

Higher Education at the Crossroads: an overview paper

Ministerial discussion paper

RESPONSE: AUSTRALIAN NETWORK OF ACADEMIC PUBLIC HEALTH INSTITUTIONS (ANAPHI)

Introduction

The Australian Network of Academic Public Health Institutions (ANAPHI) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the ministerial discussion paper Higher Education at the Crossroads.

ANAPHI is a network of eighteen academic institutions that receive funding from the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing under the Public Health Education and Research Program (PHERP). ANAPHI provides a national focus for these institutions to work together to enhance the position and delivery of public health education and research in Australia.

The network has responsibility to develop partnerships with governments and other relevant organisations to better understand and respond to the national interest; to improve the quality and accessibility of public health education and training in Australia; to improve the quality and accessibility of public health research in Australia; to promote excellence in public health education through the development and application of appropriate standards; and to promote the collective strength of Australia's public health universities in the international marketplace. As such, the network and PHERP has put in place elements that Higher Education at the Crossroads advocates for tertiary education in Australia. Much can be learnt from ANAPHI's collective experience in the practical issues of implementing these elements across Australia.

Contribution to this debate

ANAPHI believes it has a contribution to make to this discussion:

- it is a national collaboration of academic institutions with a focus on a particular area of education and research
- members of the network already participate in various models of collaborative activity: cross-enrolment; joint degrees; collaborative teaching; joint research projects
- the network has recently been involved in the development of a national educational framework that gives consideration to learning outcomes for courses in public health
- the network is presently developing a quality enhancement framework to ensure continued quality and improvement of the activities of its members
- the network is responsive to the needs of its community (public health) and other stakeholders-government, students, communities.

Other relevant elements of PHERP are:

- although public health education and training is a small niche market in the overall scheme of tertiary education, a diverse range of educational offerings is required from the tertiary public health sector in order to be responsive to the needs of its community/stakeholders
- people working in the 'public health industry' have always played, and will continue to play, a significant role in the provision of education in this field
- the academic sector of public health plays a major and critical part in supporting policy and practice
- Australian public health tertiary programs have been successfully marketed internationally, especially in the Asia-Pacific region, and attract a disproportionate number of international students

- in developing quality processes for masters programs in public health, the practical issues of accreditation of educational programs have been canvassed by ANAPHI.

Lessons learned from the PHERP process:

- when the parent university is focused on competition for students both within and between universities, it is very difficult to foster and maintain collaborations around education within specific programs
- financial incentives such as the Innovations program (funding awarded on a competitive basis to proposals for innovative projects in specified priority areas, based on specified principles) are a good impetus for groups to collaborate on the development of joint educational modules but there has to be other incentives/disincentives or structural changes to encourage the adoption of collaborative initiatives by agencies outside of those in the initial collaboration
- collaborative teaching programs are more easily developed where there are strong research links
- accreditation of specific degrees (eg Master in Public Health) could encourage greater sharing of courses around core elements-these would no longer be part of the competitive edge. However, there are considerable practical issues (resourcing, ownership, authority, diversity) around the implementation of an accreditation process.
- programs to influence the quality of educational programs are limited in effectiveness unless they are accompanied by some enforcement process.

Funding schemes

In particular, the Executive of ANAPHI would like to offer the following to the discussion on funding schemes.

The first round of funding under the Public Health Education and Research Program occurred in 1988 and has been enlarged and expanded in the ensuing years. The original aim of the funding for the PHERP program from what is now the Department of Health and Ageing (DoHA) was to develop the public health workforce and make public health education accessible to everyone working in the health sector. The program is characterised by its multi-disciplinary, cross-sectoral and collaborative nature. An independent review of the PHERP program, conducted by Professor Terry Nolan in 1999, acknowledged major achievements but made two principal recommendations for continued and increased funding for the program. This funding would allow the benefits flowing to the public health in Australia as a result of the program's research and education activity to be acknowledged and to continue to expand.

In considering the future of funding and organisation of tertiary education, ANAPHI identifies the following issues that need to be considered:

- workforce needs do need to be considered-the market as driven by the interests of students alone will result in major issues for employers in the health sector
- there exists important and useful synergies between academic and industry workforces in public health that should not be lost-the overall costs to government may be substantial if they were
- in applied areas such as public health, the links between research and education/training are frequently difficult to disentangle. If there were to be a separation of these two components, the outcomes are likely to be different.
- existing funding mechanisms for higher degrees are primarily aimed at research degrees. Public health has a need for a highly skilled workforce but the long-term potential

remuneration for such workers means it is unattractive to seek higher level education under the PELS scheme.

The nature of the public health workforce is diverse and covers many disciplines; there is therefore no one employer group that can subsidise workforce development and no one industry sector that is able to provide substantial funding to underpin the delivery of education and research programs in this area. The PHERP program provides an example of one way in which a government department or industry group can support activity in the tertiary education sector.

The network believes that DEST must give consideration to those areas of tertiary activity that are not likely to receive ongoing and substantial external funding, must acknowledge a need for co-funding in these areas, and devise a model under which these programs can be supported (including a consideration of the factors that will have an influence on whether students will commit themselves to a particular fee structure).

RECOMMENDATION

ANAPHI recommends that the Department of Education, Science and Training consider ways in which it can support programs which are more closely allied to workforce requirements than the more generally-funded DEST programs.

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