

"Learning for Life"

Review of Higher Education Financing and Policy - a Policy Discussion Paper

Comments on the Discussion Paper from the
National Open and Distance Education Student Network
(NODES Net)

Compiled by Desirée Jurgs
NODES Net Executive Officer
(current Deakin University - Geelong postgraduate DE student)

NODES Net members who actively contributed to these comments:

Leanne McMurtrie NODES Net President and
 DE student at Central Queensland University
J'ann Houley Externals Liaison Officer, Uni of SA Students Association and
 current postgraduate DE student at the University of SA
Bryan Cranston Distance Education Officer at CQU Student Association and
 current postgraduate DE student at CQU
Thea Wren DE student at Monash University - Gippsland
Jacquie Robilliard Executive Officer, Mature Age and Part Time
Students Association at Monash University - Clayton
Bruce Boyton Distance Education Student Liaison Officer at Rivcoll
Union, Charles Sturt University - Riverina
Ruth Clark DE student at Charles Sturt University - Riverina and
 NODES Net student representative on NCODE.

Any queries regarding this contribution can be addressed to:
Desirée Jurgs, NODES Net Executive Officer
Email: nodesnet@cleo.murdoch.edu.au or dmjurgs@senet.com.au

Introduction

The Policy Discussion Paper is a lengthy document which attempts to consider postsecondary education options for the coming 20 year period and, as such, is obviously not intended as a blueprint representing the way forward so much as providing basic frameworks and considerations for change.

The ideals in the paper seem, at first glance, to benefit the consumers of education. How can students challenge the content of a paper which supports "greater emphasis on accountability to students" (page 5) and "places the student and the quality of his or her learning experiences at its core" (page 6)? There is recognition of students financial position "...the level of the individual's contributions should be fair, and not represent an excessive burden on students and their families" (page 5) and the access and equity issues are considered (page 30). It continues with recognition that students will need an adequate level of income while studying if they are to be successful, although "the Committee has not come to terms with these complex issues at this stage..." (page 27).

However, the general consensus of opinion regarding the Discussion Paper's content, as gleaned from NODES Net members' verbal and written submissions to this comment paper, can be summarised in a brief statement:

The Discussion Paper contains the dangerous assertion that, by embracing technology and allowing for the charging of tuition fees by institutions, costs of education will decrease and the quality of education will be enhanced.

It is NODES Net's belief that neither allowing institutions the freedom to charge tuition fees nor embracing the large number of options available due to technological advances will decrease the cost of education to the end user (ie. the students) or enhance the quality of postsecondary education in Australia. We consider that, rather than addressing the basic issues concerning the current problems in higher education, the Review Committee has elected to ignore these issues and implement suggestions which, while appealing to many 'managers' of institutions, are really only a patch up job of current problems within the sector.

Moreover, NODES Net is concerned that the Discussion Paper fails to adequately recognise the broad spectrum of students involved in Australia's higher education sector, and in particular its distance education student population. The general impression NODES Net gained of a 'student' as outlined within the Discussion Paper is of a school leaver who is entering higher education for the first time for the purpose of obtaining their first degree, and it appears that the Committee's opinion of what constitutes the 'education experience' in Australia today has failed to acknowledge the diverse circumstances surrounding a student's choice to study off-campus.

A case in point is the clear reference to school leavers in the statement

"...only about 10 per cent of students in Australia move out of their home state to attend university. Given the costs of travel and relocation, it is unlikely that students' location preferences would change dramatically if they were offered broader options" (page 44). The first sentence could have applied to both on- and off-campus students, but was definitely clarified as being on-campus students with the wording of the second.

Although the opinions expressed in the Discussion Paper are complex, NODES Net would like to address what it considers to be the two prevailing themes from our point of view - the potential and effects of technology and of tuition fee implementation.

The Potential of Technology

Teaching-Learning Implications

No amount of technological innovation is going to redress the current crisis in higher education which is that universities are not directing adequate funding to facilitate effective teaching within their schools and faculties.

When it is recognised that the predominant communication facilities - phone, fax and humble print based material - were, in their own time, intended to enhance the teaching-learning relationship, then the current level of student dissatisfaction should serve as appropriate warning to university administrations.

