A useful strategy will be to add a category for teaching of Indigenous students in the Learning and Teaching Performance Fund (LTPF).

Promoting greater access to the target groups also mandates consideration of:

- financial situations of mature aged students who have family commitments, and
- the development of diverse teaching and learning approaches including:
 - unique delivery modes
 - mix of study/workforce participation, and
 - pathways from lower level qualifications with support for transitioning between educational providers

Additionally, student pathways between VET and higher education need to be examined to promote further successful transitioning between the sectors. There should be a particular examination of the achievement of 'generic skills' across different qualifications, and the pedagogical approach, or the teaching and learning philosophies, across these sectors.

Meeting labour market and industry needs

Productivity and Participation - national and regional mechanisms

The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) has a strong focus on skills and education in its current agenda. Partnerships between state and territory jurisdictions and the Australian Government will drive resulting education and training strategies. The involvement of state and territory jurisdictions is important to successful outcomes because a local and regional perspective is critical to the planning process.

The UK paper “Higher Education at Work” suggests a strong role for providers of tertiary education in supporting regional initiatives and social infrastructure through attracting people to study outside the metropolitan areas who subsequently build their professional and personal lives in regional centres. This cannot be transferred easily to the Australian context because of the concentration of the Australian population and many tertiary education providers on the coastal fringes.

Nonetheless, the UK may provide some lessons for the Australian context. A better focus on provision of tertiary education outside of metropolitan areas could promote regional development and employment and ameliorate the population drift to the coast. These present some important social policy challenges for governments.

The ACT context

In 2007, the ACT Government established the ACT Skills Commission, with a brief for it to provide high level, strategic advice to the Government on skills issues and the strategies required to meet the ACT’s skills needs now and into the future. In consultation with various representatives from the broader ACT community, the Commission has made a number of recommendations which relate to the integration of higher education in the skills development of the ACT workforce.

According to the ACT Skills Commission Final Report, industry and employer knowledge and understanding of the need for workforce development are critical, as is the capacity of tertiary education providers to provide courses and qualifications to meet the need for workforce upskilling. Implicit in this understanding is the providers’

role in ameliorating the impending skills shortages in various sectors across Australia.

Upskilling and reskilling are both essential elements of workforce retention. As skill needs continue to deepen and broaden in the labour market, professional qualifications and postgraduate awards are likely to be in high demand. The recent strategic issues paper prepared by the National Industry Skills Committee (NISC), “A Framework for Building the Skills of the Existing Workforce” highlighted the potential for an integrated policy framework to support the skills development of the existing, as well as mature age, workforce, with the ultimate aim being to ensure that Australia’s skills base is positioned competitively in the global economy. Tertiary education must play a more significant role in these areas.

The ACT Skills Commission Final Report further emphasized “lifelong learning” to upgrade skills over people’s working lives as “crucial to productivity improvement which in turn underpins economic growth and better living standards.” (ACT Skills Commission 2008. p10). Implicit in this focus is the expectation of the need for constant updating and upgrading of a person’s skills throughout their working life.

As suggested in the Discussion Paper, ‘career advice’ needs to be broadened to include later career advice for adults. If this advice targeted the existing workforce, information could be made available to support those workers seeking to upskill or to change careers. Partnerships with industry and employers are critical to the success of such advice.

Institutional linkages and partnerships

Linkages between the vocational education and training (VET) and higher education sectors are critical to meet the needs of the labour market. Conceptualising all post-compulsory education as ‘tertiary’ rather than continuing to make outdated distinctions between the VET and higher education sectors may assist these linkages for policy and funding purposes.

The Department believes that relationships between providers of tertiary education are most usefully developed at the local level. There are strong links between

providers of VET and higher education in the ACT. Significant numbers of students transition in both directions between the two sectors and benefit from agreements between institutions to offer courses in a growing number of qualifications.

The strong links between tertiary education stakeholders in the ACT are demonstrated by:

- The 'Beyond Articulation' project between the Canberra Institute of Technology (CIT) and the University of Canberra (UC) which aims to maximize opportunities for CIT graduates to articulate into degree programs at the University of Canberra.
- The COAG Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) project involving CIT and DET. The project aims to provide a more streamlined and accessible RPL process and focuses on the skills shortage area of Community Services.
- Joint programs, memorandums of understanding and numerous articulation and credit transfer arrangements involving the CIT and the Australian Catholic University (ACU) and the Australian National University (ANU).

The Department is keen to see the expansion of such partnerships, especially where they help to address areas of local skills shortage, for example in accounting, human services and biotechnology. These partnerships, which create pathways into tertiary education, underpin social inclusion by supporting access to higher qualifications for students from a wider range of backgrounds, skills and professions.

In particular, programs, partnerships and initiatives which enhance the engagement of 'disengaged' individuals through tertiary education must be supported and encouraged. These members of our community are not in the workforce and not participating in any training which would be likely to enhance their employability. "Disengaged" people include various minority groups, such as Indigenous Australians, individuals with limited English language skills, people with a disability, and people who are chronically unemployed.

