

AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL OF PROFESSIONS

SUBMISSION ON THE DISCUSSION PAPER  
'LEARNING FOR Life'  
REVIEW OF HIGHER EDUCATION FINANCING  
AND POLICY

December 1997

## **INTRODUCTION**

The Australian Council of Professions welcomes the opportunity to comment on the discussion paper 'Learning for Life' prepared by the Committee of the Review of Higher Education Financing and Policy. The Council wishes to make some general comments and to make comments on matters of concern to the professions.

Individual member organizations of the Council have already made their own comments.

We hope and expect that as a result of the report of the review, higher education, and education generally, will be seen as having the highest priority for public funding.

## **GENERAL**

Based on the information gained in the many contacts professional organizations have with universities the Council acknowledges that there is considerable concern in the universities caused in part by frequent policy changes and by funding shortfalls. The problems need to be addressed but it is an overstatement to say that universities are in "crisis". The graduates of Australian universities entering the professions generally have high standing both in this country and in the many countries to which our graduates now go. It would be a pity if the reputations of Australian graduates were to be prejudiced either by overstatements of the present difficulties or by measures which would cause decline. The West Committee has a great responsibility to ensure that any measures it proposes will be thoroughly thought through to ensure that they will be effective and will have beneficial effects on the university and VET Systems, thus building morale and confidence in higher education.

## **CHANGES AND KNOWLEDGE**

There is no doubt that all communities are faced with enormous technological, economic, social and cultural changes. The effect on the professions is to cause them to reconsider their means of contributing to society, their positions in society, their knowledge bases and their modes of operation.

The professional schools in universities have a vital role in this process, which is now taking place. Education in the universities involves not only the transmitting of knowledge about the discipline but scholarship and research involved in each discipline including the challenge to and critical analysis of the nature of the discipline and of the performance in the community of the practitioners of the discipline.

This is a far wider role than the role envisaged in the discussion paper which appears to place too great an emphasis on teaching as opposed to the stewardship of knowledge in the widest sense, which has been and must continue to be a vital role of universities.

Any diminution in the broad role of universities will also affect the standing of our professional graduates overseas, of particular importance as this country, with all others, becomes more integrated into global economies providing Australian professionals with opportunities to offer professional services on a global basis.

Anything which diminishes the standing of Australian universities will also have the effect of dissuading potential students from other countries from enrolling in our universities.

### **QUALITY OF TEACHING**

The emphasis on teaching in the sense of improvement in the quality of teaching and on the exploration of new modes of teaching is supported. However lack of appropriate emphasis on the role of universities in the scholarship and research of a discipline is regrettable. The professions are concerned with the role of the university professional schools as repositories of knowledge of the particular disciplinary area, as the developers of new knowledge which will both re-invigorate the area and provide the means and incentive of maintaining contact with worldwide research developments, as well as the production of graduates with appropriate knowledge and skills who will be able to take their places in the ranks of a particular profession.

### **NEW TECHNOLOGIES IN TEACHING**

The Council notes and agrees with the support for the use of new technologies in teaching. It does not agree however that this will lead to significant savings. The cost of hardware, of software, of keeping up with new developments, of the enormous task of preparing initially and of continuous updating of the multimedia education packages made possible by the new technology should not be underestimated.

The use of new technologies in the professional schools in many instances is well behind the use in the equivalent professions where the cost is well understood, as is the necessity to make productive and commercially valid use of new technology. This continuing experience suggests that projected economies will not be realised. There needs to be far more detailed analysis of the cost of the further introduction of new technologies into teaching and of the consequent changes to teaching methods before statements are made about savings in costs of education.

### **RESEARCH FUNDING**

The essential role of universities in exploring and initiating developments in knowledge in the various disciplinary areas requires a supportive culture and a structure which are not necessarily related directly to the research funding available through the ARC or otherwise to individual researchers or to research teams. The growth of a research culture and the encouragement of research involves the active participation of those engaged in policy formulation in a University including the governing body, the Vice Chancellor and his responsible research executives all with the determination to develop and support innovation in research. There is also however the necessity for infrastructure in terms of administrative support and physical facilities which go beyond the immediate needs of a specific research project.

