



AUSTRALIA

Friday, 12 December 1997

The Review Committee of Higher Education, Financing and Policy  
Location 728  
GPO Box 9880  
CANBERRA ACT 2601

Dear Chairperson,

Enclosed please find a response to the policy discussion paper, *Learning for Life: review of higher education financing and policy*, from the Deans of Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities of the Australian universities.

Responses or enquiries should be addressed to-

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Yours sincerely,

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## DEANS OF ARTS, SOCIAL SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES

### **Response to the policy discussion paper,** *Learning for Life: review of higher education financing and policy*

The Deans of Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities wish to convey to the Review Committee their profound concern at the general approach taken in this report to the vital issue of the future of higher education in Australia. We believe that it is an approach that will be destructive of the system as a whole but particularly of faculties of Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities.

The Committee's emphasis on the importance of access to higher education for all Australians is commendable, as is the focus on the idea of lifelong learning, but such commitments are meaningless unless they are informed by a coherent vision of what education is and should be. Such a vision should be based on clear understandings of the multiple purposes of an education system and the principles of effective learning. Neither of these understandings is evident in the discussion paper. The general statements about civic values which open the document are bizarrely at odds with the values which dominate the remainder: narrow, utilitarian, market-driven principles which have no place for the pursuit of knowledge, the development of critical modes of thought, the formation of a socially responsible citizenry, the fostering of creativity and imagination.

Such outcomes are essential components of universities' contribution to the public good, just as important for the health of society as economic benefits. Our faculties have always played a central role in creating these outcomes, but now find themselves in a very vulnerable position because, in a climate where all is measured in monetary terms, benefits of this kind are difficult to measure and place on the balance sheet. The token gestures made towards the public good in the discussion paper are particularly galling for members of faculties of Humanities and Social Science struggling to maintain their programs in a context of ruthless funding cuts.

The document displays a blind faith in the capacity of market forces to guarantee the public good. Students of history understand that the unbridled market has never been able to achieve the self-regulatory ideal which assures the satisfaction of all consumers' needs. Governments have an important role to play in balancing competing needs and interests, including those of future generations. In the field of education, perhaps more than any other, it is vital that governments ensure that long-term views are taken and that the well-being of the community is a constant reference point, as well as the aspirations of individual students and the demands of employers. It is not an easy task and the balance needs constant re-adjustment, but it would be madness for the people's representatives to opt out of any responsibility for the kind of education offered to citizens.

Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of the discussion paper is the obvious influence on the Committee of the commissioned paper from the Global Alliance, which presents a nakedly economic rationalist line. Asserting that higher education is 'pretty much a normal Australian industry', the authors make no serious attempt to argue this case or to consider opposing arguments. How we have reached a position where the future of our higher education system may be determined by an investment bank, on the basis of a four-week investigation, is a question that demands further analysis, particularly in the obvious

light of the expression in the paper and the ignorance of educational theory and history demonstrated in many of its assertions about the current state of teaching and learning.

From this position of fundamental disagreement with the approach taken by the Review Committee, we take issue on six major points:

1. The constant emphasis on the need for a student-centred approach is misleading, even dishonest. The discussion paper slides between the use of this phrase to suggest a greater concern for the well-being and perspectives of students to an emphasis on the student as consumer and source of profit. Where is the evidence that the system is not 'student-centred' in the first sense? We would argue strongly that our faculties are fundamentally student-centred, with our emphasis on small-group teaching and attention to individual students, and the remarkable diversity of our offerings. If student choice is a measure of student-centredness, as the Review Committee frequently suggests, how much more choice do they want than the thousands of subjects across an extensive range of fields which we offer in our faculties (and which we are under considerable pressure to cut in the interests of cost efficiency). The linking of student-centredness with user pays principles is very dangerous: it implies that care for students can only proceed from a desire to profit from them, whereas many would argue that the exploitative approach of a business is antithetical to the core student-teacher relationship.
2. The underlying assumptions about the transformation of teaching by information technology are unsupported and disturbingly naive. Few would doubt that there is an important place for IT in future education, but the exact role it will play is very uncertain, and the view that it will replace face-to-face teaching altogether is regarded as an extreme, fringe position by most practising teachers. This is an area that requires careful and sober analysis, rather than the feverish hype presented in some sections of this report. It is a crucial aspect of the document, as the wilder assertions about the effects of competition in a global education market-place are dependent on an acceptance of the claims about IT transformations.
3. Associated with the excessive faith in IT is a highly negative view of past and present teaching which is again asserted in the absence of any evidence and, as expressed by Global Alliance, is hysterically sweeping and offensive. We strongly reject the equation of 'traditional learning' with chalk and talk and behaviourist approaches. Our long-standing commitment to small group teaching is based on assumptions about the centrality of student response and interaction that pre-date contemporary excitement about the possibilities for interaction with a computer (still, at this stage, vastly inferior to the possibilities for interaction in a tutorial group). We do still lecture, and the benefits of this form are the subject of lively debate, but to equate the lecture form with behaviourism is ridiculous - whatever else it may be, it is not behaviourist. This section of the Global Alliance report is not only embarrassing in its ignorance - it is insulting to readers.
4. Like Ingrid Moses, commenting in *The Australian*, 19. 11, we cannot accept that students should have the final say on what should be taught in universities. Student preferences and perspectives should certainly occupy a central position in deliberations about future developments, but, as Moses states, university staff have knowledge and experience far beyond that of individual students, and it is this very knowledge and experience that students seek. Universities should never become mere channels for the consumable product: they must continue to exercise leadership in advising the community about what should be studied, and why.

5. The report pays insufficient attention to the place of research in Australian universities, but implies that the emphasis on research must be weakened if teaching is to be given more attention. We do not accept this connection. Like most academics, we believe that students benefit considerably from studying in an environment where their teachers are actively creating knowledge. Engagement in research is by no means incompatible with a commitment to student learning. On the contrary, it can enhance one's teaching effectiveness. The fact that some academics find it difficult to manage the time commitments of both activities is an indication that funding is no longer adequate for these fundamental university pursuits.

6. We do not wish to comment on the detailed funding options outlined in the discussion paper, except to endorse Simon Marginson's argument that thorough-going deregulation of the funding system is likely to produce 'a high-demand sandstone group of universities where the student consumer has little influence, segmented from low-demand institutions where there is more consumer power but low positional value' (*The Australian*' 19. 11). To engage in discussions of the given options is to accept the Committee's position that the one path not to be considered is an *increased* level of public expenditure on higher education. Why has this possibility not been explored? We see no evidence that Australian taxpayers are tired of paying the costs of higher education. On the contrary, a recent opinion poll has suggested that they would be prepared to pay more through the public purse.

In general, the document does little to convince us of its underlying premise: that radical change to the system is not only necessary, but extremely urgent. It cites the low morale of academics, for example. On this we can agree, but we locate the cause primarily in relentless funding cuts. Even in the face of funding constraints, the Australian higher education system is a remarkable success, maintaining high standards while widening access at a very rapid rate. Much excellent teaching and research is conducted in our universities. Why then the need for complete transformation? The paper's 'arguments' for this case rest generally on millennialist scare-mongering about the pace and unstopability of change. The appropriate response to change is critical, analytical thought, an understanding and appreciation of the past, and a judicious adaptation of existing systems to incorporate the benefits of innovation, while building on established strengths. Unfortunately, there is little of this kind of response in the discussion paper.

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