

AV-CC

Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee

the council of Australia's university presidents

(A.C.N. 008 502 930 – A.B.N. 53 008 502 930)

HIGHER EDUCATION FUNDING AMENDMENT BILL 2002

Submission from the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee

The Government's Higher Education Funding Amendment Bill 2002 (the Bill) has been referred to the Senate Employment, Workplace Relations, Small Business and Education Legislation Committee for inquiry. The Bill will amend the higher Education Funding Act to extend access to the Postgraduate Education Loans Scheme (PELS) to Bond University, Christian Heritage College, Melbourne College of Divinity and Tabor College (South Australia) as announced in the 2002-03 budget.

As indicated in last year's submission to the Innovation and Education Legislation Amendments Bill 2001, the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee (AVCC) supports the Government's creation of PELS. The Scheme is an important equity measure that increases opportunities for students to undertake fee-paying postgraduate courses by removing the need to pay upfront fees.

PELS is currently available to students at all institutions listed in section 4 of the Higher Education Funding Act 1988 (HEFA) - both Table A and Table B – as eligible for public funded higher education places. This includes 38 universities, including the University of Notre Dame, and four other higher education institutions, Batchelor College, the Australian Maritime College, Avondale College, and Marcus Oldham College.

The issue before the Committee is to determine if eligibility for PELS should be extended beyond those institutions receiving public funding (primarily universities), and if so, on what basis are they to be determined.

In his second reading speech, Dr Nelson emphasises that the extension of PELS to these four institutions levels the playing field in fee paying postgraduate coursework degrees and further extends opportunities for institutions to provide, and students to undertake, fee-paying postgraduate courses.

The AVCC believes that the ability to accredit an institutions own qualifications is the most important criteria.

Bond University

Bond University was founded in 1987 and given its University status by the State of Queensland's Bond University Act in 1988. Bond University is a self-accrediting provider of reputable university education in Australia. Its selection processes are comparable to those of other Australian universities through considering applicants from school and other educational achievements.

Since PELS is targeted at supporting students of fee paying non research postgraduate courses, the AVCC can see no rationale for limiting its application to institutions that are cited in section 4 of HEFA, which defines eligibility to receive publicly funded places. The exclusion of students from Bond University is particularly inequitable in comparison with students at the University of Notre Dame, which is primarily a private university that also provides some targeted publicly funded places.

The Melbourne College of Divinity

The Melbourne College of Divinity is also a self-accrediting higher education institution, constituted by an Act of the Parliament of Victoria in 1910. The College has been affiliated with the University of Melbourne since 1993, while maintaining its autonomy and degree conferring status. Students can enrol in a Bachelor of Arts/Bachelor of Theology double degree program at the University of Melbourne and University of Melbourne students can take four Melbourne College of Divinity units towards their Bachelor of Arts degree. In addition Monash University and the Melbourne College of Divinity offer a Bachelor Arts/Bachelor of Theology double degree program. There is no religious test for the admission of students.

As a self accrediting institution and an affiliate of the University of Melbourne, the AVCC argues that the extension of PELS to the students of the Melbourne College of Divinity is consistent with the scope of the present Higher Education Funding Act.

Tabor College and Christian Heritage College

The AVCC does not consider that a sufficient case has been established to extend PELS to students of Tabor College and Christian Heritage College, two non self-accrediting institutions.

The Minister's arguments concerning ensuring a level playing field and to extend opportunities apply equally to all other institutions approved to provide higher education courses at the postgraduate level. It is therefore important to consider the full question of what, if any, access to Government programs these institutions should have, rather than select two out. If the Government does believe it sensible to provide such access in the context of its overall investment in higher education, it should argue its case as part of its current review of higher education, not act precipitantly.

Conclusion

In conclusion the AVCC:

- *supports PELS funding being available to students of Bond University and the Melbourne College of Divinity as self-accrediting higher education institutions.*
- *expresses concern at the extension of PELS to students at two non self-accrediting institutions in advance of the outcomes of the higher education review.*