Submission

to

Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education References Committee

Inquiry into student income support

From:	Craig McInnis [c.mcinnis@unimelb.edu.au]
Sent:	Friday, 1 April 2005 4:24 PM
To:	Sullivan, David (SEN)
Subject:	Senate Hearing

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s.doc (40 KB)...

Dear David

A paper I presented at the Financial Review a couple of years ago is attached. It is probably sufficient for your purposes since it picks up some of the key themes on part-time work. If not, let me know - the Commonwealth owns the IP for the McInnis and Hartley report from 2000 if you wanted to use that instead - no problem with permission. I will have more recent data to refer to from other studies - I have reviewed quite a few journal articles on this topic since then and hopefully I can bring them to bear on the subject if I can get the time before the presentation.
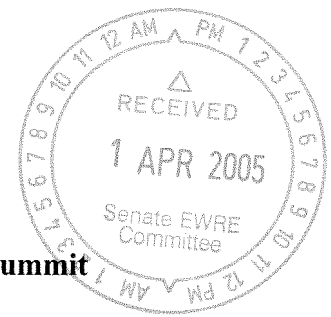
kind regards

Craig

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NEW REALITIES OF THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE:
HOW SHOULD UNIVERSITIES RESPOND?

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How and with what success universities, business and government combine
to achieve a strong knowledge economy will depend on some major shifts
in the way they interpret and respond to the changing needs and
expectations of undergraduate students. The new realities of the student
experience largely concern the change in priority students now give to their
university experience. They are spending less time on campus and more
time in paid work. They are making demands on academics to
accommodate their personal timetables and external obligations, and they
appear to be spending less time on learning tasks. It is important to make
the positive observation from the outset that the current generation of
undergraduate students are generally bright and purposeful. They have
been characterised in these volatile and uncertain times as 'concerned
optimists' yet it must also be said that, like every other young generation,
they do not necessarily know what is in their best long-term interests.
Universities have a responsibility to shape the experience of students but
the obstacles they face are formidable.

The research program of the Centre for the Study of Higher Education
(CSHE) has been focussed largely on student choices and lives, trend
studies of academic work roles, and studies of the institutional
effectiveness (McInnis 2002, McInnis James and Hartley 2000). The results

from these projects over the last five years reflect trends emerging from international studies (Kuh 2003). The most salient findings show that the current generation of undergraduate students are:

- Generally clear about what they want from university and what it should do for them, but not so clear about their own obligations to the university;
- Finding it more difficult to motivate themselves to study and tending to spend less time on tasks that would improve their learning;
- Relying on part-time paid work as the sole or main source of independent income;
- Working an average of 15 hours on paid part-time work per week – a significant increase from the early 1990s;
- Currently less likely to study on weekends, more likely to borrow course materials from friends to meet deadlines or to catch up on classes missed;
- Increasingly using information and computer-based technologies— but not necessarily in ways that enhance their engagement with the learning experience or with the learning community.

In contrast to previous generations, students increasingly expect university to fit with their lives rather than vice-versa. From the perspective of universities and academics, students appear to be less engaged with university life and study. An e-mail sent by a student to a lecturer illustrates the realities facing some academics:

> *I have a full-time job. Could you possibly let me know of any resources that I should consult before the class next week? I may not be able to attend lectures... except when things are not busy at work. Will all the information I need be in the lecture notes and in the prescribed textbook? Do the lectures describe anything that I cannot read up on in either of these resources?*

This student is enrolled full-time and the subject is laboratory based with fairly high contact hours. However, the issue of how students manage paid work does not explain the more fundamental change in the way students see their commitment to university study: the example provided here represents a significant change in student priorities that is widely misunderstood.

Some 40 per cent of undergraduates say that paid work gets in the way of study, 34 per cent say are distracted from study by money worries, and two thirds are 'often' overwhelmed by all they have to do. An accurate understanding of student priorities must start by recognising that not all students are working to make ends meet. While one in three are sufficiently stressed and distracted from study because of money worries: the remainder of young full-time undergraduates are working to maintain a lifestyle but with some financial independence from their families.

