



Scholarships for a Competitive Future
Expansion of the Commonwealth Scholarships Program
An ATN Response

The Australian Technology Network of Universities (ATN) welcomes this opportunity to provide a submission to the Department of Education, Employment, and Workplace Relations' inquiry into the expansion of the Commonwealth scholarships program for Australian university students.

In making this submission the ATN as a network notes that individual ATN members may make their own more detailed submissions to the discussion paper and that the comments that follow address the broader policy of supporting students from low socio-economic backgrounds, as well as those from regional and remote areas and Indigenous students.

INTRODUCTION

As a network of universities strongly committed to equity and access in participation, the Commonwealth Learning Scholarships provided through the Higher Education Equity Program, is recognised and supported by ATN universities. Research conducted in ATN member institutions since the introduction of the Commonwealth Education Costs Scholarship and the Commonwealth Accommodation Scholarship (CAS) confirms the overwhelmingly positive impact these scholarships have had on this student cohort, particularly in retention rates. However we believe that the value of scholarships proposed by the government does not meet the needs of students in today's economic environment. At the same time while the ATN accepts responsibility at an institutional level to supplement Commonwealth funding and to assist disadvantaged students, it is not possible to bridge the gap between Commonwealth assistance and the real costs of participation in higher education. Institutional equity scholarships should be as flexible as possible in providing assistance that is most useful to individual students, and not simply replicate the CLS Programme. This will enable universities to provide for a greater range of types of assistance that can be targeted to the needs of equity group students. In some cases universities may wish to offer smaller or larger

amounts of financial assistance than the grants specified in the CLS Programme. It is also *vital* that institutional scholarships have the same exemption status as CLS scholarships in relation to eligibility for Centrelink payments.

The ATN recommends that there be a rationalisation of the guidelines pertaining to ALL scholarships, to ensure they are exempt from income testing. This will have the additional benefits of streamlining application and assessment processes.

National Accommodation Scholarships

The Centre for Rural Social Research¹ reports that the annual living costs for a student studying away from home range between \$15,000 and \$20,000 with relocation costs cited as \$3000 to \$6000.

The ATN recommends that the value of the National Accommodation Scholarship be increased to more adequately reflect the true cost of studying away from home.

Many rural and isolated students face the additional disadvantage in that the eligibility criteria attached to accommodation scholarships is the same as that applying to Youth Allowance. Therefore students who fail to qualify for Youth Allowance rarely qualify for the CAS and often decline the offer in order to obtain employment to the level required for the Independent rate of Youth Allowance.

The ATN recommends a rationalisation of Commonwealth income support programs and scholarships at the national level.

As a nation and consistent with ATN graduate qualities there is an expectation that students exit university prepared to be global citizens, yet there are national barriers that exist in accessing programs of choice. The ATN therefore strongly supports the expansion of eligibility for National Accommodation Scholarships to include students from anywhere in Australia who do not qualify for CAS to travel either interstate or intrastate to access programs not offered within 300km of their home.

¹ Godden, N (2007) *Regional Young People and Youth Allowance: Access to Tertiary Education*
The Centre for Rural Social Research, Charles Sturt University and Monash University Department of Social Work

Finally, as a nation of ageing population the National Accommodation Scholarships should be extended to include wider support for postgraduate students. Many PhD students are excluded from participating in higher degree programs as the costs of relocating (many with families) are prohibitive.

The ATN recommends that scholarships be provided to assist postgraduate students with relocation costs.

Definition of priority disciplines under the National Priority Scholarships

At a time where there are chronic skill shortages across a range of employment categories business and industry recognise that indigenous adults, citizens of low socio-economic status and those who are geographically isolated represent a substantial untapped resource of labour². Within the context of higher education, simply put, people with higher qualifications have higher rates of employment participation. At the same time education and training must continue to be responsive to the priority needs of the nation, ie universities must be supported in delivering graduates that contribute explicitly to nation building. Further, the identification of priority disciplines should not be limited to those disciplines that are *currently* subject to skill shortages, but must include those that have a contribution to make to the *future* welfare of the global economy. In this regard the ATN suggests expanding the priority course disciplines to include those relating to business and commerce, and the environment and that this apply to both undergraduate and postgraduate students.

The ATN recommends that business and industry be consulted prior to finalising priority course disciplines to ensure scholarships are correctly targeting areas of workforce needs.

Other considerations

As the sector seeks to secure a greater interest in philanthropic community engagement in order that it may diversify its sources of funding, there is an opportunity to engage more actively the corporate sector in ensuring we deliver the skilled graduates required to meet their needs, and ultimately those of the nation. Currently, corporate scholarships do not share the same taxation benefits that private scholarships attract as they are classified as scholarships delivering a benefit to

² BCA (2007) *Engaging our potential: The economic and social necessity of increasing workforce participation*

the corporate body. As a network that has strong linkages with industry we would recommend the Commonwealth consider matching funding for corporate scholarship proposals. This would result in a significant financial benefit to the student, while at the same time encourage greater industry philanthropic support by the attractiveness of corporate naming rights attached to the scholarship.

CONCLUSION

ATN universities have long recognised that affordability is a key factor in lifting recruitment and retention of those from low SES, rural and isolated and indigenous populations. The ATN strongly believes that Australian should focus on what it takes to produce a top 10 world class university system. A critical component of this is ensuring all prospective students have the opportunity to connect to national education and research networks. The issue of equity and access will become increasingly important as the sector faces a mission based funding model as proposed by the Commonwealth government that will potentially see greater numbers of students needing to relocate to undertake their program of choice. Government policy that opens the door and assists with costs for this cohort is policy that ultimately supports Australia as a world class university system.

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