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Higher Education Reform Feedback
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The Australian Psychological Society (APS) appreciates the opportunity to comment on the reform proposal entitled *Driving Innovation, Fairness and Excellence in Australian Higher Education (May 2016)*. The APS is the peak body for psychology in Australia, representing over 22,000 members. Psychologists comprise the largest non-medical health profession in Australia. Psychology provides a diverse workforce for key strategic areas of need for the Australian population, especially in the area of mental health. However, psychology also contributes significantly in the organisational, school, rehabilitation, forensic, health and chronic disease, and academic sectors.

As one of the 14 registered health professions, the discipline is committed to producing a diverse and competent workforce, capable of providing cost-effective and evidence-based services that increase the overall well-being of the Australian population. The research by psychological scientists can provide innovative answers, derived from cutting-edge science, to health, mental health and other societal problems. Psychological research outputs contribute both social and economic benefits for Australian society.

In consideration of the diversity of the discipline and the focus on bringing innovative science solutions to brain, mind and people matters, the education of psychologists requires both undergraduate and postgraduate training.

Feedback on the consultation paper

Overall, the APS agrees with the values and aims of the paper and the focus on innovation, fairness and equity, excellence and quality, affordability and sustainability. The proposed ideas and model need to be elaborated and then evaluated with data so that it is possible to see what different scenarios would mean in terms of increasing participation by certain groups and increasing repayment of fees. As it stands, the paper does not provide enough information on the implications of different scenarios for us to determine what impacts policy change will have.

Below, we highlight several specific considerations for these reforms:

Opportunity and Choice

Postgraduate places to support innovation:

Postgraduate training is an essential component for becoming a registered psychologist and for educating those who provide the training. The APS agrees that the number of subsidised postgraduate places for psychology is insufficient and that there is inconsistency in their allocation across higher education providers. This is especially critical for workforce development for areas of specialty that are providing innovative solutions and community benefit. The postgraduate-trained psychology workforce can make major impact in many areas where behaviour change is required to implement a wide range of public policies aimed at achieving social and economic benefit. These diverse areas include e-mental health for rural and remote Australia, life style changes designed to alleviate diabetes and other chronic diseases, the design of road-side signage to allow normal attentional processes to ease traffic flows, understanding the decision processing demands of air traffic controllers and airport security screeners, strategies for individuals and communities responding to the consequences of extreme weather events; corporate and organisational leadership, and management and training, and effective communication in a global world.

Various specialisations within psychology can further contribute to innovation. Educational psychology and organisational psychology provide two examples. Educational psychologists assist students to optimise their learning potential. Organisational psychologists assist organisations to achieve healthy and equitable workplaces. Although it is important for students to have opportunities to advance to specialist higher degree programs, many universities currently find that it is not cost-effective to run psychology higher degree programs for specialised areas within the discipline.

As a science discipline, the APS would welcome additional places for skills-deepening qualifications. Psychologists bring wide-ranging expertise and capability, not only in the research leading to better understanding of human behaviour but also in its translation to prevention and service provision, and to increasing the overall psychological literacy of the population.

Fairness and Equity

Improving support for disadvantaged students:

Access to higher education, especially by groups that have been underrepresented, such as people from low SES background, rural and remote areas, and of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent, is critical for the national applicability and universal relevance of psychology. Graduates from these groups have the potential of achieving positive social and economic outcomes, both for their communities and for the wider Australian

population. The APS has been the industry partner in an Office of Learning and Teaching funded project that aimed at increasing Indigenous participation in higher education (see indigenoupsyched.org.au) and this project has identified barriers and approaches to increasing the number of disadvantaged students. There is strong demand for additional psychology practitioners in Australia and a workforce that has a deep understanding of the issues facing the broader community is critical in delivering a comprehensive service.

Supporting the regional presence of universities

The APS agrees that a range of options needs to be explored to enable better access to and to retain students from regional, rural and remote areas in psychology programs. This must include a recognition that students often want to undertake academic study in cities, away from their regional and/or rural place of residence. Moreover, specific academic training needs will often require students to move to a large city and adequate financial support for such a move is an essential first step in providing this top quality training to students from regional areas. The APS supports encouragement (financial inducements) of a greater diversity across departmental programs to cater for local (regional, rural and remote) community needs but not at the expense of rigour in training of core skills. Specifically it is recommended to implement strategies that enable regional and rural universities to connect better with metropolitan and global providers/educators. Better IT infrastructure would increase rural providers' capacities to broaden their offerings.

Excellence and quality

Flexibility to innovate

The APS is in support of flexibility for higher education providers to innovate and meet the workforce challenges of the future. The APS initiated the development of guidelines and standards for the accreditation of psychology programs in Australia and acknowledges the need for standards that assure both high quality graduates and provide flexibility for higher education providers.

More information for students

The APS agrees that high quality information for students is important; especially in a popular discipline like psychology where many graduates continue on to other professions after their undergraduate studies. Ensuring that future and current students understand the wide array of career options, both within and outside the discipline of psychology, that their skill set will allow them to contribute to, will support better admissions processes and graduate satisfaction and outcomes.

Affordability

Special consideration in the funding debate should be given to students from disadvantaged backgrounds. For many of these students and their families, student loans

and higher levels of contributions and debts are barriers to attending university and to graduating with relevant qualifications.

A fair share from taxpayers and graduates

Cluster funding

The APS agrees that the combined Government cluster and student band funding rates should be reviewed to reflect the relative cost of delivering different types of courses. The field of psychology, as a science, is in too low a government funding cluster for undergraduate training. The most direct consequence of this is that within Australia no department can provide access to the best modern tools of brain science to undergraduates to ensure their training is at the established forefront of psychology internationally. The undergraduate psychology funding should be at least at the same level as postgraduate training. We note that this imbalance has resulted in cross subsidies occurring across courses at some higher education providers, whereas others have discontinued courses at the postgraduate levels that would otherwise prepare important sections of the psychology workforce (e.g., health or organisational psychology). However, even with this cross subsidisation school and departments of psychology struggle to provide access to the established brain imaging research tools or the hands-on skill development that results from intensive laboratory tuition in their training programs, commonly available in the UK, USA and many places in Asia.

The APS prefers to leave further specific comments on fees to the higher education providers but would like to stress the importance of the principles of fairness when evaluating the impact of loan fee arrangements, changes to repayments and rates, lifetime limits, and other options.

Conclusion

The APS maintains that the values underpinning innovation, fairness and excellence in Australian higher education and many of the options outlined in this paper need to be developed in much more depth to permit assessment of the impacts of different options. The APS, together with its academic and student members, welcomes the opportunity for further input into these reform proposals and relevant legislation.

On behalf of the APS

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