WELCOME to the first i.research newsletter produced by the Institutional Research Consultancy Unit at RMIT. The aim of this monthly newsletter is (a) to provide summary information about issues relevant to postsecondary education with links to further readings; and (b) to raise awareness of developments that are having an impact on the tertiary sector and are relevant to the work of RMIT.

The IRCU is committed to scanning issues and emerging trends, analysing and interpreting such currents and sharing them with the RMIT community. As well as the monthly newsletter, we will issue environmental scanning alerts as topics of interest arise. We welcome your feedback. If you would like to comment on the newsletter, or provide us with items of interest, email us at ircu@rmit.edu.au.

NEWS - National

A synthesis and round up of current events in Australia relevant to the work of the postsecondary education sector.

Higher Education Review underway

On 26th April, Minister Brendan Nelson released an issues paper, Higher Education at the Crossroads. The paper marks the first stage of consultation in the Federal Government’s Review of Higher Education funding and policy, announced earlier in April. Issues papers around specific areas are to follow during the coming year, the process culminating in a public forum towards the end of the year at which key policy options will be flagged. Throughout the process, a reference group that is broad rather than representative in its composition will guide the Minister.

Unlike previous reviews of the sector, this one seems to be focused around some clear policy outcomes already identified by the Minister. These include:

- developing a funding model that rewards institutional specialisation and diversity within the sector (with suggestions of an increased emphasis on ‘student choice’ and competitive tendering).
- increasing external revenue to universities, improving institutional performance and ensuring that at least a few Australian universities meet ‘world class’ criteria (contentious as those criteria may be).
- Improving the quality of participation and, more specifically, improving completion rates and addressing problems of attrition among undergraduates.

Given the significance of this review for the future of Australian higher education, it is likely to prove a recurring theme in any discussion of higher education policy and practice. If you’d like to comment, or have questions about the Review’s progress, contact us at ircu@rmit.edu.au.
To view the Minister’s statements on the Review, go to
http://www.dest.gov.au/ministers/nelson/apr02/n44_050402.htm
To read the Discussion Paper, ‘Higher Education at the Crossroads’, go to

Victorian Auditor-General reports on international students

The Victorian Auditor-General’s Report on international students in Victorian universities was published in early April. Its main aims were to assess the impact of international students on access to university for Victorian students and on academic standards, their financial impact and the adequacy of existing regulatory mechanisms. The Inquiry took place against a backdrop of media reports on the question of so-called ‘soft marking’ in universities, and the wider impact of funding cuts and deregulation. Three institutions – RMIT, Monash and Melbourne – were examined in detail.

The Report found the impact of international students to be generally positive. 20% of university students in Victoria are from overseas, and the Report calculates that they contribute around $714m annually to the Victorian economy, as well as assisting universities to offset the impact of cuts in public funding. Overall, both students and university staff perceive international students as having a positive impact on both the culture and the work of educational institutions.

Problems nonetheless remain. Significant numbers of academic staff expressed concern that the English language skills of some overseas students are too low, and that this affects student success and staff workloads. It should be noted, however, that staff expressed concerns about the level of English language skills within the domestic student population as well. The Auditor-General also found that changes to regulatory arrangements to strengthen quality and accountability were too recent to properly evaluate. On a more positive note, the Report found that, while it is common for academics to be lobbied by students seeking a higher mark, ‘soft marking’ is not a problem within the three institutions examined closely, or indeed in other higher education institutions in Victoria. Problems are seen to exist more at the level of perception than practice, and for this reason the Report pays significant attention to the need for fair and transparent assessment procedures and policies.

The Report recommends that:

- universities undertake research to examine countries of origin, pathways into study and courses undertaken by those experiencing English language problems. Of course, this demands an earlier identification of students ‘at risk’ of failure due to poor English.

- the Victorian Government work to ensure that the impact of current policies affecting higher education participation - particularly the shortfall in HECS-liable places relative to demand - is understood and debated, not least in order to mitigate against ‘scapegoating’ of international students.

- That institutions pay greater attention to issues relating to assessment, including providing better guidance and resources to staff, making greater use of external examiners and panels for cross-marking purposes, and using some common examination questions across universities to support cross-institutional moderation exercises. Such measures would reduce the possibility of ‘soft marking’, and guard against perceptions that it is occurring.

