

**Submission  
No 27**

**INQUIRY INTO FUTURE DEVELOPMENT OF THE NSW  
TERTIARY EDUCATION SECTOR**

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## **Submission to the Inquiry into the future development of the NSW tertiary education sector**

My name is Anne Picot. I graduated (B.A.Hons) from the University of Tasmania in 1972 and from the University of NSW with a graduate Diploma in Archives Administration in 1978. I have worked in all three levels of government, Commonwealth, local and state and my last job was deputy university archivist at the University of Sydney. I retired in 2016 and live in Sydney.

I can say from my personal experience and observation that as the number of university graduates in the public sector at all levels increased, so did the adaptability and analytical and innovative competence and consequently the productivity, of public servants through the enormous changes in Australian workplaces over the four decades of my working life. Increasing access to university education over the past four decades has undoubtedly lifted the productivity of the Australian workforce and the opening of the sector to overseas students has widened the horizon for Australian workers, a necessary development in a period of globalization.

Unfortunately I learnt about this inquiry very late and have not had time to gather statistical evidence for some observations I would like to make. They are based on particularly the experience of working as an archivist and GIPA and Privacy officer at the University of Sydney for 13 years. I assume the NSW universities have been invited to make submissions to this inquiry. Maybe my comments will suggest some lines of inquiry at the hearings.

- (a) Tertiary education's economic development role, especially regional NSW and
- (b) the role of universities to serve specific geographic communities

### **Strengthening regional health and medical faculties**

A problem identified recently in the Parliamentary debates on abortion law reform but well known in the health sector is the shortage of medical practitioners including specialists in regional centres and beyond. Attempts to attract students from regional centres or elsewhere with special scholarships and bonded arrangements to place them when they graduate in regional centres failed in the majority of cases from my observation. Recruiting local students to regional universities with medical and nursing courses is a more obvious means to that end, but only where there is both sufficient support for the students while studying and the medical and nursing faculties have links to the region's high schools to encourage students to study the necessary prerequisites.

### **Inequality and First Nations communities**

Bolstering these faculties in regional universities with both excellence in teaching and research pertinent to the needs of the districts would address some of these issues. Improving the regional internet infrastructure in general and subsidising access to it for poorer families would make a real difference. The COVID19- forced home schooling revealed the stark inequalities in public education across the state. Given that, it should not surprise anyone that students from regional and remote centres rarely make it into medicine.

NSW with the largest population of First Nations people should address the educational and employment disadvantage of indigenous students and communities, particularly in regional and rural centres. Programs which target First Nations students at school and then provide specific assistance to such students at regional universities would help encourage more First Nations people first to university, and I suggest, particularly into health and medical fields. The University of Sydney had a nursing course developed with input from First Nations nursing staff which was quite successful in encouraging enrolments but unfortunately it was discontinued. It could still provide a model for such a program.

If the Inquiry is strictly interested in the universities' role in economic development only, boosting funding and development of health and medical faculties in regional centres will encourage the establishment of complementary clinics and research programs tailored to regional needs. For example, medical and health sciences faculties looking to bring together disciplines in conjunction

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with schools of social work, social and clinical psychology, education and rural development more generally would lead to clusters of research, and to provision of services to communities which otherwise go without or have to travel to metropolitan centres to find.

Bringing back specialisation at universities

I suggest that this kind of development in regional universities could have significant employment impact in jobs which are rewarding and much needed by rural and regional communities. It would require some specialization. This directs an efficient use of funds in the university sector where the necessity of competition for funds and students in the past 2 decades has on the contrary pushed the universities into offering very much the same range of programs and degrees instead of encouraging specialization and excellence in areas pertinent to the interests and needs of the surrounding region.

Regional universities do not need to focus on specific industries or limit their offerings only to existing industry. That said, agriculture today in Australian universities has become a significant area of excellent research and teaching programs which could always do with further development and investigation of building links with related sciences, both pure sciences and applied. Responding the manifold impacts of climate change requires more than one expert view. Partnerships with the First Nations peoples to enable students to benefit from both Indigenous and western knowledge. Western science can benefit from the holistic view of the world characteristic of Indigenous knowledge systems, away from the excessive silo-ing of disciplines which has developed over the past 50 years. This is not something to be hurried and depends on respect on both sides. There are examples of such fruitful collaboration such as in the University of Tasmania's fire science school and the development of courses based on, and led by, First Nations people on the use and management of fire in the landscape.

I would like to recommend to the Inquiry that the NSW tertiary education sector, particularly universities, open discussions with the First Nations communities on whose land regional universities are established to identify opportunities for collaboration with them for incorporating traditional Indigenous knowledge and practices in a variety of courses with recognition of senior First Nations people to help develop and teach in them.

Last on this, we should stop seeing funding tertiary education as a cost to the taxpayers to be borne by the individual student because they benefit most. It is the whole of society which benefits from increasing access to tertiary education and entry of university-educated people into our society. University education provides the special knowledge, theory and practice of the professions, from accounting, agriculture, medicine, health sciences, economics, engineering and construction, foundation sciences, mathematics and statistics, computing and data management, law, planning, transport and logistics.

Where does the arts and humanities fit into this? Simply that all human knowledge depends on a basic grasp of the history of the society in which that knowledge is developed, and the disciplines themselves on a historical understanding of how that discipline developed and changed. Like the other languages (which I believe all students should learn at least one other than the language spoken in their home), study of languages and literature is an essential part of understanding human society. History and philosophy – the study of how we know what we know – are as fundamental as the foundation sciences for an understanding of our global society and how it works. It is not surprising to me that arts/humanities graduates find employment as readily as the graduates from courses which apparently provide ready-made high-skilled workers. Our complex and increasingly disaster-ridden society needs people able to grasp new knowledge, analyse complex matters, assess risks and develop approaches and solutions in collaboration with other points of view, the purview of an arts and humanities education.

Anne Picot