MARKETS IN HIGHER EDUCATION :

THE BALANCE BETWEEN PUBLIC AND PRIVATE INVESTMENT

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The Coalition Government has sharpened the focus for questions about the future funding of Australian higher education on student based measures. Its 1996-1997 Budget statement on higher education introduced significant changes to the Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) designed to raise a greater proportion of total educational outlays from students and at a faster rate than before[1]. The terms of reference for the Review of Higher Education Financing and Policy (the West Committee) include specific mention of "*an appropriate balance between private and public funding*" for higher education (Vanstone,1997:5). Much of the public reporting of the work of the Committee leading up to the release of its interim "discussion paper" concentrated on various proposals for user-pays mechanisms.

Both the Coalition and the ALP have demonstrated a willingness to seek market-based solutions to public policy problems. "Choice, flexibility and efficiency" have become key elements of the case for the private provision of services. All too often, private production has been

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1 Differential levels of HECS were introduced for different courses and the new levels represented an increase in the charge of between 35% and 125%. New repayment thresholds were imposed which meant some students would be repaying their HECS debt while technically living in poverty and the annual repayment was higher for the corresponding income level. See Vanstone,1996:8-12; NUS,1996:3-8.

presented as the norm, with the public sector playing a residual role in producing non-market goods (see Marginson,1996:18). Each of the major parties has been forced to confront the limitations on the reach of deregulation and the capacities of markets; but rather than leading to an examination of this policy direction such difficulties have given rise to interventions designed to prop up markets. Giving tax rebates on contributions to private health funds is one example.

In this context some may view as anachronistic an argument in favour of a greater proportion of public sector support for Australian universities. However, while some level of private funding increasingly is held to be an essential component of a public system, the effect has been to alter the nature of Australian higher education. Markets have been made a viable form in higher education by the transforming of student demand into a market relationship between the individual and the given institution. Commercialisation has been led by user-pays mechanisms as vehicles for the substitution of public funding by individual private investment. Any increase in the level of that substitution, for example through a firm proposal arising from the West Review, will further marginalise the public characteristics of Australian higher education.

The Marketisation of Higher Education

Since the White Paper of 1988, released by Labor's then Education Minister John Dawkins, "reform" of higher education has been pursued through a mixture of regulation and deregulation. By distinguishing between "product control" and "process control" (Neave and van Vught in Marginson, 1993:125) the Commonwealth retained the ability to dictate the number, size and nature of institutions as well the nature of their output. Yet, as the Labor Party moved higher education away from public funding and control and towards economic competition, the funding base of institutions was broadened beyond reliance on Commonwealth outlays. "Marketisation", the creation of markets in student places, became a major element in the "reform"; and students became a key source of funds through the introduction of the Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) and as subsidised and full-cost private students. The numbers of private students grew quickly after 1988 as a result of proliferation in the new areas of fee-paying overseas and postgraduate students.

The extent of the shift from a publicly funded system was evident in the 1991 release of figures by the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee which calculated that funding per equivalent full-time student had fallen by 11.8% since 1983 (1991:13). "More with less" had become a common cry throughout the universities. In 1996 the Higher Education Council warned publicly that the decline in real funding to the system had fallen short by some $1.5 billion (Healy,1996). The HEC argued this represented an "efficiency dividend" with Australian universities having continued the same level of educational output per student whilst each year receiving on average some 0.5% less in funding per student. The National Tertiary Education Union has estimated the "dividend" between 1988 and 1995 at a value of as much as 3.1% each year and expected it to pass 4% after 1996 (1996:4).

Despite the fall in *per capita* funding, total Commonwealth outlays on higher education continued to rise throughout that period. Yet, between 1988 and 1994 student numbers grew much faster than total outlays which had the effect that, for each dollar allocated by the Commonwealth, progressively a greater level of "output" was achieved. As Marginson has described, as economic goals came to dominate education, and because spending on education is an economic cost, it became possible for a government to argue that there was "too much" education (1993:65). In effect, the "logic" of public investment came to demand a reduction in outlays in order to produce a greater rate of return. This is a perversion of the view that government outlays for education are a form of public sector investment.

