

Submission

From the University of Melbourne Postgraduate Association

To

Department of Education, Science and Training

Adult Learning Consultation

April 2004

YOU CAN TOO

Adult Learning in Australia

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Introduction

The University of Melbourne Postgraduate Association (UMPA) represents all postgraduate students at the University of Melbourne. This is some 11,000 students, the largest single group of postgraduates in the country. UMPA acknowledges that the federal government recently conducted an extensive consultation process into Higher Education. UMPA made detailed submissions to the Crossroads review and in response to the government's proposed reforms as outlined in Backing Australia's Future and in the Higher Education Support Bill that developed from that. These submissions are available on the UMPA web site (www.umpa.unimelb.edu.au). UMPA acknowledges also that the focus of the consultation "You Can Too" is on "learning for vocational, social, civic and personal purposes" and that this could be seen as an attempt to distinguish adult learning from the more formal and traditional postgraduate study undertaken in the Higher Education system. Moreover, the "adults" referred to in the consultation paper are defined as "aged 25 and over" (Adult Learning in Australia p.3).

UMPA has decided to make a contribution to the consultation process for two reasons. Firstly the separation of "vocational, social, civic and personal" from some other purpose that might be called "academic" is an arbitrary and notional distinction of dubious merit. The social and civic good derived from a robust and well supported postgraduate education system is a benefit that no-one would now seriously question. (See, for example, Feinstein et al "The Contribution of Adult Learning to Health and Social Capital"). At a time of increasing promotion of and participation in professional qualifications, many postgraduate courses are undoubtedly "vocational". And the federal government was quite happy to argue for the personal individual benefits of Higher Education when it advocated for drastically increased fees for university courses in Backing Australia's Future and the associated legislation. Secondly, as the following table shows (source: DEST Higher Education Statistics, 2003), almost 80% of commencing domestic postgraduate students in 2003 were over the age of 25.

	Doctor by Research	Doctor by Coursework	Master by Research	Master by Coursework	Other Postgraduate	Total
Under 25	1467/30%	56/21%	415/22%	3993/18%	5925/21%	11856/21%
Over	3328/70%	210/79%	1483/78%	17734/82%	21657/79%	44412/79%

UMPA has therefore decided to make submission in four of the seven areas listed in the consultation paper, as they relate to the particular circumstances and needs of UMPA's constituent members:

- Understanding the needs of adult learners
- Building relationships between service providers, employers, government and the community
- Assisting mature-age transitions
- Ensuring access to opportunities

Understanding the needs of adult learners

The needs of adult learners can be divided into two categories: their needs as learners from a pedagogical point of view, and their needs as students in terms of support and ancillary services. There is a wealth of information, theory and research into the pedagogical styles and needs of adult learners. A review of the literature indicates general agreement with the following to distinguish adult learners from child learners.

Adults:

- Are autonomous and self-directed (they must be actively engaged in the learning process)
- Have accumulated a foundation of life experiences and knowledge (they need to connect this to any new learning)
- Are goal-oriented (learning must help them attain goals)
- Are relevancy oriented (learning has to be applicable to their work or responsibilities)
- Are practical (they may not be interested in knowledge for its own sake)
- Need to be shown respect (their wealth of experience should be acknowledged)

In addition, the literature on adult learning typically identifies motivation as a key factor, and outlines common barriers that adult learners (as opposed to schoolchildren) face. Major barriers are:

“lack of time, money, confidence, or interest, lack of information about opportunities to learn, scheduling problems, ‘red tape’ and problems with child care and transportation.” (Stephen Lieb)

By and large, UMPA would argue that these pedagogical concerns relate equally to postgraduate students in the formal higher education system as well as they do to adult learners who are the more direct focus of the consultation. The barriers associated with time and money, and the associated concerns such as child care and transport are particularly pertinent in an area where postgraduate fees are deregulated and where, at the time of writing, the majority of universities that have so far decided will raise their HECS

fees by 25%. Financial and other resource issues will be covered in response to later questions in the consultation.

A common and useful distinction that is made in postgraduate studies is between those students enrolled in coursework postgraduate courses and those enrolled in research degrees. UMPA's position on the needs of both coursework and research students is to support the Council of Postgraduate Association's (CAPA) "CAPA Model Code for the Conduct of Postgraduate Research and Statement of Minimum Resources" and the CAPA "Statement of Minimum Resources for Postgraduate Study" both of which are available on the CAPA website at www.capa.edu.au. UMPA further endorses the conclusions of the study recently conducted by Reid, Rennie and Shortland-Jones for the Australian Universities Teaching Committee into "Best Practice in Professional Postgraduate Coursework".

