
Postgraduate Students' Association

University of Adelaide



Submission to the

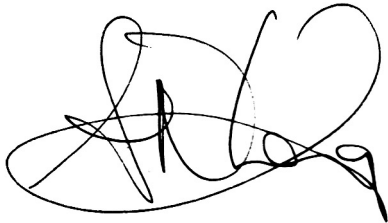
**Higher Education at the Crossroads:
A Review of Australian Higher Education**

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This submission has been produced by Anthony Long, Research Officer/Office Coordinator of the Adelaide University Postgraduate Students' Association (PGSA), as authorised by Helen Kavanagh, President of the PGSA. It is the official submission from the PGSA to the Ministerial Discussion Paper, published in April 2002.

This submission is not confidential, and may be placed on the DEST web site.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Anthony Long', with a stylized, cursive script.

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Introduction

The Postgraduate Students' Association (PGSA) is an affiliate of the Adelaide University Union and represents all postgraduate and honours students at the University of Adelaide, of whom there are currently over 3500. The PGSA exists to defend the academic, political and economic rights of its members, and represents the views of postgraduate students on a wide range of issues, including research, teaching, supervision, resources and funding opportunities (including scholarships). It also is committed to providing postgraduates with information about these areas.

Before addressing the Ministerial Discussion Paper, the PGSA would like to comment briefly on the Commonwealth's previous reports and inquiries, which are relevant to the latest Government initiative to review the higher education sector. The Minister's White Paper on Research and Research Training, *Knowledge and Innovation*, identified several shortcomings in research education, which included:

- Poor supervision;
- High attrition rates and slow completion rates for research students;
- Inadequate levels of departmental support and limited access to quality infrastructure;
- A need to improve the employment related skills of research degree graduates.¹

The Report *Factors Associated with Completion of Research Higher Degrees* highlights three aspects important to the successful completion of research-based higher degrees:

- Institutional/environmental factors;
- Individual supervisory arrangements;
- Student cohorts and characteristics.²

With the number of coursework postgraduates at near record levels, the Government must also consider the requirements of these students. There exists substantial evidence that coursework postgraduate students are not receiving the quality of education and related services that they expect and require.

The PGSA points out the need to follow the recommendations made in previous Commonwealth reports, many of which have failed to result in any positive tangible changes in the Australian Higher Education Sector.

The PGSA's submission addresses individually the sections outlined in the Ministerial Discussion Paper.

¹ David Kemp, *Knowledge and Innovation: A Policy Statement on Research and Research Training* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 1999).

² Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, "Factors Associated with Completion of Research Higher Degrees," *Higher Education Series* No. 37 (May 2001).

Learning experiences and outcomes

The Ministerial Discussion Paper raises a number of issues about the nature and quality of teaching at Australian universities. The suggestions made include focusing upon individually paced learning, extending the academic year, including teaching outside of office hours and on weekends, and enabling students to combine course units from a range of academic institutions towards their degrees. Other ideas raised include options for improving the standard of teaching, setting a minimum standard for courses and implementing a procedure to assess the skills obtained by graduates.

The suggestions made in this section of the Ministerial Discussion Paper have direct implications for postgraduate coursework degrees. The Senate Inquiry "Universities in Crisis" stated that since 1998, when enrolments in postgraduate coursework degrees reached a peak, there has been a steady decline in participation rates, whilst enrolments in postgraduate research degrees have increased.³

There have been a number of suggestions posited as to why postgraduate coursework degrees are losing favour with potential students. The Report "Identifying the Changing Needs of Australian Coursework Postgraduate Students" examined the level of satisfaction of postgraduate coursework students at Australian universities. Highlighted was the high level of dissatisfaction many postgraduate coursework students had for the facilities their institutions provided them with. Amongst the complaints were the lack of availability of academics and the limited selection of classes outside of working hours.⁴ The Report concluded that

[...] the findings do suggest that a comprehensive review of postgraduate coursework education, funding and resource allocation undertaken by the Government, universities and postgraduate associations is necessary.

