

Options for Higher Education Reform

**University House, Australian National University, Canberra, 30-31 May
2002**

“Learning Outcomes”

Dr Carolyn Allport, President National Tertiary Education Union

Brendan Nelson has invited us all to be part of a national conversation. This conversation is one not restricted to sectoral voices, but where community, including business, is central to the outcome. And community means more than business; it also includes State Governments. From the beginning this presupposes a notion that higher education is both a private and a public good, delivering outcomes beyond employment and income advantages to the student. The immediate difficulty is that the *Crossroads* paper contains far too much ideological baggage to ensure such openness. I want first to dispense quickly with the issue of ideology, for there is little there that will actually help us face the very real challenges that we need to face, both immediately and into the future. It is only by naming this first, can we move on to consider the challenges.

Ideological Baggage

Crossroads bears more than a passing resemblance to the West Review. Encoded in both is the clear view of the Government for a voucher type funding model for students, new loans schemes to maintain the principle of deferred payments, and a re-positioning of the teaching role to that of a “learning broker”. What learning problems are isolated in the reviews are sheeted home to staff, and *Crossroads* is very free with its assumptions about our attitudes (we teach what we want, not what students want), our conservatism (“universities continue to offer subjects with low student demand because of industrial rigidities”), and our professional practices (“only a couple of universities can tell whether their staff members’ outputs have earned their

salaries ... [and] most cannot report even on staff attendance let alone their workload and output” p. 27). There is little real understanding of the commitment of staff to continuous curriculum enhancement, and the very real resource constraints that many are forced to operate within. And, this goes to the heart of the difficulties with the *Crossroads* paper, it does not seem that there are public funding options contained within our strategic mix for the future.

Within *Crossroads*, the student is posited as an active individual, with clearly articulated preferences for modularised learning, and is represented as a new type of student “the learner-earner”. There is not even a gesture towards the fact that most students undertake on-going employment while they are studying, because we have no effective student income support scheme in this country. This impacts particularly on Indigenous students who increasingly are trading their Abstudy entitlement for additional income as a loan in response to cuts to benefits under Abstudy. For the year 2001-2002, \$23.5m will be allocated to loans under the Abstudy loans scheme, This places Indigenous students in debt equivalent to double an annual Abstudy benefit. Given the increasing costs of university study, and the fact that some Indigenous students do not even qualify for Abstudy, it is little wonder that we saw a 15.2% drop in commencements in 1999/2000. And yet, *Crossroads* sees increasing student fees, and direct industry funding of faculties, as the essential solution to the funding crisis. Government has little role to play it seems.

These ideological discussions have little to merit them either to the sector, or to the community. On the most positive reading of *Crossroads*, we could see it as the “teaching” equivalent of the “research” based *Backing Australia’s Ability*, and I am sure that is its ‘political’ task. Whether the dollars are there in the end is the real problem. Ideology figures largely in the focus on workplace reform, as it did in the West Report, and here we have less to gain than

anywhere else. The West Report drew on research undertaken by Global Alliance Ltd, a Tokyo investment bank, which stated that:

... it is clear that Australian universities appear to be the low cost producers in the Western non-profit world. Therefore there appears to be a reasonable prima facie case that little more labour productivity will be obtained from squeezing the system further. Future productivity improvements will need to come from either capital investment or system re-engineering, both of which require staff co-operation.¹

They also added:

Australian Higher Education Labour costs appear to be lower than elsewhere in the Western World. This raises the issue of the longer term attractiveness of the Australian higher education sector for the best and brightest.²

While we have had two rounds of bargaining since then, over time there are still major difficulties with salaries and the notion that strict productivity bargaining is the best way to enhance our labour contribution. This is not to say that change cannot and should not be undertaken, but it will be impossible without additional funding. Similarly, there is little to be gained by labelling Vice-Chancellors as weak because they have not managed to get rid of the NTEU. Such actions generate no additional money to either ameliorate the crisis, or offer a way forward for the future. If we are to stay with enterprise bargaining, then the supplementation index must move away from being based on the safety net increases and begin to reflect real movements in wage costs.

