8 August 2008

Professor Denise Bradley AC
Chair, Review of Australian Higher Education
Location 023
PO Box 9880
Canberra ACT 2601

Dear Professor Bradley,

Further Submission to the Review of Australian Higher Education

We are writing to supplement our Submission to your Committee that was sent on 31 July 2008. On further reflection, we feel that a very important matter was not sufficiently addressed, which is the nature and sufficiency of independent advice to government on tertiary education policy matters. We did address the question of the need for a tertiary education coordination authority. However, the creation of such an authority would not fulfil the need for sustained, high level policy analysis of an independent nature. This need would be even more acute if the tertiary education coordinating authority were not established.

The long-term future health of Australian tertiary education cannot be left to ad hoc, limited and sometimes amateurish policy research. Our argument is a simple one: for a sector so important to the welfare and future social, cultural and economic development of the nation, it behoves government to invest in the provision of independent policy advice that is evidence-based, and developed on sound, systematic and continuous research at the highest level. Unfortunately, such research only occurs in Australia on a limited, intermittent and insecure basis.

Australia has a few renowned scholars interested in aspects of tertiary education policy, and pockets of institutionally supported research effort. NCVER in Adelaide is serving the research needs of the VET sector well. Other centres and institutes – such as the Centre for the Study of Higher Education and the Martin Institute for Higher Education Leadership and Management at The University of Melbourne, and the Centre for Higher Education Management and Policy at the University of New England – have some capacity for tertiary education policy research. But the time is now right to create a national tertiary education policy research centre that both builds on current strengths in this area and lays the basis for relevant, sustained, high level policy research for the future.
It is important to note that there is a substantial difference between the isolated social scientist making the odd contribution to a problem associated with tertiary education, and systematic and sustained exploration and analysis of tertiary education policy by a multi-disciplinary research team. There are several such teams in other countries, well supported by governments and foundations. One example is the Centre for Higher Education Policy Studies in the Netherlands, with more than 30 research staff, supported by the Dutch government, the EU, and its own university. In the United States there is the Carnegie Foundation, along with a host of other foundations interested in tertiary education, such as Ford, Mellon, Kellogg and Spencer to mention but a few.

**Background**

Despite the many reviews of the sector, Australia has been poor in subjecting its higher and tertiary education policies to rigorous analysis and informed comment. This is lamentable considering the billions of tax payers’ dollars spent on the sector and the importance of the sector to the future of the nation.

Over the years, expert committees of enquiry have helped shape Australian tertiary education, such as the Murray Committee in the 1950s and the Martin Committee in the 1960s. But the impact of such committees has waned in recent years. The Higher Education Council within the former National Board of Employment, Education and Training (NBEET) structure commissioned specific reports on issues of immediate concern to government, as DETYA, DEST and now DEEWR to some extent continue to do under various programs, such as the former Evaluations and Investigations Program.

Another phenomenon emerging over the last decade has been for government to turn to private consultants for advice on particular issues. Consultants have been international companies, such as KPMG, or private individuals, often ex-government bureaucrats. While consultancy reports may contain valuable analysis and evidence supported recommendations, government is under no obligation to make the findings public. But the main point we want to make here is that none of government’s past or present involvement in policy evaluation is a substitute for sustained, ongoing, long-term, public and independent tertiary education policy research and a strong public debate about the options.

This situation is somewhat surprising because the need for independent, objective reflection and advice on tertiary education policy has been recognised in a number of government reports for over three decades, with many commentators and government officials noting with regret the lack of a special centre or of work of a similar kind to that found in many other OECD countries. For example, the Williams Committee (Committee of Inquiry into Education and Training, Report on Education, Training and Employment (Chairman: B. R. Williams), 3 vols., AGPS, Canberra, 1979) concluded its 1979 report to the Prime Minister with a proposal for:

... a University Centre or Research Centre to provide a focus for the work of individuals and groups in several universities and colleges of advanced education, and to extend research into universities, colleges of advanced education and TAFE institutions in the context of the whole system.
It also specifically recommended:

... an extension of systems research which probes the role and performance of Governments, Government Commissions and Boards, universities, colleges of advanced education and TAFE institutions, and then appraises proposals for their reform.

A national research and development centre in TAFE was established in Adelaide (the NCVR), but the proposal of the Williams Committee for a ‘University Centre or Research Centre’ was not taken up. A somewhat similar need was recognised in Professor Paul Bourke's 1985 report on Quality Measures in Universities. The Hudson Committee (Review of Efficiency and Effectiveness in Higher Education, 1986) commented with approval on Bourke's suggestion for:

... some specific encouragement towards further research and development of performance indicators and quality measures in the Australian context. He considers that a special centre should be funded at an appropriate institution for a specified period (five years) to carry out such research. In the Committee's view this proposal is worthy of consideration as one of many steps .... It suggests that this idea is appropriate for institutions to take up, possibly in the form of a research centre at a selected institution, to provide a focus for research on the development and use of such indicators in Australian higher education institutions.

