DEARTH OF TRAINEES WILL LEAVE HOLES IN PROFESSIONAL RANKS

A CRITICAL SHORTAGE looms of university graduates who are able to move into the professional jobs being vacated by retiring baby boomers, a report says.

It says the Federal Government has been wrong in saying Australia has over-emphasised university education to the detriment of training in the trades. Australia needs an expansion of both types of training, but in particular it needs sharply increased numbers of funded university places for domestic students, it says.

The report, Clearing the Myths Away: Higher Education’s Place in Meeting Workforce Demands, is written by Bob Birrell and Virginia Rapson, of the Centre for Population and Urban Research at Monash University.

It says there has been almost no increase in the numbers of school leavers entering university since 1996, and that an effective cap on the number of funded places for domestic students is the main reason.

Contrary to research by economists at La Trobe University and the Australian National University, the report argues that the fall-off in commencements, particularly at regional universities, is due to a combination of factors, including the greater HECs debts students incur, diminished access to the youth allowance, and jobs growth.

For many young people "taking the money" has become more attractive than study, the report says, yet the biggest employment growth sectors are the managerial, professional and associate professional categories that increasingly require university qualifications.

For example, the growth in employment of managers has risen by 56 per cent since 1996-7 compared with overall employment growth of 20 per cent.

In future young Australians will miss out on professional jobs to migrants arriving under the Government’s expanded skilled immigration program, the report warns.

"Why, if it [the Government] believes there is too much emphasis on university training, has it expanded the skilled immigration intake?" the report asks.

Included in the intake last year were more than 13,200 former overseas students, most of whom had obtained university degrees as full fee-paying students at Australian universities.

The authors say the Prime Minister, John Howard, and the former Minister for Education Brendan Nelson had entreated parents to encourage their children to take on trades training instead of a university education.

University and trades training should not be seen in opposition, the report says. There had been a "welcome increase" since 2002 in young people taking on traditional apprenticeships.

Under the Coalition universities’ potential to help meet Australia’s workforce demands had been neglected, Dr Birrell said.

The report says that, contrary to myth, Australia is not running out of young people; the number of 15- to 19-year-olds will rise until 2051.

There is a huge reserve of young people available for university and trades training, with half the nation’s 20-year-olds not engaged in any form of post-school training, the report says.

WE'RE SLIPPING THROUGH NET, REPORT WARNS

AUSTRALIA RISKS MISSING out on the next wave of globalisation as developing nations steal its place at the higher end of the global supply chain, a report published today by the Committee for Economic Development of Australia warns.

The report, Global Chains: Australia's challenge in the evolving world economy, finds Australia is losing ground despite priding itself on providing high-end service exports.

A greater focus on education and skills training is needed to secure Australia a spot in the new global supply chain, argues the report's author, John Houghton of Victoria University.

"What we are seeing is a new wave of globalisation, based around IT and IT-enabled services, that could be even more significant than the globalisation of manufacturing," Professor Houghton said. "The implications are profound."

While technological advances such the internet were supposed to bring Australia closer to the rest of the world, they had allowed footloose companies to outsource high-end service jobs to lower-cost locations, the report finds.

As a result, Australia's share of the global market for service exports had fallen 13 per cent from 1995 to 2003.

The Chinese in particular, while typically portrayed as producing lower-end manufactured goods, were working their way up the chain to exports of information technology services.

Exports of IT and IT-enabled services from China had grown 40 per cent in the first three years of this century, compared to 10 per cent in Australia.

"The rapid shift of relatively high-end manufacturing and services to Asia brings an urgent need for many Australian firms, and governments, to redefine and re-articulate their competitive and comparative advantages," Professor Houghton warned.

Otherwise, Australia could languish as one of the least interconnected of the developed economies.

POOR SOAR AT UNIVERSITY

Australia’s trade-to-GDP ratio already lags behind those of most countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, coming in at 25 per cent compared to the OECD average of 36 per cent.

RESEARCH HAS EXPLODED some myths about university entry and performance - including the notion that richer children and students from private schools get better marks. They do not, sometimes by a wide margin.