¹ Global Alliance Limited, *Australian Higher Education in the Era of Mass Customisation: Prepared for the Review of Higher Education and Policy*, August 1997 pp. 27-28, at Appendix 11 of *learning for life: a policy discussion paper*, 1997.

² *ibid.*, p. 28.

Our real challenges

1. Transform curriculum delivery to offer flexibility over time and space

We need to encourage the process of continuous learning, and create a climate where both 'teacher' and 'student' are on a continuous improvement curve. This will involve recognising the need to provide a variety of learning environments, including utilising new technologies in a quality discursive way. Online learning, or e-learning, is seen within *Crossroads* as part of a broader packaging of individual units of knowledge, and providing flexibility for the student over time and space. Universities are active in online learning, some more than others, but there are still huge difficulties with the instrumentalism that may accompany seeing online learning as the teaching environment. Recent studies, both international and national raise a number of concerns about the pedagogy of web-based learning. And it is true that we are barely at the beginning in our research and evaluation of online education. However, we do have some pointers here from our initial experience, compiled from the recent DEST study on online learning and from international sources.

- The vast majority of online courses are in the postgraduate area and are mainly specialist rather than generalist. This reflects a consensus that the online environment is less suitable for the undergraduate school leaver student.
- The online environment is widely used in the information area – handbooks, library catalogues, reservation of library services and online journals, and lecture notes. There is also some use of online technologies for enrolment, fee paying, and providing student support. Still only 57% of the universities in the DEST study provided online learning support, and only 45% provided online training in ICT skills.
- Costs of provision remain high, and there are still significant gaps in access to IT among disadvantaged groups.

- Online learning fails unless it is located within appropriate pedagogy and actually meets the needs of the students. The poor quality of online courses is thought by the Symonds study to be one of the major reasons that online students drop out of their courses. At the same time overseas experience suggests that retention rates are similar to distance education, and the difficulty may be that students who choose these options are not able to commit to the demands of the course. What seems to work best is mixed mode learning – where virtual space is used to enhance provision of information, facilitate communication with staff and other students, and monitor assessment. In the future the technology may deliver the degree of interactivity and personal interaction that face-to-face does now, but it has not yet.
- All evidence so far suggests that online learning demands more staff resources, not less, and that the continuous, and at times intensive, demands from students working in an online environment create time management and workload problems for staff.

2. Deliver an increasingly diverse skilled labour force at the graduate level

The main issue here is the balance between generic skills that are adaptable across occupational identities, and specific knowledge acquisition. And we need to be able to respond more quickly to immediate skill shortages. We must begin to become part of the solution to skill shortages in areas such as nursing, where the number of eligible students who missed out on a university place increased by 130% between 2001 and 2002.

3. Become part of the life-long learning process

Here everyone speaks the mantra of life-long learning, but there is little focus on what this actually means. Universities have certainly expanded the short course graduate offerings, but better partnerships with other adult educational

sectors could also enhance a more efficient use of capital infrastructure, as well as meeting what will be an increasing market in adult education. In this area, public universities have broader responsibilities than narrow vocational education. Employability is obviously important, but so too is social cohesion. Building a society unafraid of globalisation is critical not just to economics, but also to understanding the need to reduce conflict between people, as well as nations.

4. Lift participation rates, while at the same time ensuring a quality higher education experience.

This has two components – attracting and retaining more not less students and ensuring that it is a university learning experience that is delivered. Firstly, attracting and retaining students requires different strategies to reflect the increasingly diverse environment. If we are to attract students whose participation in higher education has been low in the past, then perhaps it would be interesting to examine the experience of universities that have been operating as cross sectoral institutions, particularly some of the Victorian institutions such as RMIT and Victoria University. What have been the learning outcomes from the different articulation models in place? Are we seeing articulation for its own sake? Or has the mix between vocational education and training and higher education enhanced learning outcomes for these students?

