

Response to the Discussion Paper by Global Learning Services

Introduction

The submission by Global Learning Services to the Review urged the Committee to stress the importance for higher education over the next two decades of

- a life-long learning perspective encouraging universal access;
- a vision that is inclusive of postsecondary education as a whole;
- a focus on student learning
- recognition of the imperatives of internationalisation;
- the need for flexible, responsive institutions.

The discussion paper has indeed given prominence to these themes as well a number of others (notably the need for satisfactory funding arrangements in a climate of restrictions in public expenditure). The Committee in its final report will hopefully refine its statement of principles for the future and give clear guidance as to how in the relatively short term the means of applying these principles might best be worked out. For example there is no reference in the statement of principles on pages 4-5 of the discussion paper to the importance of a lifelong perspective for higher education or to an inclusive model of postsecondary education nor is there any suggestion in the paper as to how these principles might be realised.

General Observations

The discussion paper begins with a highly pessimistic overview of the current state of and future prospects for higher education in Australia - the consistent theme, we are told, of the extensive consultations held around the country. While in regard to the decline in government funding there is information in an appendix which gives cause for alarm there is little else to support the impression given of almost total inadequacy and unpreparedness. Equally, little is said about the strengths of the system and there is no reference at all to the "Quality Reviews" of recent years which, while perhaps viewing universities through rose tinted glasses, comprehensively reviewed such key activities as teaching, research and community service.

The discussion paper

- in suggesting that the higher education system is poorly geared for change largely ignores the significant changes of recent years eg the substantial

increase in the proportion of university income coming from non-government sources and the general increase in commercial activity and business-like management practices;

- gives a cursory critique of the present HECS arrangements and almost ignores the persuasive paper prepared by Professor Chapman;
- makes mention of the significance of federal/state/institutional responsibilities but gives little guidance as to what changes are desirable and how they might be brought about;
- gives no suggestion as to a way forward in addressing one of the key issues, namely "achieving greater commonality in the financing of students in VET and higher education";
- promotes "diversity" as a self-evident good, without supporting argument and apparently without knowledge of the current level of diversity as described, for example, in the quality review reports;
- appears to underestimate the prevailing competitive environment amongst institutions (across tertiary education as a whole) which has grown considerably more keen in recent years as evidenced, for example, in efforts to attract high quality students, international students, distance education students, research funding, and industry support;
- adopts a "self-evident" attitude towards student-centred funding - while not considering the extent to which current funding arrangements could already be said to be student centred and not addressing the likely disadvantages of the student centred approach being proposed;
- while recognising the importance of the internationalisation of higher education over the next two decades (of the reference in the "Scope of the Review") offers few views as to what the Committee considers internationalisation to mean and what developments might be of significance;
- implies that a strong private element of the higher education sector may develop but does not suggest what the implications of this might be, eg for student support arrangements;
- stresses the need for less regulation in higher education yet argues the need for several regulatory mechanisms.

Access to Lifelong Learning

The Committee has stressed the important connection between setting a national target for "near universal access to some form of postsecondary education", making learning opportunities available on a lifelong basis and devising funding arrangements which will make this possible in an equitable manner.

Participation in education need not, of course, be in the traditional modes. The pace of contextual change in areas that impinge on education, including social and economic change, technological change and changes in the nature of work, means that the emerging role and modus operandi of the traditional sectors of postsecondary education cannot be planned on the basis of predicted futures. Rather what is needed is a set of basic principles to guide decision making and effective processes by which decisions are arrived at. The Discussion Paper takes tentative steps towards the former but gives little attention to the latter.

It can of course reasonably be assumed that increasing numbers of adults will need and want to return from time to time to some form of education and training. There will be implications in the political arena as the demand from this group for resources grows and there will be implications for the providers of education as they find it necessary to better cater for the needs of adult learners who wish to combine learning, work and leisure with a minimum of inconvenience.

