

## Re imagining the University College: A game changer for equity and access

The reinstatement of the University College as a category in Australia's tertiary education provider framework affords an opportunity to internationalise our university system, improve student access and success, and create course and institutional diversity. Well-designed university colleges would create a system that is better able to meet the demands of a heterogeneous range of students and respond to different labour market shortages.

The review of Australian education (Bradley et al) argued that the failure to capitalise on the ability of all Australians to access the economic and social opportunities that higher education provides is a significant issue for Australia. The OECD (2011) stated that social inequality is a serious problem confronting Australia, producing adverse effects on productivity, economic growth and population health.

Despite the best efforts of government, access and academic success in our universities for equity groups and non-traditional students has been underwhelming. Only 16% of students in higher education are from low SES background compared to the general population of 25%.

The Productivity Commission (2019) found that disadvantaged groups were significantly under-represented in current university arrangements. Grattan Institute has concluded that students who are part-time, studying online, indigenous or mature age are, if they can get access to existing universities, the most likely groups not to complete their studies.

Governments have a responsibility to ensure that all sectors of the population have an opportunity to maximise their educational aspirations yet this is stymied by structural and or institutional rigidities.

Our existing tertiary system, in denying students an opportunity to maximise their educational aspirations, has contributed to a hollowing out of the workforce. Australia, according to the OECD, is the seventh worst performer in relation to intermediate skills in the workforce. We sit alongside some of the world's poorest performing OECD countries and least educated economies such as Portugal, Turkey and Mexico.

Conversely, we have large numbers of unskilled workers but are sixth in the OECD in terms of graduate numbers. Our skills formation is out of balance. High performing economies such as the US, Germany, Sweden and Finland have a more balanced skilled workforce with a smaller concentration of low skilled jobs, strong intermediate capability and high graduate numbers.

High performing economies in the OECD have ensured that the status of VET as a partner in tertiary education is maintained. To achieve this they have diversified the university sector to provide unimpeded access to applied education within a university.

They have created a parallel university system, in part to ensure that the intermediate skilled workforce is maintained and strengthened. However, it is also a recognition by governments that participation and growth in university education is not necessarily driven by labour market demand or rates of return, but equally by the ambitions of families and for an individual student's self-realisation. Australians' aspirations are no different.

If we are to renovate our skilled workforce that in turn means raising the status of VET and providing improved university opportunities for Australian students, then a revised University College (UC) model is an important component. In the previous Higher Education Provider framework, the UC category, with its cumbersome and unnecessary transition arrangements and its preoccupation with research university status, was all but redundant. It simply reinforced the status quo. It had no connection with the rest of the higher education system. VET was equally disconnected because of its focus on applied education rather than theoretical education. From an access and equity perspective the UC model was useless.

A revised University College standard could still be transitional but should not be only that. The focus of the revised model should be on meeting the needs and aspirations of students and the Australian economy - not solely the aspirations of institutions.

A revised model could be a vital tool in enhancing social cohesion and economic growth in Australia. The UC should not emphasise research as a priority. They would be designed to embrace technical vocational applied education in a variety of fields such as manufacturing, technology, teaching, human resources, business, construction and health. They would preference teaching over research but engage in applied research in conjunction with the needs of industry. They would have strong industry and community partnerships.

Importantly, they would have a strong equity focus and provide a direct pathway for students undertaking VET studies to access University education. Their internal structures would be designed to support the needs of mature age, and part-time students and have the necessary support facilities for disadvantaged students.

They would offer programs at the undergraduate and postgraduate level, but not participate in doctoral level programs. The undergraduate programs would be underpinned by robust vocational qualifications. The benefit of underpinning vocational qualifications is that it minimises mission drift and maintains a clear and unambiguous focus. It also ensures that UC curricular has breadth and diversity - a program profile broad enough and flexibly designed to maximise student diversity and successful participation.

Reimagining the UC model and focusing on applied education and pathways provides reforming governments at both the state and Commonwealth level with an opportunity to consider structural arrangements at the tertiary level as well as revitalise upper secondary education. A UC which has different or alternative entry or access provisions than current arrangements (i.e. an academic score in year 12) can strengthen the importance of literacy and numeracy as an underpinning entry requirement for successful transition into tertiary education or employment.

Australia claims to be a country that gives everyone a fair go. Our current university arrangements are not equitable. The UC model will only succeed if there is a social consensus achievable when business and community groups participate in its formation and governance strongly supported by government. In return the re imagined UC will unambiguously focus on student access and success.

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