The A-G’s Report does not go to one of the key issues confronting universities; i.e. how they are to protect themselves against financial overexposure to the international student market. With the numbers of students studying ‘on-shore’ having plateaued, and the number of ‘offshore’ students and university operations overseas increasing, new issues relating to quality and financial risk will arise.

To read the report, go to www.audit.vic.gov.au/par76_is/agp76cv.htm

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University Governance under review

Minister Brendan Nelson has stated that he wants the Review of Higher Education to consider the governance of higher education institutions, with a view to improving their capacity to commercialise. This fairly narrow approach to institutional governance is also reflected in a recent report by Lawyers Phillips Fox, *The Regulatory Environment Applying to Universities*, published under DEST's Evaluations and Investigations Program.

The Report has a strong financial focus, examining the powers of universities to invest and borrow income, to establish companies, and to acquire and dispose of land and assets. These are defined under the Acts establishing each university, as well as through broad State and Commonwealth legislation and regulations.

These issues are already under consideration by State and Territory Governments, with a view to complying with the National Protocols for Higher Education Approval Processes. In NSW, changes to University Acts have resulted in increased accountability requirements for university commercial arms. Legislation regarding the accreditation of higher education courses and institutions has also been amended to establish transparent and agreed criteria. Similar legislative amendments will follow in other States and Territories. The Victorian Government will be guided by its own Review of University Governance, expected to report in May.


Research Priorities and Research Concentration – a new binary divide?

In 1999, four universities – Melbourne, Sydney, Queensland and UNSW – captured over 40% of all research funding (RMIT’s share stood at just under 2%). Research concentration is set to increase, as changes to research funding via the Institutional Grants Scheme and the Research Training Scheme kick in. As noted in ‘Higher Education at the Crossroads’, the Discussion Paper guiding the Review of Higher Education, in future the majority of institutions will be able to attract competitive funding only for strong niche areas of research and research training.

This raises urgent questions for the future of the sector as a whole. How is ‘research strength’ to be measured? The current Government policy seems to equate research strength with demonstrable links to economic growth and the global knowledge economy. Where does ‘public benefit’ research, particularly that relevant to regional Australia, fit into this equation? What indicators should be developed to recognise the strength of basic research, which may have few immediate commercial applications, and for cross-disciplinary research? What impact will this policy have on institutions with pockets of research excellence, but which are unable to develop the ‘critical mass’ in research-active staff and students required to attract more funding? Will arguments about the need for greater ‘institutional specialisation’ in fact result in a new divide between teaching and research institutions?

While these questions are obviously central to the Review of Higher Education, they are given fresh currency by the Government’s recent decision to develop national research priorities for government funded research programmes, worth approximately $4.7 billion in 2003. This
follows the decision announced in January to allocate 33% of new Australian Research Council programme funding to four key areas: nanomaterials and biomaterials, the genome-phenome link, complex systems and photon science. This drew concern from universities and researchers who feared that targeting funds to narrow disciplinary areas would stifle other areas of research and undermine the principle of merit-based funding. The Academy of Science issued a strongly worded position paper, calling for a consultative approach to priority-setting and arguing that such a significant expenditure in only four areas would undermine funding available to basic research across the spectrum.

The Government has heeded the call for greater consultation. A Panel, chaired by Chief Scientist Dr Robin Batterham, will be conducting consultative meetings from late May through June 2002, particularly in relation to:

- nominations for research priorities; including reasons for the nominations,
- key elements of a national priority setting framework (including the scope of the priority setting system, types of priorities, approach to implementation and approach to review).

A discussion paper outlining the Government’s views on a draft framework by which national research priorities will be set will be released in May, and further consultations undertaken prior to the determination of priorities for funding in September.

Clearly, the outcome of this review will be relevant to the decisions of the Higher Education Review in relation to research concentration, and the question of priority-setting will remain contentious. An earlier Review, undertaken by Chief Scientist John Stocker, recommended the adoption of ‘thematic’ rather than discipline-based priorities, whereby spending would be targeted to broad objectives rather than to specific disciplinary areas. This approach is favoured by many researchers who believe priority setting should be ‘problem-oriented’. It also is preferred by those working in fields where research tends to be more diffuse and its outcomes less readily quantified. However, others argue for increasing resources directly into fields of research with direct commercial applications, and where Australia seeks to be internationally competitive: an approach reflected in the ARC priority-setting process, and in the government’s current emphasis on building ‘critical mass’ in key disciplines.