Building relationships between service providers, employers, government and the community

UMPA's position on the funding relationship between universities and the government is clear and unequivocal:

"UMPA believes that higher education should receive sufficient public funding so that undergraduate and postgraduate courses should be free. This can only come about through the adoption of appropriate spending priorities, and through a progressive taxation system." (UMPA Submission to the inquiry Into Higher Education Funding and Regulatory Legislation p.15).

The government will no doubt continue to argue that there should be a significant private contribution to universities, and universities over recent years have put considerable financial and human resources into trying to attract funds to replace the shortfall from government spending cutbacks. Unfortunately, this enthusiasm for private investment in higher education appears not to be shared by the private sector itself. Government cutbacks have been replaced not by funds from the private sector but by significantly increased contributions by students. A 1998 OECD survey showed that Australia has the third highest level of student contribution to education compared to other OECD countries. Accumulated HECS debt is now approximately \$10 billion, despite the fact that OECD statistics show that in Australia, educational qualifications result in less increase to income levels compared to the OECD average (see Hastings, G. and Stansfield, R. "Briefing Paper on Higher Education Reform" NUS 2003). According to a recent study, the ratio of academic staff to students deteriorated in the 1990s by 28.9% while the total income per student rose by only 9.8%. Add to this the fact that of \$2.6 billion spent in 1998 on research and development in Higher Education, only \$0.136 billion or 5% was contributed by business (source: UMPA submission to the Ministerial Review of Higher Education 2002 p. 52), and the inescapable conclusion is that the teaching and research functions that were in the past supported by government funding are not being supported by the new sources of income that were meant to take their place.

On the question of relationships between universities and communities, UMPA continues to remain unimpressed with the interactions between the University and the City of Melbourne given the lack of concrete outcomes for postgraduate students. Student housing is expensive and increasingly ghetto-like (eg. College Square). Little thought has been devoted to international student postgraduate transitions. While UMPA has an ongoing relationship with postgraduate students on a representation and service basis, UMPA itself has no relationship with the City of Melbourne. This is truly ironic considering the fact that the City, given its high student population (approximately 25%), is undoubtedly one of the great University cities of the world. The contrast with other University cities, such as Lund in Sweden, is stark. The City of Melbourne's youth strategy is one dimensional and misses the adult learner mark. The City needs a University strategy. UMPA would welcome positive collaboration that led to better outcomes for adult learners.

Assisting Mature Age Transitions

A common feature of reports and studies concerned with the transition to study of mature age people is the insistence that they are likely to need a greater range of support than are students moving directly from the school system to the higher education system, even though there has been a concentration of effort in the last 20 years on the area of "First Year Transition". For example, a detailed research report produced for the UK Department for Education and Skills (DfES) lists several "discouraging factors" that work to prevent 21 to 30 year olds (the focus of the study) from participating in higher education. These include:

"lack of access to knowledge and information, identity and cultural factors, cost and the perceived cost of participating, time and other responsibilities/commitments." (Ross et al Research Brief p.1)

This and other studies lead to the inescapable conclusion that extra resources are needed. As the report's authors conclude: "It is also important to note that successfully recruiting and retaining mature students...requires additional resources." (Ross et al Research Brief p.4). In the detail of the research report they refer to key groups whose opportunities for access to higher education and whose ability to navigate their way successfully through it are particularly constrained – notably women and students from low socio-economic backgrounds. These groups will be looked at in more detail in response to the next section of the consultation.

Ensuring Access to Opportunities

In the consultation paper "You Can Too", a supplementary question in relation to this issue is "How can we improve access to opportunities for disadvantaged groups?" ("You Can Too" p.19). If we take disadvantaged groups to mean those six equity groups designated by DEET in 1990, then the recently released report of the Review of Equity Groups 1991 to 2002 makes interesting reading. The report finds that in general, people

from low socio-economic backgrounds and people from outside urban regions continue to be under-represented in higher education.

