ACU NATIONAL RESPONSE to
“Varieties of Excellence: Diversity, Specialisation and Regional Engagement”
SUBMISSION ON ‘VARIETIES OF EXCELLENCE’
FROM AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY

INTRODUCTION

Australian Catholic University (ACU) welcomes the rejection by Government in its Issues Paper, “Varieties of Excellence,” of any binary model which separates the functions of Research and Teaching. Consistent with this University’s original submission to Government’s “Crossroads” document, no institution of higher education should be categorised as a University unless it conducts, and is encouraged to conduct, scholarly research and teaching. As a quality tertiary provider of higher education, ACU endorses the further development of both a diverse and specialised system of higher education in Australia.

SELECTIVE EXCELLENCE

It is entirely consonant with the Mission of ACU that there is encouragement of selective excellence in teaching, scholarship, research and community engagement. All higher education should aim for excellence in teaching and learning and this was a key emphasis of ACU’s submission to Government on its Issues Paper, “Striving for Quality: Learning, Teaching and Scholarship.”

As the “Varieties of Excellence” Issues Paper argues, there is definite scope for some institutions to specialise in offering particular courses or fields of study, particular modes of delivery, and the teaching of particular groups of students. For a university to truly categorize itself as a specialised university, however, it needs to be supported adequately (e.g., by appropriate research funding) in ways that recognise that institutions identify and focus on selected areas of strength. By the nature of universities, and as argued in ACU’s original submission, excellence at university level must be supported by strength at both the undergraduate and postgraduate level. Government has the responsibility to countenance, within the spirit of tolerance for varieties of excellence that it argues for, adequate support for university education at institutions like ACU that is based on genuine (limited and specialised) research strength, a strong (relatively narrow) range of postgraduate offerings, and a wide range of competency oriented to professional training at the undergraduate level. In all these ways, ACU offers a variety of specialisations along a spectrum of diversity within which selective excellence has been both strategically planned and developed.

It is particularly important that Government ensure that its policy framework allows institutions such as ACU to pursue its goals, and develop its potential within the context of selective excellence that is funded adequately. The model most appropriate to ACU’s mission and patterns of quality performance has been explicated in ACU’s submission to the Government’s Issues Paper, “Setting Firm Foundations: Financing Australian Higher Education.”
As a public Catholic university, ACU focuses on particular discipline areas, has selective excellence in defined areas of teaching and research strength and plans for course provision in a context that demonstrates a sound appreciation of genuine national need. As Government states in its Issues Paper (see Clause 20) - which draws from ACU’s own input to BHERT’s submission to it - “Diversity must be manifested in ways that imply dynamism, competition, continual improvement, adaptation and innovation – as is required to position the sector to meet the considerable demands imposed by mass higher education, lifelong learning and globalisation.”

Consistent with the terms of reference and the underlying principles associated with the formation of New Generation Universities, universities such as ACU (see ACU’s original submission) projects a distinctive mission, interacts with particular stakeholder groups, offers courses in a selective way across different professional orientations, has particular research strengths which it has selectively identified and has a particular funding base, mission-orientation, and size.

As Australia’s only truly national university, ACU evidences what the Issues Paper has called “systemic diversity” and performs both distinctively and well to show that it has achieved selective excellence.

SYSTEMIC AND PROGRAMMATIC DIVERSITY

ACU recognizes that systemic diversity needs to be distinguished from programmatic diversity. Some courses with low demands need to be terminated, while others need to be maintained and it supports mechanisms that can constructively encourage collaborative and strategic course development. Priorities needed to be developed for rationalising specialisation and collaboration in ways that are not affected by excessive bureaucratic regulation and intervention. AVCC is one body that may meet these goals.

Government talked in its Issues Paper about program diversity that is demonstrated in the range of courses or fields of study that are offered. This University evidences program diversity and has worked assiduously and diligently to reduce its course offerings so that it maintains a selective focus on particular disciplinary areas. For ACU, its selective excellence is paramount and course provision is strategically and sensibly planned according to a distinctive institutional mission.

PARTNERSHIPS AND REGIONAL DISTINCTIVENESS

Varieties of excellence result from specialised partnerships and ACU has created special partnerships that serve its distinctive mission. It strongly endorses Government’s position that varieties of excellence are achieved through varieties of partnerships. One specific set of partnerships exists through regional connections.

ACU makes a very important contribution to meeting regional needs through its Aquinas Campus in Ballarat. It has a targeted focus on primary and secondary education and nursing at the Ballarat Campus, and is meeting the identified need for teachers and nurses
in non-metropolitan Australia. Both the employment rate of graduates and their satisfaction with their educational experience at ACU are very high.

However, ACU is entirely lacking in Government encouragement of what it can do to meet regional need. This is particularly apparent at its regional campus in Ballarat. There is no recognition, and no mechanism that encourages such recognition, of the needs that exist on its campus situated at Ballarat. It is entirely anomalous in the sector that the University of Ballarat is recognised as a regional university, whereas the Aquinas Campus of ACU which is situated in the same area is not. This is not a comment comparing two universities, but it is a comment about the absence of any systematic and consistent way to recognise obvious common need. This University needs incentives and support for regional engagement that is available to other institutions, and the principle of equity requires that this be so. Without such help, ACU is prevented from serving its mission and purpose. Mechanisms are thus needed to supply additional grant income, and/or provide means of offering special support to regional campuses such as Aquinas that lie within a truly national network.

Professor Peter W Sheehan AO
Vice-Chancellor
Australian Catholic University
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