

Transcript

Reshaping student outreach with Dr Nadine Zacharias

SONAL SINGH: Nadine is the Managing Director and Founder of Equity by Design.

Nadine, you are a seasoned practitioner in equity. In all of the work that you have done, what do you think about the Accord's recommendation and some of the recommendation focused on addressing student poverty as we have heard? Would this change or increase participation of students in equity groups?

PROFESSOR NADINE ZACHARIAS: That is a valid question, and in the spirit of unpacking the Accord recommendations, have asked some questions of the recommendations. And I warned Barney that I have some quibbles. With regards to the building aspirations recommendations which you have on the screen, it is to encourage aspirations, and for the government to lead this activity. The important point to take away here is that of the recommendations is to split funding along the lines of prospective students and outreach work, and current students that are eligible for needs-based funding. This is new. Previously, universities have funding for both partnership work, outreach work, and support of current students in the same program, which was the HELP, and the proposal to split this up I do not think it is a bad thing in principle.

Again, as with many of these things, the devil is in the details. The detailed recommendation is The Commonwealth collaborate with state and territory governments with consistent career advice, there is nothing wrong with that. And also with the pathways and visibility, again another tick. And also a campaign around showing examples of aspirations. I did roll my eyes at this one. We cannot go beyond a comms complaint about aspirations. I think we moved on from that state of affairs. Where other universities on this recommendation? There is no place for us to play. It is different by the government. And if you go into the text, it is around collaborative outreach. There is no indication to me that universities would get dedicated funding to drive outreach work, which they used to get at the start of HELP where every institution got a base grant to be in the outreach space.

The question here is are we disabling a sector wide commitment and capability of institutions to contribute to widening participation? Some universities do that. There is a strong commitment, whether this is by their purpose or whether this is by a commercial sense in terms of widening participation. Some universities will be in the space, but some universities do not get funding for outreach, so why would they play? And even more concerning, you might take away the capability of universities to partner in the consortium. Who will be the universities will be a part of the consortium? This is quite tricky. From a university point of view I can't see myself in this recommendation, and there is a strong hook for us to say that it also works against the targets, not everybody needs to play in the outreach space.

Again, it is counterintuitive. That is the outreach one. This is the student support and income support. This is the great news story. I'm glad this has been picked up in the prominent way that it has. I think the question for me is how do we address the stigma and fear associated with using Centrelink? And I'm not telling anyone a secret, Robodebt did not help the case. In the report infographic use of Centrelink has decreased over time. And in addition to all of the great recommendations and sub-recommendations that are already in recommendation 15, we would benefit from a recommendation around how do Centrelink show up on campus? Is there a way to make them more accessible, less stigmatise and could there be a potential partnership between universities and Centrelink?

It is an opportunity, because while it is such an intuitive recommendation for middle-class people, there is a real barrier to accessing the support that is available. And I have heard this many times across my travels. There are two graphs, and I am super quickly running out of time.

Financial issues are not just a problem for lower SES students. You can see regional and remote students, higher than the SES cohorts, and is cut across the equity groups, which is why the systematic approach through the national income support system is important. And to put the level of poverty into perspective, the budget standard, the top line that we have for the Austudy payment, it represents an adequate lifestyle. The current payment which is 71% of adequate lifestyle, work out what you have to do minus the 20%.

And where you count adequate, and similarly the poverty line which is the final graph towards the bottom. On that measure, the student support payment is if the student only relies on the student support payment than we are

Under the poverty line by 34%. There are real consequences that we are hearing about this every day from the students that many of you work with.

Finally, the really important one, financial support for replacements. Yes, I was so pleased to see that in the report. Again, the devil is in the details. And I have spoken to a few colleagues since the recommendation was adopted. The big question is the payment for the placement is it considered a living stipend or compensation for labour? All of the indications are that cannot be the latter, has to be the former. Otherwise, we ran into all sorts of problems on the University site, on the EAs, it's going to be messy. If it is a living stipend, why would the employees get engaged? There is a big question mark. And the final one that Sonal asked me to look at is the jobs broker, which I skipped over in the initial report.

And I note Barney's point it should be in conjunction with the national skills path forward, and again my immediate responses what is the problem that we are trying to solve here? That is not super clear to me. And why do we think that the national jobs broker would solve the problem? I think that argument hasn't been made super convincingly, and what it needs to be a national approach that



gets outsourced, again, I would think some universities really distinguish themselves in that space. They have on-campus employment services, and our colleagues at Griffith do this well. Can we demonstrate the efficacy of local solutions rather than creating a national one? But I will go back and look at that in the context of the national skills passport and may be able change my mind. That's it from me, Sonal.