



VC-NET

***The news service for the network
of Vice-Chancellors and Presidents
in membership of the
Association of Commonwealth Universities***

No 75

February 2008

Tuition fee levels in South Africa

Few people realise that all university students in South Africa are expected to pay tuition fees, which are becoming an increasing burden as government funding for universities declines. A study for Higher Education South Africa (HESA) shows that the government share of university income fell from 49 percent to 43 percent between 2000 and 2004, while the share from tuition fees rose from 24 per cent to 29 percent. In a country that seeks to expand access to higher education as part of a social transformation process this is not good news. What is also unfortunate is that over the same period the government's contribution to the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) has failed to keep pace with the rise in tuition fees. The Scheme's funding in 2004 represented 17 percent of tuition fees compared with 21 percent in 2000. This reduced contribution is part of a broader picture in which the state funding for higher education has fallen since 1994 and now represents 0.67 percent of GDP compared with 0.82 percent in 1995. HESA's concern over the level of tuition fees is obviously echoed by students, who face large increases in student debt. There have been disturbances over rising fee levels on several campuses, particularly in the Historically Disadvantaged Universities, where students are least able to pay.

A small measure of relief has just been announced in the 2008-09 budget, with the higher education sector gaining an above average increase in funding of 13.5 percent (compared with 12.7 percent in other categories). The NSFAS does particularly well with a 17.5 percent increase on the previous year (a real terms increase of 10 percent). HESA is clearly happy, but concerned that many problems still remain.

The affordability of tuition fees is still an issue in the UK, where the drop out rate from universities had remained constant at 22 percent over the last four years despite an injection of some GBP 800 million into programmes to encourage retention. Recent research by a charity, the Sutton Trust, suggests that poorer teenagers are being deterred by tuition fees and few know that the government would make substantial maintenance grants and allowances available to them. As a result the numbers of poorer students applying for university are declining, although applications overall in 2008 are up so far.

Sources: See www.hesa.org.za for the Feb 2008 publication by a HESA task team "Tuition fees: higher education institutions in South Africa". See the same site for the HESA response to the Budget on 21st February 2008. For the UK see the Guardian of 26th February 2008 for the Public Accounts Committee report and a rebuttal by the Chief Executive of HEFCE. For the Sutton Trust research see <http://www.suttontrust.com/annualreports.asp>

Research Assessments in trouble again

In both the UK and Australia devising a suitable research assessment process is proving difficult. In Australia the new government has reversed the decision of the Howard regime to introduce a Research Quality Framework (RQF -see VC-Net 60 and 64) and is suggesting a metrics-based system to be called the Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) initiative.

This means the abandonment of the two years of work devoted to the development of the RQF since its announcement in 2005 as a result of which it was almost ready for introduction. All details of the RQF have now been removed from the website of the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, the new name for the old Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST).

The new ERA system is strikingly similar to the UK's new system (the Research Excellence Framework) that is being planned to follow the last Research Assessment Exercise (RAE 2008) which will produce its rankings in December 2008. According to Australia's new Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research, which will be responsible for its development alongside the Australian Research Council (ARC), it will be based on a combination of metrics and international peer review. For each of the ARC's discipline clusters panels of leading international researchers will produce evaluative reports that detail where disciplines and institutions are internationally competitive in well-established and emerging areas of research. The process will start with those disciplines where metrics are most widely accepted. In welcoming the ERA, Universities Australia hopes that the use of peer reviewers will help in the evaluation of the less quantifiable disciplines where metrics are not always relevant. They also plead for the new system to cover interdisciplinary research, which is an issue that most research assessment processes have always found very hard to tackle adequately.

The abandonment of the RQF means putting some interesting challenges to one side; for example it had intended to use the impact that research had on its communities as one of the ranking criteria. This issue will be dropped with the focus on international comparisons. Adopting the ERA may also mean some cost savings for both government and institutions since the RQF was forecast to cost almost A\$100 million to set up and administer.

In the UK the debate about the replacement for the RAE has been rumbling on ever since it was announced by Gordon Brown, when he was Chancellor of the Exchequer. Recent studies have shown that the use of metrics alone would materially distort the present institutional rankings in some of the more quantitative disciplines. Now Research Councils UK (RCUK) the body that speaks for all the research councils, has logged a significant criticism of the REF, calling the proposals "not acceptable in their current form". Just when Australia has abandoned the idea of measuring impact, RCUK says that it is an indispensable part of research assessment. "It is essential", they say "that measures of impact relating to economic benefit, contribution to public policy, development of practice in the public and private sectors and public engagement are included in the new assessment approach". HEFCE which is charged with developing the REF for the UK now has an unenviable task of deciding how seriously to take this very material criticism. Unfortunately the senior person responsible for research policy at HEFCE has just decided to take up an appointment in a university.

What is clear from these two developments is that, while there does seem to be some temporary convergence in the favoured process for evaluating research in both countries, the underlying challenges are too great ever to get a method that achieves what is intended and is also reasonably cheap to operate.

Sources: In Australia, see the DIISR press release about the ERA at www.arc.gov.au/media/releases/media_26Feb08.htm and the Universities Australia response at www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au/
In the UK for details of the proposed REF see HEFCE publication 2007/34 at www.hefce.ac.uk. For the Research Councils UK submission to this consultation see <http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/cmsweb/downloads/rcuk/consultations/ref.pdf>

More Freedoms?

Two contrasting stories are being played out in Australia and New Zealand concerning the degree of control (or is it interference?) that the state has over universities. In Australia the new government has pleased the sector by announcing that it will cease to insist that compliance with Workplace Relations Requirements" is a prerequisite of funding. Universities Australia has optimistically taken this as a sign of things to come saying "we look forward to

other restrictions being eased or removed across a range of Commonwealth funding and regulatory activity”.

Meanwhile, in New Zealand the Education Tertiary Reform (Amendment) Act came into force on 1st January 2008 from which date a new system of three year Investment Plans will be operated by the Tertiary Education Commission for the 111 organisations it funds. The Vice Chancellor’s Committee thought that the Act will give the Minister and the Tertiary Education Commission an unacceptable degree of extra powers to intervene in the affairs of autonomous institutions (see VC Net 72 for NZVCC concerns).

Sources: Universities Australia press release 6 February 2008 at: www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au/

The editor, Jay Kubler, 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.

