“Buffer’ body revival fails to sway UA

VICE-CHANCELLORS LEFT UNCONVINCED

ANDREW TROUNSON

THOSE pushing for revival of an independent “buffer” body between sector and government appear to have lost the battle of ideas within Universities Australia.

The proposal for such a body as a way to cut red tape and promote coherent policy is expected to be abandoned or watered down in UA’s policy platform after most vice-chancellors were left unconvinced.

A body similar to the Menzies-era Australian Universities Commission had been championed by Australian Catholic University vice-chancellor Greg Craven and Glyn Davis, UA chairman and Melbourne vice-chancellor.

The HES understands the idea was not endorsed at this month’s UA plenary meeting, despite a pitch from Professor Craven.

Whether or not the proposal will re-emerge in some diluted form in the final policy document is unclear.

The sector’s concerns ranged from general uncertainty over the role of such a commission to fears it would only increase red tape and confusion.

There is also a belief in the sector that it is unrealistic to expect any contemporary government to accept such a check on its control over the sector.

Professor Davis declined to comment on the proposal or the plenary proceedings, but said the sector was in favour of finding some way to encourage policy coherence.

On governance, vice-chancellors have recognised the risk of policy incoherence with key decision-making responsibility divided between Commonwealth, state and territory ministers, government departments and regulatory bodies,” he said.

“There is a strong interest in encouraging a more integrated policy framework for higher education in Australia, and a lively discussion about how best this could be achieved.”

Commenting on UA’s policy formulation process, he said: “Not surprisingly, many interesting policy ideas have been raised in this process. Some have been adopted, others modified and some dropped. The final outcomes of this extended iterative process will be clear when the paper is published.”

The old AUC oversaw the distribution of increased university grant funding and provided advice to government. It was eventually succeeded by the Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission in 1997.

That body was abolished by Hawke government education minister John Dawkins in 1988 when he expanded the number of universities under the Unified National System. Mr Dawkins later complained that CTEC had had too much power and had been a barrier to change.

“I thought that if the government had views about what it wanted to do and wanted to commit huge additional resources to the system then ... it needed to have its hands more closely on the action,” Mr Dawkins was quoted as saying in 1992.

Supporters of a “buffer” body argue that it would take some of the politics out of policymaking. It could also focus and foster policy expertise that is too easily lost as bureaucrats move through departments.

Professors Davis and Craven have argued that such a body could eventually incorporate the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, and could even regulate prices if the cap on tuition fees were raised.

Grattan Institute higher education expert Andrew Norton said he doubted whether creating a new body was the best way to encourage policy coherence.

He said the sector should be wary of any single body taking on excessive responsibilities because decentralised policymaking boosted university autonomy.

Melbourne University higher education expert Simon Marginson said that while there were pitfalls, the Davis-Craven idea was a good one in principle.

He said the sector should be wary of any single body taking on excessive responsibilities because decentralised policymaking boosted university autonomy.

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Reforms raise risks for TAFE

TAFE could go the way of Qantas and Telstra, facing privatisation after competitors cherry-pick its profitable activities, a report to be released today suggests.

Christopher Stone, author of the Centre for Policy Development report, Valuing Skills, says “contestability” reforms are forcing TAFE to act like a private college.

“This turns it into a private entity that can be privatised more easily,” he says.

Stone says competitive funding arrangements raise problems for TAFE’s financial model as competitors gravitate towards cheap training.

“TAFEs are left with the more expensive courses and their per-student costs increase,” says the report, funded by the NSW Public Service Association.

Stone says expensive fields need adequate funding.

His analysis of Victoria’s open training market found that TAFEs have between 78 per cent and 98 per cent of market share in the expensive areas of mining, telecommunications, utilities and construction. Private colleges dominate trade, administration and safety.

Stone says TAFE is frequently derided as “too expensive”, but that is largely because it runs expensive courses and provides more services such as counselling and career advice.

“It’s doing a much bigger job.”

