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O F
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THE AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL OF DEANS OF NURSING
RESPONSE TO A POLICY DISCUSSION PAPER ON
THE REVIEW OF HIGHER EDUCATION
FINANCING AND POLICY

The Australian Council of Deans of Nursing finds much to commend in the Discussion Paper, some points with which it takes issue and some apparent inconsistencies. This response briefly covers these matters from a general academic viewpoint and then makes some remarks specifically related to Nurse Education, our field of responsibility.

The Council commends:

- the strong emphasis on educational values, from the very first sentence of the foreword;
- the recognition that Australian universities have served the nation well educationally and in terms of cost, and are continuing to perform well in very difficult circumstances;
- recognition of the importance of good quality in all that universities do;
- the emphasis on teaching, raising the status and improving the quality of teaching;
- recognition of the desirability of provision for lifelong education for virtually the whole community; and
- proclamation of the principle that no Australian should be denied access to post-secondary education for lack of personal financial resources.

The Council takes issue with the extreme, unrealistic economic rationalist approach to the complex question of higher education funding. We find it unrealistic to suggest that universities should be charged for their land and buildings, and to suggest that this might advantage regional universities which would incur lower costs of this kind. Many, probably most universities have been legally granted leases in perpetuity on no-fee or peppercorn conditions which could not be varied without substantial compensation. Some regional universities are on prime (expensive) rural land and would not gain great advantage over their metropolitan cousins in such a regime. Some metropolitan universities perform a great service to the wider society by being central and accessible both to students and the community generally. Universities are a public investment, just as are hospitals, art galleries and defence bases, and we see no reason to charge for the premises of any of these.

As for the argument that the premises are used for only a small part of the year and for only a few hours a day -that has been the subject of review after review, always coming to the conclusion that usage is greater than alleged and not unreasonable given the tasks to be performed - which are more than lecturing at students.

Further, we question the suggestion that education of high quality can be delivered purely through information technology to audiences numbering in the thousands. Such numbers are necessary to achieve the economies of scale needed to offset the high investment costs, but they involve little or no interaction with a teacher or other students. The mega-universities of Asia cited in Appendix 11 do not pretend to offer high quality, and they have wastage rates huge by our standards. While their costs-per-student are low, their costs-per-graduate (a better measure of cost-effectiveness) are much higher, and the proportion of their graduates who proceed to postgraduate study (a good measure of quality) is tiny. The Australian pattern of distance education, in which all students follow the same curriculum, have the same teachers and face the same assessments, is an absolute guarantee of equivalent quality in modes of study, is internationally recognised as such and has been adopted in Sweden, Canada and New Zealand.

Inconsistency

Our reading of the discussion paper suggests to us that the high ideals which we commend at the beginning of this response are inconsistent with the steps proposed to implement lower costs. The emphasis on deregulation, market segmentation and competition indicates that the Committee envisages two or more levels of higher education: one of high quality by fairly conventional means at high fee levels, and one at low cost and low quality for "the masses". We state as strongly as possible that we find this repugnant. We recognise that not all Australian universities are of precisely the same standard, but we believe they are in a fairly homogeneous band. We consider this a positive good and we would reject the idea that there should be qualitative differences of the degree envisaged in the discussion paper.

We reject also the extreme deregulation that is put forward in Appendix 11. We consider that there is great value in protecting by law the title "university" and the right to grant degrees, and that the nation's educational reputation would suffer if it were possible for any person or group to declare itself a university and to offer degrees in trivial topics. While the United States has some of the world's finest universities, we do not consider that the US is well served by the proliferation of so-called "universities" which offer degrees of no academic standing whatsoever.

Nurse Education

a) Some of the discussion paper is devoted to the argument that universities should be free to charge fees at whatever level they wish, students using their educational entitlement to pay for some part of those fees and the HECS scheme to pay for the balance as an incomecontingent loan. We fear the impact of such a policy on Nurse Education. This is necessarily a fairly high-cost course of study, yet it does not lead to high incomes; this was recognised by the Government when it introduced differential HECS charges and kept Nursing in the lowest HECS band.

If universities can charge fees at any level for all students, the internal dynamics of universities will militate against cross-subsidisation. Nursing will be expected to set fee levels that cover its full costs because colleagues in other faculties will be reluctant to raise their fees in order to help Nursing to hold fees down; but the financial rewards of a nursing career are not such as to motivate people to pay high fees to enter the profession, and there is no likelihood that those rewards will rise substantially.

- b) The discussion paper constantly emphasises the potential of electronic delivery of courses to reduce costs. While there is no doubt that some of the more theoretical aspects of nursing can be presented electronically, and are being so presented now in Australia, they are at the margin. Nursing is - like Dentistry or Surgery - intrinsically a practical activity which rests on a theoretical basis; it is not educationally sound to reduce the practical component, and it is not feasible to provide that practical component except in a live clinical setting at relatively high costs. Appendix 11 itself recognises that the low-cost electronic delivery which it promotes is suited only to a limited range of clientele; as it says in its discussion of computer-based training, "there are some subjects to which it is well suited and some to which it is not. Generally COT is best applied to areas of knowledge which are 'codified and/or algorithmic' in nature" (para.4.5.5). Practical nursing is not such a subject.

Conclusion

The discussion paper recognises that Australian universities at present are providing a high quality of education at fairly low cost. It points out some areas in which efficiency can be improved and costs can be reduced, such as administrative areas, with which we agree. It does not claim that the sweeping changes in teaching methods which it proposes would lead to improvements in quality, but says that we must make these changes because otherwise commercial American providers will market their low-cost courses in Australia and flood the market, driving our universities out of business. There is no proof to support this assertion; the development of these firms in America has not resulted in the decimation of the American universities.

Australian universities are facing up to the concept of the "virtual university". There have been and continue to be several conferences on the topic. Our universities are examining ways they can use information technologies most effectively both for teaching (in classrooms and at a distance) and for administrative purposes. We do not believe any Australian university could be stigmatised as "Do-nothing University" and we consider that they should be allowed to get on with adjustments and development in an evolutionary way without being thrown into further turmoil and revolution.

Elizabeth **Cameron-Traub**
Secretary

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