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Speech

BOLOGNA PROCESS – AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL SEMINAR

UNIVERSITY HOUSE, ACTON

THURSDAY 7 SEPTEMBER 2006

Thank you Ian, first for your kind words, also through you the Australian National University, and the Carrick Institute and the University of New England for support and assistance in planing and organising this seminar.

At a recent meeting of OECD education ministers I found a great deal of interest in the Australian Higher Education sector.

Not only about our student contribution scheme, which did attract a lot of attention as it has been in place for some 17 years now and provides a solid precedent for other countries to follow or to consider, but also for our quality framework.

There was general acknowledgement that our higher education sector has been very successful in attracting overseas students, both in terms of the quality of the education available in this country, but also for the lifestyle experience.

The Australian higher education system is one of this country's great success stories. We have a fair system, we have an equitable system - virtually every Australian student who is eligible to attend university is able to access a Commonwealth-supported place.

A reputation for high quality has allowed the sector to attract many thousands of students from overseas, to the point where education services is now the fourth largest export item in this country after coal, and iron ore, and tourism, international education services.

However, we cannot afford to rest on our laurels. The globalisation of education is well under way and the forces at work will impact on education in this country.

Many of the countries from which students have come to Australia to study are investing heavily in their domestic education facilities.

In China, for example, the government is committed to establishing some of their universities as the best in the world, and they will teach in English.

Australian students would be attracted to studying at such institutions, and that will affect the trade imbalance that currently exists where 80,000 Chinese students study here, while only 1,000 Australians study in China. A number of source countries will be looking for reciprocity in terms of Australian students studying in their countries.

Now I think that one of the more interesting developments on an international front is the European Bologna Process - the plan to integrate the higher education frameworks of 45 European countries by 2010.

It is not merely the Bologna Process that should interest us, but also the reaction of other countries – the United States, countries in Asia, South America, and also the reaction of individual higher education institutions in our

region.

In April of this year I released a paper on the Bologna Process to stimulate discussion and debate about whether Australia needed to respond to what appeared to be a process that would lead to unprecedented change in European education, but with global implications.

Now I'm aware that there is not universal agreement about the implications of the Bologna Process for Australia, but I believe it would be foolish to ignore its development and I think there is sufficient interest or concern to warrant ongoing discussion about the issue.

A number of key themes came through in responses that we have received, to the paper. For example, a high value is obviously placed on collaboration and partnerships in our region and with our traditional educational partners – it is clear that any response to Bologna should not be at the expense of these relationships.

However, for some, Bologna poses challenges that you believe must be addressed as a matter of priority if Australian qualifications are to maintain their credibility in the international labour market.

By far the most common theme in your submissions was the potential benefit –domestic and international – of some form of diploma supplement.

The diploma supplement is seen by many as a tool to more effectively demonstrate the outcomes of an Australian education, without diminishing institutional diversity. So these and other themes from the submissions and consultations will be taken up in separate sessions today and I'll come back to the diploma supplement in a moment.

At the outset of our discussions today it is instructive to reflect on the aims of the Bologna process. At its heart, it is about mobility for students and graduates – about bringing together a disparate array of systems and working towards a consensus model that enables students, and institutions and employers to more readily understand and translate qualifications across national borders.

Importantly, it should be understood that behind this ambitious programme of reform is the goal to maintain and improve Europe's international position in higher education. That's what it's all about.

Consider for a moment the role of international ranking systems such as the *Shanghai Jiao Tong* and the *Times* Higher Education Supplement. Now, these rankings increasingly attract the attention of the media, and students, and parents. While acknowledging the shortcomings of rankings, in the absence of any credible alternative they directly influence perceptions about quality, academic rigour and research strength.

Bologna is part of a response from Europe to increase the perceived value and benefits of a European education.

The process is still evolving and there will be an important Ministerial conference next year that could result in emerging issues such as the content of research degrees becoming quite important.

It is increasingly clear that in their efforts to ensure European institutions are internationally competitive, they are aspiring in effect to emulate Australia's performance.

