

## COMMENTS ON 'LEARNING FOR LIFE'

### *A Policy Discussion Paper*

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#### PREAMBLE

The discussion paper, *'Learning for Life'*, is the preliminary paper issued by the Higher Education Financing and Policy Review Committee. The Committee was required to:

- undertake a broad-ranging review of the state of Australia's higher education sector, the effectiveness of the sector meeting Australia's social, economic, scientific and cultural needs and the developments which are likely to shape the provision of higher education in the next two decades;
- develop a comprehensive policy framework for higher education that will allow universities to respond creatively and flexibly to change and will ensure that the sector meets the needs of students, industry and society in general, as these are likely to develop over the next two decades;
- identify the options for funding of higher education teaching and research and for providing Commonwealth funding to higher education for these purposes.

The first and obvious comment to make is that the discussion paper ignores these terms of reference. Most importantly, the discussion paper fails to consider almost any of the elements given in the first general term of reference, develops an outline for a policy which is not related within the discussion to any of the points in the second general term of reference and fails to provide any alternative to a policy for funding higher education through increasing private sector (including student) contribution and decreasing Government contribution.

It is particularly distressing to note the number of times on which the discussion hinges on an unsubstantiated proclamation, particularly when one notes the membership of the Committee which drafted the paper includes philosophers and educational researchers.

Many submissions relating to this discussion paper will comment on matters to do with the model which is developed and on the relationship between Government funding and that component of the income derived from the private sector, including students who pay ARCS. While the discussion has a central theme of support to the higher education sector from the public purse, it also fails to note that an increasing component of that public funding is from HECS payments or anticipated payments of private individuals. In a number of places the discussion identifies this as government funding without identifying the initial source of that funding as the contribution of students.

I wish to devote most of my comments to the discussion of research and research training. Even the Committee admits this discussion is superficial, lacking in quality and will be improved in the final report. What is worrying, however, is that, in the few comments the Committee does make, it seems to have failed to understand the situation currently in the sector in respect of research and research training. It is to be hoped the Committee will take a lot of advice and seek expert input in order to bring this section of the report in line with the terms of reference and the expectations of the sector with respect to quality.

#### RESEARCH TRAINING

The Committee has identified a need within the area of research training for that training to extend beyond the simple matter of gaining proficiency in a particular research area, to include a range of "ethical

and generic workplace competencies". Unfortunately the discussion paper does not identify these competencies nor speculate on ways in which they might be introduced, nor how the additional cost of their introduction can be met within the system.

**Recommendation:** the Committee should clarify both what it means by 'ethical and generic workplace competencies' and how it would expect the system to resource such inclusions in training.

The Committee also proposes an "*allocation of resources for research training which is directly responsive to students' choice and institutional profession*". Obviously the Committee has neither investigated nor understood the current mechanism for the award of scholarships and the fact that this provides the opportunity for candidates to satisfy both their choice of detailed area of study and their institution of choice through application within a highly competitive award system. The current limitation on student satisfaction of their choice, is the number of scholarship places in the system. Since the discussion paper does not advocate an increase in the number of scholarships, the transfer of the element of choice from an application process to different institutions to a process of award of a portable scholarship is unlikely to achieve any net change.

**Recommendation:** the Committee should develop strong arguments to convince the Government to fund scholarship places sufficient to accommodate at least all First Class Honours students in the sector.

The Committee in a hand-waiving statement talks of a national moderation system. It admits that, even without details of the moderation process, such a scheme will be difficult to develop. The Committee fails even to recognise the existence of a moderation system already in place. The system is derived from the scholarship selection process plus the existence of a wide range of choice for candidates in scholarships. Added to research grants, contracts and bodies such as Cooperative Research Centres.

**Recommendation:** that the Committee scrap its undefined and difficult to achieve moderation process for cross-institutional and disciplinary standards;

**Recommendation:** that the Committee consult organizations which recruit research training candidates from across the sector to get information on relative standards. Institutions who would qualify would include the ANU Research Schools, certain medical research institutes and a number of bodies such as Cooperative Research Centres.

The Committee rightly points to the need for supervisors of quality. It relies on anecdotal evidence to suggest that there is a need to improve the quality of supervision, but surprisingly makes no cogent case for the considerable amount of effort in this direction in the sector, nor the sector-wide influence of bodies such as the 'Ideals of Graduate Schools'.

In Appendix 10 the Committee expands on its ideas with respect to the funding of research training based on a portable scholarship system. It makes suggestions but gives no cost analysis. The Committee indeed makes no comment on the number of such scholarships - should this be the number of APAs with stipend, for example, or the number of commencing higher degree by research candidates?

Having suggested in one section of the paper that the scholarships be allocated to students, the Committee suggests elsewhere that institutions will also be given scholarships, mainly for award to other than immediately completed Honours students. The Committee further complicates its discussion by introducing the Research Training Index and implies that it would be used "*to ration the size of merit lists of institution*". This form of outside moderation to determine the number of First Class Honours awards a given institution might make is completely unacceptable, given the size of the discipline peer group across the country and the very selective entrance requirements for honours courses imposed by the institutions in most disciplines.

**Recommendation:** again the Committee scrap its moderation concept and Research Training Index.

This latter recommendation is also important given that any moderation scheme based on proportions of students achieving certain results across the country would disadvantage institutions with small Honours classes in given disciplines.

