

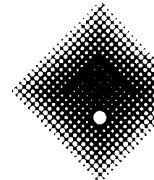
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17-Dec-97

The Secretary  
The Review of Higher Education Financing and Policy  
Location Code 728  
GPO Box 9880  
Canberra ACT 2601

VICTORIAN  
UNIVERSITY  
OF TECHNOLOGY



Dear Sir,

I wish to make the following comments on the Discussion Paper issued by the Committee. In doing so, I want to express my regret at the short time allowed for comment, and the timing of this interval in a part of the academic year that allows least attention to such tasks. My comments are therefore briefer than I would have wished.

In particular, I would argue that there is a disjunction between the professed aim of the Committee to "provide an educational environment that will accommodate all Australians for a lifetime of learning" and the detailed suggestions for changing methods of university finance and management. I would suggest that this disjunction arises because the Committee has placed too great weight on the advice commissioned from Global Alliance, and has spent too little time considering the nature of the business of the university, which is concerned with knowledge.

University teaching is, as I argued in my original submission, distinguished by being research based. It is a part of the university's over-riding responsibility to maintain, organise, extend, and transmit knowledge. The concentration of the paper on the function of transmission, to the exclusion of detailed consideration of the relationship of transmission to its other functions, means that the proposals are unlikely to achieve the benefits envisaged on page three of the paper. This deficiency is also apparent in the Global Alliance submission, which argues, without evidence, that private for-profit organisations in the USA "appear to provide a first-rate educational product" by operating under the "price umbrella" of medium range research universities. (Section 3.4) (This, incidentally, means that they are receiving an unearned cross-subsidy from the public sector.) While it may be appropriate for public universities to purchase some materials from such companies, they cannot be considered as providers of an adequate form of higher education. This client-based competitive model is not equipped to meet such objectives as "developing a well informed and socially responsible community" or "inculcating a profound respect for scholarship", and so in the long run is unlikely to be able to meet the other objectives either.

Despite international comparisons of cost-efficiency, the Global Alliance seems to have produced its report in a cultural vacuum, showing no awareness either of the distinctive nature of the culture in which Australian universities operate or of the dynamic of the relationships between this culture and the forces of cultural, political and economic globalisation. If Australia is to maintain an independent culture in a global community, it must strengthen the distinctive qualities of its own universities, including their ability to work across national boundaries. The adoption of the Global Alliance proposals would reduce them to stallholders in an international educational marketplace.

The lack of a cultural dimension - or, indeed, of an educational dimension - to the Global Alliance report is related to its insistence that education is just another industry (Section 3.1). This proposition is not argued, but relies on the ideological proposition that any argument based on the distinctive nature of an institution or process is special pleading. There is the further assumption, spelled out in a derogatory aside, that those who do not produce marketable products are not workers. It is a highly questionable assumption that even all industries that produce marketable goods should be regarded as homogeneous. That education produces public goods that are neither marketable nor easily measurable is sufficient reason for it to be considered as a special case, without dismissing arguments based on this assumption as special pleading.

The report of the Global Alliance has in common with the Discussion Paper itself a failure to recognise that the production of knowledge requires co-operative rather than competitive effort. This is not to rule out competition as always undesirable in education. Competition for excellence among members of a class is, for example, highly desirable. When however this leads to such practices as hiding books on library shelves from one's competitors, it becomes anti-educational. If educational institutions are to be treated simply as competitive sales units, they can be expected to adopt analogous practices in order to survive and prosper.

Finally, I would like to comment on the recommendations regarding research. Again, there is a disjunction between the professed aims and the means suggested for achieving them. Further, there is a failure to consider the relationship of research to teaching, both individually and institutionally. If the potential of this relationship is to be achieved in all institutions, and if the research potential of the academic community is to be fully realised for the benefit of the nation, then all qualified researchers need comparable access to research support. The proposals that would tie quantum and recurrent funding for research - that is, funding which is available to support small or less costly research - to the amount of funds generated for large project funding would inevitably further restrict such funding to fewer institutions, to the detriment of the whole system. While it may be desirable to restrict large projects through the combination of competitive and co-operative projects suggested, academics in all higher education institutions should have the opportunity to seek funding to support smaller scale research that relates directly to their teaching.

In relation to research training, I am concerned that the proposals for a national scheme of scholarships, supported by a system of moderation and accreditation, would inevitably lead to the kind of intrusive bureaucracy the Committee deplures, and at the same time further reduce the number and variety of institutions offering such training.

Yours sincerely

Dr John McLaren

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