

Draft National Protocols for Higher Education Approval Processes

Submission from CHASS (the Council for the Humanities Arts & Social Sciences)

In its submission to the original (March 2005) discussion paper "Building University Diversity", CHASS argued that there was a good case for re-examining the placement of creative arts higher education within broader universities, as against the creation of specialist institutions operating at university level.

We made two main points:

1. Specialist universities are a common feature of most OECD higher education systems, including the United Kingdom, the United States, Japan, Austria and Korea. There is no good reason for Australia to be different.
2. The specific needs for training and developing creative practice gain insufficient recognition within the mainstream approach to funding and supporting education and research in universities.

CHASS has made the case specifically in relation to the creative arts, but would support the provision being available in any area, as is the case overseas.

The draft protocols recognise the force of these arguments by providing, through Protocol D, "for awarding a modified university title to specialised university-level self-accrediting institutions." However, we understand that MCEETYA was ambivalent about this issue, and has asked for further advice on the matter. The recent consultative forum heard a range of views on draft Protocol D, which probably generated more debate than any other single topic.

CHASS continues to support providing the option allowed by draft Protocol D.

In addition to the two points made earlier, we point out that the defining characteristic of a university is the quality of its teaching, scholarship and research, not the number of fields in which it operates. Any notion that a 'university' by definition has to approach 'universality' of coverage of the fields of knowledge is both false etymology (the title originally related more to the governance of the mediaeval university by all its teachers and students) and impractical - no Australian university teaches in all fields of knowledge, and some do not include core subjects such as philosophy and mathematics.

There appears to be no argument advanced that single-focus institutions are not appropriate at the level of non self-accrediting bodies (Protocol B) or self-accrediting bodies not using the university title (Protocol C), and there are many excellent bodies of these types. It is hard to understand why it should be barred from bodies with the title university, whose essential and defining difference is a commitment to scholarship and research at the highest levels.

We do not argue that creative arts should necessarily be taught and developed in specialist institutions. Consistent with the theme of encouraging diversity, we do think it should be an option, probably only occasionally used. Given however that such bodies are likely to be few in number, we do not believe it essential to have a separate protocol. It may be sufficient to make provision within current Protocol E, by means of an elaboration - for example at the end of Protocol E1, the following sentence could be added: "Where only one or two fields of study are covered, the title of the university must reflect the narrower coverage, through words such as

'Brisbane University of the Performing Arts', and the approval to operate as a university covers only the fields approved."

The provisions unique to current Protocol D (paragraphs 7-9 under 'Assessing applications') appear more relevant to a body which is intending to move to broader provision (which is by not particularly likely to be the case for a specialist institution); and in any event are captured by the provisions in current Protocol E relating to new institutions.

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