One study, based on research that examined the performance of 26,000 children, found that less well-off students often performed better at university than their richer or privately educated peers.

But the truth of some perceptions was reinforced: the research shows that far fewer students from less privileged backgrounds ever make it to tertiary study, and fall dramatically behind their richer peers in the final years of high school even if they have the same measured ability in year 9.

Economists at La Trobe University and the Australian National University examined the
students - 13,000 starting year 9 in 1995, and 13,000 who started it in 1998 - to shed light on why students of high ability from disadvantaged backgrounds remain badly underrepresented at university. The results of their research, which was funded by the Australian Research Council's Discovery Project, could force policymakers to reconsider how to improve access to tertiary education.

The researchers found no evidence that fear of large HECS debts discourages poorer students from proceeding to university - contrary to Labor Party rhetoric. The authors say HECS appears to have solved the problem of funding constraints for poorer students.

And the findings imply the Federal Government is wasting its money on scholarships designed to increase university participation among rural, indigenous and other disadvantaged groups. If they achieve the same entry score, students from disadvantaged backgrounds are just as likely as rich students to enter university - and they are more likely to go on and do well.

"We're failing to find any evidence that money is an issue once they've finished high school," said one of the researchers, Buly Cardak, of La Trobe University.

Dr Cardak and Chris Ryan, of the Australian National University, present their findings in Why are high ability individuals from poor backgrounds underrepresented at university? A separate study, to be published by the University of Western Australia's Professor Paul Miller and Dr Elisa Rose Birch, shows students from less-privileged backgrounds get first-year university results that are more than 3 percentage points higher than rich children, for any given university entry score.

Their paper, The Influence of Type of High School Attended on University Performance, shows the private school students were significantly more likely to fail.

Both studies imply that disadvantaged children smart or motivated enough to get to university may not need help from there. "But something is going on before then," Dr Cardak said. "They're not able to convert their talent into the same entry score as more advantaged kids."

Dr Cardak and Dr Ryan found two out of three students from privileged backgrounds went to university; fewer than one in five disadvantaged students did so.

Having a disadvantaged background was found to weigh hugely on performance in the final years of school. If a rich student and poor student had the median level of literacy and numeracy in year 9, the rich one was likely to go on to achieve a university admission index (or ENTER) score of 77. But the poorer student was likely to have a score of just 63 - and probably miss out on university. The gap was even greater at lower levels of year 9 aptitude. "Disadvantaged students are unable to capitalise on their ability in the same way as their advantaged counterparts in terms of ENTER scores," they write.

The results were broadly unchanged even when the sample was limited to students who stated an intention to go to university in year 9 - which seems to rule out student motivation as the difference.

**LOAN SCHEME 'DISCRIMINATORY'**

Dr Cardak and Dr Ryan argue that "policy needs to address the schooling decisions and outcomes of these students ... well before the beginning" of their final year at school.


Electronic http://smh.com.au

A DISCRIMINATORY FEDERAL Government student loan scheme is in breach of global trade commitments and stopping Australians from studying overseas, a Melbourne academic has told an
international education conference.
RMIT Globalism Institute senior research fellow Christopher Ziguras said Australia was discriminating against overseas universities and breaching a binding World Trade Organisation commitment by not offering students who wanted to study abroad the same loans available to those who stayed at home.

Australians studying overseas are ineligible for the FEE-HELP loan scheme, which offers students in a full-fee place up to $100,000, depending on the course. Dr Ziguras said it was "only a matter of time" before this was challenged by a foreign government.

"Making FEE-HELP available for study at Australian universities (only) is clearly discriminatory and is most likely in breach of Australia's undertakings," he told the Australian International Education Conference in Perth.

While the Government had backed mobility programs helping Australian students spend a semester abroad, cost remained one of the main obstacles to locals earning overseas qualifications, he said.

According to a recent OECD report, Australia has the highest proportion of overseas university students in the world but the movement is largely one-way. Less than 1 per cent of Australian tertiary students take degrees abroad.

Dr Ziguras said extending the FEE-HELP scheme to those enrolled with foreign institutions through distance education or in person would help counter this.