The return on public investment could appear greater still if the total output from the higher education sector could be subsidised by private investment. The Commonwealth sought to reconcile the goal of production of human capital (Skilbeck and Esnault, 1993:2-3) with that of fiscal restraint. The articulation of higher education with other forms of economic production, in effect the selling of education as a service, turned the focus to pricing mechanisms.

While pursuing competitive reforms the Commonwealth has relied on the supposed imperative for fiscal restraint to justify tightened funding and make the political argument that there is "too much" education funded from the public purse. The future viability of the sector has been premised on a greater proportion of funds being raised through user-pays mechanisms. Human capital increasingly has been represented as a private rather than a public good, its value supposedly able to be measured in the form of higher relative wage outcomes accruing to graduates (see Marginson,1993:44-45). It has become easier to argue that those individuals who seek to gain such a benefit should be required to make some level of private investment (Vanstone,1996:8; Wran,1988:iv; Dawkins,1987:75).

Policy makers in the Government and in DEET found their task made easier from the mid '80s as decisions by individuals about investment in higher education were influenced more by credentialism than human capital. As the Australian economy experienced strong growth in the services sector more Australians have sought greater levels of credential in order to compete for positional advantage (see Marginson,1996:204-208). School retention rates increased dramatically in the last decade, making the Federal Government face the political necessity of growth in the higher education system. Applications for university places rose sharply and fee-incurring postgraduate coursework degrees became a viable private sector market for individual institutions. The "recession we had to have" at the start of the 90s simply reinforced the need for educational credentials in order for individuals to compete within the labour market and underpinned the shift in education policy away from notions of a community asset.

The shift in the battle for positional advantage from schools to universities indicates a great deal about the increasing acceptance of students as a major source of university funding. Tuition fees had, in any event, been absent from Australian higher education for only a relatively short period. As Kenneth Davidson commented in 1988, significant political support fell in behind user-pays mechanisms because:

> There can be nothing more galling for the rich to have spent money on buying a 'superior' private education and find it is not sufficient to guarantee a place for their offspring in higher

> education...The higher the proportion of the workforce with tertiary credentials, the more the scarcity value of the credential declines (1988:13).

The imposition of a price mechanism, then, has presented the possibility of a relative increase in the exchange value of a university degree (ie. it keeps the riff-raff out).

HECS the Key

Above all, it is the Higher Education Contribution Scheme which has been the key element in the creation of viable markets in fee-charging undergraduate places. This occurred in part because the scheme established community acceptance of greater private spending on higher education in lieu of historical levels of public sector support. As proposed by the Wran Report (1988), the HECS had as its crucial feature the compulsory payment of fees on an income-contingent basis. The identification of supposedly high income graduates as targets of the scheme created the appearance of "fairness". Furthermore, the HECS was seen to mark the conclusion of a limited experiment with up-front fees for Australian students in the form of the Higher Education Administration Charge (introduced in 1987).

Arguments about equity were employed with considerable effectiveness against opponents (see Wran,1988:iv). For the purposes of the HECS, "equity" was constructed as the goal of ensuring those who received private benefits from higher education made some personal contribution to subsidise public outlays in support of that education. As the Wran Committee asserted :

> Society in general benefits from higher education, but considerable private benefits accrue to those who have the opportunity to participate (Wran,1988:iv).

Minister Vanstone invoked this same construction of equity in support of the 1996 Budget proposals to increase the level of imposition on students through the HECS, asserting these would provide a "*fair balance between public and private funding*" (Vanstone,1996:8).

For the Government the greatest attraction of the HECS and the measure of its success has been the capacity of the scheme to subsidise public outlays. The Wran Committee had been quite explicit about this policy agenda, putting the proposal for the contribution scheme in the context of OECD governments

> reviewing their financial arrangements for higher education...(faced with) taxpayer demands to reduce government expenditures...and seeking alternative sources of funding (1988:48).

