



Department of Health
Government of Western Australia

Review of Australian Higher Education Discussion paper June 2008

Presented to:
Australian Government
Department of Education, Employment and
Workplace Relations

Secretariat
Review of Australian Higher Education
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28 July 2008

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Introduction

The Chief Health Professions Office, WA Health commends the Review of Higher Education and looks forward to the Review Panel determination on the future direction of the Higher Education sector, its fitness for purpose in meeting the needs of the Australian community and economy and the options for ongoing reform. In particular, the Office is interested in the Panel's assessment of the current system against international best practice and the education system's capability of:

- contributing to the innovation and productivity gains for long term economic growth and
- ensuring that there is a broad based tertiary education system producing professionals for both national and local labour market needs.

Recommendations

1. International standards of graduate professionals are maintained to ensure health workforce mobility
2. Individuals in the Australian community are supported to continue higher education engagement in an economically constrained environment
3. Workforce shortages are acknowledged and systems introduced to ensure that professional experts are utilised effectively in both the education and health industry
4. Research into reform, productivity and efficiency is encouraged to ensure maximal research translation into changed and enhanced health care practice

Chief Health Professions Office Background

The role of the Chief Health Professions Office, WA Health is to provide dedicated, expert advice on the professional aspects of the Health Professions workforce. The Office, lead by the Chief Health Professions Officer, initiates, develops and monitors workforce policy and strategic plans relating to the Health Professions workforce. The Office ensures a coordinated whole of professions approach to the Health Professions workforce across the whole Western Australian health system.

The Health Professions comprise a diverse range of occupations including diagnostic, treatment, restorative and preventive services and technical support functions. In WA Health, the Health Professions have been defined from the allied health and health science professions.

The twenty three professions included are audiologists, bio-engineers, certified clinical perfusionists, dietitians, librarians, medical imaging technologists, medical scientists, nuclear medicine technologists, occupational therapists, orthoptists, orthotists and prosthetists, pharmacists, physicists, physiotherapists, podiatrists, psychologists, radiation therapists, scientific officers (respiratory science, exercise physiology, sleep technology), social workers, speech pathologists and sonographers.

Submission Comments

1. Diverse, high performing institutions with a global focus

The allied health and health science professions have seen an increase in the diversity of higher education with WA Universities increasing the delivery of allied health and health science courses. Education traditionally delivered in one university is now available from multiple different providers. This diversity is not always found in the range of courses available. Universities have introduced courses for professions where student demand is high. In some instances this may not relate to workforce demand. Stronger relationships between workforce demand and student places is required to ensure an increased link between education and labour availability. Due to the geographic isolation of WA, particular consideration should be given to the availability of particular courses and programs for example medical physics and medical radiation imaging.

2. Productivity and participation

Higher education providers draw on industry for their workforce. In the allied health and health science professions, clinical expertise has often been a requirement to move into higher education. With increasing workforce shortages in these professions, strategies on sharing human capital will be essential. Where program proliferation is occurring in a particular profession, it is even more difficult to source clinical experts as educators. This may not be the most efficient use of these scarce resources.

3. Effective and efficient investment

Research undertaken in higher education facilities is increasingly important in guiding innovation and change. An evidence based approach to health care has been an important change in our health system facilitating the system to become more effective and efficient. A continued and expanded approach to this is essential. New evidence must be identified, old evidence refreshed but more importantly research evidence translation into practice evaluated and promoted. Funding for applied research in the allied health and health science professions is urgently needed

4. Underpinning social inclusion through access and opportunity

It is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain equal standards of health care across Australia due to workforce distribution issues. Rural and remote health services are critical to maintaining rural communities. Strategies to engage individuals in these communities, including Indigenous people in education leading to work as health professionals are essential. Clinical education is an essential part of this process. Rural placements are limited by the increased travel and in some regions of WA accommodation costs. Whole of government initiatives are required to ensure that all levels are contributors. This involves local, state and federal government across many departments. University funding models should

be amended to provide extra resources to regional/rural campuses and accommodation support for individuals from such areas.

5. Enhanced quality and high standards

Increases in the use of technology and a trend towards specialisation have meant that allied health and health science educators are increasingly under pressure to make inclusions to entry level curricula. A lack of consensus as to what can be lost to include additional material has brought increasing pressure to move these professions to graduate entry higher degrees. A balance must be achieved in these professions in order to maintain work ready graduates that are educated to an agreed quality standard in the minimum required time. However, there has to be continued emphasis on maintaining professional standards within education and training to ensure consumer protection.

6. A broad tertiary education and training sector

The allied health and health science professions are increasingly exploring the role of assistants and technical support workers in delivering health care. Broad articulated education pathways are essential. These educational pathways commence in secondary education and increasing the articulation between this sector, the Vocational Sector and Higher Education is important. Industry needs a diverse work ready workforce that recognises life long learning but increases the flexibility and mobility and minimises retraining requirements. A competency based approach to education promotes opportunities for fast tracking and maximises recognition of prior learning.

7. Policy linkages

Whole of government initiatives are required to ensure that all levels are contributors. Many of these issues as outlined above involve local, state and federal governments across many departments. Policy linkages are an effective strategy in ensuring alignment of direction and shared outcomes.