"If the Australian Government is serious about supporting the international mobility of Australian students and introducing more competition into the Australian higher education system, here is the perfect opportunity," he said.

Federal Education Minister Julie Bishop has said she planned to improve loans and income support so more university students could take exchange programs.

Under a system introduced last year, Australians who study part of their degree overseas can borrow up to $10,000 over two semesters.

Ms Bishop has denied Australia was in breach of the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) education guidelines, adopted by WTO members in 2001, that state there is no obligation to take measures outside its territory.

"Australia's WTO obligations in . . . education services abroad do not extend to schemes of benefit to Australian students such as FEE-HELP," she said.

Ms Bishop said the Government supported greater liberalisation of trade in education but the first priority was to ensure eligible Australian students had access to Commonwealth-supported, or HECS, places at a local university.

U.K.

NEW AND IMPROVED

SOME STUDENTS GET far more teaching than others doing the same subject, a startling survey shows. It all depends which university you go to. Donald MacLeod reports.

Can a degree that takes less than 20 hours' work a week to complete be worth the same as one that demands more than 40 hours a week from students? Universities are awarding degrees in the same subject on the basis of wildly varying amounts of teaching and study, a pioneering report reveals today. And the degrees that require most work are not always at the most prestigious institutions.

It's common knowledge that medical and engineering students have to put in a lot more time in the lab than law students or historians spend in the lecture hall, but the first survey of teaching and study time in English universities, published today, surprised its authors with the startling variations in the way different institutions teach the same subject. Tables published today in Education Guardian (see below) will surprise many students and their parents, at a time when they are becoming more conscious of getting value for the £3,000 a year they are now expected to pay.

The Higher Education Policy Institute (Hepi) has found that students studying medicine or dentistry are spending anything from 29 to 45 hours in teaching and private study; biological sciences can vary from 19 hours to more than 43, depending on the university; and a history course can mean anything from about 17 and a half hours a week to just over 32.

The authors of the report, Bahram Bekhradnia and Tom Sastry, were surprised at how much more teaching the new universities provide than their competitors in the pre-1992 institutions. Not only do the newer universities offer more teaching time, but more of it is in small seminar groups as opposed to large-scale lectures.

And the Hepi survey of 25,000 students in England also exposes the extent to which teaching at the older, research-led universities has been passed on to postgraduate assistants. If you want teaching from qualified academics, you may be better off going to a new university. A student studying biological sciences at new university Sheffield Hallam, for example, can expect a total of 28.4 hours a week teaching and study time, compared with 23.6 hours at neighbouring - older - Sheffield. On the other hand, at the University of Central Lancashire, the input for biology is only 19.1 hours a week, compared with 43.7 at Cambridge and 35 hours at Oxford.

The two ancient English universities are exceptional among the research-led Russell group in retaining the tutorial system. The report notes that Cambridge and Oxford dominate the tables for total student workload: "It is remarkable how consistently those universities appear to require more effort of their students than other universities." But it admits this impression may have been exaggerated by the fact that their terms are only eight weeks long.

In terms of hours, Coventry is in the top half of the Hepi table for physical sciences, alongside Imperial and Leicester and above Birmingham and Manchester. In engineering, Kingston and Staffordshire lie third and fourth.

What a degree means

"The extent of the differences are remarkable, and raise important policy questions," says the Hepi report. "In particular, they raise questions about what it means to have a degree from an English university, if a degree can apparently be obtained with such very different levels of effort."

Hepi has found that some institutions award many more upper-second and first-class degrees than others, and this is also true at subject level. Is this because particular students are more able, or work harder? Not according to the evidence of workload or entry requirements, says the report. It says that it has
not proved the degree classification is flawed, "but it certainly raises questions that need to be addressed".

The survey, funded by the Higher Education Academy, received 15,000 replies, but is not detailed enough to give reliable results for every subject at every institution. However, it is the most detailed account yet of what teaching support students receive when they study at an English university.

And, in many cases, it is not what they expect. At new universities, 93% of tutorials and 92% of seminars are taught by academics. This falls to 70% at the old universities - and, according to Sastry, "if you took out Oxford and Cambridge, the old universities would look a lot worse".