Secondly – providing a university learning experience requires that all teaching staff be engaged with scholarship. University teaching should not be about the delivery of modular courses developed and written by the private sector, nor imported from another university (unless part of a collaborative venture). Much has been said about the need to divorce university teaching from ‘research’, as if there is no need for scholarship. If an academic cannot say to the students “The cutting edge thinking in this discipline is....”, then they should not be teaching at university. This does not necessarily require an

ARC or an NMHRC research grant, but it does mean being involved in the basic research and scholarship that informs quality teaching.

5. Ensure that within our educational methodologies we also continue to deliver skills necessary to sustain our research and development base, both within universities and within both public and private industry

Universities are unique because of the co-existence of teaching and research within the one institution. Universities contribute over 60% of the basic research undertaken in Australia, and a considerable proportion of applied research. Our embracing of the CRC model for university/industry collaboration has largely been a constructive one, although one would like to see far more use made of the CRC model in humanities and social sciences, and also the health area. When we think about learning outcomes we need to understand the importance of ensuring that all graduates have the generic skills in research methods, analysis, and communication to assist Australia to lift its R&D performance. If we fail, then there will be less new employment growth.

Successfully meeting these challenges is necessary for Australia to make the most from its participation in a global economy. And the fact that discussion of this issue is largely absent from the review is one of its main failings.

6. Developing new ways of assessing learning outcomes

Methods of assessing learning outcomes currently employed by the Commonwealth are limited and quite one-dimensional. The analytic tools used, include:

- Measuring the rate of student completions,
- Assessing student satisfaction (through the Course Experience Questionnaire [CEQ]), and
- Measuring graduate employment and earnings (through the Graduate Destination Survey [GDS]).

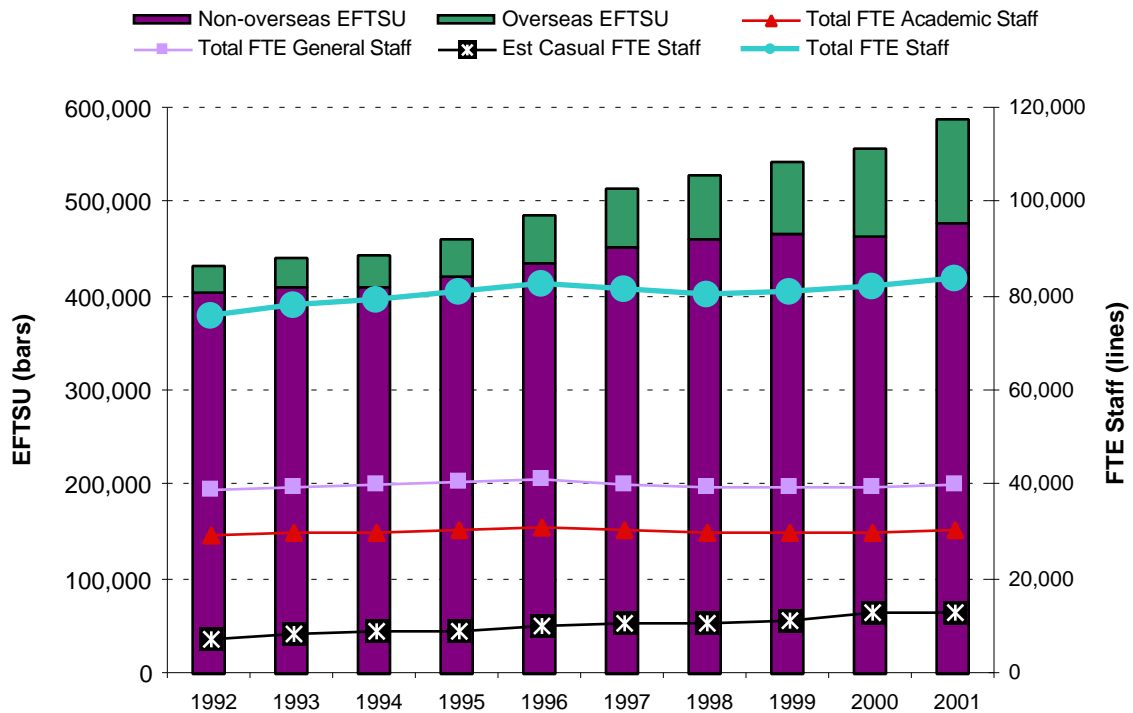
While each of these tools are useful, they do not tell us much about learning outcomes over time, or even give us a clear evaluation of the learning environment. They tell us whether students are satisfied at a given point in time, they tell us whether students gain employment, and they measure our graduation rates. We do need to explore other more dynamic options that will enhance both the pedagogy of university teaching and constant evaluation of the student learning environment.