In canvassing distance education student concerns as part of its representative function, NODES Net has heard the following opinions with alarming frequency:

academic and administrative staff of universities are generally unavailable to take phone calls in the first instance, and fail to return voice-mail messages in a timely fashion;

study materials are poorly designed, outdated, and are often received late into the semester;

administrative forms (enrolment, HECS, AUSTUDY etc.) are poorly set out, lacking in necessary detail, sometimes misleading, and generally confusing;

many universities fail to maintain or provide toll-free numbers or help desks to provide basic essential student services;

assessment feedback, often the only basis on which a distance education student can gain an understanding of their own progress, increasingly consists of a few ticks and then a mark, with lengthy (or even more than cursory) remarks almost non-existent;

teleconferences are not offered regularly enough for distance students to establish a relationship between themselves as peers and with their lecturer

When one considers that the use of phone and print based technology in particular have been in place for decades and subjected to intensive research, development and technological reform, it is patently clear that technology itself is not capable of delivering a quality educational

experience. Rather, the responsibility for using it effectively has fallen on, and always will fall on, the educators.

The questions then remain: What circumstances exist within the universities which prevent their teaching staff from working to an optimum level? How can this be overcome in the future?

The simple answer is that, due to economic factors, university administrative centres (schools, faculties etc.) do not allow for the time which effective teaching requires.

The average Australian lecturer faces increasing student numbers in their classes, is required to undertake professional research and publications, may have hundreds of papers to grade at any given point, and all in a workplace where the clerical support afforded them and the support extended to their students is being eroded due to "institutional rationalisation".

The unfortunate reality is that, in the current situation where lecturers do not have the time to field the voice-mail messages left by despairing students, the same will be true of Email for example. Along the same lines, the necessity to upgrade subject materials on (ideally) a semester basis will not vanish when the same content is delivered via the internet as compared to print based media. That lecturers do not currently have the time to organise and participate in teleconferences is also a fair indication that they will have similar difficulties in maintaining meaningful on-line discussions.

Regardless of its vehicle, good teaching requires time. What universities have failed to achieve, perhaps more so in the wake of funding cuts, is a student-focused rationalisation of all of their activities. In fact, the recent emphasis on non-teaching activities such as seeking out new funding options, business and marketing relations have, if anything, distracted these institutions from their primary responsibility of ensuring the delivery of a quality education to their students.

Until this fact is recognised, and some basic level of service standards for students is implemented nation wide, a reliance on "technology" to improve institutional outcomes will fail to guarantee any improvement in either the teaching or the learning processes.

NODES Net therefore challenges the Committee's assertion - "Web based technologies also provide opportunities for improving the effectiveness and reducing the costs of marketing, materials distribution, student testing and assessment and various administrative transactions" (page 10) - which implies, however indirectly, that computers hold the potential to replace human effort.

Access Considerations

The change in delivery modes will disadvantage mature age learners who will need to learn the new technology requirements before they can embark on

coursework. Bridging information/courses need to be in place before student centred funding is introduced (and are needed now for this group of students who wish to voluntarily avail themselves of the advantages information technology can bring).

Technology has always had its mismatches and technical difficulties in communicating between different systems. The resultant blockages will frustrate users and require extensive support in the form of information desks and the like much of which, as mentioned above, is difficult for students to access or use when relying on the 'older' forms of technology.

Neither does the simple act of introducing technology guarantee that students will be in a position to readily access and/or make effective use of it. That small percentage of the Australian population who do not enjoy reliable access to the most basic facilities such as telephone and faxes - in very remote communities, for example - tend to fall into the category of distance or off-campus students, so the Discussion Paper's enthusiasm for the adoption of technology holds no promise for them. This small percentage, should wide-ranging adoption of technologies mean that the purchase of computer systems and Internet access becomes a 'must' for every student, will vanish into the much larger percentage of students who will be unable to access, or afford to buy, the 'required' computer needs for their higher education study.