INTERNATIONAL NEWS

A round up of international news briefs of interest to those working and studying in Australian tertiary education institutions

In Australia, concern has been expressed about funding mechanisms that are resulting in increased concentration of research resources within a few institutions (see Themes and Currents below). Such fears are echoed in the United Kingdom, where the Times Higher Education Supplement (25 January 2002) reports that the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) has ‘reneged’ on a pledge to increase funding for developing research and will ‘cut funds for the good to pay for the best’. The lion’s share of funding will flow only to departments receiving the highest ranking under the Research Assessment Exercise. Universities UK, representing British Vice-Chancellors, has criticised the decision on the basis that it will stifle emerging areas of research excellence.

Also in the United Kingdom, the Times Higher Education Supplement (February 8 2002) reports that the Government is considering the development of a nation-wide questionnaire inviting students to reflect on the quality of their educational experience, along the lines of Australia’s Course Experience Questionnaire. The UK Quality Assurance Agency has also published its new framework for quality reviews, which relies on a panel review of institutional
documentation including self-evaluation documents and reports on specific ‘discipline audit trials’. The new framework will be operational in 2003.

The progress of the new Australian Universities Quality Agency and the Quality Assurance Agency will be watched closely by other nations developing higher education quality assurance mechanisms. In Malaysia, for example, a new Quality portfolio has been created within the Ministry of Education, and in South Africa a Higher Education Quality Committee has been developing plans for assessment of South African institutions. For more information about the UK model, go to www.qaa.ac.uk.

A British green paper on learning between the ages of 14 and 19 also flags significant reforms in the VET area, including

- improved articulation and ‘parity of esteem’ between higher education and VET,
- introducing a matriculation diploma that recognises achievement at 19 across a range of disciplines,
- developing flexible curriculum streams allowing students post-14 to pursue professionally tailored programmes.

To read the paper, go to www.dfes.gov.uk/149greenpaper/download/GreenPaperSummary.pdf.

The US Chronicle of Higher Education (23 April 2001) reports on a meeting of higher education experts in Vancouver to discuss a plan to create a virtual university designed to benefit the Commonwealth’s smaller states. At a meeting in November 2000, Commonwealth education ministers recommended establishing the virtual university, which would serve about 30 of the member states (those with populations of less than 1.5 million people). It aims to address problems in higher education delivery created through the "digital divide" as well as economic factors, exposure to civil conflict, and geographical isolation. At this stage, the Commonwealth of Learning, an intergovernmental organization which is developing the plans, predicts that the first courses may be delivered in 2004.

In Germany, where free higher education is coming under increasing pressure from Governments urging fiscal responsibility and accountability, students have been promised a guarantee of no fees for a first degree, under a proposed framework for a national reform of the higher education system (THES, 1st March 2002). However, the proposal has been attacked as unconstitutional by the State (or Lander) governments, which have primary responsibility for funding higher education. At the same time, student organizations have criticised the proposed national reform for permitting state governments to impose penalty fees on students who exceed a specified timeframe to complete their degrees - an option also flagged in the Australian Review of Higher Education Discussion Paper.

To read the latest on the Bill – which passed the Bundestag on 26th April – go to the German government information web page at http://eng.bundesregierung.de/frameset/index.jsp and follow the links from ‘News’

Increasing student fees are also causing concern in the United States, where the Chronicle of Higher Education (2nd May 2002) reports that tuition at public institutions is swallowing up ever-larger portions of families’ incomes, and that the trend may threaten college access for students from low-income families. A report released on 2nd May by the National Centre for Public Policy and Higher Education, entitled "Losing Ground," urges governors, state lawmakers, and college officials to becoming more disciplined and consistent in their spending on higher education in order to constrain fee increases. The Report finds that tuition revenues have been rising faster than inflation and enrolment. Between 1980 and 1998, the report says, tuition revenues at public institutions increased by 107 percent, from $1,696 to $3,512 in constant US dollars per student. Consequently students, especially those from low-income families, are borrowing more to pay for college. Those from families in the bottom income quartile accumulated an average debt of $US12, 888 in 1999, compared with $US7, 629 in 1989, as measured in constant dollars. The Report’s authors fear labour market implications, insofar as increasing debt may turn students away from important but less-lucrative careers, such as teaching.