These general findings are mirrored in a CAPA report of 2003 (“Improving access and equity for postgraduates from rural and isolated areas”). This report found that “DEST statistics show that rural students made up 19.37% of total new enrolments in 1992, and 19.51% in 2000.” In fact, the picture for postgraduate enrolments, that is the enrolment of “adult learners” in terms of this consultation, was worse:

“Total postgraduate enrolments for rural students have hovered around 16,000 nationally between 1996 and 2002 and total enrolments for postgraduates from isolated areas have dropped to 1788 in 2002 from 1981 in 1996.” (p.3)

A number of commonwealth schemes are designed to assist rural universities, but most focus on geographic areas rather than on students. And while the introduction of Commonwealth Accommodation Scholarships as part of the Higher Education Support Act 2003 is welcomed, it is not satisfactory that these scholarships are available only to undergraduates and thus exclude the adult learners who make up the majority of the postgraduate student population. In terms of students over 25 (“adult learners”), it is true that they are eligible for Austudy. However, the courses approved for Austudy exclude most Masters courses and all Doctorate courses, and thus preclude the bulk of UMPA’s members from accessing them. The plethora of income and assets tests reflects a system not based on the principle of supporting those in need but on rigid and narrow enforcement of a user-pays principle whenever possible.

It may be an unpalatable fact for the government, but the solution to the problems of attracting and retaining adult learners, in the words of the consultation paper, to the issue of ensuring access to opportunities, comes down to a question of adequate levels of financial support. The government will no doubt argue that such support should be provided by the institutions themselves. This is but another recipe for continued inequity. That the government no longer mandates the HECS level of commonwealth funded courses does not mean that any courses will be cheaper, as the numbers of universities who have applied the maximum allowed 25% increase across the board shows. Shortfalls in government funding and a failure of the corporate sector to replace them mean that that the only way higher education institutions can be sure of raising extra revenue to provide more scholarships and targeted programs is to embark on the farcical and paradoxical path of charging students more money so that they can provide extra financial support in recognition of the students’ difficulties in paying!

This is not simply rhetoric. Studies of access and retention carried out for the UK DfES show that: “some barriers to widening participation were probably beyond removal by institutions alone; (in particular student finance and support were mentioned)” (Thomas et al 2001). In more detail related to adult learners, they say:

“Widening participation, especially for mature adults from severely disadvantaged areas, presents some challenges that may well be beyond the

powers of the most WP [widening participation]–oriented institution to solve...The funding issue is a matter of concern...a commitment to WP has to be financed by trimming budgets elsewhere.” (Thomas et al p.9)

It might be argued further that the introduction of loans will ease students’ immediate financial burden. This notion is problematic for all adult learners and particularly for women postgraduates. A CAPA paper on the effects of PELS on postgraduate women (2001) found that a loan scheme such as PELS (to be subsumed under the FEE/Help scheme from 2005) will not ameliorate the deterrent effect of escalating, deregulated fees for postgraduate courses. There are more women than men studying postgraduate coursework courses, and women make up the majority from low socio-economic backgrounds. Postgraduate destination surveys, moreover, show consistently that women, on average, earn less than men, even after postgraduate study. Having already taken on a range of “adult” responsibilities such as house ownership and families, these women are unlikely to relish the thought of another significant debt burden.

With regard to providing adequate levels of financial support for adult learners, so that their participation can match the rhetoric of all political parties’ commitment to “lifelong learning”, UMPA welcomes and endorses the findings and recommendations of the recent report on Poverty and Financial Hardship. Of particular relevance are the following recommendations.

Recommendation 1

4.32 That the Commonwealth Government develop a national jobs strategy to:

- Ensure a substantial investment is made in education, training and skill development

Recommendation 70

14.43 That the Commonwealth and State Governments set national minimum standards for access to essential community services, such as health, education and welfare services in rural and regional areas

Recommendation 75

15.27.1 That the Commonwealth increase support to educational and other programs which enable older Australians to remain active members of the workforce

Summary

Adult learning makes a significant contribution to Australian social capital and to the health and well-being of the individuals and groups who undertake it. Postgraduate students such as those represented by UMPA provide the research, creativity and innovation vital for the modern economy. The costs associated with postgraduate study increase at such a rate that they become more and more difficult to bear by all postgraduates, and they serve to exclude more and more prospective students from particular equity groups (analysis of postgraduate coursework fees from 2001 to 2004 shows an **average** increase of 31% over that period). Student support measures are inadequate to compensate for the rising costs, and the provision of adequate student support is beyond the means of individual institutions. If any government is to do more than make rhetorical pronouncements on the value of adult learning, then it will have to increase significantly the financial support to Higher education institutions and to the students who attend them.

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