## RESEARCH POLICY AND FUNDING MODELS

In the area of Research in the Higher Education Sector, the most distinguishing feature of the Committee's discussion is the obvious lack of understanding of what is occurring in the sector and the resultant extreme simplicity of its analysis.

The Committee makes a series of statements on what should govern research funding a research policy; namely:

- research in universities should be curiosity driven and strategic and there should be a focus on knowledge, technology and skills transfer to industry and the broader community;
- funding should be openly competitive;
- we must set national priorities,
- there must be adequate infrastructure.

The Committee also introduces the concept of teaching-only appointments in this section.

With the exception of setting the national priorities, all of these points have been considered and, to differing extents, have been adopted in the system. The concept of teaching-only appointments has been recognised, but more in the sense of individual staff making decisions at different points in their career regarding the proportioning of effort between teaching and research. It is to be hoped that the Committee does not believe that a person in a teaching-only position in a higher education institution will not do any research at all.

The Committee rightly notes that *'priority setting for University research cannot be avoided'*. This is occurring all the time within institutions as decisions are made about support for centres and for industry-related programs. The priorities are set by the availability of funding, expertise and infrastructure and the priorities are operational in the sense that they are driven by external forces. Institutions today have much narrower research profiles than that of a decade ago. Perusal of almost any institutional Research Report will confirm this.

National research priority exercises have not been successful in other places. The Committee notes the Japan exercise, but fails to comment on the extra initiatives introduced in IAPUn when identification of national priorities for research would result in any research group or institution achieving recognition at the level of Nobel Prizes or similar.

**Recommendation:** the Committee request the ARC to determine the extent to which national priorities have been set as a result of policy decisions within Universities and funding agencies.

The Committee has rightly identified problems in the system with respect to infrastructure. The Committee has failed however, to grasp a fundamental aspect of current funding under the National Competitive Grants system. Any submission for funding directly or indirectly has the institution signing off to indicate that infrastructure to support the current project exists. To then propose that infrastructure.

funding be attached to individual projects represents double-dipping. The block grant for infrastructure represented by the RIBG represents an opportunity for institutions to manage infrastructure developments for future areas of priority. .removal of that device of freedom would be a major restriction on research infrastructure development. Indeed I suspect my own institution would tax all funded projects at the level of infrastructure costs to ensure it had the ability to develop infrastructure which underpins all research as well as infrastructure related to a given project.

The Committee fails to realise that most institutional research operates at a program level, not a project level. Individually funded projects are often pooled for the benefit of the program and infrastructure developments are focussed on programs of research, not individual projects.

**Recommendation:** the committee makes strong representations to Government for the continuation of infrastructure support at least the current levels, but 40% of dollar value of ,grants would be welcome.

**Recommendation:** the Committee steps back from its support of infrastructure funding tied to individual grants in favour of block granted infrastructure funding to be managed by institutions.

**Recommendation:** that the Committee investigate ways in which funding for research might be better shifted to program-based funding as distinct from project-based funding.

The Committee discusses the Research Quantum and seems to conclude surprisingly that the Research *Quantum has 'reinforced incentives for research by promising additional Funding to those institutions which increase research vesper at a greater rate than the system as a whole'*. It would be surprising if any such rare increase were not refaced to institutional priorities which were reinforced by the funding opportunities and institutions. It is difficult therefore to see why the Committee seems to see this as a disadvantage of the current Research Quantum arrangements.

The funding models for research proposed by the Committee are not large variants of those existing now if the inclusions of such parameters as priority setting are in fact found not to be workable. There are benefits and disadvantages in each system, but provided some of the difficulties identified above are accommodated within the Recommendations made here, there is probably no significant problem in any of them. The main difficulty is the identification of the overall resource input to research and research training. If this decreases as a total, or even remains constant at 1997 inputs, there will be considerable shortfalls in funding for projects (or programs) of now. This will affect, Australia's overall standing as a researching nation.

**Recommendation:** the Committee should develop in conjunction with ARC, NHMRC and other national research funding bodies, an estate of coral research funding Essential to preserve Australia's position as a research nation of note, and to actively pursue that level of funding, with the Government.

Within the models proposed for Research Funding over the next decade. there are some good ideas. However, any attempt to clawback Research Quantum funds into an enlarged competitive grant operation should be resisted. Institutions need the resources to develop their own priorities within a network of support from Midst y and the public sector, plus a focus on developing strengths to comb within pares of the National Competitive Grant system. These are, however, the beginnings of good ideas in the shift from project to program funding which the Committee proposes. Such shifts accelerate the development of priorities for research concentrations within institutions as well as focus the distribution of infrastructure support to underpin such developments. j In addition. a shim: to such funding would reduce the pressure on the competitive grants system enough al reduction in such grants

**Recommendation:** the Committee should develop its concepts of program funding within institutions as an alternative to project funding.

The discussion paper makes the unsubstantiated statement that; "*The balance And relationship between teaching and research are fundamental issues for the higher education system. There are signs that the balance has shifted too far in favour of research to the detriment of teaching. This is both a function of the financial incentives inherent in the existing policy framework for teaching and research and the prestige associated with research in terms of professional advancement.*"

While the opening assertion is obviously correct in that a variant of it will appear in the mission statement of every University in Australia, the remainder of the statement is open to contest. Institutions have developed an emphasis shift in the last decade with much more importance in career development of staff being associated with teaching. The problem with which the Committee should concern itself is the development of processes to measure excellence in teaching which parallel those associated with peer review in research. The solution is not a general attack on the dog of research itself.

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