While per-student funding for vocational students has been declining for years, Stone says governments never feel they’re getting it cheaply enough.

And industry will never be satisfied that TAFEs are sufficiently responsive to its needs, citing this as a reason for a proposed restructure in 1991.

“There will always be a level of industry dissatisfaction along those lines. TAFEs won’t always be precisely focused on what industry wants, for the good reason that vocational education and training has broader goals. What industry wants and the long-term interests of the economy might not be exactly the same thing,” Stone says.

Stone says industry satisfaction levels for TAFEs and private colleges alike are very high.

He says Dawkins-era reports offered no solid evidence for their assertion that TAFEs aren’t sufficiently industry-focused.

Submissions referring to industry concerns have never been made public.

His report says VET’s complexity and a paucity of data leaves it “vulnerable to agendas that are unsupported by evidence, or which fly in the face of what evidence there is”.

The report cites Victorian claims that the state’s open training market has led to more training in skill shortage areas.
Evans drops US test of student outcomes

THE Gillard government has finally dumped plans to use a controversial US generic test to measure student outcomes.

Tertiary Education Minister Chris Evans yesterday said he would accept all the recommendations of a reference group that had urged the Collegiate Learning Assessment test not be used over concerns it was unreliable and not fit for purpose.

The government had been developing a pilot study for the CLA test to adapt it for Australia.

In siding with the reference group, Senator Evans committed to introducing the new university experience survey from next year, the results of which are to be published on the MyUniversity website. A graduate-outcomes survey will also be developed and introduced next year.

The survey outcomes are a high-stakes issue for universities in the new competitive student market and will be used by government to monitor universities.

"In the upcoming 2014-16 compact (or university mission) discussions, I will be expecting universities to identify what they're doing to support quality teaching and reward good teachers," Senator Evans said.

On quality and the expansion of places, Senator Evans sought to deflect demands for more teaching money, arguing that per student funding next year would be up 9 per cent from 2008.

"It's not clear how they arrived at this figure, but according to our calculations real funding per student is down," said Universities Australia chief executive Belinda Robinson. She said funding per domestic student had fallen in real terms by at least 2 per cent between 2008 and last year.
Labor decides it’s time to trash Colombo Plan

BERNARD LANE

NEW Colombo, Colombo redux. Almost as soon as the Colombo Plan scholarships stopped, somebody, somewhere, has wanted the spirit to carry on. Historians may grumble, but in the popular mind Colombo is a simple, happy story. In turbulent times, Australia reached out to promising Asian students, paid to bring them to our campuses, and so began a mutually rewarding journey.

Colombo is a brand of enlightened self-interest, which is why so many, including Tertiary Education Minister Chris Evans, have used it to sell our export education industry. Not any more. “The Colombo Plan is part of our history, not our future,” Evans declared this month, perhaps puzzling those listening closely.

In June, he claimed Colombo for the Coalition — it was a Menzies-era thing — and promised an outward-bound version that would send bright young Aussies into Asia.

In September, Bob Carr was served up a Dorothy Dixer in the Senate inviting him to wax lyrical “on any plans to reinvigorate” Colombo. Surprise, Labor had no such plans, although Carr was willing to concede Colombo was “a good product for its time”.

But, really, it was a slight affair compared with Labor’s bigger and better Australia Awards system of scholarships. Carr even managed some time travel, finding Indonesia’s vice-president Boediono among the ranks of Australia Awards alumni, although he arrived in Perth more than 40 years ago as a Colombo student.

Australia Awards big and modern, Colombo a quaint historical footnote — the same refrain turned up in the Asian Century white paper and in its sales pitch. It even seemed, just for a spin of the news cycle, that there were 12,000 new “Asian Century” scholarships but, no, it was the same old Australia Awards inconveniently christened “the Colombo Plan of the 21st century” just last year.
But a sustainable knowledge base needs government help

MICHELE FORD

BARACK Obama’s historic visit to Myanmar, and the strong focus on Southeast Asia in the US’s broader pivot to Asia, are timely reminders that Australia needs to cement its place in the region. In the absence of a concerted effort from government and universities, our relationship with Southeast Asia risks being relegated to a sideshow as we rush to position ourselves in relation to China and India.

