

'Persuading Cabinet'

Senator Bob McMullan, faced on Monday by angry university staff members, demanding that Cabinet fully fund a 5.6 per cent wage increase, asked for arguments which would persuade his colleagues. It appears that Cabinet believes that universities can easily afford to pay, and should pay.

In Senator McMullan's words, it is apparently 'a question of whether the taxpayers of Australia should fund [the wage increase] or whether some part of it should be borne by the universities'.

There is a fundamental misapprehension here, and if Senator McMullan's colleagues in Cabinet share it, then it is no wonder that Cabinet is having trouble making up its mind.

Despite all their successful entrepreneurial activities of the past ten years, universities are not profit-making organisations. They have gone into the business of selling higher education overseas because they are perennially short of money. Why? Because the Commonwealth, the only paymaster in the higher education system, does not pay enough to permit universities to fulfill their responsibilities.

In the early 1980s the Commonwealth reduced the amount it paid per student, and while it increased that rate ten years later, it did so only for the new places in the system. The outcome has been that class sizes are now a lot bigger than they were fifteen years ago.

Not only that, a great deal more is expected of universities as employers than was the case in the early 1980s. In matters like occupational health and safety, equity, child care, sexual harassment, environmental responsibility and the like, universities have had to devote resources to new concerns.

A company faced with these legislative demands passes the costs on to its customers. Universities can't do this, and they haven't been funded for these purposes either. The long-term outcome has been, once again, larger classes.

Larger classes mean smaller staff numbers. Ten years ago there was one fulltime academic staff member for each twelve full-time students or their equivalent. Today the ratio is 1:16, a change of 33.3 per cent and an improvement in 'efficiency' of no mean order.

The cost is that several thousand people didn't get jobs in universities over the last ten years because the universities failed to make new appointments or fill vacancies. Any proposal that universities accept money for wage increases now but repay that money in the future can only lead to even smaller staff numbers in the future.

Universities are labour-intensive. Three dollars in every four earned by universities go out in salaries, yet every universities tries desperately to reduce that fraction because infrastructure costs are high and rising. Staff are expected

to do their own typing now, but that means that each has to be given a word-processor.

In my own university we need to replace these every three years, and we have a thousand of them. So the choice is: people — or the equipment they need to do their jobs. It's not much of a choice.

And every time we avoid filling a vacant staff position two kinds of people suffer — students, who find that class sizes keep growing and that they get less personal attention, and staff, who find that they have more work to do.

If some members of Cabinet are drawing on their own experiences as students, then I need to remind them that Australia's student populations are a great deal more diverse than was the case when they were students; a diverse student body needs more staff, not fewer.

If they think that we are taking in too many students, and are scraping the bottom of the barrel, then I should say to them, with the politeness born of my greater age, that we said much the same about their generation when they were students.

Like it or not (and I hope that there are not many in Cabinet who don't like it), Australia's future is bound up with the need to educate at university level as many people as we can, as quickly as we can.

And we must not do it in a Clayton's fashion. Universities are places where students should grow intellectually, socially and spiritually, and for that to happen students need access to their teachers. It is already the case that university class sizes are much larger than is the case in the senior levels of high schools.

To make them worse that they presently are cannot aid the quality of higher education, whatever it does for access. If Cabinet wants universities to go down that path, it ought to say so, and stop imagining that somehow universities have the capacity to 'find money' in ways that do not include reducing employment.