SUBMISSION TO
REVIEW OF HIGHER EDUCATION FINANCING AND POLICY
on the
Draft Discussion Paper, *LEARNING FOR LIFE*
by The Australian Academy Of The Humanities (AAH)

The title *Learning for Life* carries two meanings. It can mean that learning is a life-long process. Or, it can mean learning prepares the learner for life. It should mean both. The draft discussion paper states, "While public funding for university research should be provided for *curiosity driven and strategic research*, (a life-long process) funds need to be allocated in the context of a strategic view of Australia's total research effort, *with an emphasis on transferring knowledge, technology and skills to the community*" (preparing learners for life) (p 5). If it is to mean either or both, higher education policy in Australia needs to focus specifically on providing university researchers and teachers with the means of producing for themselves and the rest of the populace "quality educational offerings" (p. viii).

As a peak body for Humanities in Australia, the AAH is particularly concerned with research aspects of the discussion paper, but it will also comment on provision of information and information technology.

Research

On pages 37 and 38, The Committee invites comments on "encouraging good research training" and on the principles for research policy and funding models. The paper notes on page 37, "Research training, through good supervision, should provide the student with an ethical framework and generic workplace competencies as well as research related skills." But several other points in the discussion paper contradict this vision:

- The discussion paper is teaching-focussed, and sees the main function of universities as the higher education of undergraduate students. It acknowledges close relationship between teaching and research, but 'that does not imply that all academics should undertake research in addition to the scholarly activities required to maintain subject knowledge and developments in pedagogy' (p. 125). If there is a pool of researchers and a pool of teachers, it is not clear that students will have the advantages of "generic workplace competencies as well as research related skills";

- there is an inconsistency between providing the student with an ethical framework and supporting a market- or student demand-driven policy. As Hilary McPhee states ("Art and money", *The Australian Review of Books*, October 1997, p. 13), "The free market is a fine arbiter of some things, but aesthetic and intellectual value is not among them." An ethical framework is not part of a market-driven system; and
- there is an inconsistency between the recommendations for the undergraduate level, which, on the one hand, supports a market or student demand-driven policy, and, on the other hand, at the research level, setting national priorities because Australia cannot afford everything. The two are incompatible. The question is where will researchers on areas of national priority come from if these areas have disappeared from the undergraduate level? This may happen for two reasons:
    - students have not perceived the importance of national-priority subjects as undergraduates leading to the disappearances of these subjects from the undergraduate curriculum; and / or
    - subjects that provide basic skills and produce researchers able to turn their minds to different things have also not been favoured by students.

Further the indicated policy direction minimises the nexus between research and teaching. This seems almost to contradict the discussion paper's statements about supporting "vigorous, groundbreaking research; and quality educational offerings that are respected and sought after, internationally" (p. viii); and "inculcating a profound respect for scholarship" (p. 3).

As far as **research** is concerned:

> • government support for infrastructure must increase substantially if an appropriate level of funding for a suitable range of university activities is to be sustained. We support the ARC's recommended rate of 40 cents of Commonwealth funding for project-related infrastructure costs for every dollar of funding for the direct costs of Commonwealth competitive research grants. In the absence of additional funding after 1998, the infrastructure support ratio will decline to unacceptable levels; and
> • the Academy supports the ARC's claim that basic research is the foundation of the national innovation system and wishes to see basic research supported by the following mechanisms:
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> ◊ the establishment of the ARC as an independent statutory body with primary responsibility for research funding and policy; and
>
> ◊ strong support by the Commonwealth for the ARC's core business, which is to provide project-based funding under the Large and Small Grants Scheme and the Special Research Centres and a Fellowships scheme for outstanding

researchers. These schemes are of primary concern to the research community and at present have unacceptably low success rates (under 20%). Humanities researchers set special store by these schemes.

The discussion paper has argued (p.26) that "the balance between project grants (allocated primarily on the basis of peer review) and block research grants to institutions appears to have tipped too far in favour of project funding". Not only is there no evidence to support this contention, but it is far from true. There is desperately little money available to excellent researchers for project grants, and every year there are a large number of top class projects that go unfunded for lack of resources. Therefore, the AAH welcomes Dr David Kemp's indications of increased funding for higher education in his second reading speech on the *Higher Education Legislation Amendment Bill 1997* on 26 November 1997, and his media release (K81/97) of November 28, 1997 announcing "$132 Million For University Research", particularly indications of increased funding for ARC grants.

But new money needs to be put into higher educational infrastructure as well as into direct grants. Infrastructure covers both teaching and research (and the two are often difficult to disentangle) as well as the general administrative functions of universities. Infrastructure includes people as well as buildings and facilities.