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Given the increases in student debt occurring in Australia with the introduction of the Postgraduate Education Loans Scheme, and options for extending loans to undergraduates under discussion in the Review of Higher Education Discussion, the Report has interesting implications for the debate in Australia. To access a copy, go to www.highereducation.org/reports/losing_ground/ar.shtml.

Whether or not Australia should aim towards a `world class university' is a key question posed in our Higher Education Review process. It is a policy goal already embraced in Japan which has announced that it wishes to concentrate on raising its `top 30' universities to a point where they are all internationally competitive. Currently, private universities in Japan receive some government assistance for infrastructure, in order to keep student fees down. Under the new scheme, assistance to private universities will be reduced and both public and private universities must compete for funds for graduate programs ranked in the `top 30'. As in Australia, a process of priority setting will guide where the funds go, with the Japanese Government nominating bioscience, medical engineering, agriculture and pharmacy as the priority areas for assessment. And, as in Australia, the selection of priority areas and the criteria whereby funds will be allocated is causing dissension. Criteria nominated by the Government include refereed publications, citations, patents, the number of Nobel Prize winners on staff, and the academic qualifications of staff.

One of the most contentious aspects of the new scheme is that the focus on science engineering and medicine plays very much to the strength of the public universities, which are funded by local and national governments. Private universities with `niche' strengths fear they will suffer substantial cuts, as do those universities with strengths in the liberal arts and the social sciences – ranked low under the new scheme. Clearly, `world class universities' carry a heavy price tag – the question is, who pays? (Source: William J Currie, `Japan's “Top 30” Universities' International Higher Education, published by the Boston College Centre for International Higher Education, No 26, Winter 2002.)

Research notes: Choosing a search engine

The value of a good search engine to any researcher is inestimable. The Melbourne Age recently ran an item taken from the New York Times describing the techniques which Google uses to make its search engine site one of the Web's top destinations. In summary, Google analyses which sites are deemed most popular by other sites, thereby determining the most `authoritative' responses to a search query. Now new search engines are challenging Google’s supremacy: Teoma looks first for clusters of web pages around an inquiry, and then analyses links to assess which enjoy the most authority among interest groups. New engines such as WiseNut are set up to closely analyse content of web pages to determine authority. However, Google’s database of 1.5billion fully indexed web documents still overshadows WiseNut (800m) Alta Vista (600m) and Teoma (200m). (Source: The Age, livewire, 2 May 2002.)
RECENT PUBLICATIONS, REVIEWS AND CONFERENCE REPORTS


Melbourne Institute Working Paper No. 05/2002 by David Johnson and Roger Wilkins compares the cost and revenue streams associated with tertiary education. Costs primarily comprise the government outlays that are used to finance teaching in universities. Less obviously, revenue primarily derives from the productivity-enhancing effects of higher education, which act to increase earnings and hence increase the taxation revenue obtained from university graduates. The authors suggest that the current net benefit to the government of higher education is in excess of $9 billion per year, while the expected rate of return on the cohort of students entering higher education in 1999 is 10.9% per year. This paper makes a valuable contribution to the debate about public and private returns on higher education investment.


What happens after the PhD?

A new Evaluation and Investigation Programme (EIP) Report published by DEST, entitled Postdoctoral Training and Employment Outcomes, focuses on the employment, aspirations and professional opportunities of postdoctoral research staff (defined as ‘fixed-term, research-only academic at Level A or B’). The Report finds that, contrary to the traditional view of short-term postdoctoral research positions as career ‘stepping stones’, many respondents regard contract employment on research projects as a career in itself. At the same time, it notes the lack of a coherent picture of career options for research staff, which may lead to unrealistic expectations. The Report’s recommendations include:

- A coherent policy framework for addressing career management of research staff which recognises the importance and contributions of contract and early career staff.
- An agreed conceptual model for postdoctoral research ‘training’ to underpin good practice.
- The provision of generic career support for postdoctoral researchers as well as specialist work-based training
- A continuous improvement model for appraisal schemes for career and professional development involving employers and funding agencies
- Systematic data collection on contract research staff as an information source for policy development

The report is of significant interest to those concerned with research policy and management, staff development and quality assurance. To read the full report, go to www.dest.gov.au and click on publications.
Fostering Innovation

Michael Porter, the influential Harvard Business School Professor whose 1990 book *The Competitive Advantage of Nations* deals with successful industry strategy in an era of globalisation, was interviewed recently by *Business Review Weekly*. His message for Australia is simple: maximise unique strengths, rather than relying on resources or simply emulating other strong performers. Within this framework, Porter advocates partnerships between government and business in developing globally competitive ‘industry clusters’ – the Australian wine industry being one example.

