

AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY

23 December 1997

Mr Roderick West
Committee Chair
The Review of Higher Education Financing and Policy
Location Code 728
GPO Box 9880
CANBERRA ACT 2601

Dear Mr West

I am forwarding on behalf of the Vice-Chancellor, Professor Peter Drake, Australian Catholic University's *Response to Policy Discussion Paper 'Learning for Life'*. If you have any further queries please contact me or Professor Drake.

Yours sincerely

Professor Muredach Dynar
Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Quality and Outreach)

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Introduction

The University welcomes the opportunity provided by the Higher Education Financing and Policy Review Committee to respond to the Discussion Paper '*Learning for Life*'. The University's response is in two sections, the first of which contains general comment on the Discussion Paper as a whole; the second section focuses on those matters in the Paper on which the Review Committee has specifically invited input.

Section I: General Comments

The response of Australian Catholic University to the Paper is informed by its view of and commitment to the concept of a Christian university as described in its submission to the Review (April 1997) of which some extracts are reproduced below:

'Australian Catholic University shares with all universities commitment to teaching, research and service to the local, national and international communities. As a Catholic university, this commitment is expressed within an environment in which academic and spiritual values are intrinsically related ... The University recognises its capacity to help students to form their values and ideals, and acknowledges its responsibility not only to provide a quality education but also to inculcate in its graduates a spirit of service. ' (p6)

'There is a contemporary need for an ethical approach in many aspects of business, law, medicine, science and education. It is all too easy for technique to become central, rather than the humanity which the technique should serve. It is dangerous when the intellectual and technical aspects of knowledge become detached and separated from human, ethical considerations. ' (p6)

'Knowledge knows no boundaries and internationalism is inherent in the word "university".... This philosophical commitment to the international nature of knowledge is nowadays matched by powerful economic and social forces which are driven largely by developments in information and communication technology.... These things call for multi-lingual and multi-cultural understanding which must grow from human resource development in academic staff and students. Christian principles provide a moral basis on which individual talents can be developed. ' (p7)

It is important in establishing a vision and setting national goals for Higher Education in Australia to ensure that the fundamental nature and purposes of such education are fully addressed. We would argue in favour of policies which support rather than diminish the ability of institutions such as Australian Catholic University to pursue the ideal of a university as espoused by Vivian Green, an Anglican clergyman and sometime Fellow of Lincoln College, Oxford:

*'The university cannot be simply concerned with the accumulation of knowledge; it must pursue the cultivation of truth, goodness and beauty, of social quality and freedom. It must see as its primary task the formation, cultivation and transmission of a sense of value. It is, or ought to be, as much a school of morals as a community of scholars and teachers.'*¹

1. The vision for Higher Education presented in the Paper is useful in several respects including:

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- As its title indicates, the Paper stresses the importance of 'learning for life' as being continuous from pre-school throughout life into retirement. In its vision statement, it identifies important values for Higher Education, including *a culture of lifetime learning, civic values, respect for scholarship, enabling graduates to play a productive wealth-creating role, providing the community with access to advanced knowledge and skills and ensuring equity of access for all those capable of benefiting from Higher Education.*
- It identifies current problems and challenges facing Higher Education policy-makers and institutions including, *low morale throughout the university sector, the shift from elitist to mass education with the consequential pressure on funding levels, the need for enhanced teaching-learning approaches to meet the diverse learning and participation patterns of students, the growing impact of the information technology revolution and the likely trends towards globalisation in education provision, and the social and economic changes being experienced throughout the world.*

2 One major dimension of the Paper's vision statement which is, in our view, based on a false premise is the notion of '*Higher Education as Industry*'. While accepting that there is something to be gained from borrowing processes and ideas from industry in respect of managing resources, strategic planning and entrepreneurial competencies, we do not accept the validity or appropriateness of viewing Higher Education as an industry. Such a model of Higher Education, in our view, is inappropriate and potentially damaging to the enduring concept of university which has proved so beneficial to societies world-wide. If we wish to preserve the fundamental values on which universities are based, then we should seek to protect them from the more debilitating outcomes of contemporary market-driven approaches to the provision of Higher Education.

The Paper does not adequately recognise the extent to which universities have adapted to massive changes in the last two decades. The picture presented on Page

¹ V H H Green, *The Universities*, Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1969, pp 321-2.

2 under the heading '*Change is Unavoidable and Necessary*' could be taken to imply that universities have been standing still in a world of change. For example, Australian universities are presented as being primarily focussed on 'domestic' students. To suggest that it should be otherwise is puzzling given the policy positions of successive Governments and the missions of the institutions. Nonetheless, the effectiveness with which the universities have developed their international profiles is one of the major achievements of recent years. In addition, institutions have responded in all kinds of ways to the increasingly diverse needs of students. The variety of programs offered by institutions belies the claim of inflexibility due to funding arrangements. This unduly conservative picture of the existing system is of concern insofar as it provides an unsound basis for consideration of future policies.

4. It is, in our view, sensible that account be taken of the possible impact of information technologies. All Australian universities are currently active in developing alternative modes of teaching-learning using such technologies. However, the history of educational technology innovations suggests that there is a need for caution in forecasting the impact of new technologies on the teaching learning preferences of many students. Nor should it be assumed that the use of such technologies will reduce the costs of Higher Education - they must always be used to enhance the quality of learning experiences and to improve access for

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some categories of student.

The University agrees with the aim of providing the maximum opportunities to all citizens for access to postsecondary education including Higher Education. We see this as a logical development in the context of increasing demand for education at this level. While this aim would commit the nation to the provision of a higher level of resources in postsecondary education than at present, we believe that the aim is worthy in its own right and economically beneficial for Australia in the long run.

