

Engaging with the community

The review reference group must come to terms with the "world-class-ness" of what goes on in the regions, argues **PETER SWANNELL**

MY favourite painting is by the brilliant Queensland artist, Rex Backhaus-Smith. It's called *Crossroads through a country town* and its images are detailed, complex, confused, and questioning.

The role of regional universities, especially in their relationships with their communities, is far less confused, far less complex and equally detailed. My own university has a symbiotic relationship with the city of Toowoomba. It is the largest employer, the largest skills base, a catalyst for development of a knowledge economy, the most significant higher education resource, the centre of much of the region's social and cultural activity, and enormously proud of its region.

The city, by word and action, reciprocates with almost unqualified support and an overt affection. The university's second campus in Wide Bay shares infrastructure with the Hervey Bay community and is the focus for intellectual activity in that region. It provides higher education to people who previously had no such opportunity.

There is, then, nothing novel or surprising about the notion of engaging with the community. Specific funding and policy initiatives that further build capacity are useful

areas for investigation. Much more importantly, there are several key "non-negotiables" in any success strategy:

In research, big is not necessarily beautiful, ARC funding is only one measure of success and the useful "outputs per input dollar" from some of the smaller players are "world class". The research contributions of USQ, with almost no ARC record, are regionally crucial, nationally significant and internationally competitive.

Paradoxically, my own regional university provides teaching and learning opportunities to students from over 100 countries. It is an e-learning specialist and the local region becomes part of a global jigsaw of opportunities. There is nothing "local" about being "regional".

The review reference group, with only one vice-chancellor from a non-metropolitan university, and no apparent other regional representation, MUST come to terms with the "world-class-ness" of what goes on in the regions.

There are massive challenges, and opportunities, ahead of us all.

■ **Professor Peter Swannell is vice-chancellor of the University of Southern Queensland**

Strategies aimed at more for less

MARY KALANTZIS says the discussion paper asks the right questions but gives us no indication of how long we will have to wait for the answers

THE paper outlines clearly the distinctiveness of the Australian higher education system and the challenges that confront it. If there are any answers to be gleaned from something which purports to be nothing more than a discussion paper, it is in strategies to get more for less – more education with less expenditure of public resources. The problem is that fiscal squeeze will not itself answer any of the laudable questions asked by the discussion paper.

A key section of the document focuses on 'Learning experience and outcomes'. Its logic reflects the spirit of a quote from a 1992 paper by US academic, D. Bruce Johnstone, claim-

ing that new technology should enable the "same learning outcomes goals in less time and at less cost". The emphasis is on efficiency, and on simply finding "new patterns of learning and teaching".

However, since then the internet has expanded globally, and new technologies have actually proved more costly to implement in a meaningful way than the old patterns of learning and teaching. Although the paper properly proclaims the "centrality of learning" in higher education, it proceeds to focus on "increased productivity" and matters of flexibility, cost reduction, standards setting, the establishment of

generic knowledge and skills sets, and assessment of graduate attributes.

Even if "increased productivity" were to become the main agenda for curriculum reforms, the industrial and management conditions for any such reforms are absent. Pressure to increase "productivity", through whatever means, is potentially a recipe for even lower levels of morale and instructional mayhem.

The paper is correct to stress the need to rethink pedagogy, curriculum and assessment as well as develop ways to enhance the quality and status

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Challenges of the knowledge economy

MILLICENT POOLE tackles some of the paper's big questions that involve world-class knowledge enhancement and whether or not we should have at least one world-class university

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

The resource-based foundations upon which Australia's economy was built are being replaced by a new globalised economy – the knowledge economy. Our economic future lies in the service industries and professions, where much of the employment growth will be.

There is an imbalance in the discussion paper as research is associated with science and technology. The humanities and social sciences are only briefly mentioned. No discussion is given to research in the human service professions, such as teaching, nursing, business,

health, tourism and information technology, which bring social benefits to the community.

New universities, those formed after 1988, often focus on the human service professions, concentrating their research effort on community needs. These universities are handicapped in their access to competitive grants. Unlike the older universities, they have not had 150 years to build their research infrastructure.