What is stopping us meeting these challenges?

1. Our failure to face the staffing crisis

The overall student:staff ratio has been continually increasing rising from 15.1 in 1993 to 19.1 in 2000, an increase of 40%, but this overall increase also masks significant problems in subject areas experiencing growth such as information technology. Staff numbers have not even vaguely kept pace with growth in student numbers. Between 1993 and 2000, staff FTE positions increased by 3,951 while the system enrolled over 116,000 more EFTSU – one new staff position (academic and general) for 30 student places.

Student and Staff (FTE) 1992-2001



Sources: *DEST Staff 2001: Selected Higher Education Statistics* Tables 1 & 2 and *DEST Students 2001: Selected Higher Education Statistics* Table 46

There have been educational costs – small group teaching has largely disappeared and student contact has been reduced as an increasingly casual labour force is hired to both write courses, as well as teach them. Pressure on staff has also meant that informal student assistance programs, perhaps more necessary now than ever, have been clawed back. Perhaps our core claim in enterprise bargaining should be reducing class sizes.

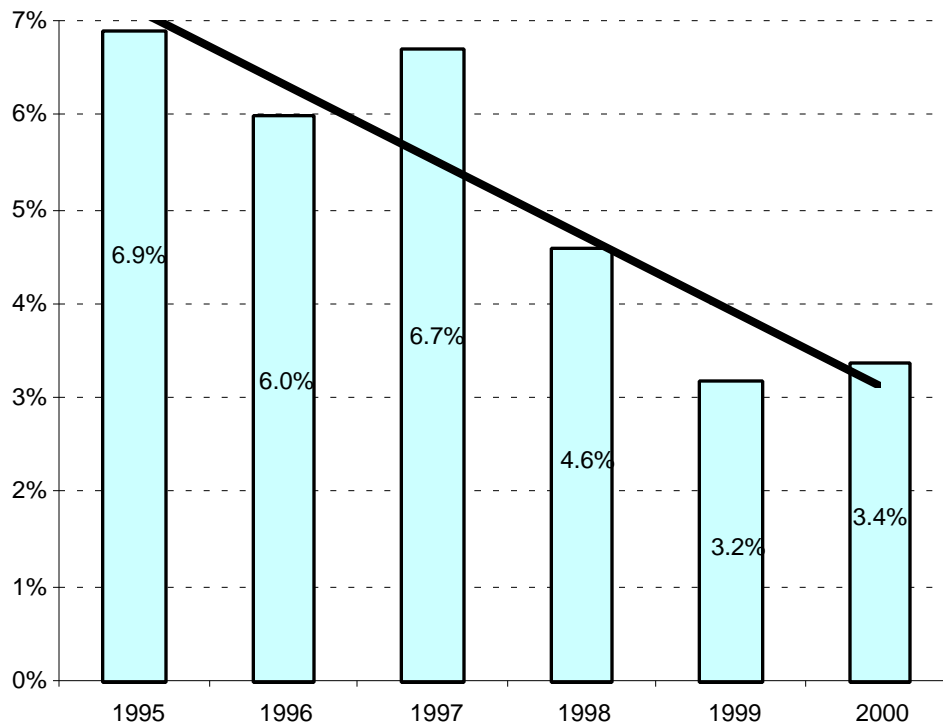
There have also been considerable costs to staff as working hours increase, job satisfaction falls and academic labour spends more time earning the income necessary to retain their positions. Mean working hours for academics is now above 50 hours a week, and that is without fully reporting research hours. Preliminary data from the ARC Higher Education Stress Study suggests that university staff are twice as likely than the general population to

experience psychological disturbance, and three times more likely to suffer severe health effects.