If infrastructure support is added directly to project grants, there will be even more need to address the shortfall in funding of the ARC Large and Small Grants and Fellowships schemes, as the individual grants would become more expensive, and, unless substantial additions are made to the funds of the Large Grants Scheme, in particular, there will be a danger that even fewer researchers will be funded than are funded at the moment.

A further policy question, and a very important one, is the appropriate balance to be struck between basic research, which must be the universities' chief concern (no one else will do it, except, in the Humanities, private scholars), and directed, prioritised research developments. Apart from the fact that, in foresighting exercises, it is usually impossible to pick long-term winners, it is absolutely essential that universities in Australia be adequately funded for a broad suite of basic research activities on top of which selected priorities can then be substantially supported. That requires Australian governments to invest a reasonable level of public funds in higher education, which is what voters apparently want, if we are to believe an AVCC-commissioned survey conducted recently by a major polling company. It is far simpler and far less expensive administratively to do this through operating grants and other directed funds than through student vouchers and fees.

At present there is no overarching policy body that guides Australia's higher education system. There is a fundamental tension between allowing market forces to determine the profile of higher education in teaching and research and a desire to maintain core academic disciplines and the traditional fabric of university education. This tension must be addressed and workable mechanisms, such as an overarching policy body, suggested to preserve disciplines that cannot survive in a totally market-driven system. As an instance of this, more languages are disappearing than appearing on University curricula. There is a significant shift towards Asian languages, seen both in the numbers taking main Asian languages, in the growth in Vietnamese, Thai and Korean, and in the pattern of more recent additions and losses. There is a loss in European languages and a number of Asian languages, eg. Hindi. Related to preserving disciplines is the contention in the report that only "culturally important" subjects are in danger of disappearing in a demand-driven system. However, as a result of demand-driven policies Australia has already lost both a great deal of our basic science (eg Physics) and subjects of national strategic importance such as small-enrolment languages. For example, Monash VC David Robertson "believes there will only be a handful of Australian science faculties into the next century" (Guy Healy, "Monash Staff Fear Sword Poised Over Science Faculty", The Australian, 17 December 1997, p. 35). The Monash cut is expected "to result in about 50 job losses" in the science faculty. Melbourne University has already cut its science faculty.

Information Technology (IT)

On page 33, the Committee invites "comments on all of these issues relating to ... the provision of information for students". There is an assumption in the draft discussion paper that IT will make the provision of higher education not only more flexible but cheaper (see Chapter 2, 'The future operating environment'). The discussion paper gives a lot of coverage to the use of IT in distance education, but it hardly addresses the matter of the use of IT in addition to the conventional lecture and seminar face-to-face format of interpersonal interaction on the campuses of universities. It regards the latter as 'both expensive and of questionable pedagogical value' (p.11) without really giving reasons.

It is highly likely that the use of IT to provide university education to students will increase its costs, and that, because of the obsolescence built into the equipment, costs will remain high. Concern is also high about the likelihood that the use of IT packages will encourage convergence of the product and the exploitation of academic staff. In many cases, it is likely that elite institutions will use both IT and face-to-face teaching, while purely IT-based teaching may become a second-class option. For many subjects, eg chemistry and physics lab work; teaching conversational language use; and instruction in the visual and performing arts, face-to-face instruction clearly cannot be replaced by IT.

In conclusion

On the ideal of access to higher education for all, the AAH challenges the assumption that all people require or are qualified to undertake “higher” education. This does not mean that the opportunity to participate in some form of postsecondary education should be denied to anyone qualified to undertake it, but that not everyone needs “higher” education. If the system is seamless and accessible to all, it must follow that strategies will have to be in place to protect the **quality of teaching and research**, if Australia's university and TAFE system is to remain internationally competitive and deliver a quality product.

Such strategies will need to be carefully planned and should include:

- mechanisms to ensure that Australia's teaching and research base covers fundamental disciplines in all areas, and not just those that are attractive to undergraduate students at any one moment;
- mechanisms to protect subjects / disciplines of small enrolment which are fundamental to the teaching and research endeavour (eg. Classics, Physics);
- mechanisms to ensure collaboration rather than competition between institutions where rationalisation is indicated (eg, the teaching of languages, music, fine arts, etc.);
- mechanisms to ensure concentration of undergraduate teaching and research training in institutions that have the research capacity to sustain them at a high level of competence; and
- mechanisms to ensure that all university departments have the opportunity to engage in both teaching and research. This is unusually important in order to ensure that Australia's teaching and research stays at the cutting edge internationally.

A totally deregulated system is incompatible with the achievement of these objectives. Some thought needs to be given by the Committee to HOW such desiderata might be achieved.

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