Higher education, vocational education and training(VET) and adult and community education(ACE) will each contribute to this objective of lifelong learning opportunities for all. While the Committee refers to the "distinctive identity and mission" of the higher education and VET sectors (making no reference to the ACE sector) it does not suggest what these missions might be. It may be of assistance to the Committee to refer to recent research which shows that many of the methods now being adopted in the VET and ACE sectors are improving educational access and outcomes especially for disadvantaged groups - typically in entry level training for people of all ages and in retraining in response to changes in the workplace. While the mission of the higher education sector may remain distinctive, some of these methodologies may be applicable; another reason to endorse the Committee's call for a comprehensive view of postsecondary education.

Need for a Comprehensive View of Postsecondary Education

We strongly support the position adopted by the Committee in recognising the need for an inclusive view of postsecondary education. However it is important that the implications of this position are clarified in the Committee's report in the context of mounting pressures for lifelong learning.

The current sectoral divisions and Federal/State arrangements operate as barriers to people accessing education and training on a lifelong basis and create inefficiencies in the use of resources. While it could be argued on the basis of present cross-sectoral movement that concern about "barriers" is overstated, one must allow for the possibility that once opportunities are opened up the benefits

will be enjoyed by many more. Recent developments in the civilian accreditation of military training demonstrate how opportunities can be created by removing such obstacles.

An inclusive view of postsecondary education and training that encourages and supports lifelong learning is likely to involve:

- the development of a web of multiple pathways for learning within postsecondary education that facilitate access and progression on a life-long basis;
- the adoption of a partnership model of planning and delivery across the higher education and VET sectors and Federal/State arenas in collaboration with the private education providers and industry generally;
- a student/learner focus in financing arrangements and approaches to delivery;
- admission, credit transfer and credentialling arrangements that support the seamless concept of postsecondary education and training;
- appropriate recognition of the role of adult and community education.

Prompted by government initiative, student demand, institutional self-interest and enlightened planners, recent years have indeed seen significant if not universal developments in such partnerships. In some cases these have been driven by commercial imperative such as in the export of educational services, in others by regional factors such as in areas less well served by the full range of educational services. In all cases such initiatives must contend with attitudinal, financial and regulatory and structural barriers and disincentives.

Need for a Mechanism to Progress this Vision

The experience of recent years suggests that the vision of a seamless postsecondary education and training system as a key component of a learning society will not be realised unless there is a means of both developing the concept further and fostering action towards such a system.

While life-long learning in a learning society requires individual responsibility for action at all levels, there is also a need for a mechanism to progress dialogue between stakeholders, provide leadership in maintaining the vision, foster awareness at the political level and set appropriate action in train.

None of the existing national bodies is appropriate for this key role. We suggest that the Committee recommend the establishment of a national body for this purpose, perhaps a **National Council for Lifelong Education and Training**

with a mandate for a term of four or five years. The Council would be expected to play a leadership role in developing a national vision for Australia as a learning society. Membership would draw on expertise from the key sectors of the Australian community. There would be appropriate symbolism in taking this initiative as we approach the new millenium.

More specifically we envisage the key functions of such a council as being:

- To promote dialogue and discussion on action necessary to achieve a learning society in Australia where there are opportunities for lifelong learning for all.
- To develop and disseminate information in support of this objective.
- To advise governments on action necessary to achieve a seamless system of education and training in Australia that supports life-long learning.

These functions would of course need to be undertaken in consultation with existing relevant national, state and territory bodies.

Strategic directions, funding arrangements and accountability requirements for higher education can no longer be maintained in isolation from the other sectors of education and training and a growing spectrum of contextual developments that impinge on the sector. In this context the Committee has an obligation to suggest a mechanism by which the basic principles it develops can be brought to reality.

We therefore recommend that the Review Committee propose the establishment of an Australian Council for Life-long Education and Training, with a mandate for five years, to provide advice on action necessary to open up life-long learning opportunities for all and to progress Australia as a learning society.