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Professor Denise Bradley, AC
Review of Australian Higher Education
GPO Box 9880
CANBERRA ACT 2601

Dear Professor Bradley

I commend to you the attached submission from Flinders University.

Flinders University welcomes Deputy Prime Minister Gillard’s statement that ‘this nation’s future challenges will best be met if we have a strong world-class university system and that’s what the Review [of Higher Education] will be part of the process of creating’ (transcript of interview, ABC 7:30 Report, 14 March 2008). In this context, Flinders University welcomes the opportunity to comment on the issues and questions raised by the Review of Higher Education Discussion Paper.

Flinders endorses the submission from Innovative Research Universities Australia (IRU Australia), a submission into which we have had a strong input and which proffers several Flinders-specific examples of innovation and good practice. The IRU Australia submission can be taken to represent the views of Flinders University except where modified, embellished or nuanced by advice in this submission.

This endorsement of the IRU Australia submission allows our own attached submission to focus on particular questions to which Flinders wishes to add a distinctive comment or contribution. The fact that an issue covered in the IRU Australia submission is not specifically mentioned in what follows should not be taken to suggest that the issue is necessarily less significant.

Our submission is organised in response to specific selected questions as set out in the Discussion Paper.

Yours sincerely

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Professor Michael N Barber FAA
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Question 1: How adequate is the statement of functions and characteristics of higher education in modern Australia?

The statement of functions as set out in section 1.2 of the Discussion Paper is satisfactory as far as it goes, though we note and support the embellishments proposed in the IRU Australia submission. The statement of functions needs to be supplemented by a recognition of the key role of universities not simply in generating ‘new knowledge’ but also in being repositories, custodians and continuing supporters of areas of existing knowledge, even those that might seem esoteric. To quote the IRU Australia submission, universities have ‘sustained and nurtured many areas of knowledge sometimes considered esoteric at the time and since proven to be critically important (e.g. Asian languages, Solomon Islands, Afghan tribalism, tsunamis, nuclear power)’. To the extent that Australia can now draw upon university-based expertise on such matters, it is because universities have nurtured such expertise, within their ongoing framework of academic quality assurance, notwithstanding that these matters might not have been high on a list of immediate national priorities at the time.

The statement of characteristics as set out in section 1.3 of the Discussion Paper is likewise satisfactory as far as it goes. Its utilitarian tone, however, seems to have little connection to the recognised function of universities, as identified in 1.2, in encouraging ‘self-fulfilment, personal development and the pursuit of knowledge as an end in itself’. This is not to challenge the legitimately utilitarian purposes to which universities must also devote themselves; it is rather a request for an insertion of greater balance in the list of characteristics in 1.3.

Question 3: What are the appropriate mechanisms at the national and local level for ensuring higher education meets national and local needs for high level skills? What is the role of state and territory governments in this area?

The South Australian Government has operated since 2004 under a State Strategic Plan. In its current (2007) iteration, the Strategic Plan sets out 98 targets across the whole range of State policy arenas. Subsidiary strategic planning documents include a State Strategic Infrastructure Plan (2005) and a Skills Strategy Report (2008). Among the 98 State Strategic Plan targets are some of direct relevance to higher education, including:

- **T4.9 Public expenditure**: by 2010, public expenditure on research and development, as a proportion of GSP, to match or exceed average investment compared to other Australian states.

- **T6.15 Learning or earning**: by 2010 increase the number of 15-19 year olds engaged fulltime in school, work or further education/training (or combination thereof) to 90%.

- **T6.20 Higher education**: increase South Australia’s proportion of higher education students to 7.5% of the national total by 2014.

Most of the other 95 targets are also of at least indirect relevance to higher education in that they specify or imply the kind of knowledge and skills required by the university graduates (in public administration, in teaching, in the health sector, in science and technology and in a host of other graduate-recruitment professions) who will necessarily be involved in addressing them.
Flinders Vice-Chancellor Michael Barber has, since his appointment in January 2008, set the University on a course that inter alia focuses on the 'new South Australia'. The State Strategic Plan provides a helpful framework through which this engagement can be described and to some extent structured.

Flinders has responded positively to the South Australian Government’s initiative in inviting international universities to establish niche operations in Adelaide. Concerns have been raised about the scale of public funds directed to establishing and maintaining these niche operations rather than to enhancing the programs and expertise already available in the existing public universities. Nonetheless, Flinders has built a particularly strong collaborative relationship at the program level with Carnegie Mellon University’s Master of Public Administration (MPA) program. The Flinders MPA program, now in association with our CMU partners, has since been nominated by the South Australian Government to auspice its engagement with the Australian New Zealand School of Government. This is a fine example of a State-government-initiated endeavour to use universities to enhance high-level skills acquisition in the public sector.