With more than 600 million people, Southeast Asia’s 11 countries are home to almost 10 per cent of the world’s population. The region is of the highest strategic importance to Australia in geopolitical terms. And as its economies mature, so does its potential in terms of markets and investment opportunities. Our relationship doesn’t end with security and trade. We also have a deep history of people-to-people engagement and a common interest in issues that transcend national borders, such as climate change, infectious disease and human mobility.

Happily, the federal government’s white paper on Australia in the Asian Century recognises all these aspects of the relationship and commits the nation to embracing the opportunities and challenges they present. What is less clear is how the government plans to nurture the Southeast Asia expertise required to do just that.

In terms of research and policy engagement, Australia has long been recognised as having a world-class concentration of Southeast Asia experts. Yet while pretty much every high-ranking university in Australia has a China studies centre, very few have an equivalent for Southeast Asia. Monash University’s once world-class Centre for Southeast Asia Studies is now but a shadow of its former self. Southeast Asia-related research has also declined dramatically at Griffith University. And while Murdoch University’s Asia Research Centre continues to occupy a niche on the political economy of the region, it no longer commands the resources it once had.

As we speak, a number of universities — among them Monash and Melbourne — are formulating new university-wide strategies for engagement with Indonesia. But only two universities are bucking the trend where Southeast Asia as a region is concerned. A Southeast Asia Institute was recently established at the ANU. Shortly before this, the University of Sydney brought together its regional expertise under the banner of the Sydney Southeast Asia Centre.

The ANU and Sydney have adopted very different models of area studies. The Southeast Asia Institute, based in the College of Asia and the Pacific, harnesses its capacity in a consciously interdisciplinary way. Under this strategy, country experts are working with agricultural scientists, archaeologists, geographers, lawyers, health professionals, veterinarians and social policy analysts to address the burning policy questions of our age. But these universities are very much doing it on their own. The white paper promises to increase the number of students studying in Asia and the region itself, and stronger university networks in the region. It also recognises the “valuable resource” that universities represent when it comes to “promoting foreign policy priorities”.

But apart from a reference to “sharing their economic, quantitative, energy, policy and low-carbon expertise”, there is no emphasis on the importance of university research, either in informing Australian policy or as a form of outreach to the region.

This omission is puzzling at a time when AusAID, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, and the Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research are reaching out to academics in unprecedented ways in relation to Southeast Asia.

In the longer term, university-based expertise on Southeast Asia is crucial to the national interest. University researchers don’t just train Asia-literate graduates; they contribute much of the evidence base that underpins informed policymaking on the part of government and effective engagement on the part of business, the development sector and communities.

Universities need to put their money where their mouth is on the region as Sydney and the ANU have done. But without co-ordinated support from all levels of government, it is impossible to expect the higher education sector to rebuild a sustainable knowledge base on Southeast Asia.

Michele Ford is director of the Sydney Southeast Asia Centre based at the University of Sydney. The centre will be formally launched by Foreign Minister Bob Carr on Friday.
The ASEAN forum is a timely reminder Australia needs to cement its place in the region.
Regulator launches review of aged-care training

Concerns over substandard courses

BY BENJAMIN PREISS
HIGHER EDUCATION REPORTER

THE national skills regulator will weed out shonky aged-care training colleges that churn out graduates who are ill-prepared to work in nursing homes.

The Australian Skills Quality Authority has launched a review of aged-care training in response to widespread concerns about substandard education for workers.

A Productivity Commission report released last year found the quality of training varied wildly between colleges. But students received the same certificate III qualification in aged care, which is two levels below a diploma, that allowed them to work in nursing homes. In some instances students received little more than the most basic education that left them dangerously unprepared to work with vulnerable nursing home residents.

