



Submission to ACT College Review 2005

Introduction and Context

The Australian Education Union has supported the quality and effectiveness of ACT secondary colleges since their creation nearly thirty years ago. The Union is aware of the strong support of the sector by students, parents and the broader community.

The Union notes that there has been no previous attempt to review the work of colleges other than narrow efficiency and effectiveness reviews since self government. The Departmental Discussion Paper *Going Forward: creating a new culture, a new construct* released just prior to this review was the first attempt to examine the sector. The Union has consistently argued for an assessment of the substantial cuts to staff in colleges over the years. There is serious concern about negative impacts on programs and support structures for students.

Since colleges were conceived, some important societal and technological changes have occurred. It is important to ensure that college provision is sustainable and relevant to the needs of students in the 21st Century. Changing populations at colleges is a major factor to be addressed by the system.

This submission will identify areas that need to be addressed to ensure that colleges are effective in the 21st century. The opportunities should be embraced and the strategies researched. Clearly there will need to be additional resources dedicated to the ongoing improvements resulting from the directions taken. In broad terms this submission will demonstrate that colleges now have new tasks, responsibilities, challenges and a changed student body to support.

The Union is pleased that this review is underway and submits the following submission for consideration:

- 1. Examine the effectiveness of the current model of the ACT government senior secondary colleges and identify opportunities and strategies to ensure the system is well placed to address the educational and welfare needs of students in the 21st century.**

1.1 Population and structural issues

The population of colleges has changed. At their inception, colleges of up to 900 students supported the local community. It was envisaged that there would be a mix of student ability and interest at each site. At that time however, the bulk of lower achievers was not continuing to Year 12 and while there was a mix in colleges, it was a mix of the more academically able and motivated.

Changes have occurred over the years due to demographic shifts, the ageing of suburbs and community expectations that students complete 13 years of schooling to Year 12. The opening of new non government secondary schools and the extension of non government secondary schools to Year 12 has also had an impact, drawing away enrolments from government colleges in parts of Canberra.

The issue of surplus spaces in colleges has been addressed on the south side of Canberra with amalgamation and a change of use at the old Stirling College site. On the north side there are over 1000 surplus spaces. With the expected opening of a college in Gunghalin in 2010, there will be additional pressure on the sustainability of current arrangements on the north side.

As discussed in *Going Forward*, surplus spaces lead to a competitive drive for enrolments as colleges face losing student numbers, staff, courses, budget and essential flexibility. Colleges, aiming for quality provision, fight for scarce enrolments and do so quite publicly. This internal competitive environment consumes college financial resources and becomes an overriding focus for college senior leadership. A greater focus on gaining enrolments from the non government sector would be more useful in ensuring the operational and resource effectiveness of our existing government schools.

There needs to be an examination of the impact of this competition on the skewing of student populations. For example, a college might promote a course perceived to be academic and of high status, such as the International Baccalaureate Program. It would be expected that this would draw enrolments of the more academic students and, possibly, their friends, leaving nearby colleges with students less interested in academic outcomes. This can lead to significant issues as students and families get caught up in various perceptions about perceived poor student outcomes at the less academic college. This puts at risk the diverse mix of students and programs at nearby colleges.

Is it desirable to have colleges divided on the basis of academic outcomes? The system currently provides secondary college funding per student rather than on the basis of need. So smaller, less academic colleges with fewer resources support a group of students needing additional learning support. Further there is the effect of small and /or skewed college populations on processes such as AST and Moderation. While there are small group moderation exercises to deal with the smaller numbers, there is a view by parents in particular that a college with less academically able students downgrades the UAI gained by students. The BSSS needs to address this perception.

It is well acknowledged that the size of a school or college is a factor in the delivery of quality education. The way schools are currently funded, there comes a point when cost effectiveness and economies of scale make it difficult to provide certain programs and quality student support. Alternative structures could be considered. Proposals that have been discussed and could be explored further are a 7 to 12 college; the inclusion of Year 10 in colleges; a joint campus arrangement with the Canberra Institute of Technology or P to 12 models.

