

Blueprint for diversity --- TAFE DIRECTORS DEFEND CALL FOR INSTITUTIONAL GROWTH

Bruce Mackenzie *The Australian* August 11, 2010

IN a comment piece in last week's HES ("TAFE degrees risk devaluing our tertiary qualifications"), Swinburne University of Technology vice-chancellor Ian Young claimed TAFE Directors Australia was proposing that bachelors, masters and PhD programs could be conducted in TAFE institutions, and worse still, have them funded by government.

This proposition, according to Professor Young, has the potential to damage the entire higher education sector. The claims made are, presumably, based upon analysis of TDA's Blueprint for Tertiary Education.

The article contained inaccuracies requiring clarification. It reminds of an observation made by Peter Karmel that universities see themselves as a private club.

The article is offensive to students and staff in TAFE institutions as well as the many professional associations and employer groups that employ our graduates and are willing participants in industry partnerships.

To imply that a TAFE institution is incapable and disinterested in maintaining the quality of its higher education is not only a criticism of TAFE, but also of the same quality system that all higher education providers must abide by, including universities.

I intend to address the inaccuracies briefly, but before doing so I think that it is important to explain the thought processes behind the TDA document, because it is designed to recognise that institutions evolve and that institutional growth can be hastened through co-operation.

It is very disappointing that the Structural Adjustment Budget funding was not extended to grow the higher education sector, but remained the province of universities only. It was an opportunity missed.

The TDA document was framed around a number of views, first that despite the billions of dollars that have been allocated to universities over the past 20 years, little has changed in the composition of the tertiary student body, segregation of the privileged on campus remains a fact of life, as it has for the past 70 years.

Second, Australia has a massive skills shortage primarily in areas that have been the domain of tertiary education, as evidenced recently by Skills Australia. Our view was that

addressing the tertiary-level skills shortages was an important function of tertiary education and it had not been addressed by existing arrangements.

Third, we are influenced by history, Winston Churchill's adage "the further you can see back, the further you can see forward" holds true. Many universities have become universities not because of any claims to scholarly activities or outstanding teaching but because the federal government in 1990s legislated out of existence colleges of advanced education.

Many of these colleges, such as Swinburne, were practical-minded places with histories that stretched back to the schools and mines and the working mens' college of the gold rush era. These institutions are now comfortable within their place and position in higher education as universities. The TDA blueprint creates an environment for the growth of new types of tertiary institution in Australia not dissimilar to what happened with the CAEs of the 90s.

Fourth, we hold the view that tertiary education institutions have a positive role to play in economically and socially complex societies. The amalgamations of the 90s were part of the Labor government's attempts to modernise the economy and build a responsive, egalitarian and innovative higher education sector. This was to be achieved by creating a diverse group of institutions. Unfortunately, what has happened is that Australia 's publicly funded higher education is overwhelmingly limited to a single sector, notably universities, and diversity has not occurred.

TDA asserts that Australia, in addition to what now exists in higher education, needs institutions that proudly proclaim scholarship and teaching excellence as goals.

That we need institutions that are proud of their association with industry and believe unashamedly in preparing Australians for careers through applied and student-centred learning.

That being responsive to Australia 's skills shortage needs is an important function of tertiary institutions.

In the 90s there were 76 publicly funded higher education institutions in Australia spread geographically throughout the country. There are fewer than 40 receiving government funding and they are limited in their geographic spread.

TAFE, with its massive enrolments and good geographic spread, is well placed to provide enhanced access to tertiary education, a key component of this country's long-term economic success.

We were influenced by the Bradley report. TDA's blueprint is an attempt to communicate a clear vision of how a more vibrant, diverse and higher quality tertiary education sector can

be created. The blueprint does nothing more than elaborate on key statements contained in the Bradley report, and in six areas that Universities Australia and TDA agreed in April this year, could lead to a strengthened tertiary education sector. I would want to stress that the blueprint's elaborations are not those of Universities Australia .

Contrary to the claims in the article, TDA's blueprint does not assert TAFEs should be given government funding for PhDs, masters and bachelors degrees.

It does not suggest that TAFEs should be reshaped as pseudo universities (some might say this happened to CAEs in the 90s).

It does not suggest that TAFE should abandon its important role in vocational education and training. It is a curious fact that many see vocational education in the very narrowest of terms.

Vocational education is part of the post-compulsory and tertiary landscape and our vocational skill shortage needs are overwhelmingly tertiary;

And, it never infers that TAFE would erode the international education marketplace by developing substandard degrees that would somehow gain accreditation. TAFE institutions' international programs more than any other education group have been decimated by substandard quality regimes.

The blueprint did, however, say many things. Importantly it suggested modifying the Bradley recommendation that the Australian government extend the tertiary entitlement. It argued that CSPs should be available in areas of national skills shortages and that TAFE institutions offering degrees have access to CSPs.

It did suggest that the national protocols for higher education approval processes be changed, that university colleges be removed and a new category of higher education institution be created that could offer up to masters degrees in three broad fields of study. These institutions do not exist; they could in the future and some TAFE institutions and private providers may aspire to this level.

The blueprint does stress that the regulatory framework in tertiary education must not compromise quality.

TAFE has suffered reputational damage in recent years because of poor regulation. The accreditation process that a TAFE institution is subject to and the eight criteria that TDA and UA agreed as a framework for higher education accreditation are significant and very important in relation to quality in tertiary education.

TDA's blueprint is consistent with the spirit of the existing national protocols in concert with the Bradley review and the principles agreed between UA and TDA on tertiary

education. The fact is that there is no such qualification in Australian higher education as a TAFE degree, nor is there a category called a university degree. They are all higher education degrees and all are subject to the same quality standards.

There are formidable entry-level requirements to becoming a higher education provider and rigorous quality processes to implement.

If the incorrect structural arrangements persist then Australia's tertiary skills shortages will never be met and systems such as government-funded health and education will become unaffordable for the average Australian. An American-style health system is not what most Australians want and from a social perspective it is undesirable.

TDA believes that the criterion of a student-centred, accessible, institutionally diverse and relevant tertiary education sector is critical to Australia's standard of living. For Australia to meet its skill needs the system needs to be re-engineered, as happened in the 90s. TDA's blueprint assists in providing a framework. Closed systems are unsustainable in a modern economy.

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