The report revealed some Melbourne training providers rushed students through a certificate III course in as little as three weeks. Reputable providers require up to a year to run these courses.

ASQA chief commissioner Chris Robinson said audits over the past 18 months had already uncovered instances of training providers failing to meet acceptable standards.

Failure to adequately assess students’ skills and knowledge before they completed their course was among the most widespread problems in the aged-care training sector.

Mr Robinson said the review would be completed by June next year, including recommendations to improve the quality of training. “As the number of older Australians rises and the demand for aged-care services increases, there will be an increase in demand for a well-trained aged-care workforce,” he said.

More than a million Australians receive aged-care services, but that number is expected to hit 3.5 million by 2050.

Victorian TAFE Association executive director David Williams believed employers often refused to hire aged-care workers unless they had graduated from reputable institutes, such as TAFEs, because they were often unable to complete basic workplace tasks.

Graduates who had received shoddy qualifications then faced massive fees to repeat courses at TAFEs because they had already used their government subsidy.

Mr Williams wrote to federal Tertiary Education Minister Chris Evans last year asking for an urgent review into aged-care training because he was concerned some private colleges were putting students through shonky courses.

“They were very much fast-tracking the training. They were doing it in way less than the normal scheduled hours of training,” he said.

The Productivity Commission report found there was a shortage of aged-care workers, but this had not led to higher wages.

Aged and Community Services Australia chief executive John Kelly said nurses working in aged care were generally paid about 14 per cent less than those who worked in hospitals.

“Part of the problem in attracting people is the salary disparity,” he said, adding that a certificate III qualification provided insufficient training for workers to meet the complex health needs of elderly people in nursing homes.

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$7m gas study centre opens

By DAVID WOOD

THE new gas and oil education, training and research centre at Charles Darwin University had its ribbon cutting and fancy sandwiches opening yesterday.

But students will have to wait until next year to join the facility.

The North Australian Centre for Oil and Gas comes at a cost of $7 million.

CDU vice chancellor Professor Barney Glover said it would cater for up to 200 domestic students in vocational training and higher education and international online students.

“We look forward to making the facility available for industry, local business and community relations activities,” he said. Courses will include process plant operations and engineering.

Professor Glover said the centre would also cater for research. The Territory Government and Inpex invested $6.5 million in the joint venture.

Chief Minister Terry Mills, Inpex’s Seiya Ito, Associate Professor Krishnan Kannoopatti and senior technical officer Hemangi Susti at the opening of the new gas and oil centre at Charles Darwin University

Picture: ELISE DERWIN
FED: A small matter of ministerial confusion

By Don Woolford

CANBERRA, Nov 20 AAP - Liberal frontbencher Marise Payne suspects changes the federal government is making to indigenous employment programs could actually cut jobs.

So in the Senate on Tuesday she asked Joe Ludwig about it in his capacity - or so she thought - as the minister representing the minister for indigenous employment.

A mild kerfuffle ensued. Chris Evans, the government leader, thought Payne had the wrong minister. It might, he conceded, be him.

However, he thought it was Penny Wong who speaks for Julie Collins, the lower house minister who rejoices in the titles of Minister for Community Services, Indigenous Employment and Economic Development and Minister for the Status of Women.

The latest ministerial representation list was consulted and, sure enough, Wong it was.

She started, with unusual candour, by admitting that she had to check on just who it was she was representing.

There followed, through the original question and two supplementaries, lots of consulting hastily unearthed briefing notes, interspersed with retreats behind lots of "I am adviseds" and platitudes, such as the imperative to end Aboriginal disadvantage.

It was a minor masterpiece in obscuring the obvious, that she didn't know anything about the matter. And why, in the circumstances, should she?

What was perhaps odder was the opposition sitting through it all more or less silently.

In that ruder and cruder other place, the House of Representatives, a floundering minister would be savaged.

