

Curtin University of Technology

Review of Higher Education Financing and Policy

Some Comments on the Discussion Paper

Learning for Life

Curtin University of Technology welcomes the broad thrust of the discussion paper 'Learning for Life'. It hopes that the following comments on particular issues will be useful to the Committee of Review.

1. The Nature of a University

1.1 The role of the university is not adequately defined.

1.2 While West states that 'education has special social and cultural dimensions that contribute to the transmission of knowledge, an informed citizenry and the quality of life,' the paper does not adequately recognise the role Universities play in developing the social and intellectual skills of the late adolescent outside the lecture theatre. University is not an extension of school, and it is not just the acquisition of academic knowledge that results in a 'university education'.

1.3 The broad impact of the university on the community outside of teaching and research is also largely ignored.

1.4 Despite a denial to the contrary, the paper also fails to clearly distinguish between the nature of technical education and that of a university when it states its 'post-secondary view'. The role of technical education is important and respected and it has a skills and competency emphasis that is distinctly different from that of a university. Effort should be made to clarify these roles and responsibilities. When considering collaboration and cooperation between the sectors the emphasis should be on dual qualifications. TARE should not be seen as a feeder to the universities.

1.5 The vision of life-long learning etc is commended. It is, however, difficult to relate the strategies of the report to the achievement of this vision.

1.6 The paper seems to assume that there is only one stakeholder in tertiary education, namely the student. Equally important are parents, graduates at various stages of their careers, staff, employers, and taxpayers.

2. Information Technology

2.1 The assumption that the information revolution will lead to lower costs of delivery of higher education is questionable. A better balanced analysis of the possibilities is needed than that contained in Appendix 11. More detailed comment on this is attached.

3. Funding

3.1 The report argues for change which alters the focus of funding from the University to the student. It fails to adequately demonstrate how this change would be more cost-effective or show how the present system is failing. The virtues of the present system which are worth maintaining are not discussed.

3.2 In Western Australia Curtin University would expect to benefit from a system which allocated funding to the student rather than the institution, as would the University of Western Australia. Other Universities in the state may struggle in terms of attractiveness to students. Implementation of the policy might result in mergers, but a sure result would be greater competitiveness at the expense of increased collaboration.

3.3 Public funding for an unlimited number of students would encourage late bloomers and those who come to appreciate the need for further education with maturity to gain access to higher education so long as the take up date from the time of leaving school was not too short. A difficulty is how to cap the total educational bill.

3.4 Mosely(1997) lists criticisms of entitlement systems as follows

- Market forces do not necessarily reduce costs

- Market mechanisms provide inappropriate incentives for education delivery

Successful entitlements schemes require that each student has equal access to information regarding the quality of providers

· Exposure to the market will encourage the further separation of institutions perceived as being 'elite' from other public and private providers

- Entitlement systems incur substantial transaction and monitoring costs and there is no proof that these will be offset through course cost reductions and improved efficiencies.

These criticisms should be fully addressed in any document recommending a move to such a system.

3.5 Western Australia already has four public and one private university and an extensive TAFE network. More private universities supported by public subsidy would further threaten the viability of some public sector institutions.

Historically the political difficulties of closing a University or even arranging a merger have been acute.

3.6 Allocating Australian resources to assist students to study at foreign institutions would not do much for the balance of payments. Curtin is opposed to this, except for assistance with study abroad where the units taken form part of an Australian university degree.

3.7 The limitation of public funding to a 'package of study' is questionable. Does this mean that public funding will not be provided for higher degrees ? Accordingly, it might be preferable not to impose a monetary or time limit.

3.8 Not all courses have a positive correlation between cost and income earned by the graduate over a lifetime. This may be used as an argument for a flat amount. On the other hand there is some evidence that under a HECS style scheme demand for courses is not cost sensitive. There are economic arguments for a HECS charge to be a proportion of the course cost, particularly if the total Higher Educational bill is to be managed.

3.9 A model of a three year general degree followed by of graduate study of two years leading to a professional qualification would allow a high public good and hence low flat HECS for the bachelor's degree with a high private good and higher cost dependent HECS for the professional.

3.10 The number of places for postgraduate course-work has been reduced and DEETYA has signalled the phasing out of HECS places for this segment of the educational market. Tax deductions for course-work which are available for those in the workforce are inequitable as those not earning get no break. If, as recommended, income contingent loans are to be made available even at a high percentage of course costs for this area they should be introduced quickly as the current situation is very messy.