"Many more people will have access to the means of location-independent communication" (page 9) is a general statement that gives no indication of how many students will be sorely disadvantaged in their attendance at higher education institutions due to the fact that they do not have this access. Research done by student organisations over the past four or five years clearly indicates that, while ownership and use of computer equipment is reasonably high, it is nowhere near at a level that would guarantee satisfaction of even the most lenient person's interpretation of access and equity principles in an environment embracing technological advances. In 1993, 74% of respondents to a survey of distance education students at the University of New England indicated that they had access to a computer (not specified as 'at home', 'at work' or 'other') and 15% indicated access to a modem and Email, indicating that access to a computer does not necessarily mean access to additional technologies that accompany that.

A survey conducted on distance education students at Deakin University - Geelong in 1995 revealed that 73% of respondents had access to a computer at home, and 55% at work. Modem access was 54% at home and 42% at work, but only a small percentage indicated that they used their modem for study purposes. Neither of these surveys addressed the potential problem that the computers accessed by these students may not be suitable for coping with the increased demands that a broad adoption of technology into higher education will bring. Many students use their computer for word-processing only, and would be required to either upgrade or purchase a new machine and peripherals to undertake study in a technology-dependent learning environment.

A more recent study conducted of distance education students at Monash University - Gippsland Campus in 1997 asked additional questions relating to access to network services as well as basic equipment access. The results indicate that 43.5% of respondents have access to a computer only at home, 7.6% only at work, and 41.7% at both home and work. 7.2% indicated that they have no computer access at all. Further questions elicited responses from students to indicated that 18% have access to Email, and 27% have access to the library database. A large proportion (30%) indicated that they did not know whether they had access at all. Although it is clear that a reasonably high number of students can access this equipment, the research conducted does not, unfortunately, give any indication of the quality of the equipment accessible and the major use of this equipment as made by the students.

While NODES Net is fully conscious of the changing nature of society and the increasing relevance of technology in it, we would like to encourage the Committee, in making its recommendations to the Federal Government, to carefully assess the pace at which the adoption of technology should occur. It is important to ensure that traditional forms of technology are not sacrificed, and that student preference for method of course delivery is respected. There are many students who lack the knowledge to use technology or do not want to use it. These students should not be disadvantaged. NODES Net cautions a headlong rush into the embrace of technology at the expense of more traditional methods of education delivery, especially considering the additional costs that will be imposed on students to purchase and maintain that technology.

Quoting from its own Discussion Paper, the Committee should keep in mind that "the location, content and mode of delivery of education should be built on a relationship between the student and the provider, not the views of administrators concerning what students want and what institutions are able to provide. Students should be the ones to make decisions about their study options." (page 4)

Cost of Technology - who bears it?

An issue that appears simple in concept, but will have wide-ranging ramifications, especially to the end user - the student - is the view that technology will help solve some of the costs in providing higher education, by linking the student to the institution by on-line coursework. This might be true from the institutions' point of view, but from the students' perspective, the additional costs of obtaining or buying the hardware, software and incidentals, ie printing costs, Internet connections and the expertise to operate all this equipment, will be borne by the student.

In summary, future technology costs to students are more than likely to include:

- Initial Setup
- Telephone links
- Computer
- Software

Modem
Printer
Training
Internet provision
Consumables (significant)
Upgrades of hardware and software

These are the sorts of costs that distance education students are likely to be required to meet to undertake a course of tertiary study in the future (for those who are not paying these costs now). While on-campus students may have access to computer laboratories and institutionally-provided Internet access, distance education students are generally required to obtain these facilities at their own expense, and aspects such as this (considering that off-campus students formed 13% of the student population in 1996 (page 16)) must be taken into consideration before embracing the benefits of technology

While the Committee writes that "in the longer term, Internet related information and communications technologies could well produce on-going cost reductions" (page 10), NODES Net believes that there is no clear indication that this will occur, unless the costs are palmed off onto the students who will be required to maintain their access, bear the cost of printing material that they would previously have received as part of their enrolment, as well as maintaining existing costs such as STD phone calls to the voice-mail services of administrative centres and other staff who have not provided the basic service of a toll-free number to date.

It is paradoxical that the Committee claims "social and economic well-being" along with "putting the student first" as some of its considerations in compiling the Discussion Paper (Foreword) when in fact its dual reliance on technology and fee implementation will bring about a heightened divide between the 'haves' and 'have nots' in Australian society.

