

# Response from Dr Craig McGarrity

Dear Committee,

As the author of submission #63 to the HE review let me briefly start by saying that your discussion paper is an excellent document of sound principles and clearly represents a lot of work trying to find the best way forward through diverse opinions. I'm pleased that my own hard work and that of others who made submissions has not been swept aside.

This response begins with succinct comments directed at the questions the committee has put forward for debate according to their order in the discussion paper. After these some succinct comments are provided on other issues which are not specifically canvassed for response by the committee but which may have been overlooked by the committee due to constraints of time and space.

PART 1: Response to viewpoints canvassed Chapter 4, page 29, "Access to public support...": I feel that the committee has emphasized the correct principle. Since the HECS charge is obtained directly from students it should then be given straight back to the providers of HE so that the 'loop' is as short a possible in the cost flow. A fast response in the funding 'loop' will allow a flexible, customer-driven institution to respond appropriately by delivering excellent teaching to those immediately funded through the expression of their interest.

page 31: "Duration of a student's entitlement..." The committee is very close to an easily workable formula here. A simple formula would work easily as follows: Entitlement is to an equivalent number of full time years of study represented by a number of units. Courses are allocated a number of units, postgraduate courses perhaps more units per course. How the student accumulates courses to make up their degree is up to the student - subject only to approval by institutions. This will provide student choice in the flexibility of their reaming and when this is undertaken.

page 31 : "Tuition fee flexibility" Competition will not be the only factor. reputation of the institution will also play a part in their decisions to set fee levels. For example one of the most vocal institutions wanting to set their own fees (Melbourne) will undoubtedly consider their services very expensive. Whether the quality of their teaching genuinely matches this opinion of themselves should be decided by a completely independent body. The results will cause some red faces.

page 32: "Differentiation by course" Although possibly more expensive to teach (properly) I suggest that science is also more wealth creating than some

humanities. If the HECS charge is the same this factor would help to offset the differential teaching costs. If HECS is differential there will be some students who choose the 'cheaper' courses and degrees. These are students who only want some form of degree as an extra qualification for employment prospects. In the UK there are already large numbers of totally overqualified people. English literature graduates working as secretaries is the most common experience. Is this the path Australia wishes to take? How will a higher charge on science courses affect the level of scientific literacy of the "clever country"?

page 33:"Accreditation, quality assurance and accountability" With deregulation students must also be protected from provider scams. As recently mentioned in an article in the Times Higher Education Supplement, peer review is more often about mutual back scratching than anything else. So a peer review model which accredits courses, judges quality and measures accountability will only produce the same result as the UK's system of external examiners. Often these are 'chums' from other institutions and the amount of "re-marking" which occurs is astonishing - even at Oxbridge. Standards are in free fall. So I would recommend NOT using a peer review model to try and uphold these three principles.

page 36:"Encouraging good teaching" I heartily applaud the shift in emphasis to teaching rather than research. However I'm sure that I will be in the minority. Academics in the system (particularly senior academics) have built their careers on research. You will be asking them to put in more work than they would like. Good teaching requires more work than good research since teaching also requires social and human skills many academics lack. My experience as a student in Australia was that the majority of these academics couldn't teach to save their lives. This is why I proposed the now highly successful staff development courses at UNSW. Retraining (or training) quite a few of these senior academics will be necessary.

page 37:"Encouraging good research training" Accreditation should be required for academics to take on research students. My experience at UNSW as student representative was that I had to "prosecute" too many academics who could not supervise. research students are too often treated as cheap labour - training simply does not occur. The PhD review at UNSW provided a step forward but this has not followed with solid, enforceable policy. Some form of national accreditation outside the control of institutions should be applied to academics. Funding of research students should then follow the student, not the institution so that the student can exercise the appropriate choice rather than being constrained by what is being offered by academics needing some cheap labour.

page 38:"Research policy and funding models" The statements by the committee on research policy are mostly very good. However the strategic nature of the research and the transfer of skills and knowledge to the community should be emphasised more strongly than the 'curiosity driven' research. Many scientists for example, particularly theoreticians, will see 'curiosity driven' as a label they can attach to research which is really no more than play. A targeted research model (as opposed to block grants) will ensure that the research profile is more flexible and more immediately beneficial to the Australian community. Although in the past this has appeared to be more costly in administration there are many immediate ways this cost can be

reduced through forethought and careful use of triennial reviews. There is a middle ground which has not yet been explored.

PART 2: Other Comments page 20: "Equity" Avenues for policy intervention do exist for HE providers to address the problem of equity. HE providers can assist students from low SES through "Foundation Year" programs which allows these students to catch up to their high SES counterparts and thereby achieve matriculation standard. Such years of study are now becoming common in UK institutions and these are proving successful in broadening access to HE. In addition HE providers can become more actively market oriented and can approach schools to encourage a favorable response to intellectual endeavour and to education per se. There is a strong "anti-intellectualism" in Australian society which must be actively combated and this is strongest amongst low SES students. Grants to support such activity could be made available to good HE teachers and could count towards teaching activity.

"A student centered approach" Accountability to students is an excellent principle and an important principle for the success of many of the policies proposed. Therefore it should be implemented appropriately. Students should have the ability to cast their opinion with their vouchers without fear of reprisal from institutions and individuals who's reputations (often built on the strength of others) may be damaged by students speaking out or leaving.

## CONCLUSION

The proposals in the committee's discussion paper are an excellent step forward. I sincerely hope that the government adopts the eventual proposals rather than rejecting all this hard work and careful thought for a "quick but convenient" solution as has happened in the UK.

Whatever policies are eventually proposed to the government the committee should be aware that safeguards must also be proposed to prevent academics from "playing the system" in ways which nullify the good intentions of the policies and their principles. Experienced academics are particularly good at this game. So much so that Edward de Bono coined the term "Ludecy" from his experiences in academia.

Dr. Craig McGarrity

(an ex-pat hoping Australian HE will improve so I can come home).