

# Murdoch University Guild of Students



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## Response To 'Learning For Life' Policy Discussion Paper.

Prepared on behalf of the Murdoch University Guild of Students by:

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## Introduction

"Student centredness" is the catch cry throughout the Committee's discussion paper. The Murdoch University Guild of Students (the Guild) fails to see that 'student-centredness' needs to solely take a market or even a financial form. The Guild believes that it should be viewed much broader in terms of access, outcomes, planning and input.

It is expected that one of the biggest issues which will face the Higher Education sector will not be cost, but quality of the education provided to students. The Guild fears that under the funding proposals outlined in the discussion paper only wealthy, or exceptionally academic, poor students will be able to experience a high quality education; thus creating even greater inequality amongst students and inevitably, in the wider community.

## Recommendations

The Guild calls upon the Committee to take on board the following recommendations:

- Propose adequate public funding as a priority option.
- Ensure AUSTUDY/ABSTUDY (and other forms of student income support) be considered with any proposed funding changes.
- Further explore proposals to strengthen TAFE/tertiary linkages.
- Do not increase public funding to private institutions.
- Maintain and strengthen central control of student numbers and the quality of education delivered.
- Monitor centrally any additional fees proposed by individual institutions.
- Maintain staff and student influence over university governance.

## Learning for Life

### GENERAL SUPPORT FOR 'THE VISION'

In view of the disastrous attacks on the higher education system over the past year or so, the Committee's general vision and numerous specific principles are welcomed.

As institutions and students continue to grapple with cuts to university operating grants, further tightening of AUSTUDY/ABSTUDY eligibility, increases in HECS, lowering of the HECS threshold and the introduction of up front fees for domestic undergraduate students; the Guild endorses the Committees vision of universal access and the recognition of the 'public good' which universities provide. Also welcomed is the suggestion that institutions should become more differentiated and that they should become more responsive to student demands. We do however, have concerns that our interpretation of the terms and principles (particularly differential) may be quite different to the Committee's ideals.

The mention of increased public funding of universities, is noted. This however, is later dismissed in the Report in favour of other funding options.

The Guild agrees that Australia should move to near universal post secondary school education and that the future system will need to be in a student centred policy framework. Support is also expressed for the Committees commitment to instil a culture of lifetime learning, a profound respect for scholarship and in the development of a well informed and socially responsible community.

### AREAS LACKING ATTENTION

It is disappointing that the Report has little regard for the views of staff and students. Almost no gesture towards the concerns of staff are expressed in the Report, besides

commenting that there is low morale in the sector. The committee recognises that teaching is currently undervalued but fails to examine how "gifted" teachers can be identified or provide solutions for overcoming the difficulty.

There is a lack of discussion on how the sector generally is coping with the many changes which have been thrust upon it during the past twelve months, or on strategies to deal with the effects of continuing rapid change. Instead it seeks to speed up the process even further by deregulation and expanding the private sector.

The Report also provides very little details about education content, the role of Higher Education, course quality and the global competence of Australian universities. How would rare and "less attractive" fields of study survive? Likewise, very little is mentioned about student rights despite the emphasis on the need for a more student centred system.

#### INCONSISTENCE

Overall, the report fails to provide a logical sequence from its stated desired principles of an ideal Higher Education system, through to its various funding scenarios.

The report emphasises increased equity, flexibility and choice, yet these aspects will be disappear once individual institutions gain control and begin charging their own fees. As for student entitlement to post secondary education, each of the proposed funding models involves a much greater financial contribution from students and an increasingly hierarchical education system which would be less accessible and less equitable.

Part of the report suggests that government should maintain and perhaps even increase the level of public funding (pg28), yet does not include this an option in the 3 models finally presented. Nor does the creation of a system in which fees will undoubtedly increase, fit with the expressed ideals that "we should aim for near universal access to some form of post secondary education" or "that the level of individual contribution should be fair, and not represent an excessive burden on students and their families".

There is also a belief within the report that deregulation and increased competition between institutions will be coupled with co-operation and the sharing of resources (library facilities etc); it is doubtful this will occur in any great way, or be a desirable arrangement for students.

Throughout the Report, many statements with which the majority of current and prospective students would agree, are used to cloud the underlying damage which a highly privatised, deregulated system would create. In fact, the report has failed to acknowledge the full meaning of higher education, what it is for and what constitutes a degree.

## Issues & Options: a student opinion

The Guild uses this section of our response to elaborate on the points raised by the Committee in Chapter 4 'The way forward: issues and options for the future'.

#### DEREGULATION

The committee strongly advocates the process of unlimited deregulation within the Higher Education sector. The Guild considers this to be extremely destructive and would benefit neither students nor Australian society. The question of access to higher education must also address the question of what access and quality of education is desired and/or required. The report, displays an alarming over-confidence in market driven solutions focusing on economic concerns, and not the policy objectives mentioned as the Committee's vision for Higher Education. The Guild does not want to see an education system established which serves no socially useful role.

