

Big Picture

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Professor Daryl Le Grew

Vice-Chancellor

The Review of Australian Higher Education, chaired by Professor Denise Bradley, will no doubt have a mountain of paper to wade through after the closing date for submissions on 31 July.

The feedback from consultations that I have attended is that Prof Bradley and her review panel are looking for practical ideas and solutions rather than hearing laments of what should be. Fair enough, we all know the problems and challenges facing the sector; the discussion paper released in June summarises them well.

Prof Bradley has indicated a willingness to be bold, whilst also acknowledging the political context within which she will make her recommendations for the future of the higher education sector. Preliminary recommendations are due in October, in time to be factored into the next Federal Budget, while the main report is due by the end of this year.

There is considerable interest in innovation at UTAS and Prof Bradley has asked that we document these ideas. We have structured the UTAS review submission around a number of case studies that demonstrate in practical terms how UTAS has responded to challenges in the sector.

The submission acknowledges the range of players in the post-secondary landscape of the future, and uses the UTAS College model to illustrate how we see the changing pathways into university, and how we are responding to the different backgrounds with which our prospective students arrive at our door. With the Tasmania Tomorrow reform agenda introduced by the State Government last year, UTAS is already actively responding to a new context for post-Year 10 education and training.

Funding is obviously one of the major issues for the sector. Full funding of research will be a common theme, I suspect, in responses to both the Bradley Review and the Cutler Review into innovation in Australia. For too long universities have absorbed the real cost of research and then in research-led universities like UTAS the impact on teaching and learning has been profound. We simply support too many research salaries from the teaching and learning budget, with higher student-staff ratios as a result. It is time to say enough is enough. Funding research salaries will allow significant gains in teaching and learning.

While funding via compacts has been a stated Federal Government policy for sometime, no-one yet knows just what compacts will look like and how they will be negotiated.

In my view, compacts need to provide stable, negotiable funding for universities over a reasonable time horizon. I am proposing a “whole of business” approach that allows individual universities to pursue distinctive missions without forcing any to become something they do not want to be. Compacts need to provide for national collaborations across networks of universities, and for national centres of excellence in vocational education and training within the university sector, such as the AMC’s world-class VTE maritime and marine programs.

No doubt individuals and groups around UTAS have made separate submissions to the review, or are party to discipline-based and professional association responses. Good! We must all engage in the debate about our future, and ideas should be forthcoming from all parts of the university sector.

Daryl Le Grew