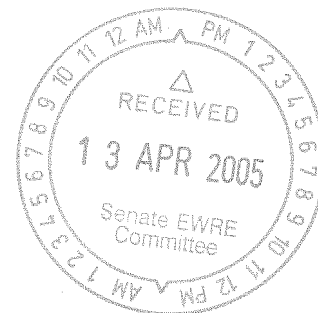

From: gpolya [gpolya@optusnet.com.au]
Sent: Wednesday, 13 April 2005 11:40 PM
To: EET, Committee (SEN)
Subject: Submission to Senate Inquiry 2005



13 April 2005

Secretary,
Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education Committee

Dear Sir,

Please find below a brief submission to the Inquiry into the Provisions of the Higher Education Legislation Amendment (2005 Measures No.1) Bill 2005.

I would be very grateful if you would transmit this submission to the Committee. I note (from The Australian, 13 April, 2005) that the revised extended deadline is 15 April 2005.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Gideon Polya

SUBMISSION BY DR GIDEON POLYA TO THE INQUIRY INTO THE PROVISIONS OF THE HIGHER EDUCATION LEGISLATION AMENDMENT (2005 MEASURES NO.1) BILL 2005

I understand that the Committee will examine among other things, the basis for the proposal to give Table B providers (specifically Bond University, University of Notre Dame and Melbourne College of Divinity) access to the Capital Development Pool and the possibility for this to be used as precedent for later funding decisions (e.g. more funding to private "universities" and to further providers regarded in some way as "universities").

In short, as a taxpayer and as a highly productive senior academic researcher and teacher with a 4 decade association with Australian universities, I object theoretically to private universities receiving taxpayer funding:

- (a) in the absence of taxpayer/government acquisition of "shares" in the private ventures;
- (b) in the absence of adequate taxpayer/government control over "academic standards" in the private ventures; and
- (c) when such recipients might, as a theoretical but realistic possibility and in the absence of taxpayer/government control, instruct students inappropriately (even to the point of threat to human life).

My detailed responses are numbered for the convenience of the Committee.

1. My credentials

I have been variously associated with Australian Universities since 1961 as a student, researcher and teacher. I published some 130 works in a 4 decade scientific career, most recently a huge

pharmacological reference text "Biochemical Targets of Plant Bioactive Compounds" (Taylor & Francis/CRC Press, London & New York, 2003), and am currently writing a book on global mortality (numerous articles on this matter can be found by a simple Google search for "Gideon Polya" and on my website: <http://members.optusnet.com.au/~gpolya/links.html>).

In my last year in a Table A University I gave some 90 lectures plus tutorials; supervised numerous practical classes; supervised an Honours student and 3 PhD students; published a total of 5 chapters in 5 books of which all but one were published overseas; published a huge scientific textbook in New York and London; after 32 years of tertiary teaching gained a Higher Education Teaching qualification (Certificate of Higher Education Teaching), the research components of which involved reviewing overseas off-campus teaching systems and then devising a system for maximum access, maximum quality and minimum cost Higher Education for Australia; received excellent teaching evaluations; and found time to make submissions to the Senate Committee Inquiry into Higher Education Funding (#389, August, 2003). I retired from this Table A academic position in early November 2003.

In my "semi-retirement" I am very busy researching and writing a book on avoidable global mortality and (because I love teaching) have been presenting about 50 hours of lectures plus tutorials per year as a "sessional lecturer" to students at an accredited private tertiary institution (for about 3.5 % of my previous pre-tax income). I am thus personally familiar with a wide RANGE of tertiary teaching options in this country.

2. Taxpayer/government funding of private higher education "businesses" requires compensatory taxpayer/government "shares" in the business

Private universities are in effect "businesses" and taxpayer/government funding of such institutions should be associated with taxpayer/government acquisition of appropriately and expertly valued "shares".

Universities have a three-fold function: (a) to teach, (b) conduct research and (c) give disinterested, expert advice to the public/government. Even within Table A universities there are already major concerns about all three functions (see earlier Senate Inquiries). Thus (a) teaching quality is highly variable, (b) research outcomes fall off markedly outside the Big 8 (or the Big 12 if you are generous) and (c) academics are generally perceived to be intimidated.

I suspect that non-Table A universities would generally only be strong in teaching at best. However a "teaching only" university is an oxymoron - it may make money by "selling knowledge" or "selling earned qualifications" but it is not doing what a "real" university should be doing. Accordingly taxpayer/government money would be better directed to Table A universities - and indeed, better still, to Big 8 (or Big 12), Table A, "real" universities which excel at (a) and (b) and might have the confidence borne of high professional attainment to even do (c).

