



Submission to

Department of Education Science and Training

HIGHER EDUCATION REVIEW

from

THE AUSTRALIAN EDUCATION UNION

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AEU SUBMISSION TO HIGHER EDUCATION REVIEW

The Australian Education Union (AEU) is pleased to make the following submission on the Ministerial Discussion Paper, *Higher Education at the Crossroads*.

The AEU represents 155,000 members across the spectrum of education provision in Australia and is vitally concerned and interested in the issues which the Discussion Paper traverses.

The AEU expresses its disappointment that there appears to be a continuing tendency to exclude unions, as the representative and professional voice of teachers, from a central role in policy reviews. We note that the Teacher Education Review also contains no representative from the AEU and we fear that the quality of the Review process may well suffer as a result. There seems to be a strong tendency to continue the exclusion of teachers' professional and industrial voice from critical policy analyses, a situation that had deleterious effects in the years of Dr Kemp.

We note that the "Crossroads" Paper is part of a continuing process of policy ideas and forums. As such, the AEU will continue to make further contributions to the debates as the process further unfolds. We note also the guidance given in the Paper that,

"197 The consultative questions and the issues raised in this paper are not exhaustive. They are intended to prompt and assist an open process of discussion throughout the Australian community."

In this light we submit the following:

1. The suggestion that a HECS-like system of fees be introduced into TAFE is cautioned against most strongly. The imposition of HECS in TAFE would change the character and student composition of TAFE fundamentally. It would most certainly lead to a higher financial burden on TAFE students. It would change the purpose and charter of TAFE as an integral part of Australia's public education system. It would undermine the principles of access and equity in TAFE. It would place a further disincentive for Australians to improve their skills and employability. It would lessen the nation's skill base. It would be an educational and social disaster.

2. The proposition that introducing HECS into TAFE would serve as a positive equity measure is rejected. All of the recent evidence in Australia in respect of HECS and previous university-style fee systems has seen a progressively increasing impost on students and families. It has served as a tax on learning and has impacted most heavily on those with modest financial means. In public statements on the issue, government spokespeople cite examples of students articulating from TAFE to university as a reason to consider HECS-style arrangements in TAFE. It would be profoundly regressive if the Discussion Paper process led to a disincentive for course articulation and acted as a brake and a tax on Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL).
3. The AEU notes that State and Territory Ministers with a responsibility for TAFE have unequivocally rejected the introduction of HECS into TAFE. This is a message of unprecedented clarity. It is in response to the Discussion Paper and represents a truly national view. In the spirit which the Discussion Paper claims for itself and with regard for sound Federal-State/Territory relations which we hope will underpin the policymaking of the Minister, we advise that this message be heeded. It is further noted the Minister in a media release (June 4) headed "No Commonwealth Plan to Introduce HECS To TAFE" is quoted in the text of the release as stating that: "The Government has not taken a decision to introduce HECS to TAFE". This has quite a different meaning from what the heading might indicate and raises further uncertainty about the issue.
4. The Discussion Paper suggests a direction in university policy which would lead to the creation of elite universities which privileged status and funding. As teachers with experience across the range of public education provision we would suggest that such a policy direction is educationally and historically regressive. It smacks of a university policy of previous centuries, where emphasis was given to the creation of privilege. We are reminded of John Raulston Saul's observation that one of the easiest and least productive things one can do in education policy is to create elites. Australia's future is to be met by spreading the quality of provision across the range of the population rather than giving resource emphasis to the inculcation of privileged access. In the schools sector, the Federal government's policy of subsidising the already advantaged has been divisive, controversial and widely seen as distributing funds disproportionately to the section of education that least needs it. It would be unfortunate if the university sector was to become subject to the same educational maladies. The goal of sound education policy across all sectors must be to gain the highest possible learning, skills and opportunity for the greatest possible number of

Australians. All students have the right to have access to, and aspire to, excellence.

5. The AEU would support a university system, which recognised diversity as opposed to hierarchy. We believe that the process of encouraging the development of a university sector with ever-worsening disparities in resourcing and esteem would be educationally and socially regressive. Such a policy would inevitably lead to a hierarchy of perceived worth in terms of what is studied and who is taught at the various universities. We are concerned that the kudos associated with graduating with teaching or education qualifications would be diminished if institutions educating such graduates were regarded as places of lesser worth or reputation. As the vital debates around professional standards in teaching continue across Australia it is essential that we work to further enhance pre-service university-based training for all who are entering the teaching profession. As such, we must ensure as a nation that our teacher training universities and courses are of the highest possible quality and reputation.
6. The AEU hopes that the Higher Education Review process leads to a clearer direction in relation to universities in which public policy drives much of the practice and decision-making inside our universities. We note that the overwhelming majority of our universities are public universities and as such they need to serve a public purpose and construct management, enrolment and governance policies which reflect public concerns and needs. We also reinforce the view that funding from government for universities must focus exclusively on our public universities.
7. We believe that the Federal government, in collaboration with State and Territory governments, should construct National Priorities for the university sector which would lead to appropriate support, direction and encouragement from government. One of the most important of these National Priorities should be in the area of teacher supply. The looming teacher supply crisis needs urgent attention and it cannot be simply left to the managerial discretion of university administrators. Resource support and political direction needs to be set in order to ensure that our universities produce the sufficient number of quality teachers our nation will require in the years ahead to meet the curriculum needs of our school students. This will involve a co-ordinated approach from all levels of government and a sustained resource commitment.
8. The Federal government has a particular responsibility and opportunity to develop policy in relation to the educational opportunities for

Indigenous Australians. The AEU believes that the Federal government must urgently develop policies, which lead to a substantial increase in the number of Indigenous Australians attending and succeeding at university. This will require specific Federal intervention in enrolment policy, income support and curriculum development to ensure that there is a massive boost in the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students graduating from Australian universities.

9. As the union with the bulk of our membership in the school and TAFE sectors we have constant first-hand experience of the negative effects the rising cost of a university education has on those most socially disadvantaged. The high level of personal or family income students have to devote to a university education has discouraged countless thousands of socio-economically disadvantaged students to even aspire to a university education. It is imperative that the provision of scholarships be substantially increased in order to allow able students of modest means to enter and stay at university. It is also essential that the current means-test thresholds be revised to allow a greater a far greater proportion of capable students to enrol at university.
10. Recent proposals from certain university bodies which seek the further deregulation of student fees would certainly have the effect of discouraging school students from disadvantaged backgrounds from aspiring to a university education. We know as teachers of school students that such processes, which are formed in the context of increasing the private costs of university education will deter many students permanently from attending university. Government policies which increase the burden on families and diminishes the hope and expectation of ordinary Australians that they might attend university inevitably raise the real prospect that to aim for university has the concomitant certainty of long-term debt. Merit, not the capacity to pay, should determine university entrance policy. Such deregulation of fees will certainly lead to a more unequal Australia.