

DASSH Submission to the Higher Education Base Funding Review: Consultation Paper

Introduction

The Australasian Council of Deans of Arts and Social Sciences (DASSH) welcomes the review of Higher Education Base Funding and the opportunity to provide a submission to the review. DASSH is the authoritative agency on research, teaching and learning for the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities (ASSH) in Australian and New Zealand universities. DASSH represents the Deans of 44 university faculties, that teach over one third of university students (140,000) Australia wide.

DASSH particularly welcomes the government's commitment to indexation and to increase Higher Education funding from 2013, to redress real loss in revenue over the past decade and a half. DASSH also welcomes the government's goals of social inclusion and increased participation in higher education as recommended by the Bradley Review of Higher Education.

This submission makes four key points which support the achievement of these goals, relevant to the Consultation paper.

- 1) The need for proper recognition of the substantive *social value* of higher education gained through a generalist degree, and the importance of ASSH disciplines in building this social value;
- 2) That student contributions to higher education should be reduced to be no higher than the *OECD average*, and that government contributions to higher education should be raised to at least the *OECD average*;
- 3) Assuming an *outputs* focussed model of base funding, the base funding model should reflect the value of the arts, humanities and social sciences in higher education, the importance of promoting excellence in learning and teaching, and the significant teaching and student support resources required to achieve increased higher education participation and better social inclusion; and
- 4) That any review of the relative *funding* of different discipline clusters should attend to the base cost of preserving *strategic discipline* areas that may experience low student enrolments.

1. The social value of higher education

DASSH agrees that the basic principles justifying government funding of higher education — benefits to the economy, benefits to society and equity of access for students from all socioeconomic backgrounds — should continue to be applied (Q1.1 Consultation Paper p.3).

The Consultation Paper and the Bradley Review note the importance of recognising the benefits to society of higher education, even though the social value of education may be difficult to quantify and measure (Background Paper, Section 7, pp.57-60). Simon Marginson recently noted "The problem for higher education is that its contributions to collective literacy, economic imagining, public ethics and tolerant social relations aren't measurable for economic purposes." (*The Age* Feb 15, 2011)

DASSH argues that whilst it is recognised that many significant aspects of social value are difficult to measure directly (those aspects that are not readily indicated by higher wages, increased taxation revenues or economic stimulation), it is important to recognise the substantive benefits to society from a general humanities or social science education.

DASSH wishes to draw to the review's attention the civic benefits of higher education and the value of ASSH discipline education to social and civic life. Among these are the evidence that a community that includes in its membership significant proportion of ASSH graduates is more likely to defend civic goods like social cohesion, respect, toleration, and a commitment to defence of the vulnerable. The American philosopher, Martha Nussbaum has recently written

The arts and humanities teach children the critical thinking that is necessary for independent action and for intelligent resistance to the power of blind tradition and authority. Students of art and literature also learn to imagine the situations of others, a capacity that is essential for a successful democracy, a necessary cultivation of our "inner eyes".

When practiced at their best, moreover, these other disciplines are infused by what we might call the spirit of the humanities: by searching critical thought, daring imagination, empathetic understanding of human experiences of many different kinds, and understanding the complexity of the world we live in. Science education in recent years has rightly focused on education the capacities for critical thinking, logical analysis and imagining. Science, rightly pursued, is a friend of the humanities. (M. C Nussbaum, 2010 *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, 7-8)

The Arts, Social Science and Humanities (ASSH) disciplines are vital in building these social benefits. While all higher education provides students with transferable skills, ASSH study provides a breadth of understanding, knowledge, critical reflection on, and cultural awareness of the human condition. Such inquiry is needed in complex modern communities and for effective responses to global challenges including climate change and demand for democracy and global justice as well as intercultural recognition. An ASSH education contributes directly to understanding of the history, culture and values of our community and those of our neighbours. It equips graduates with specific knowledge derived from the study of Australia's history, politics, society and culture and with specific skills in critical analysis, effective communication and an appreciation of different value systems and perspectives. While Australia does not need every graduate to have an ASSH education, ASSH disciplines are vital to engaged citizenship and promotion of the common good.

The social value of a higher education, and of ASSH study in particular, need to be properly recognised. A fuller recognition of substantive social benefits of generalist and study is necessary in order to develop and harness these benefits.