In fact it can be argued that the situation with respect to government commitment to independent tertiary education policy research has deteriorated rather than improved over the past two decades or so, with the closure of the Education Research Unit in the Research School of Social Sciences at the Australian National University, and the demise of the federal government’s Education Research and Development Committee (an educational research funding body) in the early 1980s. With the withdrawal of special Commonwealth funding for the Centre for Research Policy at the University of Wollongong at the end of 1994, the gap widened with respect to the systematic and independent analysis and evaluation of Australia's research and science policy.

In 1970, an article in Vestes emphasised ‘how essential it is that national educational planning bodies have the support of research units ...’ (Robert McCaig, ‘A New Approach to the Administration of Higher Education in Australia’, Vestes, 13, 1970, p. 120). The article also noted that “at the present time educational planning is stamped with the hallmark of rank amateurism. It is largely a process of conciliation and compromise among conflicting demands, almost invariably subjectively determined and usually inflated in their estimates”. About twenty years later (1991), the then Minister for Higher Education, the Hon. Peter Baldwin indicated that:

The Government is ... interested in encouraging a deepening of the process for development of and debate over education policy generally. The importance of this is highlighted by the increasing interaction of the schools, TAFE and higher education sectors, the complexity of the issues and the need to ensure that all interested parties have a genuine opportunity to bring their perspectives to policy formulation. The Government will be initiating discussions with a view
to identifying interest in a broadly supported foundation or some other form of Australian education policy Centre (*Higher Education: Quality and Diversity in the 1990s*, AGPS, Canberra, 1991).

Government’s interest was not translated into action.

**Recommendation**

Research cannot identify any one best way to coordinate, fund, govern or manage either tertiary education systems or institutions. The dynamics of tertiary education are contingent on too many historical, social, cultural and economic factors to even suggest that there is an “ideal type” that can be imposed in every circumstance. But research can identify policy weaknesses and the unintended consequences of policy implementation, helping to better inform the planning processes at both the system and institutional levels through the rigorous collection and analysis of data. We therefore urge the Review Panel to consider:

Establishment of a national Centre at the forefront of theoretical and empirical studies of tertiary education and research policy to significantly advance the application of social, economic and political theory to Australian tertiary education institutions and the sector as a whole. The overall objective would be to generate leading-edge research on tertiary education and research policy through an extensive program of projects and publications. The Centre would provide practical policy advice based on its research and its understanding of the international environment and the needs and aspirations of government and society.

It would not be appropriate in this submission to suggest either a detailed structure or set of functions for a National Centre for Tertiary Education Policy Research. There are many different models for such a centre, and these probably should be evaluated by a group of experts that includes Directors of established centres internationally.

However, we suggest some key principles to be taken into account when considering the establishment of a national centre. A National Tertiary Education Policy Research Centre should be:

a. Multidisciplinary in research focus.

b. Independent of government, but with responsibility to provide government with advice, supported by research, on specific policy issues. While clearly having an autonomous, independent role in their research, some overseas centres of this type easily maintain close working relationships with relevant government departments.

c. Located within the tertiary education sector, having a research training as well as research role. The Centre should have a strong academic profile, but not necessarily based at a single university – a consortium arrangement, building on existing strengths in the area, is well worth investigating. But there are other models that should be evaluated as well.

d. Internationally as well as nationally focused in its research. Increasingly, both government and institutions in their tertiary education policy development must
take into account the international dimension. A perspective on the further development of tertiary education cannot be isolated from positioning the Australian system within the broader international context. A necessary condition for this is adequate information on structures, trends and issues in other relevant countries.

e. Adequately funded. The Centre should have a continuing funding base that allows it to pursue medium to long-term projects and to build a rich empirical profile and information base on Australian tertiary education. But the Centre should also be able to supplement its core funding base, for example through successfully competing for external funding for specific projects. A research training role would also provide the centre with income as well as help supply the next generation of higher education policy researchers for the sector and government.

The forces for change in an increasingly turbulent and complex world do not neglect the Australian tertiary education institutions. Universities and other tertiary education institutions are required to find a new legitimacy while retaining essential traditions. Tertiary education policy research has much to contribute to this task. In Australia, one hopes for a heightened awareness of both the importance of understanding the changing role of tertiary education in society and of the critical contribution tertiary education makes to Australia’s economic and social welfare and the nation’s future. An independent national centre will provide government and the tertiary education system with the capacity to react more effectively to changing local and international circumstances and provide the basis for effective policy development.

Your sincerely,

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