In some subjects - computer science, social studies and business studies - only about half of tutorials at old universities are taught by academics. While it is possible to argue that exposure to enthusiastic young postgraduate tutors is a good thing, few students (or their parents) expect this to be a substitute for teaching by proper academics.

The Hepi survey does not look at whether the academics have been specifically trained to teach, rather than simply having done research. But here, too, the new universities would probably score highly because they tend to demand teaching qualifications of their staff.

"One of the most interesting things to emerge is how the new universities outperform the old universities in many respects. They offer more teaching and they have less teaching in large groups," says Bekhradnia. "On top of that, the teaching is by proper academic staff. You would expect the old universities to have more graduate students teaching, because they have more of them and it is part of the training to be an academic, but you don't want it as a substitute."

The survey finds that students with very few timetabled classes are the most dissatisfied with the amount of teaching they receive. But, interestingly, complaints begin to rise again if teaching hours are above 24 hours a week.

Although universities can expect complaints if they provide very little teaching in a subject - the average for history is well under 10 hours a week - Sastry believes students in general want better teaching rather than just more. Asked how the extra money from the rise in tuition fees should be spent, students plumped for smaller classes and better labs and libraries, not better sports facilities or longer hours. (Staff pay was a pretty low priority for them, too.)

**Obsessed by research**

Unfortunately for students, university leaders remain obsessed by research, in particular the 2008 research assessment exercise (RAE). In the present climate, it seems unlikely that departments will switch senior academic staff from research to teaching, unless the advent of fees makes students a lot more assertive about how much teaching they get - and who teaches them.

Sastry points out that overseas students - who pay more in fees than home students - bring in far more money for universities than research ratings do, but receive only a fraction of the time and attention that vice-chancellors give to the RAE. Funding that stems directly from the results of the RAE amounts to only 7.5% of university revenue, he says. "The system is not nearly so volatile as people think. The entire sector is convulsed by a process that doesn't move very much money around. This focus on research will come to seem very odd in 20 years' time."

He and Bekhradnia admit that their survey cannot be absolutely definitive, as it is based on students' replies. The amount of lectures and classes respondents confessed to skipping was fairly low - highest in computer science (13%) and business studies (11%) and lowest in education (2%), as one would hope from future teachers. Medics, vets, nurses and other students doing subjects allied to medicine also claimed to be extremely conscientious.

Predictably, perhaps, female students are more industrious than their male counterparts,
spending 13.9 hours in private study compared with 12 hours among the men, and missing only 7% of classes, against 10% for men.

There does seem to be some correlation between students who do a lot of paid work and those expressing dissatisfaction with their course. “It doesn’t seem to lead to students missing lectures, but to doing less private study,” says Sastry.

The survey shows no evidence that students with low teaching hours are “compensated” by being taught in small groups. Indeed, overall, new universities have more small group teaching.

When criticised about a dearth of teaching, universities tend to respond that students should be learning to work on their own, especially later in their courses. In practice, this happens only to a limited degree. Although law and history, with low teaching hours, do require high levels of private study, mass communication and business studies, which provide some of the smallest amounts of scheduled teaching, also score least well in terms of private study. Medicine and veterinary studies require a lot of private study as well as long teaching hours.

At first sight, students’ satisfaction with their courses - broadly matching the recent National Student Survey - looks encouraging for universities, with only 11% saying their experience has been worse than expected. But, as Bekhradnia and Sastry point out, 40% say it is “better in some ways, worse in others”, so just over half in total consider some aspects disappointing.

“Among that group, disappointment with academic provision was much stronger than disappointment with other aspects of the university experience.

This does not mean that academic experiences were generally poor - less than a quarter were dissatisfied with them - but it does suggest that investment in academic teaching remains critical to improving further what are very strong levels of satisfaction,” says the report.

Higher education managers ought to be concerned that nearly one in five students think their university’s prospectus is misleading. “This mismatch between what universities claimed and the reality is something to which universities will need to pay attention,” chides Hepi.