While the Wran Committee presented no evidence of this alleged demand for reduced expenditure, its proposal for the HECS held out a promise to return some 20% of average outlays on each university undergraduate place (Wran,1988:53). In fact, research by the National Union of Students indicates the HECS has proved even more lucrative than that. Taking 1988 (the year prior to the commencement of the scheme) as a base, the real drop in Commonwealth *per capita* outlays, when discounted for the value of private contributions through the HECS, had grown, from 17.46% in 1989 to 28.5% by 1995 (Kent,1996:25). It should be noted that this figure probably understates the situation because it is calculated from planned rather than actual student load.

The Proliferation of User-Pays Mechanisms

Broad acceptance of the claim that there is "too much" higher education and the success of the HECS has greatly encouraged the Commonwealth and universities in looking to supplement public outlays further. The outright substitution of a significant proportion of outlays with individual contributions arguably has been the reason behind the introduction of all user-pays mechanisms into higher education in the post-Whitlam years, whether these have been up-front or income contingent arrangements. Whereas the HECS had universal application to undergraduates, other measures initially were restricted to segments of the student population.

In 1983 the Hawke Government prepared the way for a steep increase in fees charged to overseas students by establishing the Goldring Committee and including in its terms of reference :

> changes to the private overseas students program which will have the effect of achieving Government objectives...without increasing public sector outlays" (Goldring:viii).

The subsequent decision also to permit institutions to provide places to overseas students at full cost was announced by then Minister Ryan as being designed to "*contribute to Australia's overall export performance and to economic growth*" (Giles,1985:4).

It was this which led to the present large scale market in places for fee-paying overseas students in Australian universities. The growth of this market has seen Australian higher education described as "an acknowledged player in terms of attracting export earnings" (Coaldrake,1995:2) and earn more than $1.5 billion each year (AVCC,1995:4). In 1995, universities' share of that income was derived from a student base of 8.6% of the total population of the unified national system representing 9.4% of student load (DEET,1996(a):118-121).

The fee-paying postgraduate programs of the various universities have evolved over a shorter period of time and contribute less revenue. By 1995, fee-paying postgraduates other than overseas students accounted for only 3.9% of students within the unified national system for just 2.3% of the total load (DEET,1996(a):128-131). In 1996 these figures were 4.4% and 2.5% respectively (DEET,1996(d):123-126).

Up-front fees for postgraduate places first were placed on the public agenda in 1987 by Ryan's successor, John Dawkins, supposedly at the request of institutions who wished to "*expand their course offerings and revenue base*" (Dawkins,1987:15). The large growth in undergraduate enrolments in the late 80s moved the cut-off point for labour market credentialling further into post-compulsory education to the postgraduate level. This was seen in the increased number of postgraduate entry qualifications required by the professions (HEC,1996:42).

The provision of fee-charging postgraduate coursework places commenced in 1989. A brief history is outlined in the Stanley Report (1995) which reviewed the then existing arrangements for such programs. By 1994, however, this area of provision had been deregulated almost entirely. The Commonwealth had established its own revenue stream by claiming a proportion of fees from certain categories of students[2] and institutions had expanded their revenue base through being able to charge any number of students for any type of postgraduate program (see Stanley,1995:8-9).

By 1993 institutions within the Unified National System on average were receiving only 56% of their total income from the Commonwealth (DEET,1996(b):12). While the 1996 Budget announced a series of cuts to operating grants for the following triennium, the Minister undertook to "*safeguard two imperatives - undergraduate teaching and research*" (Vanstone,1996:5). The explicitly stated outcome of this position was that institutions were expected to make up any shortfall in operating funds to the end of 1998 by increasing the numbers of fee-paying coursework postgraduates and the level of fees.

