

Higher education: a regional perspective

For Australian universities, 2008 was the year of review and reports about our core academic functions. Our research and its connection to the nation's innovation system was analysed in the Cutler Review and its component, the O'Kane review of the CRC program. The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Industry Science and Innovation enquired into our Research Training. And the Bradley report covered this and much else in its wide-ranging Review of Australian Higher Education.

As the Federal government considers these reviews it has to assess both the strategic and the budgetary implications of its responses. And it will have to reconcile what many see as a dichotomy between concentrating research in just a few institutions and requiring research to be done in all our universities.

The Bradley report is quite clear, in its recommendation 19, that the government should adopt an accreditation framework for universities which strengthens the requirement that they "carry out research in the fields in which they teach so that they can contribute fully to the knowledge economy and produce graduates who embody the distinctive value of teaching that is informed by research". In other words, to be a university you must do research.

On the other hand, the Cutler report contains a number of recommendations along the lines that the block grants, which underpin research and research training in universities, should be allocated solely on the basis of excellence in research demonstrated through the research quality rankings that will be produced by the Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) initiative. This is widely interpreted to imply that research funding should increasingly be concentrated in a small number of research-intensive universities, mostly clustered in our capital cities.

From my perspective in a small regional university, a policy of concentrating research in a handful, or perhaps two handfuls, of universities raises some serious questions. How can you have vibrant development and innovation in regional Australia without the first class research to guide it? Why should a university education in the regions be less informed by research than its equivalent in the cities? Would recruitment of the best academic staff become just a pipe-dream? And how would a university outside the research concentrations maintain the requirements for accreditation foreshadowed in the Bradley report?

But perhaps it's not about concentration and I should believe those statements I hear, that research excellence will be well supported wherever it is found. And if I do, what might that mean for my university? Is there any evidence I can call on to assess how research excellence is actually distributed amongst universities?

Well, for British universities, 2008 was the year of the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) and the results were published in December. The methodology for this round differed from the previous RAE in 2001 in that each staff member submitted to the RAE was assessed and categorised into one of four research grades from 'world leading' down to

'nationally recognised'.

This fine level of detail has enabled a much more detailed analysis of where the 'world leading' researchers are located. As expected, the top performing universities such as Cambridge and Oxford retained their ranking. Although even here only 32% of their researchers were assessed as 'world leading', and in 25% of research disciplines they submitted no researchers at all.

But the data show that all but four of the 132 universities and colleges assessed in this RAE had some researchers in the 'world leading' band, and most institutions had more than a quarter of their researchers in the 'internationally excellent' category.

These results do not surprise me, as they accord with my perception that research excellence is also widespread in the Australian university sector. I'm reaffirmed in my view that too much concentration of research resource will only diminish our international research performance and potentially leave some disciplines without any research activity at all. I'm heartened that the Bradley call for all universities to be research-active across their disciplines might indeed be met. And I'm somewhat reassured that regional Australia will have available a research base able to address regional needs.

But for regional Australia to be well served in research it must also have strong and vibrant academic

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programs to meet local needs. The Bradley report recognises this as an issue needing serious attention. And in my view the existing institutions based in the regions must be the core of the solution.

That is why two of us, Charles Sturt University (CSU) and Southern Cross University (SCU), have proposed and sought funding for a feasibility study to see whether there is a sound case to establish a national university with special expertise in providing higher education to regional and remote Australia. In particular, this new university should include CSU and SCU and have the resources to develop world class facilities for flexible, digital delivery of professional education wherever it is needed. Our existing and substantial distance education capacity makes an ideal starting point.

As debt-free universities regularly meeting our student load targets we are both positive about our individual futures and the opportunities we will have to grow. But by combining and extending our discipline profiles, more strongly linking our research and continuing our prime focus on regional delivery, all under the mantle of a Commonwealth institution, we are of the view that regional Australia's higher education needs would be well and sustainably served for the foreseeable future.