3.11 The paper fails to address the problem of replacement of an ageing staff. This has been exacerbated by release of younger contract staff under the recent economic squeeze on the Universities. Non-compulsory retirement may also have an impact.

3.12 To introduce university infrastructure charges would effectively mean an increased cost to the student. It is also a highly complex issue. Some universities are major tourist attractions and their buildings and gardens are highly prized and much used by the community. Universities should husband such resources in time frames of centuries not election cycles. Poor management of resources within the universities is best tackled by improving that management (for example by rent charges to departments), not by taxation.

4. Good Teaching

4.1 The emphasis on good quality teaching is welcome.

4.2 Curtin is introducing reward mechanisms for good teaching and would prefer to manage its own system of teaching quality improvement. Centralised systems do not allow innovation and comparison between alternative approaches.

4.3 The concept of a Centre for Teaching and Learning would have merit if no such centres existed. However, there is no justification as to how this proposed Centre of Teaching and Learning would be more effective than the system of specialized teaching support units currently existing within most universities in Australia. Support for existing bodies such as HERDSA should continue.

5. Research

5.1 In discussing the question of whether the ARC should have a role in setting national research priorities it should first be recognised that the problem is that nobody is setting national research priorities at the moment, nor is there a national policy framework within which such discussions could take place. The ARC has a fairly 'academic' view of research and should not have a sole role in setting national research priorities, but rather be reactive to a national Science & Technology policy (as called for in the Stocker report) and any other national drivers.

5.2 It is difficult to find substantiating evidence with the comments on p.37 that 'we cannot afford to set national priorities'. We should look to Singapore, Ireland and Sweden to see what can be achieved.

5.3 The following are comments on the various models are presented for the future of peer reviewed grants

Model 1:

The Status quo is rapidly becoming unworkable with respect to ARC large grants (as has been acknowledged by DEETYA)

Infrastructure grants tied to project grants do not allow for on-going infrastructure costs, eg, for the life of the equipment). The overall figure of 40c in the \$1 is probably about right.

A national moderation of postgraduate scholarship allocation is not workable.

Model 2:

Many of the weaknesses of Model 1 (see above)

Fewer large grants would limit flexibility and possibly restrict entry of new players.

Model 3: Allows institutions to set their own priorities (consistent with a deregulated marketplace).

It also includes the baggage of models 1 & 2. and depends upon the ability to measure quality of research outcomes.

5.4 A move to block grants with future allocations being dependent upon quality of research outcomes is recommended for consideration. It would be far more efficient to roll research infrastructure funds into a block grant and let institutions decide on internal breakdown. This should contain mechanisms to ensure that some proportion is maintained for 'scholarship of discovery'.

5.6 Various models for changes of the research quantum are presented.

The existing model of 4.9% does not reflect the cost of maintaining a research program, 6-10% would be nearer the mark. The present scheme is too costly to operate.

Model 3 is probably most cost effective, but the increase in research Quantum to 10% should be matched by an increase in funds, not dig more into the existing budget which would simply favour the 'great 8'. (Continuation of the funding should be dependent upon quality of outcomes).

5.7 Skills transfer and Technology diffusion programs should be supported, possibly as part of the Collaborative Research portfolio.

5.8 Equipment and facilities purchase under the present RIEF scheme seems to work satisfactorily.

5.9 National moderation of an honours system would be a bureaucratic nightmare. The present system is equitable and reasonably cost-effective. Efforts made a few years ago by the AVCC to moderate honours across universities were a failure.

5.10 The problem with West's research models is that the key principles do not take adequate recognition of a deregulated system. The most cost effective solution would be to make discipline areas (as in UK model) or even whole institutions accountable for quality outcomes, rather than individuals/small groups. This leads naturally to a block grant model to support the scholarship of discovery. Industry-Collaborative and technology transfer (scholarship of application) programs could be set up along lines of the present NZ model whereby consortia (including end users) 'bid' for government research contracts to support the scholarship of application and interpretation.

6. Other Comments

6.1 The paper lacks the depth of analysis of, for example, the report of the Dearing Committee and consequently is unconvincing in some areas. Presenting one side of an issue without analysis of alternatives is disturbing. The report lacks international comparisons to provide benchmarks on the current performance of the Australian universities and some of the proposed alternatives.

