

Higher Education at the Crossroads - A response from the Northern Territory University

In regard of the future of the Australian University system, as a general position the Northern Territory University (NTU) is supportive of the policy statement issued in June 2002 by the Australian Vice-Chancellor's Committee – *Positioning Australia's Universities for 2020*.

The Ministerial Discussion Paper (chapter 1) outlines a set of expectations and purposes of higher education and principles for a higher education system. NTU is broadly supportive of the statements made, but concurs with the authors of the paper that there are inherent tensions between some of the purported principles and expectations. For example, the provision of equal opportunity in higher education to *all* Australians would come at a price and limitations to fiscal capacity alluded to in chapter 3 of the Discussion Paper may well influence the realisation of such an aspiration.

Consultative Framework

a. learning experiences and outcomes

Qa1 What scope is there for increasing the productivity of learning?

A focus on “productivity” of learning might be better substituted with an emphasis on quality. There is undoubtedly scope for provision of more customised curricula delivered more flexibly with a concomitant level of learning and other support. However it is likely that such improvements will require an enhanced level of resources than are currently available. While the adoption of new technologies in support of learning will have the potential to deliver greater “learning productivity” in the terms envisaged in the Discussion Paper, experience dictates that the costs associated with technology mediated learning are not necessarily less, and may be more, than those associated with more traditional models, especially where scales of operation may be limited. There is also the issue of student preference in regard of delivery mode where evidence suggests that even with IT literate clients, there is a desire for face-to face elements involving lecturer-student and peer-to-peer interaction. Restrictions on maximum length of candidature in awards and progression requirements already restrict students’ tenure in the system and may be as effective as limitations on the duration of tuition subsidies.

Qa2 How can we best enhance the status and quality of teaching in higher education?

In addition to the obvious response that the provision of more resources would enhance teaching, improvements in status and quality will derive from a multifaceted approach including staff training, appropriate reward and performance management systems.

Qa3 How can institutions ensure that subjects/units and courses are sufficiently rigorous, appropriate and responsive to stakeholder needs?

Sufficient rigour in course and subject/unit content and assessment should be delivered by the adoption of appropriate Quality Assurance mechanisms including more external reviewing, benchmarking and quality audit. Curricula need to deliver an appropriate balance between specific and generic skills and learnings with strong inputs into curriculum design and evaluation by relevant stakeholder representatives.

Qa4 What impact do overseas students have on learning experiences and outcomes?

Impacts are generally positive, with a culturally diverse student body enriching learning experiences and outcomes for all. Overseas students, like all students need to be appropriately supported and integrated into the general student body.

Qa5 What impacts would minimum standards for a degree have if ever introduced?

While the notion of minimum standards requirements might be a positive one there may be some practical difficulties in implementing such an approach. QA mechanisms should provide a guarantee of appropriate standards comparability between Australian and international institutions.

Qa6 What is the impact of the Australian Qualifications Framework being reviewed?

The existence of the Framework is generally seen as positive and the inclusion of Associate Degrees and vendor certificates is not regarded as problematic.

Qa7 Should the potential contribution of the Graduate Skills Assessment be further developed and analysed as a national assessment of generic skills?

While the availability of aggregated data from the GSA may allow comparisons to be made within and between institutions on the efficacy of programs in transferring generic skills, appropriate sample sizes are vital. For individual students the *post hoc* nature of the assessment may pose some issues and inhibit participation in testing, although it is important that engagement in the process by individuals remain voluntary.

Qa8 Is the existing quality assurance framework sufficiently rigorous to assess the quality and standards of educational outcomes?

We believe that the activities of the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) have the potential to appropriately assess the quality and standards of educational outcomes.

b. access on an equitable basis

Qb1 What structural barriers remain that deter the participation of people from disadvantaged backgrounds?

In some instances staff attitudes may have a negative influence on participation of disadvantaged groups while infrastructure inadequacy and lack of flexibility in teaching approaches may cause some difficulties.

Qb2 What can higher education institutions do to make early connection with Schools to encourage representation of under-represented groups?

Undertake specific programs with schools (NTU has run programs for year 9-12 students to familiarise them with aspects of the University experience) and give final year school students opportunities to take a University subject and gain credit in advance of enrolment, an approach adopted at NTU.

Qb3 What is the scope for offering disadvantaged students differently structured courses including shorter courses?

