

Griffith University

Response to the Australian Government's discussion paper *Expansion of the Commonwealth scholarships program*

Griffith University is pleased for this opportunity to comment on the department's discussion paper on the expansion of the Commonwealth scholarships program.

Definition of priority disciplines for the new national priority scholarships

Griffith University submits that in addition to nursing, teaching, medicine, dentistry, allied health, mathematics, science and engineering, priority disciplines should include midwifery, environmental engineering and water management, and human services particularly in mental health, disability, rehabilitation and employment services and community rehabilitation if they are not already included in allied health. Accounting and information technology are other disciplines which meet critical workforce needs which should be included as priority disciplines.

Griffith submits that priority disciplines should take account of State and regional needs. Since universities have developed specialisations and programs in response to local needs, the Commonwealth should invite universities to submit proposals for national priority programs from time to time.

Some postgraduate programs leading to occupational qualifications in national priority areas take, together with their required undergraduate program, 1 EFTSL longer to complete than the undergraduate programs leading to the same occupational outcome. This is apparently inefficient and thus an argument against making Commonwealth scholarships available for these postgraduate programs. However, there are usually sound educational grounds for the longer undergraduate-postgraduate combinations, and on balance Griffith supports making national priority scholarships available for all postgraduate programs leading to occupational registration in national priority areas.

Griffith agrees with the Commonwealth's proposal to define priority courses using ASCED's field of education classification.

Definition of specialist programs for the new national accommodation scholarships

Griffith believes that a software tool is the only realistic option for identifying specialist programs for the purposes of the new national accommodation scholarships if they are to be a long term and growing part of the sector. However, from a review of the Going to Uni Course Finder it appears that major development and substantial continuing maintenance would be required to develop it into a database that could support useful decision tool. Consider an applicant for a national accommodation scholarship who wished to study a Bachelor of Arts with a major in electronic media.

Presumably if a State did not offer a Bachelor of Arts a student in the State wishing to study for a BA should be eligible for a national accommodation scholarship. If the BA in the

student's State offered a major in literature but not media studies presumably again the student should be eligible for a national accommodation scholarship to study media studies. But what if the student wanted to major in electronic media but only a sub major or just one subject in electronic media were available in their home State? The Commonwealth will be able to develop rules to cover these cases, and these will evolve as it considers a greater variety of applications. But this example illustrates that a software tool to decide these cases would have to be sophisticated and interrogate a detailed and well structured database. The data recorded in the Going to Uni Course Finder do not yet seem to be sufficiently detailed to inform many of the decisions that will need to be made.

The better approach might be to undertake a feasibility study of the various options available to support a decision tool. For example, the State tertiary admissions centres already maintain detailed information on universities' programs and majors including their ASCED code. One possibility might be to sit a decision tool on each tertiary admissions centre's database, or perhaps even construct a national program and major data warehouse fed by each State tertiary admissions centre which could be interrogated by a decision tool. This in turn would provide another option for collecting and maintaining the data for the Going to Uni Course Finder which would be preferred by universities since it would be based on data already supplied and maintained by universities for a core operational purpose.

Griffith agrees with the Commonwealth that anomalies are likely to be caused by the different indicators of students' need to relocate to study for the Commonwealth accommodation scholarships and the national accommodation scholarships. The simplest solution seems to be to have a common indicator of students' need to relocate to study, such as a need to travel beyond reasonable commuting distance which might be 2 hours' travel in 1 direction.

Allocation of scholarships to higher education providers and matching student demand

Of the mechanisms canvassed by the Commonwealth, Griffith prefers the new national priority scholarships and the national accommodation scholarships to be allocated by the mechanisms the Commonwealth currently uses to allocate the established Commonwealth education costs scholarships and Commonwealth accommodation scholarships. Any unallocated scholarship could be returned to a pool to be reallocated by the Commonwealth in the following year according to institutions' submissions and their performance on the formulae the Commonwealth uses to allocate the scholarships.

However, since the State tertiary admissions centres in NSW, Queensland, South Australia and Victoria will be handling scholarship applications on behalf of institutions from 2009, the Commonwealth might consider identifying a quota of new scholarships in these States to be allocated by the institutions through their State tertiary admissions centre. The State tertiary admissions centres have sophisticated processes for sorting and matching applicants to places which is the best available mechanism for matching scholarship allocations to applicant demand.

Use of the existing Commonwealth Scholarships program management framework for the new scholarships

Griffith supports the Commonwealth's proposal to use the existing Commonwealth scholarships program management framework and basic eligibility criteria for the new scholarships.

Timelines of State tertiary admissions centres

Griffith submits that it is highly desirable for State tertiary admissions centres to administer scholarship applications on behalf of institutions because it:

- 1 promotes the availability of scholarships at the same time and point at which prospective applicants are considering applying;
- 2 matches scholarship applications and awards and thus greatly assists institutions meet their scholarship targets;
- 3 allows scholarships to be offered at the same time and in the same transaction as the offer of a place, thus supporting applicants' decision making;
- 4 is much more efficient, saving each institution having to maintain its own Commonwealth scholarship application processing system.

However, central systems are rather less flexible than institutional systems and longer time lines are needed to introduce changes. You will be aware that applications are invited in early August and it would be highly desirable if scholarship details could be settled in time for scholarship applications to be opened at the same time, or at least soon thereafter. Griffith trusts that the Commonwealth will be able to settle its implementation of scholarships for 2009 soon so that full advantage may be taken of the services of the State tertiary admissions centres.

Evaluation needed

Griffith believes that a comprehensive evaluation of the Commonwealth scholarships program is needed. It seems that the purpose of the program has shifted from an equity measure to a recruitment measure for favoured programs or occupations. The evaluation should also assess whether the value and categories of the scholarships meet the goals the Government has specified for them. The review might also consider the relation between the scholarships and the income threshold for Centrelink benefits, which is far too low. Griffith would submit to such a review that all scholarships, including institutions' equity scholarships, should be exempt from income testing. Scholarship payments also start after students have already incurred substantial expenses for textbooks, parking, public transport, child care and after/before school care. The payments are too late for many students who find it difficult to begin their studies and be fully engaged before they receive their first scholarship instalment.

Griffith looks forward to working with the Commonwealth in managing the new scholarships.

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