“Universities may be mis-selling themselves in the eyes of significant numbers of students,” warns the report, which says that the most worrying thing is discontent among overseas students. Asked about value for money, 16% of all students said their course was poor or very poor. But for overseas (non-EU) students, this rises to nearly 30%. “This should set alarm bells ringing,” comments the report.

Of course, international students are paying a lot more for their courses - typically £8,000 to £10,000 a year, compared with the £3,000 maximum for the home and EU students they share classes with. Hepi warns: “Value for money could be improved by reducing cost, or improving the product. If it is not, in due course we will kill the golden goose that international students represent, and this finding needs to be taken very seriously indeed.”

Overall, modern universities, unsurprisingly, welcome the findings of the report. “This is very welcome confirmation from students that modern universities put them first,” says Professor Michael Driscoll, vice-chancellor of Middlesex University and chair of CMU (Campaigning for Mainstream Universities). “The message to students and their families is clear: if you want a good education, go to a modern university. It is a further wake-up call for the government, which needs to ensure that the unit of resource for teaching is sustained and to act on the distorting effect of the RAE, which leads to research rather than students being prioritised.”

Professor Paul Ramsden, the chief executive of the Higher Education Academy, which funded the survey, points out it is the quality, not quantity, of teaching that counts. “The results give a snapshot of how students in different institutions, taking a wide range of subjects, perceive the services and academic inputs they receive,” he says. “The report provides valuable insight into students’ views on
teaching and facilities and will provide a helpful point of comparison for future years. The findings suggest that patterns are changing as more students take on paid employment. It is encouraging that students generally report favourably on their experiences.

“The differences between the hours spent by students taking the same or similar subjects in different institutions are part of a complex picture. Institutions determine their own curricula and guidance on hours of work, so some variation is to be expected. What is important is the quality of engagement rather than the number of hours spent. We need to be cautious about drawing any conclusions based on this survey about differences between degrees.”

But, says the University and College Union (UCU) joint general secretary Sally Hunt, that quality of engagement may well be under threat from other sources. "UCU research to be released later this week paints a worrying picture of how much time is spent by lecturers on teaching and research, compared to administrative duties," she says. "Our members complain of ever increasing bureaucracy and this, combined with rising student numbers, puts enormous pressure on staff, particularly now that students are paying for their studies.

"Academics rightly value their autonomy but, with a recent poll showing that lecturers work the second highest levels of unpaid overtime of any profession, employers must recognise their responsibility to ensure both that staff are not working excessive hours and that students get a fair deal."

Donald McLeod ‘New & Improved’ The Guardian 18 July 2006 Electronic http://theguardian.co.uk

ISLAMIC STUDIES 'LETTING DOWN' MULTICULTURAL NEEDS

They claim education structures are "letting down" Muslims and are calling for a “new agenda” offering education which is more relevant to contemporary British society and takes a more multicultural approach.

The report, entitled Time for Change: Report on the Future of the Study of Islam and Muslims in Universities and Colleges in Multicultural Britain, was written by Abd al-Fattah El-Awaisi and Malory Nye.

Prof El-Awaisi said: "The call for a new agenda is timely and necessary to prevent the misguided and narrow interpretation of Islam which is the source of so many problems in our multicultural society. "It is only through multicultural education we can work to eliminate extremism and fundamentalism."

The report found most British non-Muslims do not "get" Islam and do not understand what makes Muslims "tick".

"Many British communities, including British Muslims, have failed to understand each other and have failed to engage effectively in multicultural Britain,” it states.

"There is mutual incomprehension and this can only be addressed by education.”

The report claims Muslim schools and colleges run by Muslims for Muslims is not the answer.

"Multiculturalism is not about separatism, ghettoisation or Balkanisation; it is instead recognition of diversity, the need for common ground, mutual respect and cultural engagement,” it states.
It adds that some departments concentrated on “out of date and irrelevant issues”, while others chose local religious leaders as lecturers for “political correctness”. It also criticised some Muslim institutions for focusing on their own political links and agendas and not those of multicultural Britain.

The report makes a number of recommendations including a government-commissioned study on Muslim institutions and their place in the development of Islam and Muslims as an integral part of multicultural British society. It also calls for Muslim institutions to be encouraged to integrate more actively into the British higher education system.

