The price of education

1 Comment

Liz Curran | 13 June 2006

Dr Brendan Nelson, the Commonwealth Minister for Education, says—in his introduction to the proposed higher education reform called ‘Backing Australia’s Future’—that he wants to ‘pass on the soul of the nation from one generation to the next’. One of my many concerns is the imposition on students of greater burdens for repayment when they leave university. This is likely to cause a drought in the number of graduates who will be prepared to work for community agencies and the public service.

Under the proposal, HECS fees can increase by 30 per cent and may increase further after 2005. Although the government claims there will be more Commonwealth scholarships, these will be hotly contested and many students and their families won’t be able to afford upfront fees. This will leave many young people with large debts after university.

As a clinical supervisor of law students in a community legal centre, I talk to students who through their casework are exposed to the often harsh realities of the lives of people from disadvantaged backgrounds. Many students in the past have expressed a desire to work in legal centres or at legal aid, once they have finished university. But recently, students have been saying they are more uncertain about their futures and worry about how they and their younger siblings will manage if fees increase and loans escalate. Some who are part way through their courses say they will not be able to afford to work at the legal centres, much as they wish to.

Students leaving university will want to pay off their debts, and this will deter them from considering jobs in the lowly paid public service. For example, legal aid and community legal centres can’t compete with the law firms at the big end of town—particularly when the federal and state governments are less inclined to spend money on legal aid despite increasing demand. Young barristers have traditionally worked pro bono for legal centres when no legal aid is available and where clients are unable to represent themselves. Legal aid remuneration is small compared with the preparation and court time required, and many young barristers struggle to pay overheads if they do too much of this work. Additional university debts will probably make it difficult for legal aid and legal centres to find representation for people when the courts are deciding their fate or that of their families.

Community organisations employ youth workers, social workers, counsellors and psychologists. In health centres doctors, podiatrists and dentists are employed. All these professions require graduate qualifications. Community health centres, for example, may be ‘priced out of the market’. There are already significant barriers to recruitment of doctors. Difficult patients with complex problems ranging from mental illness to drug addiction and chronic illness are a deterrent for many. There is a shortage of doctors in certain rural and metropolitan areas and an ageing doctor population. Any increase in debt for young doctors upon leaving university—which at one stage the University of Melbourne put at $100,000—makes it harder for health centres to attract them.

An area that often creates headlines is the care and protection system for vulnerable young children. The tabloids lament the chronic shortage of youth workers and social workers. Salaries for these professionals are notoriously low with people often working additional hours at casual rates to get by. Government departments and community agencies already find it hard to recruit, often readvertising several times. Burn-out and stress are significant deterrents, and increased debt is only likely to put people off more. Students may decide to study in other fields likely to return a higher income, so their debt can be paid off sooner.

The public service can also ill afford to pay market rates for graduates. It needs the keenest and brightest people to assist governments. For example, Treasury needs people with a strong commerce and social policy background, but will it be able to justify to other departments a significantly higher pay rate when other departments also require skilled and trained professionals?

How will community organisations be able to recruit people for what is often difficult, highly skilled and challenging work? How will community agencies compete with the corporations who can pay? What will happen to the community if fewer and fewer graduates are prepared to work in social service agencies? What sort of society do we envisage and is it really one we can say will ‘pass on the soul of the nation from one generation to the next’?

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