

**RESPONSE TO THE WEST
POLICY DISCUSSION PAPER
'LEARNING FOR LIFE'**

**from the
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF
GRADUATE CAREERS ADVISORY SERVICES
- NAGCAS (Aust) Inc -**

SUMMARY

Within a context of responding to the needs of students, business and industry, and the wider Australian community, the strategic role that university careers services can play is critical if we are to fully maximise both the individual potential, and the human capital potential, of graduates exiting the higher education sector.

Careers services assist students in the process of decision making and the acquisition of employment and generic skills relevant to their future.

Individual universities have responded differently to the current context, and hence, their capacity to add value via the work of their careers services. However it is critical that the West Committee recognises the wider application of careers related initiatives by way of targeted support for high priority programs that have the potential to bring benefits across the sector and into the wider community.

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RESPONSE

It has been well documented that the higher education sector has had to respond more effectively to those in our society who are making an investment in the system, and as the West Review highlights, to be more student centred.

Students completing the upper secondary years of secondary education, making initial university choices, and progressing to graduation and after, face a complexity of options and possibilities. They must receive appropriate assistance, and have the opportunity to develop career decision making skills to make this progress as effective as possible to realise their individual potential.

Students are making a significant financial investment in their higher education. It is an accepted notion that students participate in a university education to enhance their ongoing employment potential. "Students strongest motivation for entering higher education was their desire to improve their labour market prospects. Good careers advice is essential to them." (Dearing 8.44)

In a free market environment students will opt for an education that clearly recognises ongoing employability as a priority. This is not limited to first employment - students need to acquire skills which fit them for lifelong learning and career growth.

Business and industry, the public and private sector, society in general, all benefit from students exiting our universities.

Universities have in the past prepared many of their graduates to enter a labour market with clearly identifiable opportunities and career paths. Discipline-specific knowledge and well honed job seeking strategies were sufficient to obtain work and remain competitive in the labour market. However, for students currently entering the university sector there are a variety of factors that will impact on their capacity to thrive in the workplace of the future.

We now accept that in Australia we have had a decade of job losses, the transformation of the nation's workplaces and the end of job security.

Continuing unprecedented change and restructuring has resulted in the need for graduates to be provided with a new compendium of knowledge, attributes and skills. It is within this context that our graduates are requiring their universities to embrace contemporary approaches to curriculum design - in effect to respond to the changing demands from their stakeholders.

In 1995 important research came out of the UK for the Association of Graduate Recruiters, depicting a labour market undergoing constant change. With this, a need for graduates to develop a new set of skills focusing on self reliance and career management that would enable them to navigate and then thrive in the workplace of the 21st Century. This report has been influential in the UK leading up to the Dearing Enquiry.

The first key recommendation from that report was that careers related activities should be integral to the curriculum.

Another key stakeholder in the higher education sector is employers of graduates. Recent research conducted by a Melbourne based consultancy firm indicated that of incoming graduate staff there was a turnover of 30% within the first 6 months. These statistics represent a huge drain on the effective usage of human capital.

Of course many will stay on with an organisation or industry for which they are not closely suited. Combined with the attrition rate referred to above, there will surely be a profound impact on productivity within the Australian economy and a profound effect on our society as a whole.

In research released earlier this month for the Australian Association of Graduate Employers, it was found that of the 120 recruiters of graduates surveyed, 91% wished to support a curriculum that developed the capacity of the individual to know more about themselves and the labour market.

Dearing, in recommendation 11, states "Institutions of higher education, over the medium term, integrate their careers services more fully into academic affairs and that the provision of careers education and guidance is reviewed periodically."

Recommendation 18 "We recommend that all institutions should, over the medium term, identify opportunities to increase the extent to which programmes help students to become familiar with work, and help them to reflect on such experiences."

Internationally, the higher education sector has grappled with many of the issues listed above. For a variety of factors the UK is perhaps 3 years ahead in embracing the need for aligning the work of careers services more closely to the core strategic role of the institution, including curriculum planning within the sector that embraces the notion of career development initiatives within the curriculum for credit.

Developments in this field within Australia have been negligible. There is an urgent need to progress in this area if we are to equip our graduates with the skills necessary to thrive in a changing labour market and make an effective contribution to our economy and society.

RECOMMENDATION

That direct targeted funding be provided for research and program developments related to the work of university careers services, and more specifically for curriculum developments that focus on career development initiatives within the curriculum. These should have the capacity to incorporate electronic courseware development as an integral component, thereby facilitating student movement across the sector.

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