

Action plan for university managers

This action plan is intended for university managers who are interested in youth work, disability and aging policy, or graduate employability.

Problem

The availability of specialist undergraduate degree courses in youth work, aging and disability has declined over the last 15 years, as the demand for a more highly skilled workforce in each of these areas has grown. There are now insufficient specialist degree courses in these fields available in Australian universities.

The problem is multi-causal. To reverse this trend will require concerted action many stakeholders including by:

- **politicians and federal government policy makers;**
- **senior managers and strategic planners in universities;**
- **professional associations, advisory and lobby groups and employers** in each of these fields;
- **university course coordinators**

This sheet provides an action plan for university managers.

Consequences

Whilst in the short-term, there may appear to be immediate benefits from closing specialist degrees, because the federal government has unintentionally provided incentives to do this. In the medium and long term there are disadvantages to this strategy because graduate employability is becoming a more important as a quality and possibly as a funding measure. For university managers the loss of undergraduate specialist degrees in social professions would mean

- Loss of courses where **employment outcomes are good** and growing because of high and growing workforce demand and steady movement towards professionalisation and professional closure
- **Growing graduate employability** problems in other courses if there is an **over-reliance on generic courses** with a poor match between graduate skills and workforce requirements
- **Potential loss of fields of education** where it is possible for the university to become **a national or international leader** in teaching and in research (a big fish in a small pool).
- Loss of an opportunity to provide courses which have high social benefit and fulfil the **social mission** (benefits to society, social well-being, **positive reputational value**) that most universities have.

Causes of problems

University managers can address the causes of these problem

- **Employability:** Since 2012 there has been a presumption in the university funding model that if universities respond to student demand, then workforce needs will be met. This has not occurred, and sooner or later federal government policy will change to ensure universities provide courses where there is workforce demand.

- **Potential loss of fields of education:** has been caused, in part, as an unintended consequence of federal government policy, but also, in part, by universities' failure to nurture and value specialist areas where they could become research leaders. **Unhelpful competition** within universities means that specialist courses may not be as well promoted as larger generic courses that have poorer graduate employment outcomes. Specialist courses may need flexible support to survive that is different from processes that work for large courses.
- **Positive reputational value:** university league tables provide one measure of positive reputation, social benefit provides another measure. Some fields contribute more strongly to one or other of these measures. Ultimately, they should not be mutually exclusive.

Actions required by university managers

Each of the causes of the problem could be remedied as follows

- **Address employability:** When federal government policy changes to ensure universities provide courses where there is workforce demand (whether the method is through incentives or sanctions remains to be seen), universities will need to change their course mix profile. As it is not quick to reinstate a course once it has been closed, active steps are needed to prevent course loss now. These include ensuring that existing courses are sufficiently well resourced to survive; entering into collaborative agreements with other universities to share costs and benefits of specialist courses with high workforce demand.
- **Address potential loss of fields of education:** This requires a change in mindset away from efficiency of large courses towards resilience offered by diverse offerings. This requires university managers to nurture and value these specialist areas where there is future teaching and research potential. To do this university managers must actively value specialist courses, promote them and protect them from internal predation by larger courses.
- **Nurture existing courses:** Specialist courses may need flexible support to survive and thrive. Processes that work for large course may not work well in these specialist fields. Managers should ask coordinators what is needed in their field.
- **Use positive reputational value:** Use these courses promotionally to demonstrate social responsibility and partnerships with local communities. Grow them so they contribute to other reputational measures as well.