Senator seeks policy review for regional universities

NATIONALS Senator Fiona Nash has called for greater Federal Government support for regional universities.

She told a recent Innovative Research Universities Conference regional facilities had distinct needs that must be addressed by government policy.

“We firstly need to recognise that regional universities are very different to metropolitan ones and face unique challenges, not just because of the tyranny of distance, but also owing to greater difficulties in achieving economies of scale and offering a comprehensive range of subjects,” Ms Nash said.

She said the economic and social contribution of the universities to their regions was extensive, but more importantly students who studied outside the capital cities were far more likely to go on to pursue a career in regional Australia.

“As I travel around the country listening to stakeholders in regional universities, the message is invariably a desire for more communication with government in order to develop smarter, win-win regional higher education policies,” Ms Nash said.
State of secrecy over UQ job loss

Des Houghton

The University of Queensland will have us believe that Phil Procopis, the whistle-blower in the uni’s nepotism scandal, was made redundant simply because his department was restructured.

Procopis was the director of a unit known on campus as ARMS, an acronym for Assurance and Risk Management Services. ARMS no longer exists.

Procopis’s position was abolished and he signed a confidentially agreement to receive his payout.

Restructures happen. So does nepotism. So does secrecy.

Vice-chancellor Professor Paul Greenfield and his deputy Michael Keniger left the university after The Courier-Mail revealed a “close family member” of Greenfield had gained entry to the medical faculty without the proper entry requirements. Greenfield denied any wrongdoing, saying the relative was admitted to the medical school as the result of a misunderstanding.

Procopis is central to the story because The Courier-Mail recently revealed he was the mysterious whistle-blower who raised concerns about the improper admission with Chancellor John Story.

The scandal got a head of steam, I believe, because it shattered our perceptions that post-Fitzgerald Queensland was relatively free of cronyism and that our society had at last become a (cliche alert) “level playing field.”

In a broader sense, it also challenged national ideals of egalitarianism and the fair go. Until the university scandal, most of us naively believed Queenslanders were rewarded on merit. The truth was a little different. Now we know it will not harm your prospects to have friends or relatives in high places.

Nepotism exists in Queensland across business, the arts, law, medicine and even the media.

Premier Campbell Newman admitted it existed in government and shrugged his shoulders when asked what he was going to do about it.

The university controversy also got a head of steam because the venerable institution at first issued misleading press releases about Greenfield and Keniger leaving. Greenfield was forced out after the university commissioned an investigation by Tim Carmody, SC. Carmody’s report remains secret and we don’t even know for sure the name of the student at the heart of the affair.

The university made a mockery of the the new regulatory body, the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, by refusing to hand over the Carmody report.

TEQSA chief commissioner Dr Carol Nicoll told a Senate estimates hearing the uni would not release the document, claiming confidentiality and privilege.

Tertiary Education Minister Senator Chris Evans was cryptic, telling the hearing it was a “complex case”, and not as “straightforward” as some suggest.

Was he suggesting universities are beyond the reach of Federal Cabinet?

Greenfield walked away with a payout of $952,000, reports tabled in Parliament revealed. His deputy, Keniger, a key figure in the imbroglio, also quit. He got $695,000.
The Crime and Misconduct Commission has completed its investigations into the scandal and its brief of evidence is in the hands of the Director of Public Prosecutions.

Meanwhile, the university has not released all the details surrounding the exit of Procopis. It should.

The academic committee set up to evaluate ARMS was chaired by Dr Len Gainsford from Victoria. It praised Procopis’s unit and gave it seven “commendations”. “ARMS is widely respected by managers across UQ,” it reported. “The unit consists of a committed and dedicated team.” It said ARMS “responded well to governance initiatives” and its audits were “well regarded”.

It added: “The introduction of a risk-management framework and development of commitment towards its progress has been effective.” Despite the glowing report card ARMS was abolished.

Vice-Chancellor Deborah Terry says the restructuring was the result of a “routine, cyclical” review initiated before the admissions scandal. Terry says “it would be inaccurate and wrong” to link the role of Procopis in unearthing the scandal to his redundancy.

Procopis’s redundancy and the disbanding of his department happened despite Terry announcing on May 17 that Procopis would have a central role in misconduct matters under a package of governance reforms.

Terry told The Courier-Mail recently that at the time of her May announcement, “the proposed reorganisation . . . had not been finalised”.

In a letter to staff she added: “The review and the re-organisation were unrelated to the fact that Mr Procopis communicated to the Chancellor information he had received (about the scandal). It was entirely appropriate for Mr Procopis to do this, as UQ policy identified his position as a receiver for disclosures of this nature.”

