

An American Future for Australia's Universities: derailing the moral mission

Salvatore Babones applauds Australian universities 'moral mission'

Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott's new government is proposing to deregulate university fees as part of a series of changes announced in the budget in May. Education Minister Christopher Pyne has said the country has a lot to learn from the American system. But how accurate is this statement?

Australia's university system should be the envy of the world: research productivity is high, financial bars for students are low, and academic salaries are among the highest in the world. Unionization ensures basic procedural fairness and relative equality across the sector. Forty-five percent of people aged 25-34 years old have completed tertiary degrees.

Australia's population of 23 million is 10% smaller than that of Texas, yet multiple Australian universities regularly feature in global top 100 rankings: the Universities of Sydney, Melbourne, New South Wales, Queensland, and Western Australia, plus the Australian National University. Reasonable cost

These world-class outcomes are achieved at very reasonable cost: Australia spends about 1.6 percent of GDP on tertiary education, exactly equal to the OECD average. Inclusivity is ensured by the fact that students can defer 100 percent of tuition payments until their incomes rise well above the national median. High productivity + low cost = policy paradise.

So why is Australia's new government determined to revolutionize the Australian higher education sector?

The government of Prime Minister Tony Abbott has proposed to deregulate fees so that universities can charge whatever tuition the market will bear. Universities will have to set aside 20 percent of any funds raised through increased tuition to provide scholarships for disadvantaged students. At the same time, government subsidies will be cut by 20 percent across the board, shifting more costs onto students and their families.

The expected result is that students will bid up the price of degrees at the top universities, while regional and rural universities may find it difficult to make up the 20 percent shortfall in government support. Universities like Sydney, Melbourne and ANU will benefit at the expense of the rest of the system.

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The government's program is designed to give Australia "at least one university in the top 20 in the world." If fees are pushed high enough, it might give Australia three.

But this propaganda victory will come at a high cost. The government's program will result in a massive financial transfer from Australian students and families to elite university researchers, many of us expats from the UK and US. In other words, from ordinary Australians to people like me.

A better budget would allow modest across-the-board increases in tuition and require universities to plow these increases back into reduced class sizes. Research-only positions should be eliminated and top researchers should be required to spend serious face time in the classroom, just as they do in the world's most prestigious universities.

Most importantly, the Australian government should recognize and embrace the fact that the best universities do much more than just teach and conduct research. Universities are important sources of guidance, advice and — yes — criticism. At their best, universities are forces for positive social change.

Vital moral mission

Today, Australia's universities perform this vital moral mission as well as any universities in the world, and maybe better. For example, the University of Sydney is the only major university in the world to have a deputy vice chancellor solely focused on indigenous issues. No major American or Canadian university has an officer at that level devoted to Native American or First Nation issues.

Another Sydney initiative is the new Charles Perkins Centre for the study of obesity, diabetes and cardiovascular disease. Obesity is not a sexy, big-money area of medical research. But when more than 60 per cent of the population is overweight, someone has to find a solution.

Along with research and teaching, moral leadership for positive social change is the indispensable third mission of the modern university. The great strength of the Australian university system is not research or teaching but its fundamental morality. Australia should build on this strength, not jettison it in the vain pursuit of academic rankings.

For decades Australian universities evolved in isolation from the rest of the world. They inherited an Oxbridge tutorial system that they creatively stretched into a modern system of mass education. Higher education unions ensured relative equality across a diverse sector. Australia blazed its own trail with remarkable success.

Australia's universities have problems, but these problems will not be solved by a massive redistribution of resources from ordinary students to elite researchers. Australia can learn from UK and US academic achievement, but it should also embrace its own moral traditions. Someday soon UK and US universities may wake up to find they have something important to learn from Australia.

In the end, no more than twenty universities can ever be in the top twenty. The rest still have important work to do. We should get on with it.