The findings also suggest, however, two emerging trends that may well invigorate the universities and the academic community. Firstly, universities may well need to expand their traditional role of education to one that also includes a significant component of career counselling and management for postgraduate students. Secondly, the universities must focus on ways of including postgraduate coursework students in the academic community.⁵

The current review of the Higher Education Sector needs to address these points, so that students not only receive an education of a high quality, but they also need to receive significant assistance in enhancing further their career prospects upon leaving the university system.

Access on an equitable basis

The Ministerial Discussion Paper acknowledges that there exist a number of issues to address that affect people with an equity group background. This includes the need for such students to be given incentives to participate in higher education, improving education systems at the pre-tertiary level to overcome inherent disadvantages, and making such students better aware of their higher education options.

The 1991 Government publication *A Fair Chance For All* highlighted six groups that are disadvantaged in their ability to participate successfully in higher education:

³ Senate Employment, Workplace Relations, Small Business and Education Committee, *Universities in Crisis*, September 2001: Section 8.4.

⁴ Darryl Coulthard, *Identifying the Changing Needs of Australian Coursework Postgraduate Students*, September 2000: Chapter 4.

⁵ Darryl Coulthard, *Identifying the Changing Needs of Australian Coursework Postgraduate Students*: Executive Summary.

- People with a socio-economically disadvantaged background;
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders;
- Women in non-traditional courses;
- People from non-English-speaking backgrounds;
- People with disabilities;
- People from rural or isolated areas.⁶

During the 1990s, the level of students enrolled in postgraduate courses has increased greatly. Students enrolled in research degrees more than doubled to over 38000 by 2000, and postgraduate coursework students trebled to nearly 59000; however, students enrolled in diplomas has dropped slightly between 1990 and 2000, despite a 33% increase in the mid-1990s.⁷ In 2000, 72297 non-overseas students commenced higher degrees, 54.5% of which were by coursework.⁸ However, in light of proposals made elsewhere in the Ministerial Discussion Paper, there exists a substantial danger that participation rates in such courses will drop substantially as students from equity groups will not be able to afford the financial burden such courses place on them. Anthony Lambert, at the time representing the UTS Students' Association, told the Senate Employment, Workplace Relations, Small Business and Education References Committee in 2001 that

Fees are a huge disincentive to people such as me trying to bring real world industry experience to academia after a period away from study. They also [...] all but rule out the prospect of postgraduate research to people such as single parents or others who may be financially disadvantaged.⁹

Further evidence is provided by the DETYA Report *Investigation of the Source of Funds for Up Front Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) Contributions and Postgraduate Fees Paid by Australian Students*, which states that

[a]pproximately 65.9 per cent of funds accessed by Australian students for the payment of postgraduate fees are sourced from personal savings. Employers and family members comprise 16.8 per cent and 5.9 per cent of sources respectively.¹⁰

The Report also states that some 85.1% of fee-paying postgraduates study part time, primarily out of financial necessity.¹¹

The introduction of PELS was touted as a mechanism that would assist equity groups in accessing higher degrees. However, in light of the deregulation of higher coursework degrees and with the suggestion to deregulate research courses, there exists the danger that students would incur huge debts because the fees of the courses in which they enrol are no longer regulated. The University of Queensland Union highlighted this danger in its submission to the Senate Employment, Workplace Relations, Small Business and Education References Committee in 2001 stating that:

It is the experience of the UQ Union that economic factors are one of the most significant issues impacting on access and participation rates at public Universities. The introduction of the HECS and other fees schemes, as well as the inadequacy and inflexibility of student income support measures, have combined to place Higher Education participation outside the reach of many students and potential students from low income families.¹²

⁶ Department of Education, Employment and Training & National Board of Education, Employment and Training, *A Fair Chance for All: national and institutional planning for equity in higher education* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 1990).

⁷ Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, *Higher Education Student Time Series Tables* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2000), 13.