In exploring these models the highly valued aspects of colleges need to be retained. These include the adult learning environment, the freedom for students balanced by enhanced pastoral care and the wider curriculum

choices. If Years 11 and 12 are to remain separate from Years 7 to 10, then it is vital that there be well resourced transition programs providing adequate student support.

Specialisation has also been proposed as a structural improvement. It could meet the needs of students in colleges where there are insufficient resources to operate particular courses. It can create efficiencies, combining small classes in courses such as Languages on one campus. This kind of specialisation has been considered and trialed, and there are clear indications that students prefer to remain at one campus and travelling to another is not sustainable over the two years.

Another form of specialisation where colleges are identified to provide a special educational emphasis could be considered. For example, colleges could be sports based, focused on the arts, offering comprehensive vocational courses or with emphasis on various subjects. The concept has already come about in an unregulated way, and has driven enrolments to some colleges.

In the UK model, thousands of schools are able to select from a list of ten areas. Schools can select up to two areas. There is additional funding provided and a requirement that sponsorship be sought and found. Ten percent of the enrolment can be given priority based on the specific aptitude. Importantly, there is a condition that these schools must deliver a broad and balanced education to all pupils.

Decisions made about specialisation in ACT colleges must be in an environment of collaboration and openness. An unregulated selection could worsen the distortion of the ACT student population, with the creation of academic and residual colleges.

1.2 Staffing

Resources for colleges have been reduced at a time when challenges have increased. The Union is aware that courses have been cut as a result of a reduction in teaching numbers. The assessment process has become more complex and accountable with the additional workload picked up by staff, but creating increasing pressure on other college programs or initiatives.

A growing problem for colleges is finding appropriate staff. When teachers are absent there are great difficulties in finding staff able to teach particular courses. Inadequate funding for absent teachers challenges school budgets and regularly leaves classes uncovered. A solution is to provide improved funding for relief enabling colleges to have an inbuilt, flexible staffing arrangement. This would help ensure course viability. It should be noted that the current average age of a college relief teacher is in the sixties.

The lack of mobility of secondary teachers between the two sectors needs attention to open up positions for those who have not worked in one or the other sector. It is important to have an age and experience mix of teachers wherever possible. There is now a substantial older group in colleges looking at retirement in the next 3 to 5 years. To replace this group, succession planning and training programs for specific roles are urgently needed. VET teacher training must be ongoing to encourage the involvement of teachers from both colleges and high schools.

1.3 Leadership and Culture

Stronger systemic leadership is needed to support colleges. The active involvement of senior department leaders will be essential in order to drive changes determined by this Review process. There must be a better understanding and integration of college business across the system, with expertise at the senior secondary level to be represented in at least one senior position.

It is important that college principals and the department work as a team. Regular opportunities of this kind to collaborate and set directions are a starting point for change and improvement. Principals of colleges are in the forefront of difficult and necessary changes. If systemic change is to occur, there must be strong support given to senior management in colleges, achieved through greater departmental involvement and co-operation.

The age and mobility of teachers has a significant effect on the culture in colleges. The median age is 50+ and it is important to acknowledge the impact that a large group of “pre retirement” teachers have on the culture of teacher learning and the introduction of change. Lack of movement means there are many teachers who have worked in one college for many years and have little knowledge or understanding of changes occurring in other parts of the system. As college teachers focus their professionalism more as college teachers than secondary teachers, there is little engagement in the system’s broader debates and professional learning from K to Year 10. Historically, few college teachers attend system professional development that is not specifically related to college business.

There is a perception in colleges that the system is unsupportive to the sector. As the feedback to colleges from student and parent surveys over the years has been overwhelmingly positive, there has been some systemic and institutional apathy to review and improve. In a climate of resource cuts and increased workloads, it is easy to see why teachers feel under supported by the system. This needs to be turned around. For colleges to meet the needs of students in the 21st century an improvement culture is essential. It is to be hoped that this review will provide impetus for revitalisation.

1.4 Drift to private schools

The Union acknowledges the movement of students to private schools generally in the ACT while private schools have expanded the number of places in Years 11 and 12. Students are exiting the government system prior to Year 11, reducing public college enrolments even further. This has had a significant impact in parts of Canberra. There should be further exploration of the numbers of students leaving the system and the factors leading to this movement.

