Griffith University

Response to the Australian Government’s discussion paper

*Skilling Australia for the future*

Griffith University is making a submission on the discussion paper on *Skilling Australia for the future* to contribute to Australia’s tertiary education policy and because of the Australian Government’s interest in ‘Establishing the place of higher education in the broader tertiary education sector, especially in building an integrated relationship with vocational education and training’, as it says in its terms of reference for the review of Australian higher education (DEEWR, 2008).

‘Demand driven approach’

On page 2 the discussion paper says –

> The current training system is highly centralised, with state-run TAFEs dominating the market and government funding delivered primarily to these and other public institutions. Employer surveys highlight a lack of suitably qualified staff as hindering their expansion efforts and poor completion rates, some below 50 per cent, in traditional training fields, particularly apprenticeships.

The implication is that there is a lack of suitably qualified staff and high attrition rates for some apprenticeships because the current training system is highly centralised and dominated by state-run TAFEs. But as Birrell, Healy & Smith (2008:52) point out –

> The problem in this area is not lack of training places. The TAFEs which provide the classroom instruction in the skilled trades are not appealing for funding to create more places, nor are the private sector RTOs. The latter have shown a capacity to grow like mushrooms whenever there is extra demand for VET training.

> The main reasons for shortages in the supply of traditional tradespersons is a deficiency in the number of employers willing to provide indentures for apprentices and/or young people willing to take up and finish their indenture.

There is ambiguity in the discussion paper, in common with much Australian and State government vocational education policy over the last decade, over what might be meant by ‘demand driven’. Griffith understands ‘demand driven’ to mean responsive to the people who buy or consume the good or service. Most vocational education is consumed by students, and since students pay fees, they are most obviously the consumers of vocational education. A demand driven approach would therefore be one that responded to student demand. However, in places the discussion paper implies that a demand driven approach is one that responds to employers’ demands, notwithstanding that employers would provide only 10% of the funding for the new places proposed by the Australian Government and are only minor purchasers of other publicly funded vocational education.
Intermediary mechanisms

The discussion paper proposes that a new statutory body Skills Australia would determine priorities by industry, jurisdiction and level of training for the allocation of 275,000 of the new training places to be provided, and that the places would be allocated to employers by strengthened industry skills councils. There are at least three difficulties with this approach. First, it depends on labour force planning and forecasting which are notoriously unreliable. Secondly, it would interpose a mechanism between the providers of vocational education and those who consume it – students or employers. An intermediary mechanism such as this is unlikely to be able to match supply and demand as well as a system that established a direct relationship between providers and consumers.

A third difficulty with the mechanism is that by allocating places to employers the scheme would not provide training to employees who seek training to move to a different employer or industry. The proposal would therefore not facilitate industry restructuring which is necessary to maintain a dynamic economy and improve productivity.

An ‘integrated relationship’ between vocational and higher education

Griffith supports the Australian Government’s aspiration stated in its terms of reference for the review of Australian higher education of building an ‘integrated relationship’ between vocational and higher education (DEEWR, 2008). Griffith agrees with the National Senior Vocational Education Officials Committee (NSOC, 2008) that moving towards an integrated system of tertiary education would require ‘a fundamental examination of the education, administrative and funding barriers that act against smooth transitions between sectors, and generally for harmonisation of the sector’ and that there would need to be ‘consistent approaches to quality assurance . . ., shared use of infrastructure and contributions to innovation and productivity’.

Building an integrated tertiary education system would be a major and long term undertaking. However, the discussion paper moves in the opposite direction by constructing vocational education as an extension of employers’ internal training rather than as a distinctive sector of tertiary education. All education is a continuum from vocational to disciplinary knowledge. Correspondingly, all education should have a balance between preparing students for immediate application to work or general life and preparing students for further study.

Higher education programs range from those in engineering and medicine which emphasise vocational preparation to arts and science programs which focus more on developing disciplinary knowledge for more advanced study. But even higher education’s vocational or professional programs include substantial amounts of disciplinary knowledge and the liberal arts and sciences develop vocational skills. Likewise preparing students for further study is an important role for vocational education.

2 May 2008
References