As to the role of tertiary education in the development of ‘clusters’, Porter argues that the traditional roles of business, government and universities are breaking down. Rather than business being responsible for generating wealth, Government for creating the business environment, and universities being responsible for research and training, Porter argues that all constituencies have to be deeply involved in industry policy. Increasingly, skill development and the creation of specialised technologies are the products of creative relationships between business, government and educational institutions.

Porter also outlines an important role for universities in the development of ‘industry clusters’, arguing that universities’ decisions to strategically invest in particular fields of research over a five-ten year period can help create the pre-conditions for a cluster. The development of specialised technological capabilities may give rise to a ‘cluster’ down the track: Porter cites the example of San Diego, where a bio-sciences/biotechnology industry has grown out of basic research undertaken in a number of institutions.

Porter’s thinking contradicts the popular cooperative research centre model, whereby universities collaborate with public and private sector in an attempt to build clusters from scratch. He suggests that it is more important to identify embryonic clusters, and build a critical mass of resources to support them. His ideas clearly pose a challenge to policy-makers, not only because of the alternatives they pose to the CRC model, but also because of the necessity for foresight and long-range planning they demand.

The full text of the article is in *Business Review Weekly*’s March 28 – April 3 2002 issue. For back issues and orders, go to www.brw.com.au

Measuring the ‘Knowledge-Based Economy’

The Business-Higher Education Round Table (BHERT) has published a set of key indicators showing where Australia ranks in the global ‘Knowledge Economy’. Drawing on the OECD Science, Technology and Industry Scoreboard, BHERT also includes a summary of the move towards a ‘knowledge-based economy’ noting the rapid advance of Nordic countries (notably Finland and Sweden) and the US in investing in knowledge, and in take-up of information and communication based technologies.

The report shows that Australia’s level of knowledge investment as a proportion of GDP is well below the OECD average, and that we rank below the OECD and EU average in terms of proportion of the adult population attaining at least an upper secondary education. On a more positive note, Australia ranks sixth highest in terms of proportion of the adult population having a tertiary education in 1999 (down from sixth in 1998). Taken together, these figures suggest the need for concerted effort to improve the transition between secondary and tertiary education, and build opportunities for those who have not completed upper secondary qualifications to develop skills and knowledge.

While much of the information in the report is common knowledge, some interesting facts emerge: for example, while Business Expenditure on R & D (BERD) has fallen sharply in Australia in recent years, business R & D intensity in medium-low and low-technology sectors in Australia is the highest in the OECD. And – perhaps not a surprise – Australia ranks
second highest in the number of international students in university education as a percentage of total enrolment.

For a copy of the publication, contact the Business-Higher Education Round Table (bhert@bhert.com) or telephone 03 9654 8835.

Productivity Commission Report on Government Services

The Productivity Commission has released its Report on Government Services for 2002. Part B of the report (Chapter 4) includes information on the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector. Key elements discussed include competitive tendering and participation rates in the VET sector. The Report on Government Services for the years 1995-2001 is also available on the website.

To access Chapter 4 go to http://www.pc.gov.au.

DEST Higher Education Statistics

DEST’s Higher Education Division has recently published 2000 Finance, 2001 Student and 2001 Staff statistics. They can be downloaded from the DEST website on http://www.dest.gov.au/highered/statpubs.htm

Finance statistics are drawn from annual reports, and provide summary information about income expenditure for each institution. They include operating results, break-down of income sources and expenditure areas. The 2000 figures reveal that dependence on Commonwealth grants continues to decline, down to 41.9% (59.9% inclusive of HECS) from 48% in 1999. The biggest single source of revenue after Commonwealth Grants is fees and charges, which now outstrips HECS.

