

Genuine study choices have a social side

Opinion

Ian Goulter

A central theme of the Bradley report, and Education Minister Julia Gillard's response, supported in the federal budget, is providing prospective students with greater choice. The government has clearly accepted the principle that student demand should drive the higher education system.

I wonder, however, whether there is a shared understanding of what choice means in a higher education context.

Genuine choice has a range of dimensions. It can include the capacity to choose between various programs based on cost, the proximity of different institutions, or the accessibility of competing course options. These might be broadly described as the study aspects of choice.

There is also a range of social aspects of choice. For example, the choice to live at home while studying; the choice to retain social connections to communities and friends; and the choice to undertake a program that reflects the values and aspirations of the community to which you belong.

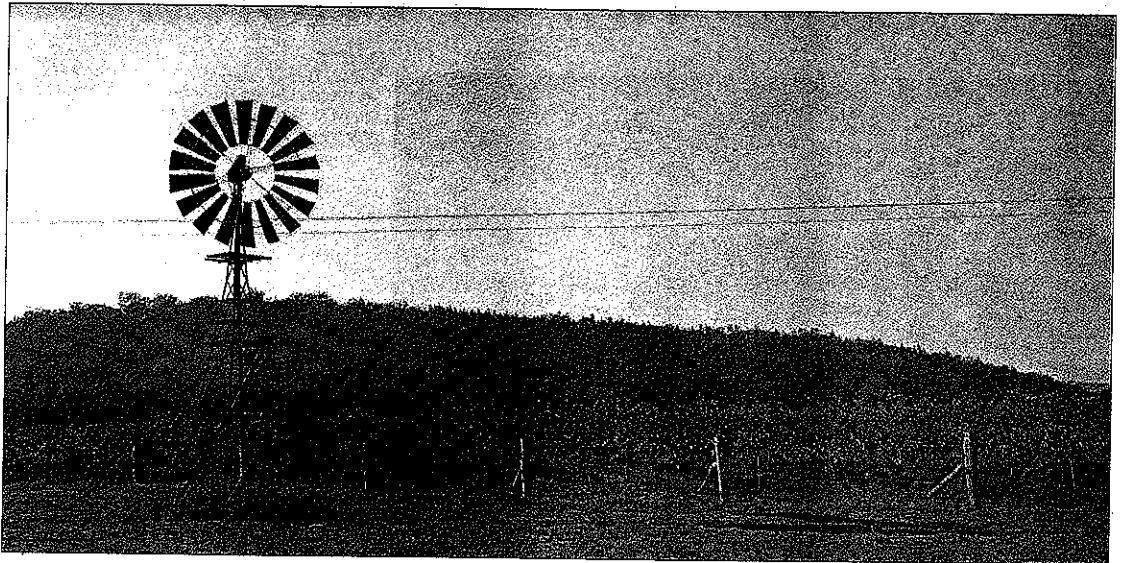
There appear to be competing definitions of the word choice in the higher education debate. Some define choice as permitting students to genuinely realise their individual needs and aspirations. Others view it as giving students more options from which to choose, but requiring them to adapt their needs and aspirations to what is available.

These two approaches have significant implications for students.

Take, for example, a prospective student living in Hornsby in Sydney's north-west who wants to study law on campus. The student could apply to the University of Western Sydney's innovative new law program in Parramatta or attend the established law programs of the University of Sydney or the University of NSW.

They might undertake an initial degree and then enrol in a postgraduate law program at Macquarie University. They may be interested in the approach of the University of Technology, Sydney or the University of New England. All these law programs are accredited for admission to practise by the same accrediting authority, so the student will feel comfortable that whatever choice they make will be a good one.

This student would not only have a broad range of choices on where to study but can select from a range of



Going the distance... prospective students in rural communities have little option but to leave home to pursue a university education.

Photo: PETER BRAIG

The tendency is to believe that expanding options for some is the same as delivering genuine choice to all.

options one that best suits his or her academic or career aspirations.

In addition, they would have the choice of living at home or living in university accommodation. They would have the choice to remain in contact with their school or neighbourhood friends, continue to volunteer in their community and perhaps go to the same church, mosque, temple or synagogue. They have a diverse range of education opportunities while retaining a sense of connectedness to their families and communities.

The reality is that this choice is not available to all prospective students in Australia. A prospective student living in Bathurst has no choice but to leave home if they wish to study law on campus. A prospective student in Lismore has no choice but to leave home to study dentistry on campus. They will incur additional costs in doing so, as well as endure separation from their families, friends and communities.

I am not arguing that it is feasible for every student in Australia to be able to walk to their local university and undertake whatever program suits their goals and aspirations. What I am suggesting, however, is that there has been a tendency to believe that expanding options for some is the same as delivering genuine choice to all. This can lead to assumptions that

might narrow genuine choice, rather than enlarge it. For example, it has been suggested that genuine choice can be realised by a rural student if he or she is given a travel and accommodation scholarship to attend a metropolitan university. This addresses the study aspect of choice, but fails to consider the social aspect.

While I strongly endorse providing financial support to rural students to attend metropolitan universities (and vice versa) where this permits them to achieve their goals and aspirations, the failure to address the social needs of rural students merely gives them options, not genuine choices.

If we are to talk about genuine choice, it is important to agree that every Australian should enjoy the opportunity not only to realise their study needs and aspirations, but to realise them in a way that reflects their social needs and aspirations.

Importantly, this lack of genuine social choice for all Australians has the strong potential to exclude from higher education those for whom it is a key or major determinant to their participation.

In ignoring the importance of social choice to participation, we run the risk of compromising our national goal of significantly enhanced social inclusion. We must therefore be prepared to look at ways in which we can maximise the choice available to

the maximum number of Australians.

Charles Sturt University has spent the past 20 years proudly delivering genuine choice by providing a comprehensive range of nationally accredited programs across multiple regional locations.

It is unsatisfactory, from my perspective, that we are unable to deliver the same choice we provide our campus communities to other communities across Australia.

This is why we have committed to examining how we might ensure the sustainability and enlargement of genuine choice for rural and regional Australians (the federal government has provided \$2 million to Charles Sturt University and Southern Cross University to jointly investigate establishing a national university servicing regional Australia) and how we might significantly improve distance delivery in a way that minimises the impact of the lack of local choice where we do not have the financial resources to do otherwise.

If we simplify the challenge of genuine choice to the provision of a travel voucher, we risk overlooking the practical, proven and effective opportunities we have today to deliver genuine choice to as many Australians as possible.

■ Ian Goulter is the vice-chancellor of Charles Sturt University.

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