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Higher Education Reform Feedback
Higher Education Group
GPO Box 9880 CANBERRA ACT 2601

Email: HEReform@education.gov.au

Driving Innovation, Fairness and Excellence in Australian Higher Education
Feedback from Macquarie University

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on behalf of Macquarie University on the Driving Innovation, Fairness and Excellence in Australian Higher Education consultation paper. This is attached.

If the Group would like to discuss the feedback further or if there is any further information we can add, please don’t hesitate to contact me.

Yours faithfully

S. Bruce Dowton
Driving Innovation, Fairness and Excellence in Australian Higher Education
Feedback from Macquarie University

Macquarie University welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on Driving Innovation, Fairness and Excellence in Australian Higher Education and notes the paper’s recognition of higher education as benefiting everyone in Australia and as one of our largest exports. We also welcome the opportunities for collaboration to build the national innovation capability opened up by the National Innovation and Science Agenda and developed in this paper. (The University is already pursuing these opportunities through major recent initiatives such as the University Health Sciences Centre which brings together clinical care, teaching and research and the Macquarie Park Innovation District which sees us engaging with major companies in the area to establish a regional innovation cluster for Northern Sydney.) We also welcome the appointment of an expert advisory board to develop reforms arising out of this consultation process.

The principles which underlie this feedback are first, the importance of transparency in the implementation of policy and second, the view that, as a general rule, student payments should support the student experience while research is of such value to the nation that it should be funded by the nation.

Opportunity and Choice

The Best Options for Students

The University supports the proposed extension of the demand-driven system to sub-bachelor courses at public universities, both because, as the paper recognises, these courses can lead to ‘rewarding jobs and careers’ for students and because of their potential value as pathways to bachelor level and higher qualifications. (This position is consistent with the finding of the 2013 Review of the Demand Driven Funding System that ‘pathway programs successfully prepare students for university study’.)

Postgraduate Places to Support Innovation

The University welcomes the recognition in the paper that ‘the availability of subsidised postgraduate coursework places is inconsistent across Australia’. Macquarie’s experience has been that we have not been able to secure new places for courses which seem similar in content to programs which have been justified as “historically based” in other universities and which would open up similar employment opportunities for our graduates. We would therefore strongly support the reallocation of ‘all subsidised postgraduate places on a more transparent and consistent basis’. We would also support the allocation of additional places to support the aims of the National Innovation and Science Agenda, given that one of the four pillars of that Agenda is the development of talent and skills. However, we consider that the proposal to adopt a ‘time limited-learning
entitlement for Commonwealth subsidies’ while perhaps initially attractive would probably be so complex to administer as to be not worth the effort.

Fairness and Equity

Improving Support for Disadvantaged Students

The University welcomes the proposed review of the Higher Education Participation Programme, given its vital role in ensuring that people from disadvantaged groups are able to access higher education. There is already considerable evidence both that the Programme is effective and that it provides good value for money. For example, Macquarie has worked together with UTS, the Australian Catholic University, the University of Sydney and Western Sydney University, on activities which the April 2015 KPMG Evaluation of Bridges to Higher Education: Final Report found have involved 298,980 student contacts across 314 schools over the three years from 2012 to 2014, resulting in 92 per cent of students developing better study skills. The evaluation estimates that:

an approximate net monetary benefit of $30 million was realised from the implementation of Bridges, which reflects monetised benefits in the order of $46 million from an additional investment of around $16 million. This equates to a return of $2.80 for each additional dollar invested in the program. Importantly, these benefits increase substantially where the analysis focuses on schools within low socio-economic areas alone: a return of at least $6.00 is realised for each additional dollar invested in schools within low socio-economic areas.

Any evaluation of the HEPP will need to take account of the long-term focus of many HEPP-funded projects. So, for example, initiatives with primary school students will take many years to have an impact on higher education enrolments, though of course indicators of likely success can be measured along the way.

We would also be concerned if the evaluation were to overlook the extent to which current project-based HEPP funding has ensured a broad base of programs, engaging with many cohorts at different levels of education. A reasonable fear is that any proposal which ties core funding to benchmarks would reduce the variety of outreach programs, by skewing activities to achieve only the most reliable outcomes in cohorts with the most volume. Cohorts with small numbers requiring bespoke support would be in danger of being overlooked, as would the deeper engagement with communities which has already been shown to achieve successful outcomes in the longer term.

The consultation paper raises the possible adoption of ‘scholarship type models’ to overcome financial hurdles for students. However, this really only provides support for students to get “in the door”. Achieving equitable success rates relies firmly on additional institutional support through targeted programs, both learning and socially-based, to reduce the many educational barriers faced by disadvantaged students; thus, to ensure successful outcomes, funding needs to support both students and institutions.

Driving Innovation Consultation Paper: Macquarie Response; page 3
The paper rightly observes that rates of participation for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders are ‘not acceptable’. HEPP funding is making some difference but additional funding is needed both to promote access by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, to higher education and to support them as needed throughout their studies. At Macquarie, take-up rates for the Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme are high compared with other universities and success rates are also good. However, more need support and more work could be done to identify students who are having problems or who are likely to have problems with their studies. And, if funds were available, more could be done to assess academic skills and better target tutoring as well as to track progress.

A related point is the need, across the higher education sector, to expand on the range of support available to students. For example, as an increasing number of students study online, new strategies are needed to ensure their progression. The University has been trialling the UniWellbeing Course, an internet-delivered treatment program, set up to address problems with depression and anxiety (experienced at clinical levels, it is estimated, by one in five Australian university students). The UniWellbeing approach is based on the very effective MindSpot Clinic which the Department of Health funds at Macquarie for the online assessment and treatment of people across Australia with depression and anxiety. Preliminary results suggest that UniWellbeing is proving very effective and it may be a model for other universities. There would be value in sector-wide investment to develop similar approaches to academic advising and support, devising programs which are easily accessible, cost-effective and scalable.

Excellence and Quality

Flexibility to Innovate

We note that, during the recent election campaign, the Prime Minister appears to have made a commitment to introduce Flagship Courses. Any efforts to encourage innovation in approaches to teaching and learning are welcome. However, it is also worth noting that Flagship Courses aren’t necessary to achieve this end. Indeed, considerable effort is going into innovation at Macquarie already, placing graduate success at the centre of learning and teaching so that we foster skills that apply beyond the classroom and into the workplace. We are also concerned that attempts of the kind outlined in the discussion paper to ensure that fees for such Courses are ‘reasonable and fair’ will involve no end of bureaucratic monitoring and supervision.

Affordability

A Fair Share from Taxpayers and Graduates

The University regrets any proposal to reduce Government investment in higher education, given the importance of learning and teaching to the future of Australian society and the national economy. However, plans to review funding clusters and costs of delivery are welcomed. (The 2014 proposals would have seen significant and undesirable reductions in, for example, Science,
Engineering and Social Studies and need revisiting.) In addition, the paper rightly notes that the Fields of Education have not been reviewed since 2001 and there is now an obvious need for new codes, for example on data science and data security.

The consultation paper raises the question of cross subsidisation; that is, using student contributions to support research. This should not be ruled out altogether. There are circumstances in which cross subsidisation would appear desirable; for example, where a university wants to make a strategic investment in a particular area of research or wants to pursue a community engagement goal, in both cases anticipating a longer term benefit both to the institution and to the community. However, our view is that, as a general principle, student payments should support the student experience while research should be regarded as a public good and funded accordingly.