This snapshot of student lives varies considerably by institution, and by field of study, but the theme of declining commitment and limited connection is recognised across the system. It is compounded and reinforced by the everyday realities on campuses and also by the increasing pressures to rely on distance education modes of course delivery in some contexts. With considerable justification, academics complain that large classes and a decline in class contact hours reinforce the view of students that being on campus and in the classroom is no longer critical to the quality of their overall experience, or vital to their academic success. The student perception that the staff are not available for consultation about academic work adds to the negative cycle of low expectations and low demands. In 1994, 45 per cent of first year students agreed that academics were available to discuss their academic work: by 1999 this had dropped to just 38 per cent (McInnis, James and Hartley 2000).

There is little point denying these realities or persisting with the notion that the past — real or imagined — in which students were fully immersed in their studies be recreated. Instead of bemoaning the phenomena of disengagement, it is more useful to understand that what we now have is a process of negotiated engagement. If students are making clear statements about their priorities, the question is, how responsive and obliging should their lecturers be? What demands are academics entitled to set for attendance, participation, task completion and the quality of work submitted for assessment? And, more to the point, what position should the university take to ensure that students should become connected to the community of learners?

How Universities Should Respond

The first response to the changing context of student lives is for universities to recognise the competing pressures influencing student priorities. Universities need to provide appropriate support structures while at the same time taking responsibility for shaping the nature and outcomes of the student experience. Central to achieving these outcomes is an acknowledgment of the importance of learning in a social context in higher education. As Kirby argues:

> *Universities must be strong enough to be very demanding of their students. To demand a real participation in the interactive exchange of knowledge and values that is the hallmark of the university experience ... Isolation is intellectually and emotionally limiting. (Kirby 2002)*

Students have many more choices about when, where, and what they will study, and how much commitment they need to make to university life. They have been encouraged in their expectations by

the choice and flexibility offered by universities, partly as a consequence of market competition, partly because new learning technologies make it possible. For example, course structures have opened up to the point where their credibility as forms of higher education is at risk. When first year students can take third year subjects, or when the notion of a major sequence of studies with the cumulative development of skills and knowledge means that graduates depart with a superficial acquaintance with the subject matter then standards are questionable. This level of choice means that it is possible for large numbers of students to have idiosyncratic timetables thus dramatically reducing the chance of cohort development. It is already the case that on average about 25 per cent of students do not have any significant contact with other students on campus – left unmanaged, this is likely to worsen. Students are therefore in an increasingly powerful position to shape the design and delivery of the curriculum. They are creating their own course structures with subject sequences and pathways that do not necessarily follow the linear logic of policy makers or curriculum designers.

Because the current student experience is poorly understood, and because universities have been pressed to accommodate the great diversity of student backgrounds and experiences, the responses of universities have been largely *ad hoc* with strategies for instruction and support based on guesswork. It is worth noting that the loss of confidence of universities in asserting their leadership and authority in the design and delivery of courses, in making demands of students, and in defining their role as providers of higher forms of learning, exposes them to competition from other providers.

New scales developed for the national Course Experience Questionnaire administered to all graduates of Australian universities (McInnis, Griffin, James and Coates 2001) includes a "Learning Community Scale" that partially measures student engagement. The scale includes such items as "I felt part of a group of students and staff committed to learning", "I was able to explore ideas confidently with other people", and, "students' ideas and suggestions were used during the course." The sentiments encapsulated by the Learning Community Scale are more positively related to the development of the generic skills most valued by employers than the quality of teaching in the narrow sense of instructional effectiveness. In fact, it seems that students who rate their undergraduate experience highly on the learning community items are more likely to say their university experience provided them with communication skills, capacity for leadership and analytic and critical thinking skills.

Meeting the Challenge

The single most important determinant of student success at university is probably the amount of time and effort they put into their studies and university life (Kuh 2003). Moreover, working with other students adds considerable value to learning outcomes and is indeed, an important end in itself. In this context, the failure of universities and academics to spell out their demands of student commitment —the time that should be spent on campus, or the minimum hours of study required to pass — is creating disengagement by default as universities leave students to fill the vacuum of unstructured consumer-driven expectations. The following strategies of varying complexity suggest ways of re-asserting the value of student engagement. Amongst other options, universities should consider:

1. Directing policy for enhancing and maintaining the quality of teaching and learning at the total student experience, not merely the quality of instruction. Explicit goals concerning the nature and levels of demands expected of students are required, along with institutional support systems aimed deliberately at maximising engagement.