Strong, quality promotion by the system in co-operation with the colleges would greatly support retention of students in the system. It is to be hoped that this Review, with a subsequent examination of resources requirements, will also ensure improved quality provision, ongoing support from the community and consequently a slowing of enrolments at non government schools.

1.5 Relationships with outside educational institutions

Links with other educational organisations are essential for colleges. These relationships help ensure the relevance of programs and smooth transitions for students moving between them. Apart from high schools, closer relationships

should include the Canberra Institute of Technology, the ACT tertiary institutions, business and community sector organisations and other local groups that may be partners in programs and innovations to support students.

The new initiative of the ANU College is welcomed as a significant and positive opportunity for students and teachers from the public sector. It is hoped that the initiative can be expanded in the future in terms of student numbers and course diversity. The as yet unannounced Australian Technical College for Queanbeyan may have an impact on ACT colleges by reducing the number of cross border students.

2. Investigate current practice in ACT colleges in relation to sustainability and relevance of courses and evaluation approaches and provide a range of possible options for future practice

As the population of colleges has changed with all students being encouraged to complete thirteen years of schooling, proportionately fewer students have university as their goal. There needs to be an examination of the relevance of current courses for both groups. The structure and assessment of courses should be reviewed to provide an improved, more engaging experience for all.

Current Australian studies of the senior secondary years are summarised in the paper *Going Forward*. They focus on providing more flexibility and revised modes of delivery in particular to support the new cohort of students attending school beyond Year 10. Modular approaches help some students achieve positive outcomes as their learning progress is acknowledged in timely and explicit ways.

New technology in society and the workplace has created a need for revision of courses and the curriculum generally. An example is the rewriting of media courses and IT. Students studying these courses at this level require access to the latest technology and subsequent course revisions to ensure their learning is relevant to current industry practice.

The Union is concerned about the increasing and ongoing cost of supporting information technology and up to date computer systems and software across the whole range of courses at senior secondary level. Purchase, leasing and maintenance costs are stretching college budgets and are likely to be impossible over time.

It is time to review the costs and benefits of school-based course development. While the college system was established with a philosophy of school based curriculum development, college teachers now do less course writing and more adaptation of courses. The office of the Board of Senior Secondary Studies currently co-ordinates the efforts of teachers across the system in major course writing exercises, usually funded by college budgets. These Type 2 courses along with adopted type 1 courses now make up 75% of courses taught in colleges. The efforts of BSSS to provide worthwhile professional learning needs to be further supported.

College assessment and scoring procedures are complex and time consuming. A cost/benefit analysis of teacher time spent in this way should be carried out. The technology requirements are significant and ongoing training of teachers is necessary. Online assessment items should be developed and utilised to support college teachers in their work.

Vocational Courses have provided a constructive alternative pathway for some students not intending to take a tertiary package. VET has also provided additional opportunities for those students seeking an academic added value to their tertiary outcome. Students unable to achieve good outcomes in tertiary courses are often encouraged to take vocational courses. Some of these students have learning problems and are unable to reach the required vocational standard or have problems sustaining their effort. This has led to a significant drop out rate and it is recommended that there be an analysis to ensure the ongoing relevance and success of VET.

3. Examine the extent to which effective teaching strategies and student support structures are used by colleges and college teachers in meeting the full range of educational needs of students

The college system has provided an excellent environment for highly motivated, skilled learners intending to go to University. The two year continuous assessment approach with students choosing courses and packages works well for a large group of students. Many teachers have substantial expertise in their teaching area and are dedicated to best practice in their teaching. However, a large group of students with less motivation and direction now attend college and there is evidence that their needs are not being met.

There are three main aspects to examine. Firstly, the courses currently on offer within the system need to be examined to ensure they are relevant and engaging for the full range of students. This should include the way courses are packaged and college timetables are shaped. Secondly, teaching methods and assessment procedures need to be reviewed to ensure all students are learning and being assessed in an optimum environment. Thirdly, there needs to be a focus on the nature and extent of student support services. These are vital if all students are to gain the best from college.