Prof Nye said: “All those who participate in the development of this area of higher education have the responsibility to respond to the new realities of contemporary multicultural Britain. “We must ensure the integration of all aspects of society within these debates and also recognise the need to make the understanding of Islam and Muslims a mainstream part of the curricula.”

Daniel McCartney is two months into a masters course in international marketing and brand management at Lund University, central Sweden. Far from paying top-up or tuition fees, McCartney - who graduated from Leeds University in 2005 with a degree in business management - is studying for free. “I had no idea that there was the opportunity to do postgraduate study for free until I stumbled upon Sweden by chance,” McCartney says. “I visited a friend who was doing an Erasmus programme in Lund. It gave me the opportunity to have a look at both the city and university. I was thoroughly impressed. The aspect that amazed me the most was that in Sweden tuition fees do not exist.”

McCartney joins a growing number of students who are opting to do their postgraduate courses in Europe for a fraction of the price of their UK equivalents. The number of students is small, but the courses - which are taught entirely in English - are offering viable competition to UK universities.

Quality teaching
Lund, founded in 1666, is the largest academic institution in Scandinavia. Among the 1,400 courses available to students are 18 international masters programmes that are taught in English. It also offers Swedish lessons to international students. Like other institutions in Sweden, Lund advertises its courses on a website run by the Swedish Institute: www.studyinsweden.se.

"Lund has a strong world ranking, and is surpassing my expectations," says McCartney. "There are 21 different nationalities on the course - studying together with people from continents from all over the globe makes it a very diverse place. "The same course in the UK costs at least £10,000. The high fees effectively close the door for the average student to pursue a masters in the UK.”

Daniel Whitmarsh, 25, from Wokingham, also studies in Sweden. He graduated from Bournemouth University with a BA in business and IT and has spent the last year completing an MA in computer science at Uppsala University. "I was not sure what to

A FREE LUNCH IN UPPSALA

Mention cheap tuition to any postgraduate student and you may just hear the stifled laugh. "There's no such thing as a free lunch," they'll say, and they should know, especially after the bill for university fees has dropped on to their doormat. Yet some bright students have found an answer to the fees nightmare: in Europe.
expect, dropping everything and running to Sweden to go to university, but the standard of teaching has been excellent," he says. "I was not sure about the quality when I arrived, but I know Harvard graduates who are on it."

In the past 10 years, more than 130 British students have chosen Sweden to further their studies. But the potential market is huge and it is not only postgraduate qualifications that are on offer.

So far, Swedish institutions have not openly marketed their courses in the UK. Niklas Tranaeus, senior officer from the Swedish Institute, says: "Swedish universities may in future want to market themselves in the UK, but in general they have been very cautious. The UK is considered a tough market as UK students tend to study abroad less, say, students from other EU countries. The general perception in the UK is that you have to know the language to study in a European country, but this isn't always so."

UK institutions have an obvious advantage when it comes to teaching in English, but that advantage is being eaten away. While the bill for university tuition in the UK has risen at a steady pace for over a decade, more and more European universities have launched programmes in English.

The European Union encourages student mobility between European countries, and in 1999 the EU set up the Bologna process. This aims to create a European Higher Education Area to make more comparable, compatible and coherent systems of higher education in Europe. Such schemes have helped spread the use of English across the continent.

It is not only UK students that European universities are drawing away. Large numbers of international students - upon whom many UK universities rely for extra funds - are now studying there. Arnav Ghai, 21, from New Delhi, India, a graduate in electrical engineering and computer science at the International University in Bremen (IUB), in Germany, explained: "A representative of the university was touring the world promoting the university and came to my school in India. The IUB charge students up to €15,000 (about £10,000) per year for tuition, but any student who can demonstrate a financial need is offered financial assistance through grants, low interest loans or work on campus. The most highly qualified are offered scholarships.

Living cheap

Living expenses are also lower. The IUB charged Ghai €360 (£240) a month for accommodation including free cable TV, internet access, telephones in each room and free calls within the university. "It was like living in a hotel," says Ghai. "I had considered courses in the UK, and applied for some, but the deciding factor was the fees. In Germany I got a scholarship, which made the whole thing affordable."

