

Published in *The Australian* 17 December 2008

As a manifesto for the education revolution, the Bradley Review is modest in its demands and disappointing in its conservatism.

The basic vision and principles are to be commended, especially the attempts to bring all of tertiary education under one umbrella and the proposals to simplify the bewildering array of student support arrangements. But the report fails to deliver a road-map that will achieve its objectives or provide a stretch set of goals to which the government can aspire.

The report confirms the government's contention that the financial situation faced by universities has been worsening; it also confirms that Australia is losing its earlier competitive edge - "Australia is losing ground against a number of its competitor countries on a range of indicators... In 2020 Australia will not be where we aspire to be – in the top group of OECD countries in terms of participation and performance – unless we act, and act now."

It urges the government to return tertiary education to the top of the OECD rankings. It argues that the government needs to spend more but then concludes, confusingly, that "...the recommendations in this report, if fully implemented, are likely to do no more than maintain the relative international performance and position of the Australian higher education sector". So while the report argues for more public funding, it fails to deliver the necessary recommendations that would achieve these aspirations, and says nothing about a possible co-contribution by business and industry.

To take but one example, staff:student ratios are shown to have worsened from 12.9 in 1990 to 15.6 in 1996 and 20.5 in 2006. This is posited as the cause of several of the problems identified in the report: student access, student experience, student retention, staff workloads and therefore staff attraction and retention at a time of major staff shortfalls. One might have expected a discussion of optimal staff:student ratios and perhaps a recommendation that they be returned to 1990 levels. This measure alone would cost somewhere around \$1 billion per annum, yet the report recommends an increase of only \$1.8 billion over the first four years, based on a 10% increase in the teaching and learning programs and subsequent indexation. While it argues for an increase in student places to improve higher education attainment from 29% to 40% of , these are not costed.

It argues, correctly in my view, that the accreditation and quality assurance system needs to be overhauled and should concentrate on measuring standards and assuring the public that these are internationally competitive. But the process proposed requires a ten-yearly reaccreditation on top of the more onerous quinquennial quality assurance audit – this should be streamlined to avoid duplication of effort.

The report also argues for a tight nexus between research and teaching and proposes that all universities demonstrate involvement in research. The evidence for this connection has been less than conclusive while there is good evidence to support the argument that the research load is carried by a comparatively small proportion of academics irrespective of their institution. So to continue with this requirement in a strengthened form is likely to limit system diversity and prevent institutions from choosing to specialise in teaching and learning.

As part of its aim to de-regulate the system, the report argues for student entitlements which place students at the centre of the funding flow and free up institutions to enrol any qualified students in any course that the institution wishes to offer. However, there is a limit on the amount that institutions can charge as a co-contribution, with caps set centrally, so the level of flexibility is both enlarged and constrained, and it is unclear who will decide on the number of vouchers. This freedom to act will inevitably be constrained by total government budgetary commitments to higher education and the government's wish to limit the number

of students in expensive courses while encouraging enrolments in others. On the other hand, institutions would be able to refuse government funding in specified courses and charge full fees, but again with a possible cap imposed by government. The level of take-up of this option could serve to reduce the impact of the voucher system on weaker institutions.

The report contains a detailed discussion on access to higher education and the need to support students from low SES groups. The intention is to increase participation from these groups as a social good and to ensure that we are producing the number of graduates to meet the country's workforce needs. The participation rate has remained static at about 14% for many years, a fact that is common to several countries, and the report proposes a target of 20%. While the report discusses this problem at length it lacks a focus on its root causes, which have probably more to do with a lack of inspiration to aspire to higher education than simply a lack of resources – that should probably be addressed in schools through programs that encourage students and parents to understand the purposes of higher education and as something to which they can and should aspire.

Whether the report can be implemented rests on several further feasibility assessments and structural reforms recommended by the report, and not least on the government's response and preparedness to commit funds. But it will also depend on how the system is co-ordinated and managed. The report argues against the creation of a central commission to set policy and strategic direction, yet its recommendations require a substantial degree of negotiation between institutions and funding authorities and much performance monitoring. Dividing these responsibilities among several bodies is unlikely to improve on the current situation and it will certainly not be as effective as a single body interacting with government with responsibility for monitoring overall performance and the health of the system.

If the system is not to inadvertently fall again into the neglect that has been identified in the report the government should re-visit the question of co-ordination.

*Vin Massaro is a professorial fellow in higher education at the University of Melbourne and a higher education consultant.*