

TERTIARY CAMPUS MINISTRY ASSOCIATION AUSTRALIA (inc.)

EXTENDED PRESS RELEASE - 10 OCTOBER 2003

"TERTIARY CHAPLAINS EXPRESS OPPOSITION TO NELSON REPORT"

The changing nature of tertiary education was a constant subject of discussion at the national conference of the Tertiary Campus Ministers Association (Australia) Inc. (TCMA) in Adelaide last week. The TCMA is the peak body for tertiary chaplains in this country and has international links to similar bodies. One of the ways they responded was to make a submission to the Senate inquiry and to Dr Brendan Nelson, Minister for Education, Science and Training.

The TCMA was concerned that the changes to higher education proposed by the present government fail to recognize the contribution that the education of individuals makes to society as a whole, the nature of the education process, and the inequitable impact these changes would have on people with a financial or other disadvantage.

Our complex society depends upon a wide range of people with highly developed skills. Whether they be doctors, teachers, lawyers, scientists, social workers, administrators or engineers, we want to be able to trust these people and to know that they have the best available education, that they enjoy and have an enthusiasm for their area of expertise, and that they see the place they have in wider society. Some of the proposals in the Nelson report jeopardize these qualities.

In order to achieve these aims, tertiary education must be equally available to all. It should enable people to pursue knowledge. It should be a humanizing process, helping people to become well-rounded individuals with a comprehensive understanding of their role in society. Above all, tertiary education should free people to contribute to the freedom and wellbeing of others.

In the TCMA's view the Nelson review marks a serious step backwards in the ethos of Australian higher education.

1) The most obvious backward step is the increased cost to the student. HECS charges will increase for most subjects. For those who fail to qualify for a university place funded through HECS, there will be the very expensive option of studying at university by paying full fees. Both these changes will discourage students from poorer backgrounds, and will mean that wealth rather than talent will increasingly play a role in determining who gets an education in which fields.

The simplistic adoption of a user-pays approach will not only affect those less well-off. The chief beneficiary of higher education, society as a whole, will also suffer because some will not have the opportunity to develop their talents.

2) For most courses, students will have a maximum of five years to gain a degree. This seems motivated by a desire to make the education "industry" more efficient, producing more degrees in a given time. There are often good reasons for students to take longer.

Most students choose a course while still at school, often strongly influenced by parents or peers. They may have limited knowledge of their own talents, the real demands of the discipline, and the other options available. Perhaps the most important thing they learn at university is how to learn and what they want to learn. It is in the student's best interest to be given the maximum freedom to find their way and where necessary to change courses during their study without undue financial penalty. Under the current proposals most students changing course will need to pay at least a portion of their education at a full-fee rate. This may jeopardize the completion rates for many students as it may become 'cheaper' to drop out rather than to change course and complete a degree.

The five-year Learning Entitlement also places great strains on students whose studies do not go as planned. Many successful students take a while to adjust to the university learning environment and may need to repeat subjects as a result. Students can also have their progress stalled by personal, family, financial, health or other issues. The threat of having to pay full fees if they do not complete the course within the tight time-frame proposed will likely make them reluctant to deal with these issues adequately, and as a result the impact of the issues may exacerbate as the student progresses through their studies.

3) There remains the process of education itself. Education should make people more fully human so that they can flourish in and contribute to society. We want professionals, rather than machines. We want people who have freedom and wisdom rather than mechanical knowledge. This will only take place if the university is a human community rather than a degree factory, if staff and students have the freedom, the time and the resources to learn broadly and interact widely as a community.

4) We are also deeply concerned with the linking of increased funding for universities to industrial relations changes. The freedom to engage in enterprise bargaining, Union membership and industrial activity by tertiary education sector staff will be seriously restricted. However, regardless of the debates in this arena, they should not be linked in a 'factory like' way to individual student outcomes. The health of the Australian university system is dependent on lively and vibrant intellectual communities engaged in research and development, teaching and reflection, not in communities distracted by the constant need to debate the basic understandings which form this education.

We believe reform of the Tertiary Education sector is necessary. We do not believe that the proposed changes currently before the Parliament and the Australian people will create a stronger, wiser and better educated nation where all Australians can rejoice and be free.

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