The public service sector has a critical role to play in modelling effective partnerships between employers and higher education providers to develop the workforce which can be used by other industries. Small business, which represents a significant share of the employment sector, would also be an area where partnerships would provide opportunities for workforce development.

The Australian Public Service, and the ACT Public Service, are major providers of employment, particularly in the ACT. They could be encouraged to:

- support training initiatives and flexible conditions for an ageing workforce
- provide Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and gap training, and
- investigate ways to encourage training and education through instituting a program of 'sabbaticals' of 1 year in 5 (or 7) with pay adjustments, primarily for on-going learning.

A further proposal is for the joint funding of tertiary education places by employers and funding bodies, with incentives for employers to encourage investment in workforce development.

“Reverse articulation” pathways

There is a need for greater research attention on articulation to VET from higher education. There is anecdotal information that increasing numbers of students transition in this way than from VET to university courses.

Harris, R., Sumner, R., and Rainey, L. (2005) have used the term “reverse articulation” to describe this pathway and identified significant differences in the students who articulate in this way:

1. Students entering VET with a higher education qualification tend to enter a **field of study that is different from that studied previously**
2. Students are likely to make the decision to move to the VET sector **after completion or discontinuation of a degree**
3. Students moving from higher education to VET tend to choose destinations such as **business, administration & economics, arts humanities & social science**

Harris *et al* suggest that the reasons students give for moving from higher education to VET tend to be to:

- develop links with industry
- begin a new career
- undertake personalised study, or
- reduce their study costs.

The CIT/UC “Beyond Articulation” project is beginning to collect and analyse data on ACT students who transition from university-level studies to VET courses.

While the VET to higher education pathway is more recognized and accepted to promote workforce development in many industries, reverse articulation pathways are important to enable professionals, researchers and scientists to gain workforce skills and hands on experience in the industry through the VET sector.

Lag between “demand” and “supply” for graduates in specific areas

By the nature of the tertiary education system, there is a lag between demand for graduates in a particular field of study and the supply of graduates in that field. Professional qualifications generally require a minimum four-years to complete which is the minimum lag time between demand and supply. In practical terms, the lag can be significantly longer than that because of the system of allocating funding for Commonwealth Supported Places (CSP) which permits only small incremental changes by higher education institutions. The lag can also be increased by the increasing student preference for part time over full time load thus allowing students a mix of employment and study.

For some professions the lag is exacerbated by mandated requirements to complete practical experience post graduation before being admitted fully to, or registered by, a professional association. Examples are intern requirements in medicine and the legal profession's legal workshop or articles where these still exist in a State or Territory.

The demand-supply lag complicates strategies to respond to identified skills shortages in particular professional areas. This can lead jurisdictions to look elsewhere for solutions to skills shortages, such as to recruitment of professionals from other states or internationally.

In some cases, the skills demand “bubble” may have burst before supply can begin to meet demand. For example, tourism is a “volatile” skills area which is sensitive to unforeseen world events such as fuel prices, currency fluctuations, natural and other disasters such as political strife or terrorism.

The relationships between skill priority areas, availability of CSP, course fees and scores required for course entry need to be examined. There are assumptions made in funding and in student recruitment that the student numbers can be increased by reducing course entry scores or fees and providing greater numbers of CSP. Within individual higher education institutions, student demand for individual courses frequently impacts on scores required for entry. So higher student demand correlates with higher entry score, lower demand with lower entry. The staffing resources and available facilities for the course within the institution often impact on student places and entry scores. The impact of skills shortages and local priorities for workforce development are lower order factors in decisions. Entry scores are thus often not related to the student capacity to undertake the course which would logically be a consideration in promoting student outcomes.

The student experience of higher education

Student finances and support

There should be some analysis of the financial situation of students undertaking higher education studies and the supports available to them. There is conflicting research in this area. Many students suffer financial burden while studying. Most students undertake employment to support their living, accommodation and tuition costs. These periods of employment are often up to full-time and involve shiftwork, which can negatively impact on the student’s capacity to undertake studies and ultimately the quality of their learning.

Other research suggests that student access to higher education is not impacted by their financial situation while studying. Some additional research is warranted to analyse impacts of the study/employment mix on students. This analysis could have implications for future workforce upskilling involving patterns of study and employment.

The debts incurred under HECS/Fee-HELP schemes has increased significantly over the past years reflecting reductions in higher education funding bases. Individuals who undertake long periods of higher education studies may continue to make repayments on their degrees for a decade after completing their studies.

One suggestion for ameliorating student finances would be to vary the conditions on Youth Allowance. Students who are undertaking paid employment in their field of study could continue to qualify for Youth Allowance when their earnings reach the benefit limit. The allowance could then be directed to HECS repayment. Apart from the financial benefit to students, there are multiple positive outcomes through:

- students receiving valuable workplace training
- additional workforce capacity
- the skills and knowledge transfer between industry and educational institution.