Staff statistics show that the total number of staff (FTE) in Australian higher education institutions increased by 1.8% between 2000 and 2001. This comprises a 1% increase in academic staff and a 2.3% increase in general staff. Interestingly, there has been an 11.8% increase in the proportion of staff who are working part-time, and a 3.2% increase in the proportion of staff who are employed on a casual basis.

Student statistics show the continuing rapid growth in Equivalent Full-time Student Units (EFTSU) which jumped 5.5% over the past twelve months. The biggest percentage growth was in Queensland, where EFTSU increased by 9.5%. In Victoria, the growth rate was 4.4%.

Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Publication Roundup

The ABS has recently released a number of key publications with a focus on the tertiary education sector:

- Higher Education Research Expenditure up…but still falling as a percentage of GDP

Latest ABS statistics show that higher education expenditure on R&D (HERD) increased by 2% in volume terms between 1998 and 2000. However, HERD as a proportion of GDP decreased from 0.43% in 1998 to 0.41% in 2000, reversing an upward trend.

Funding for applied research and experimental development has grown, while funding for basic research has fallen. Given that the vast majority of basic research in Australia is conducted within universities, this may give policy-makers cause for concern. The proportion of HERD from business has remained static since 1996, which also suggests that, despite the growth in university and industry links, stimulating business investment in HERD remains an urgent imperative for institutions and Government.

To access the ABS data and AVCC analysis, go to www.avcc.edu.au/policies_activities/research/policy/recent_submissions.htm.
• **2001 Year Book Australia : A Unique Look at Australia: Today and During the Last Century.**

Highlights from Chapter 10 on Education and Training include important international comparisons. Key findings include:

- The proportion of the 25 to 64 year old Australian population who are university educated (18%) is slightly above the OECD average (14%).

- A higher proportion of funding for educational institutions in Australia comes from the private sector (24.5%) than for the OECD average (13.4%). The level of private funding in Japan and the USA is more than half of all final funding for tertiary institutions, while in the Republic of Korea private funding represents more than 80%.

- Australia’s level of spending – public and private - on tertiary education (1.59% of GDP) was above the OECD average (1.33%).

- The percentage of full-time students working part time and attending higher education increased from 40% in 1995 to 45% in 2000, reflecting an increase in participation levels over this period.


- **Doubling of University degree holders in Australia over the past decade**

The proportion of people with a Bachelor degree or higher has almost doubled in the last decade. The results of an ABS survey, show that 9% of people aged 15-64 years in 1991 had a Bachelor degree or higher. This figure had increased to 17 % in 2001. The survey, *Education and Work, Australia May 2001* also highlighted that almost one in five (18%) of Australians in age group surveyed were enrolled in a course of study in May 2001. This document (Cat No 6227.0) is available from the ABS ([www.abs.gov.au](http://www.abs.gov.au)).

- **Making Transitions from Education to Work**

There were nearly 2.3 million people aged between 15 and 64 enrolled in some form of education in May 2000, approx 18% of the population, with over 90% of students studying for a recognised education qualification. Approx 52.8% of the 1.6 million tertiary students were female. There was an increase in the number of apprentices to 138,200 in May 2000, up by 4.5% over the figure for May 1999. This document can be ordered from the ABS (Catalogue number 6227.0) via [www.abs.gov.au](http://www.abs.gov.au).

- **Is life in Australia getting better?**

The ABS has released a report on *Measuring Australia’s progress, which examined all major aspects of Australian life including education. This document (Catalogue Number 1370.0) can be ordered from the ABS ([www.abs.gov.au](http://www.abs.gov.au)).

- **2002 Labour Statistics in Brief**


Australians are working on average shorter hours per week, but working longer if they are full-time. The overall fall in average working hours is due to a higher proportion of people in part-time work. Australians are looking for work in greater numbers, as measured by total numbers of persons employed and labour force participation rates. The participation rates for males have fallen slightly since 1991, and the participation rate for females has increased at a greater rate than for males.
The key industry sectors by employment in Australia are Retail trade, Manufacturing, and Property and Business Services. The percentage of employed persons in manufacturing continues to decline, which is reflected in the downward trend in job vacancies in manufacturing. The other key industry sectors of Wholesale and retail trade; Finance and Insurance and Property and Business Services; have also experienced a downward trend in job vacancies over the last three years.