Australian higher education has arguably achieved many of the objectives of the Bologna Process.

For example, Australia already has a three cycle degree system, we already have a national qualifications framework, well established quality assurance systems and the sector has experience with credit transfer through the University Mobility in the Asia-Pacific programme. Our higher education system is underpinned by a coherent and consistent approach to the delivery and quality assurance of higher education across borders – state as well as national.

One of our strengths must be the capacity of our institutions to offer a distinctly Australian education experience underpinned by world class quality and standards. Our challenge, of course, is to ensure a diversity of missions and objectives.

I am aware of some concerns in the sector about aligning too closely to Bologna. Let me state at the outset that it is not my intention or wish to see a Bologna style approach grafted onto the entire system in Australia.

It is my firm view that institutions need to determine how they will position themselves in relation to developments at home and overseas.

Now some institutions may focus on European developments and choose to move in sync with Bologna others will most certainly look to the United States.

Some may work closely with professional bodies in areas where international pressures are demanding a response from Australian institutions. Many institutions will blend a response to a range of international developments in light of their own assessment of student need and market opportunity.

In common with many comparable countries, over the coming years Australia can expect to see a reduction in the number of potential domestic students. The demographic changes as well as the proportion of the population which now has a degree will see an inevitable decline in domestic demand and institutions face the unprecedented situation in which the number of places is outstripping or has outstripped demand.

The Bologna Process and the increased incidence of teaching in English at European institutions will help those institutions challenge our traditional student markets in Asia. As the competition for students intensifies both at home and overseas, the pressures will intensify on universities to distinguish themselves yet still offer students a high quality educational experience.

Later today, Professor Glyn Davis will be talking to you about Melbourne's approach in developing its strategic directions – a leading example of an institution plotting its own distinct course.

It is not a course for everyone to follow, nor should it be. You will hear different views from Professor Ian Young, Professor John Hay and others.

Quality will be and should be the greatest determinant of student choice. Graduates from Australian institutions should be seen to be among the best in their chosen fields to ensure opportunities are available to our graduates in Europe, Asia, USA and of course throughout Australia.

Which raises the obvious question of *how will we know we are providing a top-quality education?* How will our potential students know, how will employers know and how will people from other countries know?

The answer is complex. Our graduates for a start will be able to tell us from their experiences and we will know through the research of our universities. But we also need quality assurance processes that affirm that at both a domestic and international level we have quality.

The Bologna Process is driving efforts towards the development of a European Qualifications Framework as well as consistent approaches to quality assurance amongst signatory countries.

Australia can rightly claim a place at the head of the pack in relation to our comprehensive quality framework. But we must remain focussed on ever higher levels of performance, outcomes and standards.

If we cannot point to a transparent quality audit system which is focused on the achievement of outcomes and predicated on robust academic standards then we do run the risk of being left behind.

I was pleased to see that, in response to the external review of its operations, the Australian Universities Quality Agency has signalled its intention to move from its focus on quality assurance processes to an assessment of outcomes, taking a more robust approach to the assessment of teaching, and scholarship and research in our universities.

A quality audit approach which is underpinned by well defined academic standards would be complemented by a single national accreditation agency. This would ensure equal and consistent standards apply to approval processes; and establish a single point of reference for aspiring higher education providers; and would help minimise red-tape. The Australian Government is taking our first steps towards this aim and I am pleased to see at last recognition of the need for a national approach from the Federal Labor Opposition – despite the reluctance of State Labor governments to embrace the concept.

Quality is a shared responsibility – universities themselves must earn, maintain and enhance their reputations. But we do need to ensure that when quality assessments are undertaken, the results give a clear picture of institutions' academic achievements. I have no doubts that students, graduates and employers will come to expect, indeed demand, this information in the future.

European developments can sharpen our focus on partnerships in the region. I was pleased to host the inaugural Asia-Pacific Education Ministers' meeting in Brisbane in April this year. Twenty-seven Ministers and senior officials from Turkey in the west to the Marshall Islands in the east met to discuss actions we could take in concert, on education and training, to strengthen good relations in the Asia-Pacific and to increase international mobility of

students and academics, and increase research collaboration.