Flinders has likewise responded positively to the mutual concern felt by the University and by the South Australian Government about the social and economic enhancement of Adelaide’s southern region in the wake of the Mitsubishi factory closures. The Flinders response, within a collaborative framework sponsored by the State Government (not least through its designated Minister for the Southern Suburbs), has focused on the high-level skills agenda. Through a number of existing and proposed programs, there is a focus on better matching the capacities and aspirations of southern suburbs’ residents (particularly those put most at risk by social and economic changes) with the skills needs of the emergent South Australian economic drivers in the resources, defence, electronics and advanced service industries. This is another example of a good University-government collaborative relationship in addressing the skills agenda.

Flinders acknowledges a number of other specific South Australian Government investments in its higher education institutions. The scale of such investment, however, varies considerably from State to State, and it also varies from institution to institution within our State in a way that does not always seem particularly strategic. The effect is a variable outcome not necessarily related to the relative capacity and quality of particular institutions.

Question 4: How adequate are the mechanisms for aligning supply and demand of graduates? How do pricing and labour market signals impact on student choices?

Question 5: Are there particular examples of good practice where you can demonstrate either rapid response to skill shortages or successful initiatives to improve generic skills?

Flinders University has recently had to address the consequences of an apparent mismatch between employer demand for graduates and the supply of students for university places in relation to its electronics engineering program. ‘Pricing and labour market signals’ appear to have had only a weak impact on past student choices in this domain. Our response, after a two-year suspension of intake pending a major review, has been positive and decisive, and we offer it as an example of a ‘rapid response to skill shortages’. Flinders is relaunching a restructured and refocused electronics engineering program from 2009, in the process addressing the student supply problem via a number of innovations including:
• a focus on better informing potential students in the secondary school system, and their parents, about the career opportunities in and intrinsic attractions of electronics engineering;
• support for enhanced teaching of mathematics and related subjects in the secondary school system;
• a refocusing of our electronics engineering programs to offer specialisations (e.g. robotics) more likely to attract potential student interest;
• an enhanced partnership with the TAFE sector to provide better articulated pathways; and
• a new collaborative arrangement with the University of South Australia to provide pathways into the engineering specialisations offered by both institutions, in the process improving the accessibility of all specialisations.

Question 8: Should there be a national approach to improving Indigenous and low SES participation and success in higher education?

Question 9: If you support a national approach to improving Indigenous and low SES participation and success how do you see it being structured, resourced, monitored and evaluated?

Question 10: What institutional initiatives have proved successful in increasing low SES or Indigenous participation and success? (Please provide information about outcomes as well as activities.)

Flinders University welcomes the systematic incorporation of a social inclusion perspective into the analysis of the past performance and preferred future trajectory of the higher education sector. Flinders has since its foundation been proudly associated with a social inclusion approach to the recruitment and education of its students, nurturing and enhancing a number of innovative pathways that complement the traditional post-Year 12 intake track. A consistent and longstanding theme of academic research at Flinders across a range of disciplines has likewise been inspired by a social inclusion perspective, the most recent addition to our repertoire being a 2008 Federation Fellowship program in the area of the social determinants of health.

Social exclusion associated with Indigenous and low SES status is founded upon deeper social, economic and cultural structures of disadvantage operating at a societal level. It is therefore inevitable and desirable that addressing these deeper structures of disadvantage correspondingly requires a societal-level response. Much of this must be via the Australian Government through policy domains such as student income support, social security, incomes policy, taxation, immigration, housing policy, Indigenous policy and post-arrival settlement policy.

We explicitly acknowledge that a key to increasing the participation in higher education from Indigenous and low SES groups involves expenditure not directed specifically at the higher education sector but rather in intervention strategies that target early childhood and primary school education, family support mechanisms and community development initiatives. This should not, however, be taken as a proposition that the higher education sector does not have a stake in such strategies. On the contrary, universities educate the human service, public administration and other professionals whose knowledge, skills and commitment will need to be brought to bear on these matters. Furthermore, universities are repositories of knowledge about the whole range of factors — social, economic, cultural, medical, educational, policy-related, etc. — that need to be taken into account in
identifying and addressing the root causes of Indigenous and low SES disadvantage. Flinders University in particular has a strong research, teaching and consultancy profile across these issues.