Moreover, the opposition had no reason to be forgiving towards Wong.

Her main representational role is to speak for the treasurer, a job that she carries out with relish.

Wong was at it before the indigenous jobs hoo-hah emerged, trumpeting the IMF's latest rather flattering economic outlook for Australia before turning on Joe Hockey for thinking our economy was flatlining.

"In the world of Hockeynomics, a growing economy is flatlining," Wong sneered.

That's usually about as nasty as things get in the Senate, though NSW Liberal frontbencher Concetta Fierravanti-Wells went one better (or lower) when she suggested Bob Carr was compromised by the allegations of corruption against Eddie Obeid in the Independent Commission Against Corruption.

The foreign minister's reply could scarcely have been briefer: "Mr President, no."

And as Carr stepped down as NSW premier more than seven years ago, Fierravanti-Wells did seem to be attacking with a very long bow.

AAP dw/klm/jl
The University of Canberra will increase students from 14,000 to 21,000 by 2018 with the help of $26 million in Commonwealth funding signed off on Tuesday.

The plan to increase enrolments by nearly 50 per cent over the next six years is one of a number of reforms, including broadening student intake through improved pathways through the University of Canberra College and additional learning support for students who might not otherwise get a place.

UC will also redesign its curriculum, and invest in flexible learning technologies and collaborations and partnerships with other tertiary institutions – most notably with Holmesglen TAFE in Melbourne to create the University of Canberra Melbourne, which will take enrolments from next year.

Tertiary Education Minister Chris Evans visited the campus to sign off the $26 million in Structural Adjustment Funding, approved last year in the lead-up to a merger between UC and the Canberra Institute of Technology but put on hold when the CIT resisted the merger.

UC reapplied and was approved the funding for strategic growth outside Canberra – although Professor Parker said he was still interested in pursuing closer links with CIT. It was also the first official duty for ACT Chief Minister Katy Gallagher since she took over responsibilities for Higher Education and Regional Development earlier this month.

She welcomed the injection of funding, saying “we recognise the importance of education to the ACT economy as the largest non-government export and its importance to our city as a whole”.

Professor Parker said the UC was in “the strongest position in its history with more students, more academics and better facilities than we have ever had. Our financial position is sound and our reputation is growing. This Commonwealth investment will help the University of Canberra continue to flourish in an increasingly competitive environment.”

Professor Parker believed the UC’s future success would depend on eliminating “the barriers of distance, time and location (to) offer students even more choice and flexibility to further cement our role as Australia’s Capital University”.

Biggest growth will come through UC College, which takes students in a range of preparatory courses for the university and is expected to grow from 675 students this year to 2800 within six years. The funding includes new headquarters on campus to accommodate this growth.

UC announced a program to help Indigenous high school students realise their academic potential through a partnership with the Aurora Project, which will include academic enrichment camps for students from across NSW, Victoria and Western Australia, and a scholarship program including the prominent Charlie Perkins Trust and Roberta Sykes scholarships to Oxford and Cambridge.

UC indigenous alumni Fiona Peterson – who graduated last year with a Bachelor of Management – was one of 18 students supported by Aurora and the UC last month to travel to Harvard, New York University, Columbia, Oxford and Cambridge to explore study options. Ms Peterson is considering an MBA at one of their business schools.

Deputy Chancellor Tom Calma said: “As both the Deputy Chancellor of the University of Canberra and trustee of the Charlie Perkins Trust, I am delighted the Commonwealth has supported this great initiative of the Aurora Project and the University of Canberra.”

“The academic enrichment project is an exciting initiative which will build the aspirations of our young indigenous high school students to be all that they can be, ensuring they finish high school with the option of further study at university. In most cases, that’s an option their parents never had, and it will open up a world of possibility for the next generation.”

The UC has doubled its number of indigenous students from 62 in 2008 to 128.

Funds: Chief Minister Katy Gallagher and Tertiary Education Minister Chris Evans.