That Budget also set forth a new measure for full cost up-front fees to be levied against Australian undergraduates over and above funded load. The structure of these fees, to be levied by each institution on a number of students no greater than 25% of its total undergraduate enrolment, bore the hallmarks of earlier agitation by the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee for the power to respond to unmet demand by charging so-called "over quota" students (see Smith,1995). As the number of fee-paying overseas students had increased so, too, had calls for Australian undergraduates to have the same opportunity to buy a university place. The Minister now exploited such demands to reconstruct equity and argue that it was only fair that Australians should be able to buy a university place (Vanstone,1996:12).

In the form announced in the 1996 Budget this regime is unlikely to attract significant numbers of extra students or to generate substantial

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2 For each fee-paying coursework postgraduate student an institution was required to make a payment to the Commonwealth equivalent to the minimum HECS liability.

revenue. The key aspect can once again be described as its representing the "thin edge of the wedge". The new fees were implemented through an amendment to the *Higher Education Funding Act* which has delivered to Ministerial discretion the decision over whether an institution can impose tuition fees on its students[3]. One scenario anticipated by the opponents of this new fee is for Ministerial discretion to be exercised to alter the initial balance between the quota of places and the total number of funded places with the result that, over time, greater numbers of undergraduate students will be charged full cost tuition fees and with a mere rump HECS-liable places remaining.

The End of Income Contingency

As a user-pays mechanism the HECS clearly played a significant role in the decline of publicly funded and accountable higher education. However, as a distinct form of user-pays it has the advantage for advocates of government involvement in education in that the income contingent character of the scheme is dependent on the levying and collection of charges being undertaken by public education and taxation bureaucrats. While a roll-back of the "reforms" of the last decade might be the ultimate goal, the role of income contingency has become central to protecting the remnant public system of higher education. The politics of income contingent fees, however, are weighed against the claims of some for greater levels of private investment and concerns over the efficiency of such schemes as vehicles for private investment.

As Ann Harding has shown, "repayment" of student debt accumulated under the HECS can be a very lengthy process. In the case of males, for even half the aggregate total debt to be remitted can take up to six years from graduation, rising to three quarters paid at twelve years (Harding,1993:23). In the case of women, half the total HECS debt might remain unpaid fourteen years after graduation. The 1996 Budget aimed to address the flow of revenue from the HECS with a dramatic lowering of

3 This amendment broadened the definition of *designated course of study* in section 34.1 (in Chapter 4 which establishes the HECS) by deleting the word "postgraduate". Ministerial discretion is described in section 39.

the repayment thresholds and an increase in the size of the repayments for each income category[4].

Further, while the HECS can be argued to operate as an up-front fee mitigated by a loan[5], its effectiveness as a market mechanism is constrained by centrally negotiated educational profiles. Individuals can choose whether to invest but not where. Student based funding, the mobility of individual student investment based on market factors, was the key element of the proposal for vouchers outlined in the Coalition's *Fightback!* 1993 election manifesto (although vouchers have a much longer history than this). Despite the official excising of this proposal from the Coalition's policies after the 1993 election defeat the idea has remained on the public policy table. The West Review has provided a new opportunity for vouchers to be raised as a serious funding option. The "Group of Eight" universities backed vouchers in their formal submission to the Review, as did several economic consultants commissioned by the Review Committee (Illing,1997(b):39). A telling development was the earlier public support given to this option by a senior academic member of the Review, Professor Chipman (Illing, 1997(a):2).

The greater encouragement of market behaviour by students which is offered by vouchers over income contingent fees is argued to rely on providing only a partial subsidy to an individual's costs of study. Vouchers often have been proposed to deliver Commonwealth funding to each student to cover only a

portion of tuition costs. Individual institutions would charge a "top-up" fee and levy this on an up-front basis which might be mitigated by some form of non-income contingent loans scheme. The greater financial risks

4 The actual outcome may be that revenue flow is affected only marginally. One study has suggested that while the lower thresholds and higher repayments may produce some greater flow the simultaneous change of higher HECS charges and differential HECS will, in any event, lead to more students choosing to defer their debt rather than the up-front payment option (see Windsor, G. "Research spots flaws in HECS" in *The Australian*, 16/7/97 P.34).