Success in these broad societal programs will in due course result in increased participation in higher education from these equity groups. For a more immediate impact, individual universities are best equipped to nurture targeted partnership relationships with local communities and constituencies. Targeted admissions pathway programs at the institutional level can also help. The IRU Australia submission provides further elaboration, some telling examples and a specific early outreach proposal — ‘Higher Education ASPIRE’ — targeting disadvantaged young Australians.

Some specific issues in relation to Indigenous participation and success demand special consideration. Associate Professor Lester-Irabinna Rigney, Director of Flinders University’s Yunggorendi First Nations Centre for Higher Education and Research, has recently remarked on the critical importance of education in addressing the needs and interests of Indigenous Australians.\(^1\) The support provided by dedicated centres like Yunggorendi seems to be an important factor in enhancing retention and completion rates among Indigenous students who have gained university entry. However, Associate Professor Rigney also raises some challenging questions about whether such support is sufficient unless universities also address issues around curriculum inclusivity and Indigenous staffing. In relation to getting potential Indigenous students to the admissions stage, necessary national strategies must again be supplemented by locally-negotiated partnerships and pathways, particularly those that can support Indigenous students well before the later years of the secondary school system.

Question 12: … Is there evidence that declining [sic] student staff ratios have impacted on the quality of the student experience?

This question provides a convenient avenue to address not just the issue of inexorably increasing student:staff ratios but also other impacts of resource constraint.

From the perspective of academic departments and teaching staff, the upward trend in student:staff ratios encapsulated in the Discussion Paper’s Figure 15 has been one of the most notable features of the past several decades. The average teaching loads of academic staff have become substantially greater, and some kinds of teaching that used to be characteristic of the sector — such as small group (tutorial) teaching — are notably less prevalent. While to some extent this may have been offset by advances in educational technology that facilitate more flexible delivery via modes that can be more customised to individual student needs (e.g. replacing the ‘small group’ experience with that of the ‘virtual group’), this change is not necessarily less resource intensive in terms of the staff resources needed for high-quality delivery and support. Overall, the negative effects of high student:staff ratios on aspects of the student experience (e.g. large lecture classes, less frequent staff contact, greater use of casual staff who are likely to have less time for student consultation, etc.) are readily apparent.

The question of whether higher student:staff ratios per se have an impact on the quality of academic outcomes for students can draw on a substantial and interesting evidence base, though mainly at the pre-tertiary level. The effect of ‘class size’ and other measures of resource allocation on student academic outcomes has been intensively researched. The research gained its initial impetus from the startling findings a generation ago that

resource allocation reportedly made little significant difference to student academic outcomes. In the intensive and increasingly nuanced research that followed, the major revision has been well-replicated finding that ‘teaching quality’ has a strong causal impact. In short, ‘good teachers’ and ‘good teaching’ are associated with good student outcomes.2

An evidence-based approach to resource allocation in the education sector can therefore be soundly based on analysis of how resource allocation impacts upon teaching quality. There is a convincing case for observing that resource constraints in the university sector indeed impact on teaching quality. Good teachers need to be adequately rewarded to keep them in the profession. The quality of teaching delivery is increasingly dependent on the provision of high quality ICT infrastructure, expensive to install and expensive to maintain. Teaching quality is recognised to be influenced by the extent of formal prior preparation and ongoing professional development among academic staff, enhancing their teaching skills; this is likewise expensive to implement in practice due to direct resource constraints (e.g. funding professional development and/or upgraded credentials in teaching practice) and indirect resource constraints (e.g. finding the time for staff with high teaching loads to take advantage of these opportunities).

An interesting and relevant piece of local evidence from Flinders University is that academic staff in our School of Education — nearly all of whom are formally trained as teachers — consistently score (on average) the highest of any discipline in our Student Evaluation of Teaching surveys.

In addition to this, there are the undoubted but harder-to-measure qualitative impacts of resource constraints (or resource-driven time constraints) on good teaching delivery: finding the time for appropriate student feedback, for the critical review and updating of curricula, for closer engagement with external stakeholders in course design, for an expansion and intensification of work-integrated learning opportunities, for conversion of teaching delivery to flexible online modes in response to student needs, and so on. A better resourced Flinders University would certainly be able to make significant advances across all of these areas.

The pressures on teaching quality are only part of the story. Because of the increased teaching demands, the time available to teaching-and-research academic staff for other academic activities is severely constrained. Most crucially affected is time for research, but the constraint also affects a host of other activities including the kind of collaborative cross-institutional contribution upon which the sector as a whole depends (thesis examination, journal refereeing, keeping professional associations viable, presenting at academic and professional conferences, and so on).