"I hadn't even thought about living in Europe when I set off from India. I went with the idea of doing an undergraduate degree and then a masters - not necessarily in Germany - and then finally working," he says.

Holland is another popular destination for UK students. Flights are cheap, it has a population that speaks very good English and it is close to home. Many courses charge as little as €1,500 (about £1,000) a year for tuition and EU students are entitled to rebates of up to €1,000. For anyone who has dreamed of spending a year abroad, the opportunity is almost too good to be true.

UK universities are aware of the new competition. Sandra Elliott, director of Cardiff University's international development division, says: "Cardiff is aware of the development of greater numbers of degree programmes being delivered in English on mainland Europe, but these initiatives have not had a direct impact upon international student numbers."

A spokesman for Universities UK said: "It is understandable that some of our European neighbours are developing new ways to attract international students to their institutions. Yet it is important to remember that while European countries may offer an English-speaking education, students will be living in a non-English speaking country."

McCartney has found that going out on a limb was worth the risk. "I would recommend studying in Sweden, it offers just as good an education for a fraction of the price."

"If it was more widely known that courses are available in English and are financially viable then they would become incredibly popular."

Tim Clarke The Guardian 24 October 2006 Electronic http://theguardian.co.uk
"SISTERS' DON'T WANT A FUTURE IN COEDUCATION"

THEY WERE ESTABLISHED in the 19th century, when women had fewer opportunities than men to earn a strong liberal arts education.

Now student leaders at the colleges still known as the "Seven Sisters," even though their number has dwindled to five, are joining forces to discuss the future of women's schools. Last weekend, they gathered in Northampton and agreed that they had an obligation to maintain the traditions upon which their institutions were founded.

The meeting followed recent decisions at Regis College, the last Catholic women's college in the Boston area, and Randolph-Macon Women's College in Lynchburg, Va., to admit men starting next fall. Both schools have struggled to increase enrolment and achieve financial stability.

But the student leaders say that despite an increasing trend toward coeducation, they don't expect their respective institutions to follow a similar course. At least not any time soon.

"I think that we can maybe use this history of the Seven Sisters and band together against the threat that women don't want to come to women's colleges," said Molly McCadden, a 21-year-old senior at Smith College.

The remaining Seven Sister colleges are Barnard, Bryn Mawr, Mount Holyoke, Smith, and Wellesley. As opportunities for women increased, Vassar College -- one of the original septet -- opened its doors to men in 1969. Radcliffe College officially dissolved in 1999, 22 years after its undergraduate women were absorbed into Harvard College.

Although many small women's colleges are suffering financial woes, the schools with larger endowments are seeing more applicants. Mount Holyoke, for example, set an admissions record this year with the most applicants since 2002.

In mid-September, the presidents of Hollins and Sweet Briar Colleges, both in Virginia, submitted an opinion piece to two Virginia newspapers that reaffirmed their commitment to single-sex education. Similarly, the student leaders who met on Oct. 28 agreed that their founding tradition would survive.

"I think that we have a thriving community that doesn't want to go coed," said Hallie Timm, a student parliamentarian at Mount Holyoke.

Timm, 19, applied only to women's schools two years ago. After attending an all-girls' high school, Timm said she agreed with research that showed that women performed better in a single-sex environment. Last week, the federal government altered its policy on single-sex education, granting greater latitude to public schools to create single-sex classes and schools, as long as students attend voluntarily.

Timm said the trend among small women's colleges is frightening.

"I treasure the single-sex education," she said. "But if the choice is to close or go coed, honestly I would be more saddened by [my school] closing."

Whatever direction women's colleges take, Eman Bataineh, 21, Barnard student government president, said alumnae should advocate for their institutions.

"There's more hope for the women's college if you can still maintain the ideologies behind having a women's college and behind education that is socially conscious, in terms of thinking about gender and sexuality," she said. "As long as that stays, it'll be a little better than turning coed and forgetting why there was a women's college to begin with."