It does not make academic or economic sense to have many universities researching and teaching the same

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Crisis, what crisis, asks Nelson as the debate is launched

DISCUSSION BEGINS/BRIAN DONAGHY

AUSTRALIA does not have a single world-class university and under current arrangements does not have a hope of achieving that, according to the Minister for Education, Science and Training, Dr Brendan Nelson.

There were parts of Australian institutions which were world-best, "but the way the system is at the moment we will not, ever, have a world-class institution," he told the South Australian Press Club in Adelaide last week at the launch of Higher Education at the Crossroads.

"The decision I made within three weeks of becoming Minister was that the current status quo of universities will be very difficult to sustain.

"There are people in the sector who argue that there is a crisis in higher education. I understand why they argue that but I just say to them 'if you want to see a crisis in education go to the Northern Territory and go to places outside Darwin and Alice Springs and you will be able to tell me that only 16 out of 378 pass a basic Year 3 reading test and only 23 of 369 can pass a basic Year 5 reading test.' I'd suggest that is a crisis in education.

"... Or talk to the Australians of working age, who hear us talking about the internet and emails and connectedness to the rest of the world and they still do not know how to turn a computer on."

Given that the higher education sector had \$20 billion in fixed assets, \$4.4 billion in liquid assets, borrowings at the centre of \$426 million representing 2 per cent of asset values and revenues this year of \$10.4 billion, almost \$2 billion more than it had six years ago "then I don't consider that there is any serious ground for arguing that there is a crisis".

"But if you think about where we want Australian higher education to be, 10 or 20 years from now, then we have to make very serious decisions."

Higher Education at the Crossroads is the first in a series of higher education review discussion papers. The ideas and choices in the paper are not government policy, but are intended to stimulate discussion.

Subsequent papers would cover governance, administration, the interface between vocational education and training and higher education, finance, quality of teaching, research and quality and a final paper on specialisation and regional engagement, Nelson said.

It was "critically important" to ask, 13 years after John Dawkins amalgamated the universities and colleges of advanced education, and the introduction of HECS, "what defines a university? To what extent does teaching, scholarship and research combine in a university?"

Could, for example, an institution engaged in scholarship, teaching and research be a university if those activities were predominantly focused on the region in which it was based?

The second fundamental question was to ask who was going to university.

"We know that four out of 10 don't complete. One of those four comes back but of the other three half leave in the first year. Why do they leave? Why are they there in the first place? What should we be doing to support those students to see that they are less likely to leave?"

"There will always be attrition ... but let's make sure that the students go there for the right reasons."

Turning to specialisation, he noted that 20 per cent of the units offered in Australian universities had fewer than five students enrolled, and more than 4000 units had only

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Clashes loom over workplace reform issues

INDUSTRIAL/
JACQUI ELSON-GREEN

WORKPLACE reforms outlined in the Crossroads discussion paper could bring universities and unions to loggerheads and raise the hackles of academics if the proposals become reality.

Broadly arguing for greater flexibility, the paper targets pattern-bargaining as being counterproductive and goes so far as to suggest that the "very basis of EB is undermined" when locally agreed outcomes can be over-ruled by the union's national office.

These statements clearly reflect a lack of understanding of the importance of national standards to academics, according to the national president of the National Tertiary Education Union, Dr Carolyn Allport.

Allport said that because the academic workforce is so mobile, individuals who move around the sector want to know there are national standards on a range of matters from maternity leave through to salaries.

Institutional practices such as the increased rate of casualisation are perhaps more of an inflexibility in terms of the academic labour

force, Allport claims, pointing out that 78 per cent of all new employment growth in the sector is casual employment.

But executive director of the Australian Higher Education Industrial Association, Ian Argall, claims there is clearly some tension between the view supporting national standards and the need for greater responsiveness to the individual needs of enterprises.

"The whole point of EB is meant to have an enterprise rather than an industry focus," he tells *Campus Review*.

"Unfortunately universities have the worst of

all possible worlds because there is a very strong enterprise focus on the salary issue, but on almost everything else they have to deal with a national or industry-wide agenda developed by the NTEU."

They get all the pain but none of the gain, he argues, also noting that if universities are going to compete with each other they need to find their own niche and be able to do things a bit differently in order to best fill that niche.

"And that is antithetical to the idea of national

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