A shorter course may not, in every instance, meet the needs of disadvantaged students, some of whom may require more time than the mainstream student to achieve equitable outcomes. There is scope to structure curriculum more flexibly and to introduce different approaches to assessment without compromising standards.

Qb4 To what extent and by what means should resources be applied to address equity issues?

While it is acknowledged that earmarked funding for equity target group students needs to be applied effectively and efficiently, the current heavy reliance on performance based allocation mechanisms can pose problems. Improvements in access, participation, retention and success of disadvantaged students depend on the application of resources that are already stretched. Reducing resources when performance of target group students against equity indicators declines simply makes it more difficult to gain outcomes for disadvantaged groups. We believe that the model for funding equity group students should take greater account of the representation of these students in the natural catchment areas of universities. Definitional problems in relation to target equity groups (for example students of low socio-economic status) continue to cause difficulties in funding allocation and need to be resolved. Almost 30% of the Territory people are Indigenous and are identified as one of the most disadvantaged groups in Australia and there need to be more effective mechanisms for addressing this disadvantage.

c. engagement of universities with their communities

It is arguable that all Universities, not just those with regional campuses have a special responsibility to the communities they serve. As a result of location, population base of their natural catchment areas and other issues, the task that regional Universities have may present a different range of challenges to those facing metropolitan institutions, but it is also important that city based Universities have an appropriate community orientation.

Qc1 What is a reasonable expectation of the contribution of higher education institutions to regional communities?

A principle for, and expectation of, the higher education system espoused earlier in the document was equal opportunity for all Australians to participate in higher education and institutions based in the regions should have a goal to provide such opportunity for members of their communities and similar services to those provided by their metropolitan counterparts. However, differential costs and resource limitations may inhibit the extent to which such an aspiration can be achieved. As indicated above all universities are, and should be serving community, but because of the differential distribution of population in Australia, the communities to be served

appear more obvious and easier to define in the case of regional institutions although such institutions also provide service to national and international communities as well as the local constituency.

Qc2 Should universities be specifically funded for community service activities and if so, who should pay?

In one sense all universities are, and should continue to be paid for community service and to answer this question “community service activities” needs to be better defined. If what is being asked is should universities receive a premium to deliver services to communities in the regions where the costs of providing such services are greater than in a metropolitan setting, then the answer should be yes. The approaches of fiscal equalisation applied in regard of the provision of other education services should prevail in relation to higher education.

Qc3 How can government policy encourage universities to focus on being of service to the community?

This could be achieved by the development of a framework that provides incentives for universities to identify and engage with the communities they serve.

Qc4 Should funding decisions for regional higher education institutions in relation to purchase of educational services be with regional bodies?

The arrangements for funding decisions should be similar for all higher education institutions as all serve a range of constituencies and interest groups.

d. institutional specialisation

Qd1 How can Australia best develop and maintain world-class capability in knowledge advancement?

Universities should be able to determine their own futures in response to incentives that reward differentiation where such differentiation is in the national interest. University standing in the national and international arena is strongly influenced by research performance. The need for a greater level of research focus at institutional level has been extended to the national arena through the research priorities exercise. However areas of world class research activity can be, and are distributed, across several universities and other institutions in Australia rather than necessarily being concentrated in a few with positive legacies of age and wealth. The varied communities that all universities serve have a requirement for ongoing R&D activity and postgraduate training, which in the case of regional Australia is often best provided for locally. The establishment of the necessary mass of internationally recognised scholars and physical infrastructure for a University in Australia to be perceived as one of the world’s elite higher education institutions may be impractical and not in the best interests of Australia as a whole. Stronger collaboration between Universities should be encouraged but not necessarily only through groups of “like institutions” such as the ATN federation or the “G of 8”. There may be equal or greater merit in collaborations being encouraged between universities with different missions and characteristics whose activities could be complementary.

The formation of highly specialised units such as Agricultural Institutes, especially if established as stand alone organisations, could suffer from scale related difficulties and miss out on benefits of shared infrastructures available through larger enterprises. A distributed system of expertise would be facilitated by further development of communications and computing infrastructure.

Qd2 What roles are envisaged for universities that will not be competitive in sustaining current profiles of research and research training?