The Committee emphasises that higher education must be pervaded by a "clear sense of direction" which includes "ensuring that no Australian with the intellectual ability to succeed in higher education is denied access owing to his or her social or economic circumstances" (page 4). If one takes into consideration that certain Australian universities are already responding to economic changes by considering enforcing the purchase of a computer system by students on their enrolment, then the above statement of access exists at loggerheads with the suggestion that technology be embraced. Should a computer system be introduced as a basic 'requirement' for study at a tertiary institution, then a large proportion of the students who responded to the surveys conducted at the three universities mentioned above would, more than likely, have to purchase new equipment to reach the level set by the institutions.

Tuition Fees

Common Good v Private Benefits, and flawed logic.

The Discussion Paper refers to a balance between the personal benefits derived from a university degree and the benefits to the community, the 'common good', of having an educated population. It cautiously states that all students should be involved in post-secondary education (page 29), presumably for the common good, and make a financial contribution because of the private benefits which will follow.

The flaw in this argument is that with everyone holding a degree, the law of supply and demand is upset. The financial benefits alluded to will not be realised. Once post-secondary education is universally achieved, the private benefits are lost, or at least minimised, while the public good rises. If this is so, the public purse should fund the base level education, not the individual.

This comment can be validated by a brief look at recent history. In the 1960s, the general entry point into the work force was after year 10 of high school, and students anticipated an average wage. Those who went on to year twelve or university were expected to gain the higher paid positions. By the early 90s, a year 10 education was scarcely adequate, and year 12 the normal leaving point. Today, there are few assurances from a Year 12 certificate and university is seen as a requirement for meaningful, well paid work. To push the base level education to a university degree would not alter history. It would, put simply: keep unemployment figures lower for a few more years, create a more informed population and reduce the private benefits expected from a degree (while simultaneously putting recipient at financial disadvantage for the costs of their education).

Student Centred Funding

These comments aside it is not expected that an argument for full public funding will win through in the current climate. The Discussion Paper poses some interesting options. It promotes a student centred funding model, with the possibility of each student being allocated a dollar amount per lifetime (page 30) with which they shop around and purchase their course requirements on the open market. Competition from providers is expected to bring the cost of education down on the domestic scene and make for a competitive education industry to bring in international income.

In addition, any income contingent loans for study must not be pegged to comparative costs of today. An added technology component is needed for students to purchase and regularly update computer hardware and software. These points predict that some of the Discussion Paper's recommendations in their current form are little more than a recipe for disaster. For the schemes to work for mature age Open, and Distance Education students, there will need to be bridging courses and support schemes which will increase costs rather than reduce them. Without these, this cohort of students is likely to fail, to be frustrated and/or eventually turn away from post-secondary education. The debt incurred through well intentioned but poorly supported attempt at tertiary education will add to the aggravation.

There is a further suggestion that learning will be lifelong. An omission is the continued education costs to domestic students. Instead, there is the comment that "...Australia must make every effort to attract all school leavers into post-secondary education" (page 29). If these points are coupled, what is suggested is that the base level of education in Australia is raised, but a significant cost to individuals obtaining this base level has been established. As base levels of education do not lead to the more financially rewarding jobs, additional study will be required, presumably at full fees. This really is ensuring the growth of an education industry.

A rather alarming statement is made in the Discussion Paper, "Institutions should have freedom to set tuition fees. This will be an essential element of a funding structure that meets the objectives of increasing flexibility for students and achieving a globally competitive industry. Institutions must have the ability to provide a range of course and delivery options, and to decide the level of resources that are devoted to them" (page 31). Setting tuition fees is not necessarily going to 'meet the objective of increasing flexibility for students' unless basic support services for all students are reinstated prior to the development of technology-based learning methods.

It will truly be a sad state of affairs when Australia's higher education institutions take steps to rectify the Committee's observation that "institutions are not encouraged to manage in a business like manner" if this means that, like so many other Australian institutions (such as banks), universities will be regarded by their students as demonstrating an obsession with technology, at the same time raising more and more charges against their 'customers' while failing to satisfy their expectations of product and service standards.

