

Universities under fire over 'commercial games'

GEOFF MASLEN
Melbourne

UNIVERSITIES across Australia are under attack from academics and students over their eagerness to raise money from fees and, according to the critics, lower standards simply to earn income or attract "customers".

Dr Andy Butfoy, a lecturer at Monash University, last week joined the growing band of critics. He accused his university of issuing "astounding instructions" to academics insisting that they lower their marking standards.

Writing in *The Age* newspaper, Butfoy said "scaring away customers with rigorous marking was not in tune with the need to show greater sensitivity to the market."

"Universities are now obsessed with increasing their market share. [This] is seen as the obvious way to enhance revenue. Unfortunately, making market share a primary objective opens the door to gimmicky and shallow education," he said.

Many universities were overly focused on productivity - by getting faculties, departments and academics to pay for themselves by charging fees and raising additional funds, Butfoy said. The area in most danger was the humanities and liberal arts.

"Universities risk creating the impression that their interests in peddling qualifications overshadow concern for educational values. This increases the danger of form squeezing out substance when it comes to teaching and learning."

A Melbourne lawyer, Vivian Waller, followed up this criticism with a bitter attack on Melbourne University over a full-fee postgraduate course she had enrolled in. Waller said she and other students had been treated to lecturers who did not appear, who had to borrow a pen when they did and one who would



not respond to telephone calls or faxes about writing research papers within three weeks.

"The view shared by myself and my fellow students was that the course was an exercise in money-making and had very little to do with education," Waller said. "If universities want to play commercial games it won't be long before a fee-paying student sues them for breach of contract, breach of the Trade Practices Act and breach of the Fair Trading Act."

Then on Thursday evening, SBS TV broadcast its *Insight* program which contained a series of savage criticisms by students and academics. Among the critics was Dr Gail Graham, who made an official complaint while working at

Wollongong University about the preferential treatment given to fee-paying students.

Graham claimed MBAs were being awarded to fee-paying international students when some could hardly speak English.

Asian students at RMIT were similarly critical of that university over the way it recruited fee-payers, some of whom were said to be inadequately prepared to tackle a higher education course, and the resources that it then made available.

Tiffany Chew, RMIT's international student officer, said she was seriously concerned that students with limited English were being exploited. "If you

can't understand what's going on in class, you can't pass," she said.

But that is exactly what the critics claim is now happening: that foreign students who pay full fees are passing their courses without really understanding what they are being taught.

On the same program, a Malaysian postgraduate student at Melbourne said he was worried the reputation of universities such as Melbourne was being affected by claims that institutions were lowering standards.

The president of the Australian Vice-chancellors' Committee, Professor John Niland, flatly denied that criticisms of the quality of Australian higher education represented the views of the great majority of staff or students.

"We have 600,000 Australian students and 65,000 international students in our universities and day in and day out, they observe at first hand the quality of service that institutions provide," Niland said. "In such a large group there will always be instances where both staff and students are unhappy with their particular experience yet if you step back a couple of paces and put things in perspective, you will see that Australian higher education is one of the treasures we have."

Niland said the public approval rating of universities was a "good deal higher than that of either of our political leaders". He said, however, that the "amber lights are flashing".

"We have been given a warning that we have a precious commodity that is in danger of being compromised. But to suggest that it has gone under flies in the face of what people are actually doing - for they are voting with their feet."

In his article, Butfoy said "half-baked corporate sloganeering" was poisoning Australian universities. University managers claimed to be concerned with excellence in education but this was mostly mouthing platitudes, sometimes

with the intention of disguising what was really going on, he said.

Universities were being forced to appeal to a wider and wider range of potential students but this was not motivated by equity considerations. The motivation was essentially financial and one unfortunate consequence was the increased pressure to admit students who had inadequate time for study or who were "not up to scratch".

Butfoy would not comment on his claims to *Campus Review* but it is believed he has received a "please explain" from the university management which wanted proof he could substantiate his assertions. He did say, however, he had the evidence and that he had received a considerable number of messages of support from Monash staff and students.

A senior academic in the arts faculty at Monash said Butfoy was presumably referring to a memo sent to all staff last year following a decision by the education committee to "widen the band of academic performance".

The memo indicated that students who in the past would have received a pass grade for a mark above 60 in future would be given a credit. Similar changes applied to the award of higher marks.

"This does involve a considerable shift in the way we think about these grades and it does mean we will effectively be giving credits, distinctions and high distinctions for fewer marks than has previously been the case," the memo said.

The academic believed the change ordered was in response to concern that Monash's marking standards were too strict compared with those at Melbourne.

A Monash spokesman said the marking changes were the result of a decision by the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee more than a year ago to have all Australian universities brought into line with a consistent grading regime.

Hilton chief's postgrad dilemma

BRIAN DONAGHY
Adelaide

THE government policy of insisting on full fees being paid for professional postgraduate courses was sharply criticised by the human resources manager of the Adelaide Hilton International hotel, Mark McBriarty.

Employers, particularly in industries with high staff turnover saw little point in paying for someone who would then move on.

It had been shown that 78 per cent of MBA students left their employers within a year of completing, he said.

He rejected the notion of an indenture scheme to tie employees for a minimum period of time to the firm which paid for their studies.

"You can draw up all sorts of con-

tracts, but they won't hold water," he told *Campus Review*.

The last thing employers needed was staff who did not want to be there.

Earlier, he told a UNESCO conference on vocational education and training, at the Adelaide Institute of TAFE, that "the biggest bane of our society at the moment is down-sizing."

"Downsizing is like renovating a six-bedroom house down to two bedrooms and then asking the same rent for it. You cannot deliver a five-star service with a two-star staff."

He said five-star hotels had an annual staff turnover of just over 100 per cent - a "disgustingly high" figure which meant that the needs of the people in the industry were not being met.

For the past three years the Hilton had taken on 300 students for work experience each year - and selected

the best 15 from each 300.

"From there we sit down with the Adelaide TAFE and put together a 12-month traineeship program, with four days' work a week and one day at TAFE. Then we ship them off to Europe for a couple of years to be foreigners in some else's country."

"Then they come back and start further skills training."

What the hotel needed was just-in-time training - it was "pointless" training someone in supervisory skills, say, two or three years before they were likely to have to use such skills.

As a result, he expected to see such students in future stretching their degrees over longer periods so that they would be 27 or 28 years old by the time they graduated.

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