This question is premised on the basis that a uniformly “open market” competitive approach to the support for research and research training is inevitably the most appropriate one. It is hardly surprising that universities of vastly different size, wealth and history perform differently in research. One questions whether it is appropriate to expect such unequal players to compete on a level playing field for research dollars through schemes such as the IGS and RTS. Research and research training provided *in situ* are vital for regional development and for nation building which presumably federal government has a responsibility to undertake. Notwithstanding the important issue of maintaining excellence in research and research training (which strongly competitive schemes tend to foster) retiring younger/smaller/regional universities from the research arena on the basis that they cannot compete with large metropolitan institutions for federal funding would raise questions about the maintenance of their status as universities, definitions of which include requirements for research to be undertaken and could limit the development of Australia at the national level. In our view funding for research and research training should include elements that, subject to appropriate quality controls, allow investments to be made in nation building.

e. efficiency and effectiveness

Qe1 What is the scope for rationalising the number of courses offered?

Notwithstanding the constraints of competition policy, there may be scope for rationalising the number of courses on offer through greater inter-university co-operation, although issues of access and equal opportunity to equivalent provisions may place limits on the extent of rationalisation that is achievable. This is an issue for isolated and regional institutions where there are community expectations that a reasonably broad range of provision will be available locally.

Qe2 How can staff productivity be increased and monitored?

It is important that staff productivity be measured in an accurate and appropriate way and that claims about inefficiency and ineffectiveness be made on a strong analytical rather than anecdotal basis. There may scope for a greater use of measures of staff activity constructed on more of an outputs basis. The operation of effective performance management systems should optimise staff productivity.

Qe3 What scope exists for further improving the efficient use of capital assets?

It would be useful to benchmark the efficiency of use of university capital assets with those of other organisations. NTU has made space and facilities available to community organisations on both a temporary and permanent basis but plans to gain efficiencies by the location of Commonwealth government facilities on University land have not come to fruition.

Qe4 How can universities' administrative processes be made more efficient?

Again it would be useful if the efficiency of universities' administrative processes could be benchmarked against those of other public sector organisations. Many universities, including NTU, have invested heavily in new IT-based financial, student, human resource and other administrative systems that are aimed at delivering improved efficiency and effectiveness in administrative functions. Continuing investment in physical infrastructure and human resources will be required to maintain and improve administrative efficiencies.

Qe5 What scope is there for greater collaboration between higher education institutions in academic and administrative areas?

Undoubtedly there is scope for greater collaboration in both academic and administrative areas, though for a University such as NTU that is some 300km away from another university member of the UNS, there are some restrictions. Nevertheless NTU is seeking to collaborate in a range of service provision with other organisations in the NT (including the development of a broad Partnership Agreement with the Northern Territory Government) and to build on existing arrangements through collaboration with universities and other organisations interstate in the delivery of academic programs and in research. Outsourcing of some administrative functions to other organisations within the NT has been and is currently under investigation.

f. governance, management and workplace relations

Qf1 What forms of staffing flexibilities do different universities need?

A capacity to more rapidly change staffing profiles in response to fluctuations in student demand is required. As the large cohort of staff recruited in the mid 1960's leaves the system, there might be constraints on the availability of suitably qualified staff to fill vacancies. Attracting staff to remote and regional Australia, especially in some discipline fields where there is no obvious advantage in working outside the metropolitan areas, is currently difficult, especially when funding regimes make it difficult to provide significant financial incentives. There is likely to be an increasing need to employ specialists in different areas of what has traditionally been seen as "bundled" activity by academic staff, for example seeking staff with specialist skills in instructional design that will be involved in curriculum development but not necessarily in delivery and assessment.

Qf2 How can enterprise bargaining be more effectively achieved?

This could be achieved if it were possible to genuinely bargain at an institutional level, rather than have institutional initiatives moderated by a union that seeks to impose a national position.

Qf3 How can performance management and recognition and reward of staff be improved?

There may be a need to revise promotions policies to reflect the changing nature of academic work where a greater proportion of individuals may be employed in a more specialist capacity than at present as a result of "unbundling" roles traditionally

undertaken by specific academic staff. Greater capacities to provide over-award payments and to deal with poor/under performance are required.

Qf4 What are the capabilities required of university governing bodies?

Such bodies should take a trustee approach and provide expert strategic advice to top managers of universities.

Qf5 What are the capabilities required of university top managers?

Top managers would optimally possess good leadership and change management skills with both business and academic acumen.