The key findings for the 2002 publication (with comparable data from the 2001 publication in brackets) are:

- Labour force participation rates have increased from 63.2% in 1991 to 63.7% in 2001.
- Participation rates for males fell from 74.7% in 1991 to 72.3% in 2001. For females they increased from 52.0% (1991) to 55.3% (2001).
- Full-time employment rates declined from 77.6% in 1991 total employment to 72.6% in 2001.
- The total number of persons employed increased from approx 7.7 million in 1991 to 9.2 million in 2001 of which there were approx 5.1 million males in 2001 up from approx 4.5 million in 1991 and 4.0 million females in 2001 up from approx 3.2 million in 1991.
- The average weekly hours worked by employed persons has decreased from 34.4 in 1991 to 33.6 in 2001. The average hours worked per week by full time has increased from 40.1 in 1991 to 40.4 in 2001. The average hours worked per week part-time workers has increased from 14.9 in 1991 to 15.7 in 2001.

Compared with 1999, job vacancies were up in Education, Health and Community Services and ‘Other’ categories, and down in Manufacturing, Wholesale and Retail Trade, and Finance and Insurance.

This product is free (ABS catalogue Number 6104.0) and can be downloaded at www.abs.gov.au

Statistics 2000 - Students in Vocational Education and Training: An overview

The recently released report from the NCVER (Students in VET-2000 An overview) includes the following highlights:

- In 2000, 13.2% of Australia’s working age population (15-64 years of age) were involved in some kind of vocational education and training within Australia’s publicly funded VET system. This represents an increase of almost two percentage points over the proportion in 1997.
- Although female participation in VET has improved, there are marked differences in the type of training being undertaken by males and females.
- Australia’s VET system has become an attractive option for entry level training for young people and an increased focus for older persons wanting to upgrade their skills, retrain, or undertake general interest studies. This has resulted in marked growth in student numbers for the 15-19 and 40-64 age groups.
- Students undertaking VET while still attending school comprise an important and rapidly growing component of Australia’s VET system. Numbers reached in excess of 100 000 by 2000, representing around 8% of Australia’s vocational students.
- Rural and remote Australia contains proportionately more VET students than their population share (in contrast to their relatively low participation rates in higher education). There are also marked differences in distances required to undertake training, with those in rural and remote travelling far greater distances.
- Although historically poor in providing adequate training opportunities for Indigenous peoples, Australia’s VET system attracted more than 50 000 Indigenous students in 2000.

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The Report can be downloaded from the NCVER site at http://www.ncver.edu.au/.

**Conference Report – Centre for Applied Economic and Social Research, Melbourne University, 5th April 2002.**

The conference organised by the University of Melbourne’s Centre for Applied Economic and social Research and the Australian newspaper was entitled “Towards Opportunity and Prosperity,” and focused on a broad range of social and economic questions. On Friday 5th April, however, the spotlight was on universities, with Minister Brendan Nelson announcing the Review of Higher Education. Reserve Bank Governor Iain Macfarlane, whose dinner address focused on the need for a new partnership between Government, industry and institutions to improve the quality of Australian higher education, set the theme. Melbourne V-C Alan Gilbert and Professor Peter Karmel outlined their proposals for a system of fee deregulation, while Professor Bruce Chapman presented an alternative scheme for reforming the existing HECS scheme.


**COMING UP**

It’s our intention to profile forthcoming conferences, events and tenders in this section of the newsletter. If you want to alert us to any such happening, contact us at ircu@rmit.edu.au

**Review of Higher Education Conference – Canberra, 30-31 May 2002**

The fifth annual conference of the Australian Network for Higher Education Policy Research will focus on the current review of higher education in Australia. Entitled "Options for Higher Education Reform", and organised in conjunction with UNE’s Centre for Higher Education Management & Policy, it will be held on the 30th and 31st May at the Australian National University, Canberra. For more information, go to http://fehps.une.edu.au/X/ANHER/conf_2002.htm.

**HERDSA Conference 2002 – Perth, 7-10 July 2002**

The Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia invites papers for symposia, round tables, workshops or posters around the theme of ‘quality conversations’: improving teaching and learning in higher education. For details, go to www.ecu.edu.au/conferences/herdsa.