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

Indicators suggest that Australia is falling behind on expenditure in higher education. Australian governments need to benchmark Australia's expenditure on tertiary education against those nations with higher living standards and educational outcomes. Current planning and funding models are apparently not adequate, sometimes giving distorted outcomes, and can often result in mismatch between expected and actual outcomes. There must be a more obvious link between investment in tertiary education and outcomes of a highly skilled, high GDP earning and internationally competitive workforce.

A better focus on the role that higher education can play in “building regional economies” is difficult in Australia with so many campuses clustered around the coastline in metropolitan areas. There needs to be some acknowledgement of the important functions of regional institutions and campuses and their role in developing regional economies and population bases in those areas.

Teaching in tertiary education institutions needs to be more highly valued. There has been a recent focus on external sources of income and institutional activities which generate external funds. This can be at the detriment of teaching and learning, which is at the core of all tertiary education and the primary income source for institutions. The student experience of teaching and learning within institutions is a powerful marketing force.

Resourcing the system

University funding and infrastructure

The funding of higher education may need a wide-ranging review. As government funding sources dwindled over the past decade, so too did spending on infrastructure and development. This has impacted negatively on many institutions, particularly older ones. Increasingly, higher education institutions have relied financially on full fee paying and international programs. The impact of this reliance needs to be considered, especially the relationship to domestic student access and the development of schemes which encourage special entry for groups with traditionally poor access to higher education, including Indigenous and mature aged Australians.

Staffing In universities and ageing of the workforce

A barrier to the future development of the higher education workforce is the difficulty in attracting lecturers to the workforce. The academic workforce is increasingly reliant on short-term and part-time contractual staff, which is not conducive to development of career pathways. The requirements for teaching staff to have a research postgraduate degree is a barrier to those who have wide industry experience and who are urgently needed to provide quality teaching at undergraduate level.

In addition, professional pathways which allowed academics to undertake “sabbaticals” for periods of industry experience would provide current industry exposure and could promote collaborations between higher education and industry sectors.

Spousal employment

Limited academic employment opportunities for spouses in regional centres mitigates against highly qualified individuals accepting senior positions at regional universities and those with campuses in regional centres. There is anecdotal evidence that applicants seeking senior academic or administrative positions in regional campuses do not take up their positions because of limited opportunities for academic positions for their spouses. It is more common at regional US universities for an offer of employment in senior management positions to include some provisions for spousal employment within the university context. While Canberra is a comparatively large regional city with abundant employment opportunities, ACT universities may need to consider employment packages to include spousal arrangements if they are to attract highly qualified senior staff.

Governance and regulation

A broad tertiary education and training sector

The Department considers the role of non self-accrediting education providers requires clarification. This segment of the tertiary education sector is critical to the provision of tertiary education services both on and offshore. The relationship of these providers to universities must be considered in the broader quality agenda.

ACT non self-accrediting higher education providers (NSAI)s report structural barriers to closer partnerships with universities on joint course offerings. Many NSAI offer industry-specific programs, so seek partnerships such that core course units are taught in university, which permits the more industry-specific, or specialised course units, to be taught by the NSAI.

Barriers to such partnerships are reported as:

- lack of funding allocations through CSP
- lack of incentives for universities to enter into partnerships, and
- the feeling that NSAI programs are at a “lower level” than higher education.

This latter point highlights the need for the Australian Qualifications Framework to be revised. Bachelor degree formats are changing from 3-year to 4-year structures, while qualifications earned in the VET and higher education sectors are increasingly overlapping. There is a concomitant effect on other level qualifications. The whole notion of time-based qualifications is becoming increasingly dated (witness ‘accelerated apprenticeships’, recognition of prior learning, the Commonwealth’s definition of a ‘place’ as a quantum of training within the Productivity Places Program). Australia should rise to the challenge of finding an alternative metric as the basis on which funding is allocated.

Enhanced quality and high standards

The state and territory jurisdictions are working towards harmonizing guidelines and procedures related to the National Protocols for Higher Education. It is too early to judge the success of this harmonization. The Department believes that this movement towards greater consistency and harmonised accreditation and registration processes, particularly for non self-accrediting higher education providers, is a positive step, but that there are some challenges ahead in this regard:

- that the highest standards are maintained
- that professional licensing is aligned with nationally agreed accreditation and registration standards
- that local strengths and industry/professional priorities are not lost
- that the formation of a national accreditation and registration body must preserve the best features of existing state and territory agency bodies, and
- that Australia’s international reputation as an educational provider is enhanced.

There are also challenges to build further on Australia’s educational brand name for quality in the international market through:

- support for initiatives to promote quality tertiary programs in international markets including processes for monitoring quality

- assuring the quality of higher education programs delivered to international students both on and offshore through strengthening the National Protocols.

Conclusion

This current Review of Australian Higher Education offers opportunities for fundamental changes which can promote positive outcomes for Australian tertiary education. The Department particularly supports strategies which can enhance workforce development and participation.

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