Australia has a long-standing commitment to capacity building and regional development through education. Greater mutual understanding of each others' societies, built through education exchange and cooperation, contributes to regional security.

But, there is also the market imperative: In 2005, there were 163,000 enrolments by overseas students in Australian higher education institutions. More than 80 per cent of these enrolments came from Asia. We can ill afford to lose students in our region to the attractions of an educationally integrated Europe.

Given the great diversity in our region it was a significant achievement that Ministers at the meeting in Brisbane were able to agree to collaborate on:

- Quality assurance frameworks for the region, linked to international standards;
- Recognition of educational and professional qualifications;
- Measures to improve the quality of maths and science teaching in the region; and
- The development of common recognition of technical skills across the region.

The overarching objective of what became known as the Brisbane Communiqué released after the meeting is to better position the education systems and approaches of the broader Asia-Pacific with international developments, thus ensuring transparency and mutual trust between countries' education systems across the globe.

This is an ambitious and a long-term goal.

Australia has a leadership role in the follow-up work to the Brisbane Communiqué and we are chairing the multilateral *Senior Officials Working Group* which has been charged with progressing the aims of the Communiqué in a practical and a timely way.

This Working Group will report to Ministers in 2007 and, more extensively, at the 2008 Asia-Pacific Education Ministers' Meeting. Consultation with those in Australia who have a stake in this process will follow the first meeting of the Working Group in November.

So, while the greater Asia-Pacific region will set its own goals and frameworks, Bologna (and the Copenhagen Process in the area of vocational and technical education), provide pointers for greater collaboration in the region, for the benefit of the region. In recognition of this, the Senior Officials' Working Group will remain alert to the future possibilities for compatibility with initiatives such as Bologna.

The European vision also introduces some urgency for this region to develop its own approach to collaboration and facilitation of student and academic mobility. Without this development, we could face a situation where Europe eventually has a highly integrated education system, while the Asia-Pacific has, by comparison, very limited recognition, credit transfer, and fewer opportunities for people of the region to enjoy the benefits of being part of a globally-connected workforce.

And while Australia has been highly successful and focussed on inward student mobility, by contrast, there is a comparatively low level of Australians undertaking study abroad.

Now, there are many benefits to individuals and to the nation from Australians undertaking at least part of their studies overseas. It helps to develop and maintain Australia's capacity with regard to languages other than English and form a deep understanding of other countries.

Internationally, there have been numerous initiatives to promote student mobility over the past 5 to 10 years, and most have been driven by the goal of maintaining and improving higher education in respective countries. These include the European Union's Lisbon Agenda and the proposed massive expansion of its Erasmus Programme over the next decade; and of course the recent tabling of a Bill in the US Senate to establish the Abraham Lincoln Study Abroad Program.

Increased efforts to facilitate greater mobility must be a key element of Australia's goal to maintain the position of our higher education sector internationally.

There is a growing recognition in Australia of the benefits for our international relations and trade of developing a workforce which has the capacity to operate and engage internationally. However, there is very little evidence to demonstrate the benefits (particularly the commercial benefits) that an international study experience contributes in the workforce. Scepticism about those benefits, combined with other disincentives, has impacted

on willingness to invest in this area for both institutions and students.

Now, many Australian universities are well advanced in pursuing measures to promote academic and student mobility and many of you have also indicated strong interest in expanding your study abroad programmes.

In April this year I announced a review by my Department of why Australians are not taking up the option of study abroad to the same extent as their international counterparts, to identify what barriers may exist and what incentives or conditions would act as a catalyst for change.

Now, I hope to have a clear strategy by early 2007 for working with the sector to boost the mobility of Australian students, and by so doing continue to strengthen the richness and diversity of Australian higher education.