⁸ *Ibid*, 33.

⁹ Anthony Lambert, cited in *Hansard*, Sydney, July 18, 2001: 1078.

¹⁰ Simon Smith, Carey Ramm & Rebecca Archbold, *Investigation of the Source of Funds for Up Front Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) Contributions and Postgraduate Fees Paid by Australian Students* (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 1998), 8.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 37.

¹² University of Queensland Union, cited in *Universities in Crisis. Report on Higher Education*, 275.

Another area of concern is the level of fees that coursework postgraduate students face. Unlike undergraduate students who rely on HECS to fund their study, coursework postgraduate bear the full brunt of the fees levied on them. Unlike the HECS system, which suggests that society receives a level of benefit from the education students receive, the PELS system implies that the benefit gained by students is purely individual in nature, and that society in general does not. This is blatantly untrue, and any review of the higher education sector needs to address this imbalance.

Engagement of universities with their communities

The Ministerial Discussion Paper argues that it is important for all universities to maintain and foster links with the community in which they are located, the primary emphasis of this section is on regional institutions. Whilst the Paper correctly highlights the “special responsibility” that regional universities have to their local communities, the proposals suggested have the potential to damage the research and teaching performed at these institutions.

The Paper points out that over twenty percent of tertiary students attend universities outside the major metropolitan areas. However, despite this acknowledgment, the Paper suggests that a method with which universities could better engage with their communities would be to lower student enrolments at these institutions. Whilst the point is not expressed as such, any reduction would be at the expense of the selection of courses offered at such institutions, necessitated by the proposals outlined in the section entitled “Efficiency and Effectiveness” on pages 26 and 27 of the Discussion Paper.

The PGSA recognises that there exists the danger that the number and variety of postgraduate degrees – both by research and by coursework – will reduce drastically in light of any such changes. Given that regional communities are becoming increasingly older as their youth moves to Australian capital cities, any such changes to the higher education sector – both at the undergraduate and postgraduate level – threatens to increase further this exodus away from regional centres.

Institutional specialisation

The Ministerial Discussion Paper raises several points about the nature of the diversity of research and teaching areas present in the Australian University system. The first addresses the issue of whether Australia should have at least one university of world-class standing – one that can be ranked in the top 75 of universities worldwide. Questions about the ability to achieve this objective should not be considered until an understanding of whether the pursuit of such a strategy is desirable. The PGSA is concerned that there exists a considerable danger that in attempting to enhance the standards of one or two universities to a world-class level, the remaining institutions will suffer a severe drop in standards and in reputation as a consequence. A logical solution to this issue is to establish specialised areas of strength at individual universities. However, as will be demonstrated shortly, this proposal is also flawed. An additional concern raised by this proposal is that not only may most Australian Universities suffer, there is also the danger that a campaign to develop one or two universities to compete with the top institutions worldwide will not achieve the level of success that is hoped. In a sector that faces increased demands and funding issues in the near future, the PGSA questions the validity of pursuing such an agenda at this time.

A further issue raised in the Ministerial Discussion Paper related to the enhancing of one of two universities to world-class standing is that of diversity between universities. The Ministerial Paper correctly states that there exists a level of uniformity between institutions, with the danger of a lower level of research, teaching and research training. A possible solution to this problem would be

the creation of specialised research strengths at individual universities. However, the PGSA feels that this model is also flawed in a number of ways.

Under the current schemes, research concentration occurs as the result of the Research Training Scheme (RTS) and the Institutional Grants Scheme (IGS). Under the proposed model of specialisation, there exists a risk that the breadth of research and teaching offered at Australian universities will be restricted, rather than encouraging higher levels of productivity and achievement. Consequently, the number of postgraduate and undergraduate degrees offered at individual institutions will be reduced.