3. Taxpayer/government funding of "second rank" private universities demands some taxpayer/government control over "academic standards"

As outlined in (2) above, the private universities may do what they do very well indeed but it is unlikely in my perception that they get anywhere near the standards of the Big 8 (or the Big 12) universities. Accordingly this key criterion for taxpayer/government funding will not be met at the outset.

4. Taxpayer/government-funded universities should conduct themselves properly and be ethically accountable to the taxpayer/government

No doubt Bond, Notre Dame and Melbourne Divinity do a very good job of what they do and do so properly and ethically. However media reports and Senate Inquiries in recent years have certainly

indicated that all is not well in the Table A universities - with reports of appalling abuses such as soft marking, plagiarism, scientific fraud, "money" fraud and victimization.

Indeed last year I personally encountered an "interesting" selection criterion for a 6 figure salary managerial academic position, namely "tolerance of ambiguity". Honorable Senators may well ponder what this means but associates of mine in many walks of life including academia professed to know exactly what this meant, namely preparedness to lie.

If the taxpayer/government is to fund Table B institutions, then ethical accountability has to be set in place - but this has patently not even made it to first base yet with Table A universities. Of course the bottom-line is that explicit or implicit lying to students, parents and the community is simply unacceptable.

However the biggest lie that is still current is that there is a shortage of university places - when it is actually possible to dramatically increase teaching quality and student access for lecture-based courses at negligible cost (see my submission #389 to the 2003 Senate Inquiry into University Funding).

5. Taxpayer/government funding of private "special interest" institutions carries real risks to secularity and public safety

There is a serious argument against government funding of "special interest" schools and tertiary institutions, namely that the secular taxpayer/government will be using public money to support specific religious belief systems which might then be empowered to progressively chip away at our secular state (indeed a similar argument could apply to perversion of public morality by ostensibly "secular" institutions indoctrinating students in asserted pragmatic virtues of "lying" or "tolerance of ambiguity" in business, management or political science courses). Various examples could be given at the risk of offending sections of the community. However I will offer an example below based on my personal background and current scholarly research interests.

One could imagine students being deliberately mis-instructed by tertiary institutions - and that indeed is what is intrinsically involved when scientific fraud or plagiarism are treated "softly" by academic managers.

A further, realistic scenario for Table B institutions derives from fundamentalist, Biblical literalists demanding (as is widespread in the USA at present) that geology and biology students be authoritatively taught that Darwinian evolution is rubbish and that God made the world in 6 days 4,000 years ago. It is quite on the cards that such fundamentalist, literalist tertiary institutions could set up shop in Australia in the current "knowledge selling" Higher Education environment.

However a qualitatively different level of moral culpability arises when the inappropriate instruction threatens human life. Thus institutional encouragement of students via its teaching programs to take dangerous drugs, smoke, drink drive or share needles would attract public outrage. We all know that the same needle should NEVER be used on successive people and to formally teach students otherwise would be tantamount to "passive murder" - all those actively involved (or passively involved through appraisal, from the level of a tutor up to the Head of State) would be complicit in conspiracy to cause death. This now leads to my very real example.

At the outset, let me explain that I had the benefit of a Catholic secondary school education and learned to deeply value human life. As a consequence I totally agree with the position of the late Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, in his opposition to the invasion of Iraq (that has so far been associated with 0.4 million avoidable post-invasion deaths, with half of the victims being infants under the age of 5). However I completely disagree with the Church's ban on contraception and specifically the ban on the use of condoms for Safe Sex in the context of the horrendous HIV/AIDS epidemic.

UNAIDS (2004) provides very detailed statistics via the Web on the AIDS epidemic (see: <http://www.unaids.org/bangkok2004/report.html>): 26 million total AIDS-related deaths for the period 1982-2004; 3 million AIDS-related deaths in 2004; 5 million newly HIV-infected cases in 2004; 39 million people in the World presently infected with HIV. Of course HIV/AIDS has flow-on socio-economic consequences and thus thus further contributes to avoidable mortality in the World.

It can be roughly estimated that about 20% of the unfortunate people making up this appalling statistical set became infected because of primitive, literalist, anti-contraception interpretation by the Church of a "populate or perish" code appropriate to warring Israelite tribespeople 3,000 years ago - but utterly inappropriate and deadly in the contemporary world. Indeed knowingly infecting another with HIV is a criminal offence - and accordingly advocacy against Safe Sex is extremely morally culpable.

Taxpayer/government funding of schools and tertiary institutions that resolutely instruct their students to eschew Safe Sex makes the taxpayer/government complicit in instruction that is wrong, primitive, ignorant, dangerous, irresponsible and a threat to the health and welfare of society. Accordingly the taxpayer/government should demand cessation of any such dangerous and irresponsible instruction before one cent of funding of any kind is forthcoming.

This submission has been made in the public interest.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Gideon Polya