**New Generation Universities Conference – University of Western Sydney, 21-22 June 2002**

This conference is organised in partnership between the University of Western Sydney, the Association of Commonwealth Universities and the OECD’s Programme on Institutional Management in Higher Education.

Venue: University of Western Sydney. For more information go to www.uws.edu.au/uws/conferences/nguc

**Australian Universities Quality Forum - Brisbane, 27 and 28 September, 2002**

The inaugural Australian Universities Quality Forum (AUQF) will be held in Brisbane, September 27 and 28, 2002.
The purpose of the AUQF is to facilitate the discussion and advancement of quality assurance, quality enhancement and the sharing of good practices in higher education. It is aimed primarily at the senior executives charged with overall responsibility for quality (such as the VC or DVC), the Chairpersons of Academic Boards, quality practitioners, government agencies and AUQA Auditors. For information, go to [http://www.auqa.edu.au/auqf/](http://www.auqa.edu.au/auqf/).

**Association for Tertiary Education Management (ATEM) Conference – Brisbane, 29 September – 2 October 2002**

The ATEM Conference this year will focus around the theme of "e = mc\(^3\) (Excellence = Managing Colleagues, Customers and Core Values)". It will be held at Queensland University of Technology. For more information go to [http://www.atem-aappa2002.qut.edu.au/about.html](http://www.atem-aappa2002.qut.edu.au/about.html).

**IDP Education Australia - Hobart, 30 September – 4 October 2002**

IDP is holding the 16th Australian International Education Conference in Hobart, Australia later this year, based around the Conference theme - "New Times, New Approaches". For further information, go to [http://www.idp.com/16aiec/about/about.htm](http://www.idp.com/16aiec/about/about.htm).

**2001 ACER research conference – Melbourne, 15-16 October 2002**

This year the focus will be on understanding young peoples pathways from school to work to adult life. The venue is Hilton on the Park, Melbourne

**Contact**: Jennie Armato-Martin. Tel (03)93973975, fax (03) 93973394 or email info@meetinginnovation.net.au

**South-East Asia Association for Institutional Research – Kuala Lumpur, 22-24 October 2002**

This conference focuses on the theme of Information and Communication technologies in Global Education. For more information and registration enquiries, contact Dr Raj Sharma at rsharma@swin.edu.au.

**The Vital Partnership: triennial conference of Australia’s combined peak bodies for graduate employment – Melbourne, 18-20 November 2002**

Organised by the Graduate Careers Council of Australia, National Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services, and Australian Association of Graduate Employers, this conference is pitched to all with a stake in achieving successful graduate employment in an increasingly global labour market.


**Australasian Association for Institutional Research 2002 forum – Perth, 4 – 6 December 2002**

The 2002 AAIR Forum (to be held at Edith Cowan University)will focus on the theme of quality, posing the following questions:

- How do institutions respond to the challenge?
- Who do we charge - both in dollars and cents, and to prepare our organisations?
- Will students bear the brunt of the costs of the quality movement - and if so, what will be the benefits?
- What price will we pay?
• What will be sacrificed- nationally, institutionally and individually?

For further information, go to http://aair2002.ecu.edu.au/

The Institutional Research Consultancy Unit

The IRCU’s mission is to
• Assist and contribute to informed decision-making
• Contribute to strengthening the efficiency and effectiveness of RMIT’s activities and programs
• Be proactive in the study and advancement of tertiary education
• Manage, share and create knowledge for the benefit of RMIT

The main function of IRCU is to coordinate the collection, organization and analysis of institutional data and other quantitative and qualitative information to support institutional management, operations, decision-making and planning functions of RMIT University. The IRCU is also engaged in applied educational research, performance measurement, evaluation and assessment; and is proactive in the study and advancement of higher education.

The IRCU Staff are

Angel Calderon – Head
Garry Ferris – Strategic Economist
David Garner – Strategic Consultant - Industry
Ann Hornsby – Executive Assistant
Julie Wells - Institutional Research Advisor
Neil Wentworth – Institutional Research Systems Coordinator

Email ircu@rmit.edu.au

Parting Thought................

‘Information sharing is critical because intellectual assets, unlike physical assets, increase in value with use. Properly stimulated, knowledge and intellect grow exponentially when shared.’