2. Misusing the flexibility of casual labour

Between 1995 and 2001, 128% of employment growth in universities was in casual employment [ie continuing and contract employment declined by c 850 positions while casual employment grew by nearly 4000 FTE] In other words, we are sustaining the crisis by not employing staff in career positions. In fact we are creating a class of teaching only academics with little capacity for career development. The driver for these bad habits, of course, has been the financial situation of most institutions.

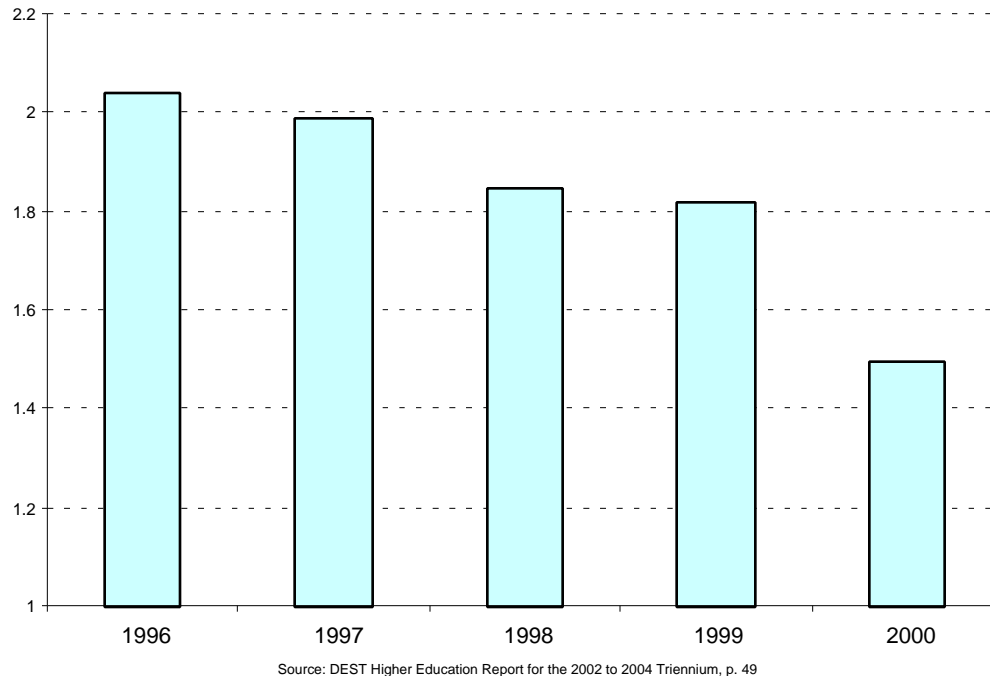
University Safety Margin 1995-2000 (Surplus/Deficit relative to total income)



Sources: *DETYA Higher Education Report for the 2000 to 2002 Triennium*, p. 27 & *DEST Higher Education Report for the 2002 to 2004 Triennium*, p. 48

NB: the improvement in the 2000 result is more than accounted for by the increase in surplus at UNSW and Melbourne.

University Current Ratio 1996-2000 (Current Assets to Current Liabilities)



Just as we wish to encourage academics to be more involved outside the academy, whether in research, learning partnerships, or public debate, we also need to have better models for encouraging people from the professions to play a role in university teaching. There is much to gain from furthering such synergy and flexibility.

3. Limitations on increasing student financing of education

Australia is one of the most privatised public systems in the world – no 4 on the OECD measure for percentage of direct educational expenditures for higher educational institutions coming from student households behind Korea, Japan and the USA. *Crossroads* assumes that as long as we have a deferred loans scheme, fees can rise to what the market will bear. In the United States, and New Zealand there has been considerable difficulties in collecting the debt from students. It is true that a student loans scheme will work better in Australia because it is collected through the tax system, but without capping there will still be problems with the management of student debt. There are

also implications for other capital markets as a consequence of young adults entering the workforce already carrying substantial debt.