There is a danger that newer and regional universities will suffer greatly under the creation of designated research strengths at larger institutions. Such smaller universities risk losing academics, students and research places they currently have under the RTS, thereby lowering the quality of their output further. Whilst the suggestion is made that universities that are not engaged intensively in research as are other institutions could be 'reorientated' to specialising in areas such as undergraduate education or professional development, this proposal is flawed. There exists the danger that the their academic capabilities of such institutions will be jeopardised further.

Those areas of research that are unable to attract large-scale commercial or short-term funding because of the nature of their research are also under threat. Areas such as the Humanities, the Social Sciences, the Pure Sciences and the Fine Arts are most at risk, as they are unable to attract external funding to the level necessary to establish a research specialisation of world-class standards (this point is addressed further under the section "revenue diversification"). However, having highlighted areas of concern, the PGSA does acknowledge that there exists a limited scope for institutional specialisation in a few specific areas of academic excellence. However, such specialisation should not be at the expense of diversity and at the expense of those areas and institutions not included in such programs.

The PGSA believes that there exist alternatives to the outlined models. Rather than forming specialised areas of strength at individual institutions, cooperation between similar areas at different institutions should be encouraged: rather than creating specialised centres of excellence at a limited number of universities, existing departments should collaborate on joint projects, thereby strengthening each of them.

Efficiency and effectiveness

The Ministerial Discussion Paper highlights the need for the improvement in efficiency at, and the effectiveness of, Australian higher education institutions. A number of possible solutions are outlined, including addressing students' withdrawal rates, reducing an alleged excess in courses with low enrolments, improving staff productivity and administration efficiency and the use of universities' capital assets.

The PGSA notes a number of areas of concern with possible solutions to the outlined issues. Of primary concern are those affecting negatively undergraduate and postgraduate students. The proposed emphasis on reducing student attrition rates, whilst in itself is a useful endeavour, threatens to penalise postgraduate students.

However, not all areas of concern are considered to be problematic. The PGSA agrees with the need to improve the performance of university administration, which is becoming increasingly top-heavy and inefficient. Tasks are being repeated unnecessarily across a wide range of university administration areas, and the restructuring of administrative and academic divisions is occurring too frequently, and without any obvious benefit. Administration exists to support academic staff and students – a fact that appears to be forgotten on occasion. In the opinion of the PGSA, university

administration functions could be restructured so that there is as little repetition as possible across the various departments or even shared between universities. For instance, all payroll and staffing matters could be centralised, thereby freeing individuals at the departmental level to undertake other activities.

Also of importance is a centralised admission and enrolment procedure. Under the current system, there is a duplication of work across institutions, which impacts negatively the speed and ease with which students enrol in courses. Current trends see increasing numbers of students enrolling in courses at more than one institution, which leads to conflicts, omissions and confusion in the enrolment and assessment procedure. A centralised system, of which all universities were a part, would minimise such issues, and improve efficiency and costs. There would be no need for each university to spend large sums on installing, upgrading and maintaining computer software to cope with the changing demands of the higher education sector: each university's records would be compatible with another institution's, and inter-institutional administration would be more efficient.

Governance, management and workplace relations

The Ministerial Discussion Paper raises a wide range of issues concerning the governance, management and workplace relations of Australian higher education institutions. Claims made in the Paper suggest that current administrative structures do not manage successfully to cope with the changes the higher education sector has experienced in recent years, and will experience in the future. The suggestion is made that universities ought to be managed by individuals who possess considerable business experience and ability, rather than by delegates who represent what the Paper describes as "sectional interests", namely those of academics and students. The Paper claims that universities need to be run as businesses, rather than in the vein that they currently are. Another area addressed is academic staffing of universities, and how the performance of academics ought to be assessed.

The PGSA sees several areas of concern in the proposals suggested in the Ministerial Discussion Paper. The suggestion to change the structure of university management to eliminate academic staff and students from it, as such individuals, do not represent adequately universities' corporate interests. The inclusion of students on university councils encourages, and fulfils the role of, student participation rather than representation. Furthermore, it provides a level of balance to councils, as many members have no direct contact with university life. The importance of this is highlighted in the *Universities in Crisis* Report, which describes the treatment that student council members face when presenting their views, being often treated as being biased, regardless of whether they have legitimate concerns or not.

