

Submission to the Job-ready Graduates Consultation

Australian Government, Dept of Education, Skills & Employment

A problem-based approach to developing a reform strategy is an excellent one to adopt. Five current problems, along with the reform strategies proposed to address them, are tabled in the consultation document. Perhaps the process might have been improved if it involved a consultation process at the outset to scope a more complete set of problems to be solved? While a strategy for enhancing job readiness in graduates is one that meets with wide-spread, strong approval –including with those who will be the graduates of the future – it would be desirable for this to be positioned within a broader-based view of the societal value of education. Education, including higher and further education, is important in promoting health and well-being within the population of the nation through the myriad ways it enriches our lives and society. This supports not just job readiness but sustaining employability throughout life in people who know how to maintain good health and well being. Education at all levels should be a key enabler of this. A focus on the first job a graduate will have is too narrow. Thus, the terms of reference informing the reform strategy appear more limited than is desirable in achieving an optimum reform strategy for the nation to gain maximum benefit from its implementation.

The issue with the reform strategy that creates the most immediate concern is the timing of its introduction. Students make subject choices in Year 10 of high school for their Year 11 and 12 studies. These subject choices in turn prepare them with the required and assumed knowledge for enrolment in the University degree program of their choice and interest. Thus, any change to be implemented before the enrolment year of 2023 is potentially unfairly disadvantaging three years of students who have already made their subject choices for years 11 and 12 – all of the current year 10, 11 and 12 cohorts in 2020. Impacting any of these current cohorts with this change to be implemented in 2021 is less than optimum, but in the context that the COVID-19 pandemic is also impacting the education of these senior high school students, it actually seems cruel to impose this change at such short notice. A well-managed reform would not be introduced in this way. Appropriate timelines for introduction would be observed.

I will not address the possibly unwanted and perverse outcomes that may result from the detailed costings of the various funding bands it is planned will be introduced in the reform. This is being discussed by many and will be part of many submissions. Instead I will raise a point which I think may not be raised by others but which is of great concern to me in the education part of my academic work. The most significant problem I would identify that is preventing the nation gaining maximum benefit from its investment in tertiary level graduates is that a significant fraction of students can not devote sufficient time and attention to their studies to gain the maximum intellectual and professional development they could achieve from their education. Also, the graduates themselves may not maximise their individual benefit from their own investment. This is due to many students needing to be in paid employment, in parallel, to support their studies, often essentially fulltime. In the time constrained life this creates, and when education becomes viewed as a commodity by students and others, it does seem to be a commodity for which individuals will pay more for less, when it is the graduation testamur alone that is given value. The downward pressure this puts on what is learnt per unit of study, per degree etc. is totally contrary to what the government states as its aim in the context of this reform. (What is learnt includes all the high level skills and capabilities in addition to the brain wiring that is being achieved via the higher education process.) It would be highly desirable for this systemic problem, the impediments to full engagement, to be investigated further with a view to how it might be addressed in any reform that is rolled out in the sector. It is the very degrees that the government wants to be more populated that suffer the most from this. It is likely no coincidence that the number of students of science and engineering (S&E) has not grown as much as other degrees since the Dawkins reforms. One of the

reasons for this is the larger number of contact hours in these S&E degrees. This makes them less compatible with large fractions of paid employment. I suggest and believe it is the larger number of contact hours, across a range of different types of learning activities, including learning by doing in the context of laboratory classes in particular, that is a positive differentiator of science and engineering degrees which facilitates the job readiness and high productivity of these graduates. These factors for S&E graduates have been documented in reports that the government has no doubt used in planning the reform. The reform will almost certainly lead to reduced contact hours in these S&E degrees because of the reduced funding per student in total. It is likely to initiate a vicious cycle not a virtuous cycle on this dimension.

Job readiness is best facilitated by strong student engagement in programs of study that are regularly reviewed, independently, for maintenance and enhancement of quality standards. It is probably not a coincidence that many of the degrees that have been identified as producing graduates who are judged to be job ready are those that are accredited by external professional bodies. Thus, including stakeholders who represent relevant employer groups in the independent review process of degrees is important. Work integrated learning, as emphasised in the reform strategy, also contributes to this connection. But, so does learning-by-doing as implemented in S&E degrees through laboratory and project experience, and required by accreditation processes (engineering, physics, chemistry and possibly others). The substantial component of such learning activities in S&E degrees is significant in leading to the high work productivity of such graduates that has been reported and which may be in part responsible for the government's enthusiasm to encourage more students to study these degrees. It is also why such programs of study have a higher delivery cost compared to other cost bands. The reduced funding per student in science will almost certainly lead to reduced contact hours in these degrees and will likely initiate a downward spiral in graduate capability which is contrary to what the government intends. This reduction in contact hours has already occurred in some HASS degrees in the past decade and earlier. Reversing this trend would be a more meaningful, but also more expensive, reform.

A focus on a graduate completing a degree ignores the gains that are there to be made by students being able to apply themselves more fully to their studies so that they achieve at higher levels in their subjects. A prevalent mindset that a degree of any grade point average or weighted average mark is as good as any degree also disincentivises many students from achieving to their ability. As already stated many students have paid work which is a large fraction of fulltime, to support their immediate needs, while also being enrolled in full-time study. Part time study can help to allow students to engage more with their studies but it diminishes the student experience. Plus, the government is also reporting negatively on the increasing average time students take to complete their degrees which is a natural result of more part time study. Reforming the system to incentivise students to achieve to their ability and capability in full time study would be a meaningful reform. Many nations do this better than Australia.

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