5 This is because the scheme offers a 25% discount to those who pay their debt up-front on enrolment. The option of deferred payment, then, imposes an effective surcharge on students and the total debt then is indexed each financial year.

thus attending an individual's decisions about educational investment are argued to produce more economically "rational" behaviour. Once again, the policy makers and the major parties who make the political arguments have presupposed the dominance of economic arguments over the community asset of a broadly based system of liberal education.

In a significant move towards student based funding, the Coalition in late 1996 won important changes to the *Higher Education Funding Act* with respect to fee-paying students enrolled through the Open Learning Agency (OLA). Whereas, previously, students could defer the up-front fees imposed by the Agency in a manner similar to HECS, from 1997 onwards the "HECS loan" has been capped at $326 per subject. The Government simultaneously passed to the OLA the power to determine its own charges to students. The gap between the limit for deferment and deregulated tuition fees will be substantial if other fee-charging arrangements are any guide. This arrangement transforms the HECS from a subsidy of public outlays for student places to a subsidy for the individual outlay of each student in a manner very similar to the likely operation of any future voucher scheme.

Given this willingness on the part of the Commonwealth to move away from the centralised allocation of places, students correctly have identified the introduction of the "25% quota" of up-front fee-paying student places as an attempt simultaneously to test the viability of an open market in undergraduate education while softening-up community attitudes to a much more privatised and "fee for service" higher education system. Numerous protests have greeted the decisions by institutions in early 1997 to pursue the up-front fee option, including occupations of university buildings at UTS and RMIT. The militancy with which students have been prepared to defend the very income contingent scheme (ie. the HECS) which their forebears so strenuously opposed less than a decade earlier has ensured that the Commonwealth must continue to trade-off the economics of user-pays in education against strong political demands for at least the present levels of public investment.

The Privatisation of Higher Education

With options for the future funding of higher education given a predominance within the work of the West Committee it is important to note that private economic relations had been a model in higher education for all but some thirteen years prior to the White Paper. In addition, public acceptance of the non-government schools sector meant that a political beachhead had been retained for the introduction of fee-paying mechanisms throughout higher education. Private higher education does exist in Australia and the largest providers are the publicly funded institutions within the Unified National System.

In a system which increasingly mixes public and private providers it is important to clarify the nature of funding supplementation. While private sources of funds are increasingly important to public universities the experience of the schools sector suggests that public supplementation is equally important to private providers. Given the historically public character of Australian higher education there exists an early gap in competitiveness between public and would-be private providers. Government intervention, as discussed earlier, may well require the operation of significant public outlays being directed to supposedly private operators (see Marginson,1993:224-227).

In 1995, receipts from the HECS and various fees and charges imposed on students raised some 19.8% of the total income of higher education institutions (DEETYA,1997:14). Yet for all the interest in fee-paying overseas students and postgraduates their contribution to operating grants overall is small indeed. In 1995 overseas students produced 5.9% of that income and fee-paying postgraduates delivered a mere 0.98%. "Other fees and charges" generated 3.9%. The greatest concern with relation to these markets is whether they are approaching the limits of their growth capacity. Even without the adverse impact of the "Hanson phenomenon" observers have begun to suggest that demand from fee-paying overseas students may have plateaued (Healy *et al*,1997; Armitage,1997b). Professor Stanley himself, in his review of postgraduate fees, suggested a slowing in growth of demand for fee-paying postgraduate places (1995:1).

Even continuing growth of fee-paying student numbers is a doubtful basis for funding the university system as a whole. Fee-paying overseas and postgraduate students are concentrated in so few institutions that a reliance on the income they generate would create a sharp stratification across the system[6].