6.2 Kemp (1997, September 15) has expressed concern that a third of school students have literacy problems. What kind of post-secondary education will this group receive in a mass tertiary education system ?

6. 3 It has been stated that the final West Report may be substantially different from this draft. Any major re-write should be referred back to the universities for comment.

References

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Perspective:
Open and Flexible Learning/Alternative Modes of Teaching and Learning

A response to the West Committee's Learning for Life

The West Report, Learning For Life (1997) indicates that real life long learning should be predicated on the use of alternative modes of teaching and learning. While overall, the recognition of the increasing importance of alternative modes of teaching and learning is to be commended, it appears that too much faith is being placed on the applications of digital and communication technologies (C & IT). The UK Dearing Report is more circumspect when talking of the growth in importance of new technology

'Universities have also been experimenting with new technology, in the expectation that this could lead to more cost-effective teaching. Almost invariably IT has led to higher costs, with greater efficiency still a promise for the future.' (Dearing Report, 1997)

The West discussion paper does not appear to recognise the cost of hardware and connectivity and the time and costs for the acquisition of skills by staff. The Kaplan quote, (West 1997 p. 10) which states that 'Universities would be wise to begin putting in place their strategies for interactive multimedia web course offerings' is perhaps a bit simplistic.

Overall, we support:

- the use of technologies in improving learning environments, study materials and administration
- the development of a resourcing formula which recognises and supports alternative modes of teaching and learning
- the move to encouraging alternative modes of teaching and learning to improve the flexibility of time and place, thereby using University buildings and resources more cost effectively
- lifelong learning and the emphasis on generic skills
- planned staff development and accreditation of University teachers

A number of issues were not clearly addressed in the discussion document that would benefit from more analysis. Assumptions regarding its attitudes to the future development of alternative modes. These assumptions are:

1. The lower cost of technology e.g. West, p. 10

According to a national study of the use of information technology in higher education (Green, 1997), the cost of these technology resources can no longer be born by the institutions themselves and students are required to pay an extra 'IT fee' of around US\$140 per year to cover the excess. Green points out that this extra funding is way short of the requirements and institutions are having to look elsewhere to supplement the costs, which each year increase.

'Financing technology is a growing concern' ... institutions ... 'identify "financing the replacement of ageing hardware and software" as the most pressing IT issue for their institutions' (Green, 1997).

Becker (1996) conducted a detailed costing of introducing IT into education. His estimates are that an additional US\$2,000 to \$2,500 is needed to fund each student (Two thirds of this cost is human).

A paper reflecting on the UK Dearing's findings states:

'The development of computer-based materials is ... always expensive and any economic benefits, at least, are notoriously difficult to identify ... The use of C & IT in learning and teaching might result in a better quality of learning: it might result in a more efficient means of learning: it always results in higher costs' (Fraser, 1997).

See also Todd Oppenheimer's article *The Computer Delusion* (1997) which raises a number of controversial issues concerning the importance of new technology in education.

2. Internet delivery of course materials does not take into account the implementation costs, in terms of staff time. (An industrial model - separating development and implementation e.g. 'significant re-engineering of the production process' p. 10). There also appears little consideration of the cultural implications for Australia of the globalisation and commercialization of the curriculum.
3. All staff will somehow develop the skills and motivation to use the new technologies and teaching and learning will automatically improve. e.g. p. 9.
4. The non critical, non-problematic view that technology is neutral and does not effect and change teaching and learning. No account is taken of social second order consequences of using new technologies (Kling, 1996).
5. That all students (including disabled and disadvantaged groups) will have appropriate access to and abilities in working with C & IT and that any 'electronic delivery' saving can merely shift the cost across to the students.
6. The experiences and economics of the mega universities should not be equated with activities in Australia, since our situation is significantly different. E.g. we have dual mode institutions with much smaller students populations and a wider range of curricula.
7. That open, distance learning is necessarily cheaper than on campus teaching and learning.

References

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- Dearing Report. (1997). *The national committee of enquiry into higher education*. URL: <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/ncihe/>
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- Kling, R. (Ed.). *Computerization and controversy: value conflicts and social choices*. 2nd ed. San Diego: Academic Press,
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