



VC-NET

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Opening the doors still further to aspirant universities

In July Charles Clarke, the UK Minister of Education, finally announced the government's decision on revising the criteria for degree awarding powers in England. The issue has been on the table for about a year and extensive consultation has taken place. His decision has several parts to it: the criteria for a granting powers to award taught degrees are being "modernised to make it easier for non-traditional institutions to apply"; once this has happened, these institutions can be given the university title as long as they have more than a certain number of students; those applying for a university title need no longer have students in five subject areas nor do they need powers to award research degrees. The criteria no longer contain any requirement that a significant proportion of staff must have higher degrees or even teaching experience in other universities; however their teaching staff must keep up with research and scholarship in the subject they are teaching.

The requirements for a university title therefore are that an institution must have powers to award taught degrees and have over 4,000 FTE students with at least 3,000 of these on degree level courses.

The implications of this are that several institutions that had been caught by a moratorium on further designation as a university can now go ahead with a claim; it also means that several higher education colleges will also join the queue for a university title. Thus, we may soon read about the Universities of Winchester, Chichester, Chester and Northampton. Some months earlier the London Institute had transformed itself into the University of the Arts, preparing the way for mono-disciplinary institutions. However, there will not be many following this route since most of the independent art and design or agricultural colleges are too small to fit the criteria, unless they merge.

In principle the new regulations open the way for private and corporate organisations to receive a university title as long as the requisite student numbers are achieved.

On the other side of the world a similar debate has been taking place, but it is expected to reach a very different answer. A consultation paper from the Tertiary Education Commission (TEC) of New Zealand (which oversees some 900 tertiary providers in the public and private sectors) is seeking some consensus on what the characteristics and performance standards are for each category of provider - universities, polytechnics, colleges of technology, training institutes etc. It argues "one means of ensuring an appropriate diversity of teaching and research is to clearly state expected characteristics and performance for different types of organisation". The Paper is seeking guidance on two benchmarks: the first is the postgraduate profile of all universities; should it for example be 3 per cent, the figure chosen by Australia in 1990? Since the Australian minimum is now 5 per cent and all but one of New Zealand's universities have more than 14 per cent postgraduate students, what higher percentage is reasonable? The second benchmark is at the other end of the spectrum: how much sub-degree provision should be funded in universities? The TEC proposes setting a

cap on the percentage it will fund in this category, given the many other institutional providers, and is asking whether a 5 per cent figure might be reasonable. A final issue tackled by the TEC is whether it should fund any research outside universities and it suggests that only taught postgraduate programmes might be funded outside universities, leaving them with all the research masters and doctoral programmes.

This debate illustrates the advantage of having one funding body able to take a sector wide view, which in this case looks likely to ensure that New Zealand's universities have a credible proportion of advanced students taught by academic staff undertaking research – which could well be a different picture from the new breed of English universities. The English decision to grant a university title to institutions with no significant research activity may well present UK institutions with difficulties in explaining to international markets how the present reputation for quality is to be preserved. Teaching informed by research is different from teaching informed by knowledge of research.

Source: UK's consultation on degree awarding powers and university title is at the DfES web site at www.dfes.gov.uk/consultations/conResults.cfm?consultationId=1226 The New Zealand TEC consultation can be found at www.tec.govt.nz/ See also Higher Education Policy Institute, Report no 5. "Implications of the Government's proposals for university title: or what is a university?"

The third stream might flow in Australia

A recent consultant's report in Australia commissioned by the Business Council of Australia and the Australian Vice Chancellors Committee is recommending that the federal government accepts that commercialisation of research is a core activity alongside teaching and research (as in the United Kingdom's "Third Stream" funding) which requires federal funding and support. The starting point is Australia's ambition that its universities' performance in commercialisation should reach the levels seen in the top 20 US universities.

The report sets out a list of six drivers, all of which it suggests need to be in place, if research commercialisation is to be successful. They are:

- * That legal frameworks for protecting intellectual property (IP) are in place.
- * That appropriately resourced and skilled staff exist in universities to manage the commercialisation process.
- * That high quality research is there in the first place.
- * That early stage venture finance is available, from a range of sources.
- * The presence of "strong local receptor companies" willing to adopt and develop the IP.
- * That the behaviour of the participants in the system must follow best practice standards.

The report then sets out what it considers these best practice standards within universities to be and provides five Guidelines for success as well as some case studies. One of the guidelines echoes the message in the UK's Lambert Report (see VC Net 43) that research funding mechanisms must be amended so that they reward universities that achieve outstanding results in the area of commercialisation. It warns however against any attempt to introduce naïve or inappropriate metrics to assess commercialisation performance.

Source: "Building Effective Systems for the Commercialisation of University Research" can be found at either www.bca.com.au or www.avcc.edu.au The Lambert Report from the UK is at www.lambertreview.org.uk

Internationalisation in fashion

In its first ten years after the first free elections South African higher education was preoccupied with transforming its institutions and remedying the failings of previous regimes. Its focus was primarily inwards and not outwards looking. This is now changing and the eyes of policy makers are looking not just to immediate neighbours in SADC and sub-Saharan

Africa but to the wider world. For universities greater collaboration with partners overseas is seen as crucial for reasons that are principally academic rather than financial. This new internationalism is in the words of Martin Hall, Deputy Vice Chancellor at the University of Cape Town “grounded in the normalization of South African society”. It involves a pragmatic approach to exploring and developing international networks for both research and teaching, where it fits institutional strategies. He identifies student exchange programmes as being of the greatest benefit and able potentially to repopulate the laboratories and help to renew the human capital in universities.

Australia is also re-emphasising the importance of internationalisation. The Australian Vice Chancellors Committee is calling for targets to be set for the proportion of Australian students studying abroad as part of their course. “Australia is part of a global world. Our students need that exposure to the global world to ensure that Australia strengthens its global image”.

In the UK international competitiveness is at the top of the agenda, according to the current chair of UniversitiesUK, who called recently for a national strategy to ensure that UK universities remain globally competitive. “The winds of global competition are blowing harder” he said “it will not be long before leading American universities establish campuses, including graduate schools, in London”. “We have done well, but more could be achieved if the international competitiveness of our universities moves to centre stage of Government long term strategy”.

Source: “The importance of internationalisation for higher education”. Prof Martin Hall. See www.chet.org.za under Current Issues, 25th August 2004. “Pursuing the Vision for 2020: election 2004: the next challenges for universities” at www.avcc.edu.au “Develop global competitiveness.” Speech on 15 September by Professor Ivor Crewe at www.universitiesUK.ac.uk/mediareleases/

The editor, Svava Bjarnason, and author, John Fielden, are always pleased to receive comments on the usefulness and content of this briefing service. News from other Commonwealth countries, which might be of wider interest, is also most welcome. They can be contacted by e-mail on vcnet@acu.ac.uk or by fax on +44 (0)20 7387 2655.