It has been occasionally remarked that there seems to be an apparent contradiction at the heart of some of the discussion about the resourcing of universities. The sector is claiming to be impeded by significant resource constraints while also claiming to have succeeded in many admirable respects — such as creating Australia’s largest service export industry, continuing to produce excellent research outputs, and placing an emphasis on teaching quality to a degree that was uncommon several decades ago.

The cost of maintaining these successes is quite substantial and much of these costs, as the IRU Australia submission documents, is being borne by students at a greater relative level than in comparable countries. While there would be a case for concluding that the overall quality of teaching has indeed improved, there has probably been a narrowing of curriculum content, various adjustments to the nature of assessable student work and a

2 Flinders University would be in a position to prepare a succinct summary of the relevant academic literature if this is of interest to the Review panel.
displacement of breadth by a more task-focused approach in response to the time constraints faced by both students and staff.

Another way of looking at the impact of resource constraints is to focus in addition on what universities admit they are not doing so well. Some examples will suffice:

- Language teaching is in decline to the detriment of Australia’s immediate and long term national interest.
- Mathematics teaching and research are in decline notwithstanding unambiguous evidence that mathematics underpins so much of the innovation and advancement needed in a modern economy.
- The resource-related professions (e.g. geology, mining engineering, etc.) and the electronics-related professions all complain of a mismatch between their need for skilled graduates and what universities are currently supplying.
- Universities readily admit to difficulties in retaining highly skilled academic staff in areas of high professional demand such as information technology, advanced business studies (especially in the accounting and finance areas) and medical education.
- Attraction and retention of high-quality staff is in fact an issue across all discipline areas: as salary levels and working conditions become relatively more unattractive, those who might otherwise contemplate university-based careers are instead looking elsewhere, at an immeasurable cost to the sector and to the country in terms of foregone talent and unrealised potential.
- Some elements of the most basic infrastructure resources needed in universities — teaching spaces, laboratories, libraries, and so on — are currently provided at a level of degradation and antiquation that is sometimes embarrassing, and unable to compete with international and industry-sector best-practice provision.
- We struggle to maintain, and certainly struggle to enhance, our provision of work-integrated learning opportunities in the face of the increased costs of providing, supervising, assessing and integrating off-campus practicum/internship programs.

Under-resourced universities and over-worked university staff are understandably drawn to focus inward on the demands and priorities of their own immediate environment: delivering degree courses to enrolled students, trying to keep up with the scholarship of their particular disciplines, endeavouring to bring to completion long-delayed research projects, managing the processes and logistics necessary to the smooth running of campuses, and so on. It seems sadly inevitable that external partnership-building outside of academic networks suffers in the face of these immediate demands and priorities. Perhaps this helps to explain the troubling figures reported by Professor Peter Høj, Vice-Chancellor of the University of South Australia, revealing that just 2% of Australian firms undertake ‘collaboration with universities or other higher education institutes’ compared with a pan-European figure of 9% and individual European figures as high as 33% (Finland).3 Not the least of the benefits of a better resourcing regime for universities will be to unleash the unrealised potential of university-industry and university-community partnerships.

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For all of these reasons, and others documented in the IRU Australia submission, Flinders University endorses Deputy Prime Minister Gillard’s observation that ‘we’ve slipped behind when it comes to public investment in universities; we’ve slipped radically behind’.

Question 21: Do you believe there is a place in Australia’s higher education system for universities that are predominantly ‘teaching only’ universities? If so, why?

Flinders University endorses the broad consensus across the higher education sector that the recognition of teaching-only universities would contradict a defining characteristic of universities, to the detriment of both the quality of university-based teaching and the quality of university-based research. The interaction and overlap between teaching and research drives much of the distinctive university-level productivity and innovation in both arenas. This position does not rely on a claim, which we acknowledge would be ill-founded, that all academic staff in universities are research-productive as well as teaching-engaged. Rather, the proposition claims that successful universities, and academic units within them, encapsulate a teaching-research nexus that enables each activity to be carried out in the context of the other with a flow of influence between them. It is a distinctively university-level feature that research advances can rapidly lead to curriculum change, and that the work of advanced students promotes research innovation. The communication of research problems and research findings through university-level teaching is a significant, and often under-recognised, stimulus to the advancement and refinement of research.

Question 26: Do you believe that knowledge transfer and community engagement are legitimate and appropriate roles for contemporary higher education institutions? If so, how do you see this additional role for the higher education sector blending with its traditional roles and are there limits to these additional roles?