Qf6 Should university establishment acts bind university boards to act for the university as a whole?

While the training of university board members can help the board take an holistic approach, this is probably best achieved by having legal requirements in place.

Qf7 How appropriate is the current division between the Commonwealth and States and Territories of management responsibilities for higher education?

To some extent this depends on any changes in funding arrangements for the higher education system. It is important that an appropriate balance between university accountability and autonomy is struck.

g. revenue diversification

Qg1 What structural and institutional elements constrain universities from improving revenue flows and net returns?

In the case of NTU the structure of local markets and the nature and extent of business development have an impact, as does the high cost of delivering services.

Qg2 What steps could be taken to raise revenue from alumni.

Active promotion of the University through alumni publications and functions and invitations to donate are some ways in which revenue might be raised from Alumni.

Qg3 What measures might stimulate higher levels of philanthropic contributions to higher education?

The introduction of optimal tax arrangements for benefactors would be helpful. There may be limits however, to the level of philanthropic contribution based on population size and the nature of enterprises in the natural catchment area of a University. The fund raising arm of NTU has raised around \$14 million in donations over a 10year period from a Territory population of under 200,000.

Qg4 How can government best support universities in seeking sources of revenue to complement public investment?

In addition to providing appropriate tax breaks in relation to private sector investment, promotion of the value and worth of the higher education to Australia would be helpful.

Qg5 How can universities ensure that overseas student fees cover the cost of their education?

Obviously accurate knowledge of the costs is important, whether full or marginal, is required in setting tuition fees for overseas programs.

Qg6 What scope is there for greater collaboration between higher education institutions, industry and other institutions on improvements to education as an export service?

There are opportunities to do more collective marketing both locally and nationally and to seek collaboration with enterprises and research organisations in the development of curriculum and learning experiences that would be attractive to overseas students.

Qg7 How can university teaching and research gain commercial support while maintaining academic integrity?

By continuing the accountability and quality assurance mechanisms that are currently operating.

h. allocation of public subsidies

Qh1 How large should the Australian higher education system be?

On the basis of principles espoused earlier, a system that is large enough to provide equality of opportunity to all Australians is what should be available although fiscal constraints obviously limit aspiration.

Qh2 What is an appropriate balance of public and private contributions to the costs of higher education?

Given that the net return to government on its investment in higher education has been calculated to be significant in financial terms it can be argued that the major contribution to costs should remain with government.

Qh3 What is the best mix of public funding mechanisms for universities?

NTU supports the funding framework suggested by AVCC. It believes that performance based funding for undergraduate education has potential difficulties, that while places should be related to demand there should not be an very tight linkage and that funding mechanisms should take account of university differences, including differential costs of service provision.

Qh4 How should non-university courses, which articulate into university degrees, be funded?

It depends on the circumstances in which the course are offered and by which organisations they are provided.

Qh5 Should tuition subsidies be time limited and should loans be capped?

The University does not have an in principle difficulty with the notion that tuition subsidies be time limited and that loans be capped as long as any limits imposed are reasonable in the context of student circumstances.

Qh6 How can universities best be given increased flexibility for raising resources within a framework of accountability?

NTU supports the AVCC position on this issue.

Qh7 Should private providers have wider access to public subsidies on the same basis as public institutions as a means of stimulating differentiation?

While this approach might be considered in more populous parts of Australia, the population base in the Northern Territory provides a very thin market that poses challenges to the two existing publicly funded providers.

i. cutting bureaucratic red tape

Qi1 Are the current levels of reporting and regulation appropriate and necessary?

While it is accepted that there is a significant investment of public monies in the higher education sector that need to be properly accounted for, the reporting requirements are believed to be excessive and too cumbersome.

Qi2 How can bureaucratic structures and processes and compliance costs imposed by governments and other agencies be streamlined?

As a cross-sectoral institution with significant TAFE as well as Higher Education activity, NTU is particularly burdened by dual sector reporting requirements and would greatly benefit from cohesion in post-secondary reporting.

Qi3 Should the inter-governmental agreement in respect of higher education responsibilities be reviewed?

In the context of the response to Qi2 this is desirable.

Qi4 How well balanced are government relations with universities in respect of enabling reasonable autonomy of decision making and assuring public accountability?

There has been a tendency for the Commonwealth to attempt to manage “from afar” and current rigidities in the system inhibit responses to circumstances.