The Guild's concerns are heightened by the disastrous effects which deregulation is having on other public sectors, particularly in the areas of health and community

services: and the fact that politically, deregulation is currently viewed as a highly feasible option to many difficulties facing the Government. With the resources provided to the Committee, we are disappointed that the outcomes of deregulation in overseas higher education systems has not been explored further before this is seen as such a desirable path, (eg. apparently evidence from USA private higher education system is that tuition fees have risen sharply in recent years).

The attempts of the committee to demonise all forms of regulation results in a limited array of funding options to choose from, the Guild believes that the Committee should explore more options that retain considerable public regulation.

#### FEES

The report is wrong in its belief that allowing universities to set their own fees will help students. It will only serve to increase inequalities and see the older established universities benefit greatly. Their currently perceived status attached to long traditions will be further entrenched and reinforced as they are able to command inflated fees in a deregulated marketplace. Such high demand institutions will become the domain of the wealthy, yet be under very little pressure to respond to individual student requirements.

This will further create a system in which students with the ability and willingness to pay high fees will have access to significantly better standards of education, leaving a majority of students subjected to under resourced courses which do not offer the rewards of those available from the elite institutions. The market forces will produce elite universities where students have little or no influence and lower demand institutions with more student power but no real value in terms of being able to create change or future employment prospects.

The Guild rejects the committees assertion that "competition between universities ... would provide downward pressure on tuition fees" as we have yet to see proof that this is the case. This certainly has not been proven in regards to postgraduate fees in Australian institutions.

#### HECS

The proposal to introduce a real rate of interest on HECS is noted. This too will create an obvious disincentive for many potential students, particularly women. Individuals who gain the least financial benefit from their studies will be further disadvantaged by the interest charges, whilst those who can repay the debt quickly will be unaffected.

#### CONTROL

It is clearly not true that establishing a student- centred funding system - "Vouchers", will increase control to students. What it will certainly do is move power and control from the Government (the public) to institutions themselves.

This concept, coupled with giving Universities the autonomy to set their own fees will lead to considerable increases in charges for students and are the most disturbing feature of the report.

The Guild believes that the Governments should retain a central planning role to help ensure that the public good is being serviced by institutions which will otherwise be unaccountable to the public for their actions. Accountability systems are necessary to monitor the performance of institutions in many areas including the charging of any fees and ensuring that equity, access and outcome factors are continually improved.

In a highly deregulated market there will be very little control over the way universities (or private providers) operate. This can only lead to the creation of low cost and low resourced institutions which do not serve the needs of students or Australian society. Such an environment will also result in exploitation of the market by the larger and more influential institutions.

#### PRIVATE INSTITUTIONS

The reports signal that private providers will be encouraged into the post secondary school sector is a very surprising. On many occasions media reports have indicated that the Government has concerns about the Higher Education sector being too large.

The Guild can foresee great danger in attempts to expand the private sector at the expense of the public sector. Why would it be seen as desirable to provide private institutions with public money without any public control over how those funds are used? It is also obvious that once funding is provided it will be seen by the Government as politically unfeasible to then withdraw it if things go wrong.

Our recommendation is that Australia requires a strong, well resourced, centrally controlled, public sector Higher Education system which caters for the needs of all post secondary school students.

#### UNIVERSITY GOVERNANCE

The report states that university governance structures are “not appropriate for a more competitive environment”. The Guild sees this as an attack on the notion of universities as scholarly institutions which should aim to serve the community. The Guild believes that it is important to retain staff and student influence over the university. A rationalisation of university governance procedures would inevitably result in less consultation with the staff and student community and an increased focus on profit orientated outcomes.

## Other issues.

#### STUDENT INCOME SUPPORT

One of the most encouraging factors acknowledged by the Committee is the need to ensure that student living costs are considered in conjunction with any proposed changes to education cost funding. With the approach of the Youth Allowance and the already severe tightening of AUSTUDY/ABSTUDY eligibility, we urge that this vital funding aspect remains a priority consideration when examining any funding proposals which increase costs for existing and prospective students.

#### THE TAFE SECTOR

In principle, the Guild supports the proposal to examine ways to improve links between Universities and the TAFE sector.

#### LOW RESOURCED CAMPUSES

Without an effective national co-ordinating mechanism, the interests of the sector as a whole will not be served. Competition will create an environment where larger institutions will poach students from regional and newer institutions; small and regional campuses will struggle to survive; and some institutions will undoubtedly fail.