Thus, the viability of private providers of higher education remains to be proven. The highest profile private provider has been Bond University and the question of public subsidies was the subject of much discussion before a 1995 Senate inquiry into its proposed sale to the University of Queensland. The Bond Chancellor testified before the inquiry that the University had graduated 2,000 people over six years at a total loss of some $90 million - market forces had left the institution short by $15,000 per EFTSU (Senate,1995:1;11-12).

The school sector demonstrates something of the magnitude of the subsidies required in order that private providers can be viable within a mixed system. In 1996, for example, the Commonwealth allocated to public schools an average of $425 per student and, generally, to non-government schools $1662 per student (DEET,1996(c):212). This contrasts with recent public comments by Minister Vanstone as to the efficacy of private school education[7].

A form of direct subsidy from the Commonwealth to private providers would be to permit the operation of any future voucher system to include other than the public institutions. The interest in the issue of Bond being purchased by the University of Queensland was the extent to which an obviously struggling private provider would be propped-up by less direct

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6 In 1996, 6 institutions shared 49% of total non-overseas fee-paying postgraduate numbers in the UNS (DEET,1996(d):123-124). In the same year, 7 institutions enrolled 47% of the total overseas student numbers (DEET,1996(a):111-112). To further emphasise the concentration, located on each of these lists were the institutions of Monash, Melbourne, RMIT and UNSW.

7 Vanstone used ABS data on unemployment rates for school leavers to assert that "private schools have beaten unemployment" and that the Government would seek to push government schools "into reaching those same standards" (Garcia,1997:1). Tellingly, however, the Minister made no comment on the comparative rates at which the Commonwealth has funded government and private schools.

subsidies. Cross-subsidisation already operates in the area of private provision, most notably with fee-paying postgraduate places (Stanley,1995:15). As institutions attempt to generate ever greater income from fee-paying student places of various types they take on more and more of the character of private providers, yet the viability of their student markets remains dependent on the availability of cross-subsidies.

Such an arrangement can be seen clearly in the case of recent deals involving Macquarie University and The University of Sydney. Macquarie has entered into a deal with the Sydney Institute of Business and Technology (SIBT) to provide diploma programs identical to the first year of a bachelor degree in accounting or computer science but on a fee-paying basis (Macquarie,1996:1). Sydney likewise has a deal with the Universal Education Centre (UEC) with respect to its commerce program (Armitage,1997a:3).

For students the essence of the offer is an opportunity to buy their way into a degree program since success in the diploma will qualify for advanced standing at the associated university. Each institution in turn will receive a portion of the fees paid by students enrolled in the parallel program. The external providers will receive considerable subsidy in kind through such things as the provision of teaching materials developed within the public university and through the university in each case undertaking to provide its imprimatur to the educational standards of its private partner.

The significance of these deals is that while they are dependent on cross-subsidisation they both provide an intermediate step between the marketisation of higher education and the privatisation of public institutions themselves. This scenario seems ever more likely now that the University of Melbourne has determined to pursue the project of a private university almost parallel to the existing public institution (Healy,1997:37)."Commercial considerations" have been cited by Melbourne in keeping secret the details of the project, including the type and level of any cross-subsidisation. The difficulties created by this position for the exercise of public accountability extends to the type and level of cross-subsidy the public university will make available to its new private offspring.

Towards a Balance

Universities are making greater use of market models to resolve the policy difficulties arising from the state's retreat from a position of adequately resourcing public higher education. Many will suspect that the West Review is intended by the Commonwealth as a mechanism to provide a firmer intellectual and policy basis for such a development. Direct action by those supportive of a properly funded public university system has already raised the political stakes in that regard.

The limitations of market mechanisms raise the question of whether a balance between public and private funding is achievable at all. Increasingly, the distinction appears to be between a public system subsidised by private contributions and a private system subsidised from the public purse. While a rolling back of the policy "reforms" of the last decade may not be a realistic goal in the immediate term, the continuing fight against the deepening of user-pays mechanisms and their substitution for public funds remains central to the desire for a higher education system which is democratically accountable.

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