4. Misunderstanding the increasing central role for public funding.

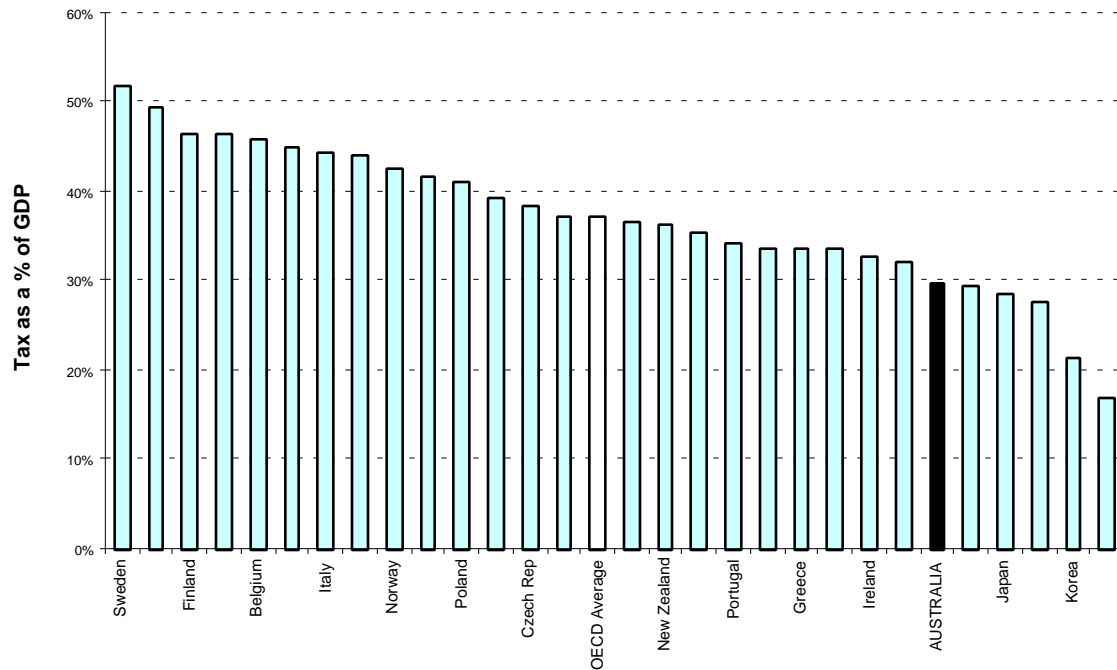
There is a general understanding within OECD countries of the need to increase participation in higher education to serve the needs of increasingly information and global economy. It is the comparative advantage in knowledge, and its application that will be crucial over the next century, and this has driven considerable investment by many of Australia's trading competitors to build up their higher education systems. In order to maximise comparative advantage, such investment should enhance quality. The more we lift participation, the greater is the argument for public investment to play a role, since the balance between the return to society and return to the individual will tip towards the former.

Alongside a greater role for public investment is also the need to ensure that accreditation and quality assurance processes enhance the "national brand". Some of the difficulties that have occurred over the last five years in the quality area have arisen from the perception that higher education is a new market where new profits can be made. And there is an obsessive quality about the consistent use of the term "private provider" in the paper. It must be said that at times we have sacrificed quality in the chase for the dollar.

Finally – where is the money coming from? Australia is a low taxing country. It ranks sixth from the bottom of the OECD when total tax collected by all levels of government is measured relative to GDP. Only the three countries with a more privately funded tertiary education system [Korea, Japan and the US] and Turkey and Mexico tax less), and it is low and middle-income wage earners who carry the greatest tax burden. If we are to enhance our learning environments both for the individual as well as our communities, and in the long run provide sustainable employment, then we need to speak strongly for the involvement of Government and public investment. This is the major

ideological failing of the *Crossroads* paper, and perhaps of our politicians in general.

Tax as a proportion of GDP in the OECD, 1997



It is important that we put ideas forward to the Review in a positive way, and these should be ideas based on our own views about moving forward. We need to identify programs that will enhance learning outcomes for students, rather than accept the agenda outlined in *Crossroads*.