Alongside any proposals for change in pedagogy, assessment processes or new technologies in the classroom there must be universal, relevant professional learning. System and college leadership is essential to the success of any change program. To support review outcomes it will be essential to provide resources to meet the learning needs of teachers.

Professionals need to upgrade their practice regularly. The Union has worked with the Department in encouraging and expanding professional learning opportunities for all teachers. A major focus for the Union, the Department and college principals has been to provide learning programs for teachers to improve their teaching practice. *Going Forward* found that this has not been achieved due to lack of time and resources. The Union expects the system to provide leadership on these pedagogical issues so that there is real impetus for improvement in classroom practice.

There is some debate in the system about whether Accredited Courses are sufficiently challenging for many students. The recent internal review referred to this and commented that expectations of students in these courses were too low. On the other hand, there are students who don't cope well with these courses. The whole issue of appropriate courses for all students needs to be examined.

While it is important to review the nature of courses, there are other aspects of the college experience which impact on different groups of students. There are insufficient staffing resources in colleges to run the number of lines needed for

some students. Those having difficulty finding direction or who are easily distracted from their studies, benefit from an increased number of lines so that their day is full. This is particularly important in Year 11 during the transition period.

A recent innovation at one college addressed this by setting up a half day structure for its especially identified students, with no breaks except morning recess. The students completed the Year 12 Certificate in a locally designed and system accredited course within the 2 years. Some students worked in the afternoon. If they wished, they could accelerate their Year 12 completion by taking extra lines in a range of units in the afternoon.

Going Forward outlined a number of initiatives in the UK and at OECD level. The Tomlinson report, as discussed in the review, puts forward a direction which would support many of our “at risk” students. It claims to tackle the “educational causes of disengagement and underachievement and low post-16 participation”.

The transition of students to college is an important area on which to focus. There are positive effects from dividing the secondary sector but the interface between high schools and colleges is poorly handled. This is evident in the responses to the annual Year 11 questionnaire. If transition processes were working well, it would be visible in the “drop out rates” of students from Year 10 to Year 12. Studies show that there is a substantial drop out not being addressed by the system. In the very short period of time students are in college they need early expert advice and assistance to gain the very best outcomes possible.

The Student Pathways initiative now operating in high schools could be of great use to colleges in supporting students, in their transition to Year 11. Transition is a critical issue in student support and is currently under funded. If we are to continue with separate secondary sectors, a serious effort must be put into better transition processes, including the use of student pathways information.

Student success at college requires direction, good motivation to learn and the capacity to complete the required work in their chosen packages. Many factors can prevent success at college. The use of drugs and alcohol by some students clearly interferes with effective learning. A large proportion of students have part time work. When this interferes with college there are problems with attendance and completion of assignments. Family and living circumstances can affect attendance. Students are often carers and need additional consideration in managing their schooling.

To manage and support the “at risk” population in colleges there needs to be more professional counselling and a greater capacity to provide a case management approach for students at risk. This would enable students to gain emotional and practical support along with meeting their learning needs.

The student support structure at each college is critical in supporting the whole range of students. Those taking tertiary packages need package checks and career advice. The students involved in non tertiary pursuits need advice on accredited or VET courses that will support their post school options. In addition students failing to attend or complete their course work need constant follow up to keep them on track. Currently colleges do not have sufficient resources to meet this growing demand. Year Advisers, Work Experience Officers and

Careers Advisers work long difficult hours on top of a reduced teaching load. College management has to balance the need for staffing classes with the needs of students beyond the classroom. There is insufficient staffing to do it all.

Students with learning needs preventing them from participating and succeeding at college need additional support. At one end of the spectrum are students who have been specifically identified by the system as needing extra help. Low levels of literacy and numeracy continue into the college years preventing learning in standard class sizes with inappropriate teaching and courses. Colleges need well trained Resource or Learner Assistance teachers to meet the needs of low achievers.

There are currently no special education resources at college. Colleges are expected to cater for these students in classes of up to 25 when often they have been in small groups and receiving individual support at high school. Those students, who have continuously failed at previous schools, are not able to access support to help them achieve any success at college. Resources and expertise need to be applied to colleges to allow this to happen.

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September 2005