The evidence available to visiting panels from the various professions in making inspections of professional schools suggests that the physical infrastructure is not being renewed adequately with the risk of adversely affecting research productivity.

The proposal made in the discussion paper for funding of research and of research students does not appear to recognise the importance of a general research culture nor of the need for properly funded research infrastructure to exist in a university as the context in which individual research tasks and projects are undertaken. Funding methods must not stifle that context nor cripple infrastructure.

## **INTERNATIONALISATION**

From the point of view of the professions the comments in the discussion paper on the internationalisation of higher education need to be placed in a broader context.

Whether as professional firms, as individual professionals or as professionals working within governmental or private organizations, many of the professions have been actively engaged in the increased Australian involvement in international economic activities for a considerable time. There is an understanding of the importance of higher education internationally which goes well beyond attracting fee-paying students from other countries to undertake courses at universities in this country.

The acceptance of our graduates and their qualifications by other countries in order to carry out work in those countries is based on the mutual recognition of standards for admission **to the** various professions. This is assisted by the movement of staff and students in both directions and by academic interchange in teaching and in research.

A number of professions largely through International and Commonwealth professional bodies have systems of international accreditation in place and there are also such governmental bodies as NOOSR; the National Office of Overseas Skills Recognition. The question of the acceptance of educational qualifications internationally is becoming increasingly important as internationalisation develops further and should be brought into consideration in the present report. Furthermore the education of graduates who will work in

overseas countries demands greater attention to providing our graduates with skills in relation to the language and customs of the countries in which they will work. The universities have important parts to play in the complex range of interactions as a result of greater international economic activity well beyond recruiting fee-paying overseas students.

### **LIFE LONG LEARNING**

The Council and its constitutional bodies have long advocated the concept of life long learning and what is often called CPM; continuous professional development. It is therefore interested in the concept of a "lifetime post secondary entitlement of public funding," which acknowledges that learning should be continuous throughout a lifetime. It does not believe however that the cost of such funding as dealt with in the discussion paper, that is to include undergraduate degree (or double degree) and "possibly some post graduate study" is a realistic evaluation of the costs either in relation to present need or to future developments.

There is a need for a thorough examination of the implications of this concept especially in relation to current 'life long learning' courses as provided by universities and by the private sector including the professional bodies many of which currently offer courses of various kinds and lengths, and to assess the level of public funding which may be justified.

### **MOVEMENT BETWEEN UNIVERSITIES AND VET SECTOR**

The professions generally support the flexibility of movement of students between the universities and the VET sector and are aware that the AVCC has adopted policies for this movement and that there is a flow of students both ways already taking place. Nevertheless there is concern that the level at which some courses are taught in the VET sector may not be at the level of theoretical depth as similar courses taught in universities. Credit for such VET courses should not be allowed as exemptions from similar courses conducted in professional schools in universities unless there is adequate provision in bridging courses for upgrading levels of knowledge.

### **INFRASTRUCTURE CHARGES**

It is difficult to see any real benefits flowing from the proposal that an infrastructure charge should be made on the physical assets of universities, meaning their buildings and grounds. Such an additional charge imposed on universities which are already suffering severely from under funding is not supported. Locations of universities and consequently the valuations of their assets of buildings and grounds have been determined historically for various reasons. Any charge made on current valuations could well disadvantage some universities by comparisons with others.

City based universities with consequent higher asset valuations would be at a disadvantage compared to suburban or rural universities. To suggest that such a charge may encourage them to relocate disregards the immense additional building and site costs and disruption of relocation.

So far as the professions, and indeed commerce and industry, are concerned the presence of inner city universities has community benefits in relation to the closer contact made possible, contacts which would be weakened by moving out of a city location.

The adoption of an infrastructure charge could also lead to the partial sale of present land holdings thus reducing amenities to students and staff and reducing options for future growth.

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