Flinders University’s positive response to this issue is encapsulated in a major proposal that it has submitted for consideration under the Diversity and Structural Adjustment Program. We are seeking support for the establishment of a Knowledge Transfer Partnerships program to facilitate two-way partnerships with stakeholders in the southern Adelaide region in the interests of improved responsiveness to labour-market needs and of promoting community development and social inclusion in the region. We do not regard this initiative as in conflict with our ‘traditional role’ in advanced-level education and research; on the contrary, we regard it as enhancing and complementing this ‘traditional role’ by providing for local application of staff and student research, increased local support for work-integrated student placements, an enhanced knowledge base within the University as well as within the region, and an opportunity to open up potential new horizons on the education and research agendas.

Flinders supports the IRU Australia proposal for structuring future Australian Government support for such initiatives via a new Knowledge and Community Partnerships Fund.

Transcript of interview, ABC Radio AM program, 20 February 2008,
Question 32: Is the level of regulation in the sector appropriate? If not, why not, and what should be done to reduce the level of regulation?

In relation to higher education funding allocation and accountability, Flinders University strongly endorses the IRU Australia submission that, in urging the retention of the current partially regulated model, seeks a sensible and stable middle ground in the regulation/deregulation spectrum.

We note with satisfaction the remarks of Deputy Prime Minister Gillard that the Government intends ‘to take the foot of government off the throat of universities’. The IRU Australia submission points to a number of examples where current onerous reporting and approval requirements serve no useful purpose.

On the other hand, a significant degree of system-level oversight, planning and information-sharing is necessary if Australia is to achieve and maintain a world-class university system. Accordingly, we acknowledge a range of matters that require the maintenance of an effective national regulatory framework, including:

- the administration of transparent and fair funding arrangements;
- a necessary accountability for the expenditure of public funds and for the custodianship of public assets;
- the maintenance of niche educational programs in the national interest;
- ensuring the institutional stability required to underpin long-term student access to educational programs; and
- the collection of the cross-institutional information necessary for sensible planning, benchmarking and mutual organisational learning.

In relation to the regulatory architecture of the higher education system more broadly, Flinders was a signatory to a joint submission in 2007 from the three South Australian universities to the Inquiry into the Desirability of a National Higher Education Accreditation Body. The submission, consistent with the terms of the Inquiry, focused on the regulation of non-self-accrediting private providers. It supported the development of greater consistency across the sector through the establishment of a national body. The submission noted that the private provision (mirroring to some extent the public provision) of higher education was increasingly characterised by delivery across State borders, making it important and appropriate that there be some national regulation. The submission advised that national consistency should extend further than just accreditation, with the national regulatory authority being granted the capacity to oversee the management, at the national level, of the ESOS Act and Codes of Practice that apply to institutions across all States and Territories.

Flinders University recognises that the current self-accrediting status of Australian universities is a privilege that cannot credibly be regarded as self-justifying. Flinders notes and accepts that the Australian Universities Quality Agency is focusing in its second round of audits on reviewing self-accredited institutions against the relevant aspects of the National Protocols for Higher Education Approval Processes. While this is not technically an accreditation audit (not least because envisaging the accreditation of a self-accrediting institution would be something of an oxymoron), it does impose a more closely regulated degree of accountability for and compliance with the specified criteria for the award of University status. Flinders University understands the need for the higher education sector as a whole to be seen to operate within a robust regulatory framework that ensures

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such accountability and compliance, and accordingly endorses this approach. It also
endorses the Australian Universities Quality Agency as the most appropriate regulatory
vehicle for this purpose.

Question 33: Does Australia’s Quality Assurance Framework need revision? If so,
why? What changes would you make?

Flinders University commends the performance and broadly endorses the evolving work
of the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA). AUQA is increasingly recognised
at the international level as a good-practice example of a national quality assurance
agency that appropriately monitors quality in the university sector and encourages the
upgrading of quality assurance mechanisms within universities. While acknowledging that
AUQA audits consume significant resources and energy at the institutional level, leading
to occasional understandable expressions of irritation, we accept that the Australian
system of quality assurance oversight with AUQA as its instrument is a sound model.

Question 35: Is there more that could be done to improve university governance?
How should this be done?

We submit that this is probably the least significant issue raised in the Discussion Paper.

Flinders University endorses the emerging consensus across the sector that the current
National Governance protocols should be divorced from any direct funding consequences
but otherwise can serve as a sensible set of principles to guide university governance
arrangements.

Flinders University has a very effective governing Council. In common with the other two
South Australian public universities, its membership is completely independent of
government due to the South Australian Government giving itself no role in the
appointment of Council members. This has enabled the membership to reflect a range of
professional experiences and stakeholder interests, producing a Council of diverse skills
and talents that also coheres together very effectively.