

Bradley and the new Binary System

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My initial response to the Bradley Report on 17 December last year was that as a manifesto for the education revolution, the Bradley Review was modest in its demands and disappointing in its conservatism. As one examines it more closely it becomes apparent that its arguments and intentions were often less than clear and contradictory.

The Report has suggested that Australia should achieve a graduate output of 40% in the 25-34 year age group by 2020 and has proposed student entitlements, which the Review believes should be limitless. It has been speculated by demographer Dr Bob Birrell that this increase might be achieved through the creation of perhaps twenty new teaching universities in outer-metropolitan and regional areas.

Before accepting these proposals, government should examine them far more closely as it seems that they may be almost impossible to achieve without some major changes both to the detail of implementation and the thinking that underlies them. Both Birrell and Bradley seem to overlook the cost and workforce implications of their suggestions. But more importantly, the Bradley Report itself provides a major stumbling block for the proposal.

An unlimited number of student entitlements is unlikely to get past Treasury because it would constitute a blank cheque with no precise controls over the quality of the product. The Report suggests that any student who can find an institution that is prepared to offer him or her a place would have an entitlement to enrol in that place – there is an assumption that all institutions will have minimum entry standards and rigorous progression rules and that no institution would attempt to game the system by enrolling all-comers in the interests of access and equity. Treasury is unlikely to be quite so trusting with its money.

Achieving the 40% target would involve producing an additional 544,000 graduates. For that to occur by 2020, completions would require an annual growth rate of 78,000 from 2014. The additional enrolments would then stabilise at 355,500 per year. Assuming that some new enrolments would go to existing institutions, this is still the equivalent of about 20 new institutions of around 12,000 students each.

Assuming that the government were prepared to fund these places, no mention has been made of the likelihood of finding the academic workforce to teach them, nor of the cost of building the necessary teaching infrastructure, nor of the plausibility that demand would rise so quickly. Even if current low levels of unmet demand were reversed because of the economic downturn, the Report is still assuming a supply-driven increase.

Based on the Report's dismal staff:student ratio of 1:20 almost 18,000 additional staff will be needed at a time when the academic workforce is shrinking. However, if we take the Report seriously when it argues that equity and access should be accompanied by the support necessary to ensure that students succeed, the 1:20 ratio should be 1:16 or perhaps the 1980s level of 1:12.

The additional facilities required are assumed by the Report to be covered by the Education Investment Fund, which "should be sufficient to meet major infrastructure needs of the sector over the coming decade". Using the average international space norms of 14 square metres per student for new university buildings, an additional 355,500 students would require something approaching 5 million square metres of built space. At an average cost of \$6,000 per square metre this amounts to \$30 billion. Using the lower end of the range for Australian universities of 12 square metres the cost would still be \$25.5 billion.

Bradley has explicitly closed the door on teaching universities, whether these be through strategic institutional decisions or through government compacts. Under the Report's proposed accreditation regime a university can only retain its title if it demonstrates that it is pursuing a level of research that will satisfy criteria to be developed by the new quality and accreditation agency. This does not mean that the new institutions could not be colleges or TAFE Institutes, but as the recommendation requires that the increase be in graduates with a Bachelor's degree or higher, short of reviving the binary system, it would seem that any new institutions will need to be research active universities, thus removing the cheaper option.

Given that the Report failed to show a clear teaching and research nexus and given that we already have two excellent private universities that have demonstrated that it is possible to concentrate on teaching and attract fee-paying students, it is odd that it should have insisted on research as a necessary condition for university status. It is even more disappointing to discover that the reasons for doing so are as prosaic as an attempt to stop the argument over research concentration. If the Report had wanted to achieve this aim it would have done better to free up the system and create some real diversity by allowing universities to decide whether they wanted to do research and how much, leaving those that wanted to concentrate on teaching to make that choice. It might also have led to the creation of more universities which could concentrate on the Report's other ambition to increase graduate outputs.

Perhaps one of the unintended consequences of the Bradley Report is that we create a new binary system with most of the new places in new Colleges or dual sector TAFE institutions that could offer degrees without aspiring to full university status. The cost of capital development would be lower and it is likely that staff costs could be reduced as well.

The government's response to the Bradley and Cutler reports is crucial to the future of Australia's standing in international higher education and its capacity to attract international students. It should be based on a critical assessment of the arguments that have been put forward in the two reviews and the country's future needs. While bold decisions are needed to achieve excellence in higher education, the government would do better to provide a staged implementation of properly costed and funded recommendations than accept changes that it cannot fund adequately.

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