I am also pleased about the expansion of the Endeavour programme, as part of the Australian Scholarships initiative. Announced in April this year, this will also provide not only for incoming students and scholars, but also for Australians to undertake study, and research and professional development in the region and will include vocational and technical education awards. By attracting the most meritorious candidates in all fields we hope to have international education experience become an integral element in the education and careers paths of our best and brightest.

On the domestic front, Bologna also affords us an opportunity to consider how we can most effectively communicate and translate our system of education to the rest of the world. We need to move beyond discussion about alignment or compliance and find ways to demonstrate the quality and value of an Australian qualification.

It is clear from industry feedback that a diploma supplement is the key to achieving this. I have no doubt that such a tool has the potential to assist students, graduates and employers both at home and abroad.

Now, such a statement could outline a student's achievements and the learning outcomes of their particular course of study as well as provide information about the specific mission and focus of the institution awarding the qualification. It would provide consistent information about quality assurance in Australia.

Other submissions to the discussion paper told me that if we are to give any serious consideration to the introduction of an Australian Diploma Supplement, a significant part of its value will derive from consistency – not consistency of content but consistency of approach.

To progress the important work that has been done so far, the Australian Government will provide \$400,000 for a consortium of universities to develop a single agreed template for an Australian Diploma Supplement.

An Australian Diploma Supplement would document student outcomes as well as describe the nature, context, content and status of a graduate's qualification. It will mean Australian qualifications can be better recognised overseas and will support the achievement of the Brisbane Communiqué's goal of increasing mobility.

My aim for an Australian Diploma Supplement is the development of a tool that will help our graduates wherever they want to work or study. It will therefore be an integral part of this project that it considers the requirements of a range of international processes and markets including Europe, the Asia-Pacific and the United States.

This initiative will build on our earlier efforts and move forward in response to the feedback you have provided so far. It can only be progressed by the Government working in partnership with the higher education sector.

Bologna is shifting and evolving even as it is being implemented and it is important that we continue to stay abreast of developments.

To assist this, I will establish a high level steering group to monitor Bologna and related developments. The steering group, to be comprised of representatives of the higher education sector as well as my Department, will report to both government and the sector on implementation issues and will help to anticipate developments as they occur. In doing so, it will help fill some of the gaps in our knowledge on the latest developments in Europe and act as an important source of advice and leadership on this issue.

We are fortunate today to have international advice and leadership from John Richards, Charge d'affaires at the European Commission Delegation and Professor Stephen Adam of the University of Westminster in the United Kingdom. I welcome and thank them for their contribution.

Mr Richards will be well placed to provide a European Union perspective on Bologna and share his observations on the opportunities and challenges it poses. Many of you will know Professor Adam, not least from his contribution at the International Education Conference in April this year. I am sure Professor Adam will make

another valuable contribution over the course of the day as he shares his latest insights.

More broadly, I welcome the debate and discussion about how institutions and governments could respond to the Bologna Process and other key developments in the international environment. Your responses so far exemplify not only the diversity of higher education in Australia, but also underscore that the sector is outwardly-focussed and strongly engaged with a range of international partners.

I do not expect that all of you will share the same vision about where your future lies – and rightly so. Bologna is in many ways Europe's response to an increasingly competitive international education environment – a response which is as yet unfinished - its final shape and form are not yet clear.

Its importance for us may be intertwined with the way our partners in this region choose to respond as with the outcomes in the European environment itself. However, there can be no doubt that it both signifies and underlines the imperative for a higher education system that delivers a quality academic experience, that is connected and supports study abroad as a valued element of any course of study, and which fosters international collaboration in both teaching and research.

I look forward to hearing the results of today's discussions about other issues such as credit transfer and degree structures, and I reiterate my commitment to work with you, particularly where you identify priorities.

If Bologna does no more than prompt us to scan our own horizons, I believe it will have been of value. But I am more hopeful than this. I think that, through these discussions and our consideration of the challenges and opportunities that Bologna presents, we will be able to achieve some tangible improvements for quality, and diversity and mobility to help ensure that an Australian education continues to be regarded, both at home and abroad, as a significant investment in the future.

Thank you
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