Given the increasing demand for Higher Education and the apparent inability of Governments to meet fully these demands for those capable of benefiting from Higher Education, some degree of deregulation of the current system is inevitable.

Deregulation presents a new set of problems to the Australian Higher Education system, which the Paper identifies. We agree with the Paper in its identification of the need to change the current highly regulated system of funding. At the same time, we are concerned at the unanticipated outcomes likely to follow deregulation, and the possibility that some excellent universities may be seriously damaged by the marketing advantages associated with the prestige (not to be confused with quality) of older institutions. We would therefore favour a gradualist approach to freeing up the system, accompanied by specific funding initiatives designed to ensure equity for students and support for those institutions which are likely to be under pressure because of their newness or location.

The Paper rightly identifies 'globalisation' of education as a major challenge. The suggestion that overseas providers may be able to compete with Australian institutions in the provision of courses either through the world-wide-web or by opening campuses in Australia is a matter of some concern. The possibility that Australian public funds could be diverted to overseas institutions in a deregulated system is real as is the potential to undermine the strength of the existing Higher Education institutions in Australia. Given the size of the domestic populations which are served by several

universities in the USA, it is possible that the Australian 'market' could be swamped by some of these institutions, to the

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detriment of Australian institutions. Such a trend would in time undermine Australian Higher Education and, in doing so, seriously affect the capacity of Australian institutions to pursue research and scholarship in ways which assist the Australian economy and address adequately the specific cultural priorities of Australia. We would like the Committee to address this issue with a view to protecting Australia's long-term interests by ensuring that its highly regarded university sector is recognized internationally for its genuine contributions.

8. The Paper tends to be somewhat ambivalent in its views on research. On the one hand it expresses the view that teaching-learning is a 'primary' function, on the other hand that Research is 'integral'. We believe that the interrelationships among research, teaching-learning and community service are crucial elements of a modern university. It is unrealistic in Australia to expect the corporate sector to provide a much greater share of research funding than at present. It is therefore essential that Government ensure adequate public funding for university research. While recognising that some institutions will have greater capacity for high-cost research activity than others, we believe that support for the pursuit of research by academic staff at all universities is crucial to the quality of teaching-learning in the long run. In this regard, relentless pursuit of cost-efficiencies in the provision of courses may disguise the steady deterioration of quality of what is offered to students.

Section II: Responses to Specific Aspects

Issue: Provision of universal, publicly funded access to post secondary education' (p29)

This proposal is superficially attractive. It can be argued that there is already a high level of access funded by the tax-payer to postsecondary education. The problem inherent in the proposal is that, in a context of limitations on public funding, it is likely to lead to a reduction of public funding for Higher Education rather than an increase in the overall level of public funding for the postsecondary education sector. It may be more practicable to continue the current direction of funding policy which is to encourage equity of access for all those able to benefit from Higher Education.

Issue: Access to a lifetime commitment of public funding arid income contingent loans (p31)

We support further research into the practicability of such schemes. However, it is important that nothing be done to further erode accessibility to and affordability of Higher Education for all those who are able to benefit from it. There is nothing in these proposals to prevent Governments from continuing to ratchet down the funding levels per student available for Higher Education.

Issue: Flexibility in setting tuition fees (p31)

The ability of institutions to determine fee levels is an essential prerequisite to any process, however gradual, for the deregulation of the Higher Education system in Australia. We do not share the optimistic view that 'market forces' will drive such fees downwards. Experience in other countries suggests that there will be a move towards higher fees by those institutions with established 'prestige', thus further entrenching their privileged position. A major concern is that these institutions do not

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use their privileged infrastructure and profiles to undermine institutions which are new and those in regional areas of Australia.

Issue: *Funding of courses (p32)*

Public universities should continue to receive some block grants that would reflect their responsibilities for the educational needs of communities identified in their mission statements. In relation to differential funding of courses, we would support regular reviews of the real costs of different course-types, while maintaining a differential funding approach, so as not to discourage institutions from offering high-cost courses in areas such as science and languages. We do not favour unduly complex funding models, such as those associated with course levels, except for research degree study.

Issue: *Infrastructure charge (p34)*

We cannot see the merit of this proposal, which will be seen as an attempt to reduce funding levels to institutions. There are already ample incentives for institutions to use their facilities for the benefit of local communities and for some cost-recovery to cover maintenance.

Issue: *Student centred funding (p36-37)*

There are strong arguments for a gradual move towards student-centred funding models rather than institutional funding models. Because of the complexities and uncertainties associated with funding, we would suggest that a gradual change in the current system leading to a fully student-centred model over a preplanned period be adopted. The purpose of any such a model should be to ensure access on equitable terms for all those who have the ability to benefit from Higher Education. Key elements of policy would be the provision of a guaranteed amount of tuition costs by Government, the availability of sufficient places in relevant courses of study, and quality assurance mechanisms to ensure that such courses are of appropriate standard. We believe that no Australian student should pay full fees for a first degree.

We strongly support incentives to enhance the development of teaching competencies among academics, including the current CUTSD initiatives. Requirements for research degree supervisors to undertake supervisor training are also supported.

Issue: *Research policy and funding models (p38)*

It is fundamental to the ethos of a university that research and teaching be closely interwoven in the culture of the institution and reflected in the attitudes and activities of academic staff. For that reason, all universities rightly perceive research as an essential part of the academic enterprise. It is true that some academics are less committed to ongoing research than are others, but the preferred position is that all academic staff should be encouraged to undertake research. This must be recognized in the funding of institutions whether such funding be student-centred or received directly as a block grant.

We support the current emphasis on allocation of research funds to institutions on a competitive basis. We would favour the first of the three options for research funding as set out on p38 of the Paper.