

Freedom and control: the implications of student demand-driven university funding in Australia for student choice: a case study of Australian social professions. (0118)

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In Australia, the Bradley Report (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008) recommended that the basis of the university funding model should be changed. Specifically the report recommended that the centrally planned funding model (whereby institutions received subsidies for an agreed number of places for domestic students on each course, and allocation of funded places was capped) should be replaced by a student demand-driven funding model, whereby the funding provided to universities followed student course preferences, and there were no caps on the numbers of subsidised places available to domestic students. A rationale for this change was that universities would become more responsive to student demand and consequently student choice would be better served. This analysis was premised upon the flawed assumption that Higher Education functioned approximately as a perfect market (Marginson & Considine, 2000).

This presentation is based upon a case study of availability of a niche social profession, commenced as part of a nationally funded research project that indicated that geographic availability of the youth work specialist degree was very limited (Author, 2014). Further desk research conducted since the project into the availability of degrees in other specialist social professions, showed that in areas such as disability studies, gerontology, and community mental health, geographic availability of degrees was limited and in most cases had declined markedly. Limited geographic availability is relevant in the Australian context because the majority of domestic students reside at home to study. This decline had occurred despite the unmet need for graduates in these professions. In addition, several key areas of government policy require graduates with specialist knowledge, as evidenced by the nomination of these occupations on the State Priority Occupation List (SPOL) in Western Australia. Specialist graduates in these disciplines are needed to lead and manage, implementation and change in important areas of government social policy innovation, including, the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) (National Disability Practitioners, 2016), Domestic and Family Violence, Aging-in-place Age Care Policy, existing policy on Closing the Gap (Higgins, 2010), Youth Justice Reinvestment (Justice and Community Safety Directorate, 2016) and Countering Violent Extremism (Attorney-General's Department, 2016) in Australia.

The decline in diversity of course offerings available to students and a decline in student choice, despite social need, cannot be attributed solely to the change from a centrally planned funding model to a demand driven funding model. This presentation will discuss how various factors in the higher education environment, including universities responses to the higher education funding regime, the demand-driven funding model, and other environmental considerations contribute to a reduced the choice of offerings available to students, reduced capacity for universities courses to meet recognised social needs, and to decline in student course choice despite the rhetoric that suggests demand-driven funding models would increase student choice. The analysis also raises several issues about freedom and control, and especially whose freedom should be prioritised, and how control should be exerted over the mix and balance of courses universities offer.

There is little that academics can do to directly affect this policy except through political action, and even then choices seem limited at present. However, within the sector it may be possible to mitigate some of the worst effects of these policies through inter-institutional collaboration. Interinstitutional collaboration has been used successfully in some instances to extend availability of niche courses in a variety of disciplines (Dow, 2008; Goodrich & McCauley, 2009; Robertson & Shannon, 2009; Schmidt & Molkentin, 2015). The researcher recently received national funding to bring about collaboration to improve the diversity of course offerings through inter-institutional collaboration, and by the time of the conference, work on this project will have commenced. The purpose of the funding was to achieve change within the Australian higher education sector. The research will therefore use an action research approach and eight Australian universities have expressed interest in participation. The initial work will identify potential models for collaboration, how institutions perceive the benefits and barriers of different collaborative approaches, and whether (and how) the benefits of collaboration can be realised in a competitive higher education environment, and whether (and how) barriers to collaboration can be overcome. By the time of the conference the preliminary stages of the project will be complete, and there is an expectation that preliminary results will be available.

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