2. OECD contribution, access and participation

The consultation paper explores the issue of what should be the appropriate level of student and government contributions to the cost of education should be. The general argument for higher student contributions and lower government contributions revolve around the expected increase in a graduate's income due to their educational contribution. A comparison of levels of contribution by students and government across OECD countries shows that Australia's average annual tertiary tuition fees (HECS) are relatively high (Background Paper p.32), whilst public expenditure on tertiary education institutions per student in Australia is below the OECD average (Background Paper, Figure 3.6, p.33). The proportion of public funding for tertiary institutions has been decreasing across the OECD in recent years. Nonetheless, the share of higher education from government in Australia has been consistently lower than the average for OECD countries since 1995, the earliest year for which comparable data are available (Background Paper, Figure 3.5, p.32). Since 1994 the Government contribution per student place has declined approximately 20%. There was a small rise in 2004 and 2005, bringing 2010 CGS funding back to 1999 levels. Over the same period (1994-2010) student contributions have doubled (Background Paper, Figure 3.3, p.30,).

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DASSH argues that the review should aim to set the level of student and government contributions at the OECD average, if it is to achieve its social objectives of participation and social inclusion. Setting the student contribution at a high or higher level is in tension with the government's goals of equity of access for all students. Those students least able to pay (or who view a large HECS liability as a disincentive to further study) are often those who are less likely to go to University for socio-economic reasons. Whilst the Australian Government provides greater student assistance than other OECD countries with lower fees (Background Paper p.33), high fees create impediments to participation that are in tension with the government's goals for participation from all socioeconomic groups and to achieve increased levels of participation amongst low SES students by 2020. In particular, students who would be "first in family" to attend University are those likely to view HECS liability as a disincentive as are mature-aged married women whose household income is just below average household income.

As indicated above, the social values of generalist higher education enjoyed by communities depend on a broad participation of their members, and are not immediately reflected in higher incomes.

3. An 'outputs' model

The review seeks advice on how a base funding model can be incentives for institutions to invest in and deliver high quality teaching (Q6.1 & 6.3 Consultation Paper, p.11). DASSH argues that resources should be put into achieving quality teaching and student outcomes.

The current model of base funding is based on inputs (student load). Assuming that the government's commitments to indexation of funding are met, and that the erosion of the real value of commonwealth funding ends, then DASSH argues that a move to output funding should reflect achievement of the goals of excellence in learning and teaching as well as equity and participation. For example, by linking funding to demonstrated outcomes (successful course completion) for low SES students and to students who are the first in their family to go to University. Incentives would include paying a premium for successful completions by students in these target areas, noting that achieving these outcomes are likely to involve a significant investment in enhancing teaching and student support, given that students in these target areas are often less well prepared for university study.

High quality education requires well-trained academics who retain knowledge and understanding of the pedagogy, scholarship and current debate within their disciplines. The link between excellence in teaching and research capacity has been diminished by the erosion of funding to higher education in Australia, which has caused the increasing casualisation of the academic workforce. While many casual academics strive for teaching excellence, their work conditions preclude significant attention to curriculum development, pedagogy, research and scholarship in the disciplines required for high quality university education.

4. Cost of teaching particular disciplines

The review asks whether the current funding relativities reflect the relative cost of delivering undergraduate courses in particular disciplines (Q3.1 Consultation Paper, p.6). The Bradley review noted the cluster funding differentials reflect historical assumptions about the cost of teaching and that the "current range of Commonwealth subsidies across fields of study bears little relationship to the actual cost of teaching or to any notional public benefits" (Bradley Review 2008:161). DASSH agrees with Bradley's findings and argues that these historical assumptions are not defensible and they do not accurately reflect difference between teaching patterns in different disciplines, nor reflect significant changes in teaching practices in between and within disciplines.

In ASSH disciplines there have been significant innovations in teaching, including increased use of field work in social science disciplines, development of a wide range of flexible delivery methods

across ASSH disciplines, different patterns of teaching (including online and intensive teaching modes); use of interactive technologies in languages, journalism and communication studies. Earlier assumptions about lab-based versus classroom based teaching are not readily defended. Similarly, the development of online and flexibly delivered teaching require substantial cost in development and maintenance of curricula that is not reflected in the disciplinary cluster funding.

The current model of education funding, aiming at the average marginal cost of teaching students, risks strategic disciplines with diminishing student demands. For example, the teaching of Indonesian (*Near Neighbours – Good Neighbours: An Inquiry into Australia's Relationship with Indonesia*, May 2004) The current funding formula does not create incentives for cross-institutional collaboration in development of teaching materials or course delivery. As a result it is very difficult to either protect low-enrolment strategic disciplines or to reduce inefficiencies in the sector.

If the government wants to promote high quality teaching, then funding needs to take account of the real costs of delivering quality education, and not just the marginal costs of teaching additional student load. In the ASSH case, this means recognising disciplinary differences, changing teaching patterns and curriculum and recognising the necessity of funding research, curriculum development and pedagogy, and skills development of University teachers and research staff.

Conclusion

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the base funding review. We recognise that there will be many submissions across the higher education sector. DASSH has sought to specifically comment on a few areas where the disciplines of arts, social sciences and humanities continue to be disaffected by government funding.



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