2. Refocusing institutional efforts on active social learning environments in which resources are targeted at creating new forms of learning communities appropriate to the new realities of student lives. Learning communities provide the advantages of traditionally small cohesive groups of students, moving together through their course as a cohort. Replicating this experience in some form is an achievable goal for all universities regardless of size or mission. Making effective use of ICT resources with this in mind is an important starting point;

3. Rethinking the rules of student engagement and the strategies appropriate for negotiated engagement. Universities and departments and academics should review their assumptions about the 'ideal client', their learning needs, and the nature of the 'typical student experience'. This means changing approaches to student advisory systems and making explicit the expectations institutions have of students and insisting on them taking responsibility for their choices;

4. Systematically investigating and monitoring the local factors shaping the nature and level of student engagement. In other words, universities need to seek first to understand where university fits with their student priorities and the reasons why they make their choices and commitment decisions.

5. Communicating their expectations of students, attendance requirements, the amount of time they need to devote to study, and the standards of work, and adapting these for the diverse populations;

6. Supporting academic staff 'holding the line' in the face of pressure from students for special consideration (time off, late submission of assignments etc). Policy on paid work hours should be fundamentally

rethought. Attempts at prescribing or regulating student paid work are self-defeating but policy for assignment extensions, timetable changes and attendance requirements should make clear the limits of paid work as a reason for reduced commitment;

7. Rewarding students both directly and indirectly for their engagement and commitment. Like it or not, more formal reward systems are probably needed to support what were once intrinsically rewarding activities. This requires raising the stakes to shape student priority setting; and,

8. Designing and implementing institutionally relevant measures of student engagement – especially at the first year undergraduate level.

Conclusions

Whether or not students should be able to negotiate their engagement in ways that best suit their circumstances is not at issue. It is simply inevitable that they will increasingly expect to do so. The new realities of the student experience place new demands on the policies and infrastructure of universities. It is highly unlikely that students will reduce their part-time work activities and increase their commitment to university life without substantial incentives, or the imposition of disincentives. With less regulation of student fees comes a heightened interest in the quality of the student experience provided by universities. For universities this will require a reappraisal of just what kind of experience is acceptable: how to balance the demands placed on students with the level of support provided to ensure a reasonable prospect of success.

In the process of negotiated engagement, universities have a responsibility to assert their leadership in society and should therefore make demands on students in terms of their academic orientation and application, and ensure

that students reap the long-term benefits of a broader social experience of learning. Being overly responsive to student needs is an abrogation of that responsibility:

Universities have to work with the new realities of student lives and priorities without necessarily yielding to them. It is a serious error and quite naïve to assume that the nature and level of student engagement can be changed, for example, by regulating the hours students work. It is equally foolish to eschew the leadership role that universities should be playing in ensuring that the undergraduate years provide an experience that is more than the narrow acquisition of vocational knowledge and technical skills (McInnis 2002).

The loss of opportunity for a cohort experience is exacerbated by extremes of choice and flexibility. Government policy has largely ignored the changing context in which students have distinctly different milestones with respect to their life plans from those of previous generations. The business sector persists with the fantasy that universities should be able to produce ready-made knowledge workers, perhaps reinforcing the impression that a broader undergraduate experience is of little value. If universities are to regain control over the shaping of the student experience, and they should, they will need to do it in partnership with business and government. Defining outcomes or characteristics of the graduate in the National Qualifications Framework is far from sufficient. Developing measures of student engagement as part of the national quality assurance agenda might promote the adoption of some of the strategies outlined in this paper. The national response to the new dynamics of student priorities has so far been piecemeal and coincidental to the issues of quality and the development of a powerful knowledge economy. A coherent national response to disengagement is needed, and a new national agenda for managing the negotiated undergraduate experience is essential.

References

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