

Submission to the Review of the Demand Driven Funding System Australasian Council of Deans of Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities (DASSH)

The Australasian Council of Deans of Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities (DASSH) supports the position of Universities Australia in relation to the review of the Demand Driven System for funding places at Australasian Universities. DASSH shares the Minister's expressed concern to expand Australian higher education to enhance knowledge and capabilities of Australians to contribute to society in the context of a global economy effectively. DASSH supports the following principles for improvements to the demand driven system:

1. That it supports Australian universities to provide high quality educational qualifications, through appropriate accountability measures.
2. That it includes equity provisions to ensure that students from low-SES, indigenous and regional groups are not disadvantaged in their access to higher education.
3. That it permits universities the autonomy to develop different courses and modes of delivery of programs designed to meet student demand and workforce needs.
4. That it supports universities in providing pre-degree programs for students who are less well-prepared for university study.
5. That it continues to preserve the autonomy of universities to decide how to best spend its block grant allocation; and that steps are taken to ensure strategically important areas of study and expertise are preserved within Australia.
6. That it supports collaboration and partnerships between universities and between universities and other educational providers to develop educational innovation.

Increased participation

The demand driven system has only been in place for two years, and thus it is difficult to make definitive claims about its impact. The evidence thus far shows that it has increased access to the transformational opportunities of higher education to students from low socio-economic status backgrounds with the increase of applications from and offers to these students being higher than those of other socio-economic groupings.

Socioeconomic status (SES)

- Applications from applicants from low SES backgrounds have shown the largest increase (1.3%) compared with those from medium SES backgrounds (0.4%) and high SES backgrounds (0.3%).
- Offers to applicants from low SES backgrounds have also shown the largest increase (1.7%) compared with offers to applicants from medium SES backgrounds (0.6%) and high SES backgrounds (0.2%).
- However, applications by applicants from low SES backgrounds were less likely to result in an offer. Their offer rate was 79.7% compared with 81.5% for medium SES applications and 83.4% for high SES applications in 2013.

<http://www.innovation.gov.au/highereducation/ResourcesAndPublications/HigherEducationPublications/HigherEducationReports/Documents/UndergraduateApplicationsOffers2013.pdf>

Quality

We support those who argue that continuation of the demand driven system requires appropriate accountability by higher education providers to ensure that the quality of Australian qualifications is protected.

Innovation and responsiveness to student demand

DASSH notes that the demand driven system has had the impact of increasing demand for Group of Eight universities, reducing demand for regional universities and reducing demand for key ASSH programs (creative arts and architecture) (<http://www.artshub.com.au/education/news-article/opinions/arts-education/arts-vulnerable-in-education-review-197308>). Universities and Faculties of Arts, Social Science and Humanities have responded to the perceived threat to low demand programs such as languages by redesigning their degree requirements to ensure the viability of these programs (e.g. through breadth or broadening programs), while also ensuring that students get a well-rounded education and achieve the graduate attributes of their course. Regional universities have begun to offer new courses and modes of course delivery (e.g. flexible learning, online modules) aimed at attracting students who are not well-catered to by major metropolitan universities.

There is, nonetheless, a continued risk that some areas of study that are strategically important for Australia's interests (e.g. the study of Indonesian), are already under threat and may not be able to attract sufficient student demand to be viable in the demand driven system, and so a separate means of protecting those areas of study may be required beyond market forces; including increased support at high school level for studying a language.

DASSH believes that it is vital that universities are able to operate and adjust their courses and modes of delivery in response to the market without political interference. Universities should be able to close low enrolment courses and enter into flexible degree and funding arrangements across institutions.

Pre-degree programs and support for student learning

For the demand driven system to achieve the promise of increasing the proportion of Australian students with higher education qualifications and of improving access by low-SES students to university education, the cap on pre-degree programs should be revisited. In many universities, pre-degree bridging or foundation programs have been developed to ensure that students who come to higher education through non-traditional routes are not disadvantaged when they enter higher education. The capping of pre-degree enrolments frustrates this effort and supports the conditions that could lead to lessening of educational standards and the learning experience of students.

Skill needs in the economy

There is a risk that the demand driven system may accelerate the trend to equate a professional qualification with employability and to discount the employability of students with generalist degrees, like the BA and BSc. The Graduate Destinations

surveys have noted a significant growth in the proportion of graduates who have undertaken bachelor degrees in the broad field of study of ‘society and culture’ to report that their undergraduate qualification is important for their main paid jobs (Beyond Graduation 2012). ASSH graduates are employed across a wide spectrum of industries and professions. Further, while graduates with bachelor qualifications in the society and culture broad field of study have lower median starting salaries immediately following graduation, five years after graduation their median salaries are equivalent to average five-year post-graduation median salaries (Beyond Graduation 2012). This trend is borne out by similar US and UK surveys (Carnevale and Cheh 2013, “Hard Times, College Majors, Unemployment and Earnings” <http://cew.georgetown.edu/unemployment2013/> ; UK Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2013 Longitudinal data <http://www.hesa.ac.uk/content/view/2974/>).

In sum, early evidence suggests that the demand driven system is increasing participation; improving access for students from low socio-economic status backgrounds and rural and regional communities; and meeting the skill needs in the economy. The reforms have also encouraged innovation, competition, diversity and greater responsiveness to student demand including development of new modes of delivery (such as online learning).

There are some emerging unintended consequences, such as sudden load shifts that require more flexibility across universities (both domestic and international) to offer joint degrees, targeted infrastructure spending in ASSH through sophisticated teaching spaces that enhance problem-solving and use of digital technology to support blended delivery of courses, and a need to reassess the extreme disparity in funding across disciplines that restricts the capacity of facilities to respond quickly to changing preferences. These are all welcome developments by DASSH.