In trying to find a market niche, an underclass of low quality, poorly resourced (yet more accessible) institutions will be created. The Committee itself acknowledged, (yet failed to provide suggested solutions) that culturally significant, yet low enrolment courses will suffer within a deregulated market. The beneficiaries will be the already powerful, at the expense of all others.

A deregulated and highly privatised environment will increase the choices available to the already privileged at the expense of the disadvantaged. We strongly emphasise the point that not all forms of participation are equal and a system of high participation will not necessarily equate to equity.

#### TECHNOLOGY

Interestingly, the committee places great importance on increased opportunities offered by advances in information technology - most notably the opportunity to save money (not necessarily improving access or learning experiences for students).

Surely a huge initial and ongoing financial investment will be required before institutions can gain any real cost savings. Many students will always want the option to attend institutions to personally interact, for personal growth and to belong. What better technology may produce are students who are increasingly proactive and demand increased quality - a "better deal" from their university.

The Guild is concerned that the result of an enthusiastic push towards new technologies and so called 'flexible learning' methods will actually be a reduction in the quality of education.

## ... and the 3 Funding Models!

The glaring omission in discussing proposed funding models is the lack of consideration to increasing the current level of direct public funding. This needs to be recognised as the most productive way of ensuring the Australian higher education system remains accessible, provides a real service to society and meets the needs of all students.

The report stresses that no Australian students undertaking an initial post secondary school qualification should be required to pay an upfront tuition fee without access to income contingent loan arrangements. It also states that our national target should be near universal access to some form of post secondary education and that the level of individual contribution should be fair and not represent an excessive burden on students and their families. The problems with these ideals are that the report then lists a number of measures which will see fees skyrocket and as many students know (through unsuccessfully applying for AUSTUDY) - access to a system is very different to actually receiving an entitlement.

Far from making higher education more equitable, the proposed funding models add to the financial burden. What the committee is offering is a voucher-type system. Student centred funding means vouchers, which will do nothing to improve the choices available to students.

Under the proposed models, control is not transferred to students but to individual universities. Voucher systems are frequently justified in terms of the empowerment it offers students, through allowing them the choice to attend whichever institution they choose, free from government allocations of student load. In reality, control will move from the Government to the institutions, which will then act in their own interests and determine how many students they enrol at their University and in which courses.

There may well be a shift in student load and also the distribution of load between academic disciplines, however, it is highly unlikely that consideration will be given to whether this benefits society or the sector as a whole.

Students choice will not be increased as the majority of students will never be in a position to actually choose their preferred institution. In an increasingly deregulated environment, more than ever, elite universities will lure students with the highest entrance scores and other potential students will hope for an offer from the remaining institutions.

Another key issue is the proposed split and shift between private contributions and public funding and whether the number of funded places will be limited. There appears to be easy scope to introduce differentiated arrangements according to courses or year of study, further leading to increased costs for individual students. A major danger is seen in moving primary responsibility for funding away from the government to students as there are no proposed safeguards outlined, leaving individual students and the public extremely vulnerable. This will no doubt lead to students in more expensive courses being expected to meet a higher proportion of their course costs.

Will additional fees (up-front, top-up, ancillary or whatever) above the proposed vouchers need to be repaid, and who is it envisaged will actually qualify for the income-contingent loans?

Whilst we acknowledge that the Committee suggests that elements of each of the three proposed funding models are interchangeable the Guild **strongly disagrees with the recommendations that:**

All models - Institutions be free to set their own fees.

Model 1 - Students at private universities should have access to income contingent loan arrangements.

Model 2 - Allow HECS to be set at a standard percentage of course fees. (The Guild is also concerned about the lack of specific detail on how scholarship scheme would work)

Model 3 - The tertiary system should be funded through a voucher system, and that the post secondary school system should be fully deregulated.

We understand that Dr. Kemp has indicated that the government has ruled out the introduction of a voucher system and rejects support for the introduction of a HECS arrangement for TAFE students. However, we also recognise that Government introduction of deregulatory mechanisms to universities is a very real danger.

## Conclusion

Overall the introduction of deregulation, substantial upfront fees and a voucher system will create further chaos in a system which is still struggling to come to terms with the impact of the last two Federal Government budget cuts.

Whilst many of the Committees values are endorsed, we do not see that the proposed funding models will improve the higher education system for the benefit of individual students, prospective students or Australia as a whole. The report considers education in purely economic terms and does not address other aspects, outcomes or the broader social considerations of equity and a broadly educated population.

The Murdoch University Guild of Students is committed to striving for a healthy, viable, and free public education sector which is accessible to all students who have the ability and desire to achieve a tertiary education. The Guild hopes that the final report from the Review of Higher Education Financing and Policy will take on board some of the criticisms that we have made and make recommendations that will ensure the survival and growth of the higher education sector in Australia.

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