

op. ed. piece on planned closure of the ALTC – Feb 2011.

Floods, cyclones and collateral damage

Flood damage is insidious. Its effects can be far-reaching. The latest casualty is a key piece of the national higher education infrastructure – the Australian Learning and Teaching Council. Julia Gillard is throwing it into the maelstrom.

The ALTC sits at the centre of efforts to improve the quality of Australian higher education. In just six years, it has mobilised a network of innovators, across all Australian universities, who are dedicating time to help the higher education sector adjust to the challenges of the 21st century.

Education is one of the country's top four export earners. Higher education plays the biggest role in generating those earnings (\$10.6 billion in 2009-10). It does so in a fierce global competition for the best students and for talented staff. Like any industry, higher education needs investment in R&D. It needs to try out new ways of teaching, new kinds of courses, more flexible ways of supporting student learning, better uses of digital technologies, better ways of meeting the needs of an increasingly diverse student market. Each university does some of this R&D independently. But like other industries, there is a compelling logic to sharing efforts and risks in pre-competitive R&D. ALTC has been the main vehicle for doing this.

Many Australian industries receive federal government support for pre-competitive R&D. They get support through Australian Research Council funded Linkage projects. They also have federally-funded Co-operative Research Centres. For example, there is a separate CRC for each of the poultry, pig, beef, dairy, sheep and aquaculture industries. There are multiple CRCs in mining, manufacturing and services – 42 altogether, with federal funding totalling over \$3 billion dollars.

Education has never had a CRC. Funding rules make it very difficult for universities to play the part of end-users of research, despite the fact they are a \$20 billion industry. What they have had, until now, is the ALTC.

Scrapping the ALTC will save the Federal budget \$22 million a year. Some of its most valued activities will continue, in some form, within individual universities. But the sector will lose the opportunity to innovate at scale, to share what works and what doesn't, to share the risks that are a necessary part of innovation in a competitive, rapidly-changing world. The costs to the university sector, and to Australia's exports, will be much greater than \$22 million.

Other ALTC activities may be taken up by Federal Government departments or new agencies like TEQSA (the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency). But bureaucrats will never have ALTC's ability to energise a community of activists willing to commit their own time to the collective improvement of teaching and learning. Every dollar of ALTC money generates many dollars worth of extra voluntary effort. The support felt for ALTC can be seen in the comments that have poured in to the GetUp website: over 200 in the first two

days; over 1000 supporters in the first three weeks. Some of these have come from university staff working in flood-devastated areas, whose sense of anger and betrayal is clear to see:

“The quality of teaching and learning in higher education is critical to the future of the nation as we skill up generation after generation to take custody of the nation's many assets. I have been up to my knees in the mud of the Queensland floods assisting the personal recovery of my sister. The news that we would compromise the future of teaching and learning quality in our higher education sector in the name of recovery is, at best, offensive to me and many others who have aided the clean-up and, at worst, a poorly targeted measure to add what really is diddly-squat to the \$5.6billion needed to fund repair.” (Professor Susan Savage, QUT, ALTC Discipline Scholar Architecture, 27 January 2011; <http://tiny.cc/d9srm>).

What should be done? The simplest solution is to reverse the decision to scrap the ALTC. It would be good to see it restored to its 2009 budget levels (\$29m). Or expand the scope, so it can stimulate R&D to innovate across the full range of university business, enabling our research to become more effective, and healing the fractures between the different strands of academic work.

Scrapping the ALTC sends a loud and clear signal to our export market: the federal government no longer cares about enhancing the quality of Australian higher education. It is no longer willing to resource the changes needed to make Australian higher education socially inclusive.

The results of the first national research assessment exercise (ERA) were published earlier this month. Everyone's eyes have been on research and the relative positions of universities and disciplines. Scrapping the ALTC in the middle of this hubbub will yet again say “research is more important than teaching; competition is more natural than collaboration”.

Regulation, league tables and the quality police do not a revolution make.

Federal Labor is squandering the goodwill of those of us who are passionate about the quality of public education. We do not want to see the Education Revolution washed away. Throwing ALTC overboard is not a good omen.

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