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Extending public funding to private higher education providers is “right”

If a week is a long time in politics, forty-eight hours is a remarkably short time in the real world and that’s all it’s taken for Universities Australia to come out describing the Kemp Norton recommendation to extend CSP places beyond the current closed shop of our public universities as “wrong”.

Why?

Well disappointingly not on the basis of any research which we as taxpayers fund them for but rather on the basis of base prejudice, because some private institutions operate on a for-profit basis.

Of course if they were to examine the evidence they would find, as Kemp and Norton did, that non-university institutions do a wonderful job of educating students at Bachelor, Masters and even Doctorate level without government funding.

Private higher education institutions deliver opportunities to a range of students, including a large proportion from low SES backgrounds, they have excellent graduate outcomes with their strong links to industry, and offer a range of niche courses as genuine alternatives to the current homogenous university offerings.

So who loses if Universities Australia gets their way and preserves all Commonwealth-supported places in our public universities? Simple – students who want an alternative.

At the moment students studying at private higher education providers are ineligible for a Commonwealth-supported place (meaning they pay a higher price for their degree) and they face an additional, Commonwealth imposed, 25% fee on their loan – adding another barrier to the costs of studying with the provider of their choice.

Despite these barriers, the number of students enrolling in private higher education institutions has continued to rise, even as the demand driven system has significantly increased university enrolments. Quality is up and students are choosing to pay more to pursue the education that best meets their needs and their career aspirations.

We need to ask if that’s fair. After all as a society we welcome the care provided to our children in their early years by commercial organisations, the care that similar organisations provide to our elderly, and we support people with a disability having a choice of who provides care for them with the introduction of the National Disability Insurance Scheme.

It would seem that our public universities believe that the only group unable to take a sensible decision on the choices available to them are our best and brightest.

The fact that the Group of Eight holds a contrary position from the broader university sector should tell you all you need to know about what’s driving Universities Australia’s concerns.

The Group of Eight welcomes the flexibility, innovation and diversity of private providers entering CSP funding arrangements. These universities have the reputation and graduate outcomes to know they won’t lose students to private providers if CSP places are extended. Apparently other universities are not so certain of their reputation and outcomes, and thus their ability to compete with high performing private providers.



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