Revenue diversification

The Ministerial Discussion Paper points out that the revenue for Australian universities has increased by 70% between 1991 and 2001, which the Paper attributes to the diversification of universities' revenue sources. In 2002 important revenue sources for Australian higher education institutions now include fee paying international students and local postgraduate students, continuing education, investments, bequests and donations and consultancy service fees, in addition to Commonwealth grants and HECS funding.

The need to reduce the reliance of universities on Commonwealth funding is highlighted in the Discussion Paper. Given as a reason is that whilst taxpayers in general subsidise significantly higher

education, it is individual students who reap the benefits (primarily economic) from their study. The PGSA believes that this statement is flawed: whilst it is true the university graduates do benefit financially from their education, it is also correct to state that their taxes help fund the higher education sector. Furthermore, Section C of the Ministerial Discussion Paper (pages 23-24) highlight the importance for higher education institutions to engage with their communities. As a consequence, the wider community benefits from the Commonwealth funding given to universities.

The Senate Employment, Workplace Relations, Small Business and Education Reference Committee's Report *Universities in Crisis* noted that the Government has adopted an unstated "policy objective of moving Australia's higher education system down the path of the US private universities". The Report continued by declaring that "[t]he circumstances of the prestigious private universities in the US are vastly different from those of Australia's public universities". It noted correctly the large discrepancy in the ability for private US institutions to rely heavily on external private sector funding and the situation that faces Australian universities, stating that private funding "cannot therefore provide an acceptable substitute for public funding".¹³ The PGSA is of the opinion that this it is vital that the Australian university system does not follow its American counterpart's lead in this regard.

Funding for Faculties and Departments that are not in a position to attract industry support is also an area of concern. Whilst disciplines that are of direct benefit to corporate entities have considerable success in this regard, and will to continue to so do, areas that do not conduct research and teaching that could be commercially-orientated do not. The PGSA is concerned that such disciplines will suffer further under a system that relies to a greater degree on external funding as they will not be able to attract such financial support for their teaching and research. In the Discussion Paper there are no suggestions presented that could remedy this situation. If universities are to rely to a greater degree on external funding, then disciplines that are unable to attract it due to the nature of their research and teaching need the implementation of a system that will secure for them adequate funding for their endeavours.

The Paper suggests that not only does revenue diversification reduce the burden on Australian taxpayers who currently fund extensively the higher education sector, it also claims that "[i]mportantly, revenue diversification strengthens institutional autonomy".¹⁴ The PGSA questions whether revenue diversification does increase the level of institutional autonomy. Whilst it may be correct to state that external funding does decrease the level of dependence universities currently have on the government, it does not therefore follow that autonomy is thereby increased. Indeed, corporate funding places the academic integrity and independence of higher education institutions at risk. Corporate sponsors may influence the type of research and teaching that occurs, and may also affect the nature of research in which academics engage. Of particular risk in this regard are IT departments, which will need to provide access to the latest technology in the field, but run the risk of being subjected to pressure from corporations, which wish that their products be given preference in favour of their rivals' solutions. As the Discussion Paper correctly point out, there is also the risk that collaboration between researchers may be hindered because conflicting commercial interests prevent this from occurring. If such a system were to be implemented, there need to be safeguards created to ensure the independence of academic integrity and academic pursuit. Postgraduate students are particularly vulnerable to the commercialisation of academic research, as they may be forced to pursue the projects desired by their corporate sponsors, rather than the projects that they themselves wish to undertake.

¹³ Senate Employment, Workplace Relations, Small Business and Education Reference Committee, *Universities in Crisis. Report on Higher Education* (Canberra, Commonwealth of Australia, 2001), 11/12.

¹⁴ *Higher Education at the Crossroads. Ministerial Discussion Paper*, 31.