"Fee flexibility is also essential to...create incentives for the provision of lower cost study options" (page 31) NODES Net disagrees with this statement, and brings to the Committee's attention a statement made earlier in this comment paper - that universities are not directing adequate funding to facilitate effective teaching within their schools and faculties in the current environment. Allowing institutions to charge tuition fees will not guarantee an increase in quality of courses or an increase in resource provision for teaching staff. The institutional benefit of the introduction of tuition fees appears to be the eventual ability to provide low cost courses and, as mentioned previously, the likelihood that incidental costs to students will increase.

NODES Net's fears are highlighted again in paragraphs on rising costs (page 43). The freedom of institutions to set their own fees introduces the possibility of higher costs. This is supposedly to be negated by "...the scope for information technology to drive costs down" (page 43). Technology may ultimately reduce costs to institutions and government, but it is not likely to reduce costs to students.

NODES Net's Reservations about the Review Process

While it finds the Discussion Paper a useful focus for emphasising the place of distance education students within a vision of future education, and appreciates the opportunity to submit this comment paper, NODES Net would like to raise some serious reservations concerning the process by which this document came about. We have noted with alarm that no student representatives, let alone those who study in the off-campus mode, were included as members on the Review Committee. Even if it was impractical to include a student, a representative from Student Support Services from any institution would have been a valuable and important inclusion on the Committee.

Having stated that "the current arrangements assume that central administrators know more about...the needs of students, than students themselves" (page 18) in calling for "a greater sensitivity...to the changing preferences of students" (page 18), the Committee has left itself open to the same criticisms. We don't believe that the Discussion Paper pays enough attention to the diverse social, economic and other individual circumstances under which external, predominantly mature aged, students face the enormous task of completing a tertiary qualification.

It is paradoxical that the Committee claims "social and economic well-being" along with "putting the student first" as some of its considerations in compiling the Discussion Paper (Foreword) when in fact its dual reliance on technology and fee implementation will bring about a heightened divide between the 'haves' and 'have nots' in Australian society.

NODES Net would like to conclude this comment paper with the experience of one of our members who attempted to obtain a copy of "Learning for Life" in order to actively participate in our forums on the Discussion Paper. If technology is to be embraced due to the fact that it will "ultimately drive costs down", then perhaps this member's experience can serve as a warning to those who intend to recommend the adoption of technology (and indirectly to this experience, tuition fees) in higher education for the future.

A Glimpse of the Future - from Bruce Boyton, Distance Education Student Liaison Officer, Rivcoll Union, Charles Sturt University - Riverina.

The simple exercise of reviewing the Committee's Discussion Paper provides some insight of education in twenty years time and how costs will be 'reduced'.

To obtain the report a call was made to the University library but no copy had been purchased because of budgetary considerations and the fact it was available on-line. The only option was to download or purchase the report, ie. a transfer of the cost to the student.

In downloading, it was necessary to find a computer with appropriate software, as the Pentium at work was not adequate, ie. a time loss to the student. Then, 493 pages of printing later, I had the report available, ie. a transfer of the cost to the student. If a student had elected to view the document on-line, many hours of Internet access time would have

been taken up, at further cost to that student.

A student with a lesser system would have:
consumed a ream of paper and severely depleted reserves on their toner cartridge
wasted time in downloading the software before the document itself could be viewed (any length from 45 minutes on a cabled institution/work system to in excess of two hours on a home system with a slow modem)
lost this time off their Internet Service Provider account leading to a cost in dollar terms
lost time because the standard of printer required to print the report in a reasonable time frame would have been beyond most home computer configurations (it took more than three hours to print on a laser printer)
with a low end hardware, the process would prevent any other use of the computer for study.

To add to the above disadvantages, the point needs to be made that the scenario relies on the student having a computer system in the first instance, and that it has the capacity to complete the task with the required software and peripherals.

With the need to keep advertised costs down, it does not take too much thought to foresee that institutions will only offer the very basics to their students. Maintaining competitiveness will be a life or death issue. Cost efficiencies will be made through the Internet, but as with most commercial offerings (including Internet access), extras will be at a fee for service. These may include centrally printed written material, Service Desk provision for computer support and the like. The costs of these extras will undoubtedly be concealed to make offers more attractive and it will be a most difficult task for commencing students to understand the ramifications of the cheapest choice. After all, who expects major problems and technical difficulties when they are choosing their institution?

The lower costs for the providers means an increasing cost to the students. This is not putting the student first, nor is it allowing access and equity to prevail.

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