As the only ARMS employee made redundant, Procopis must be feeling unlucky. An insider tells me Procopis never wanted to be a whistleblower. He was just doing his duty.

Until recently he was also chair of the Crime and Misconduct Commission’s audit committee.

Who tipped him off remains a mystery. “The university will not disclose their identity,” says Terry.

There’s the suggestion that young people with violent inclinations seek out aggressive films and games to help make sense of their feelings.
Cuts devastate future

I DO not live in the Latrobe Valley, in fact I don’t even live in Victoria, I am currently living in Canberra. My father grew up in Traralgon though, and my grandparents have spent most of their life there too. I have spent many Christmas holidays in Traralgon and visit a couple of times a year.

I am writing this letter to try and get some action from the Member for Eastern Victoria Peter Hall.

As you would know recent TAFE funding cuts have forced many TAFEs and universities to close courses and even entire campuses, this is disappointing but there are always other places to study.

In my case, there isn’t. I have been studying Auslan (the native language used by deaf people in Australia) for two years, but I only have my Certificate I. In Canberra there is only one place that offers the opportunity to study Auslan and it is part time.

Last year there were not enough people to continue the certificate course and this has been the case for the past four years. I asked my teachers and they told me that there was a TAFE in Melbourne that offered a full time course in Auslan where I would obtain my diploma in two years.

Not only that but I would learn so much more about the deaf community than I ever could studying part time.

I was convinced, this is my passion and I was so excited that there was a way that I could be immersed in Auslan and the deaf culture every day.

I registered my interest with Kangan Institute and then started two jobs to help pay for my move from Canberra to Melbourne as well as the fees for the course and all other things that come with taking the step of moving out of home.

I was so excited, I love Victoria. I was born there and always had my sights set on moving back and now I was going to as well as having the opportunity to study what I think is my passion in life.

Just over two months ago I read on Facebook that due to the TAFE cuts, Kangan was cancelling the Auslan course.

This is the only full time course on the east coast of Australia (there is one currently running in Perth but who knows if that will still be running by the end of the year).

I was devastated; the news brought me to tears.

Six months of working to get to something that was so easily snatched away.

Not only was I upset for myself but after chatting with many deaf people I was reassured of how big of an impact this will have on them.

This was one of the only paths to take to become an interpreter.

Without this course RMIT will have a very, very slow feed of students into their Diploma of Interpreting course, which I am sure will eventuate in them having to close their doors to students wanting to become an interpreter for Auslan.

Without qualified interpreters deaf people have extremely limited access to doctors, lawyers, education and many other services that are a basic human right in Australia.

I quickly found out who the minister responsible for the funding cuts was the Higher Education and Skills Minister Peter Hall. I collected my thoughts of both protest but also confusion and wrote them down in a letter.

I sent this letter to my grandfather (who lives in Traralgon) and he hand delivered it to Mr Hall’s office.

After a month passed I hadn’t received a response so I emailed him via his website to ask if he had received my letter, another month has passed and still no reply to either of my queries.

So now I am writing to you, in the hope that you will print my letter it and it may provoke some kind of response from Mr Hall.

Kate Grant, Farrer, Australian Capital Territory.
Program gets students jobs

It must be wonderful to be a politician and be able to make totally unsubstantiated statements in an attempt to justify your party’s inane decision to slash TAFE funding.

In last week’s Courier, Minister for Higher Education and Skills, Peter Hall, intimated that the previous government was to blame for the huge cost blowout in the Vocational Education and Training system.

He seems to neglect the fact that his government, which has been in power for the past two years, has failed to put into place any system of accountability or auditing to limit the proliferation of training providers who have used the system for their own financial gain.

Minister Hall then went on to indicate that the courses that have been impacted most significantly by the funding cuts are those with low job outcomes – most notably hospitality, retail, business and sports and recreation. Low job outcomes! Tell that to the 63 per cent of the Mansfield students who have undertaken school based apprenticeships in these areas over the past five years and are now working full time, part time or undertaking study in the same industry area.

The other 37 per cent of students, while not still working in those industries, have all developed the skills and competencies that assist in making them employable in other industry areas.

It is no surprise that of the students completing a school based apprenticeship at Mansfield Secondary College this year, 51 per cent are doing so in the above four areas.

Why? Simply because these industry areas are a reflection of the town in which we live.

Minister Hall states that TAFE funding has been increased for training in areas of high value to the Victorian economy.

Do we assume then that hospitality, retail, business and sports and recreation and by extension, Mansfield, are of little value to the Victorian economy?

The minister goes on to say that the funding for these courses has been reduced because they offer little likelihood of meaningful long term employment.

Is it just a coincidence that Mansfield’s youth unemployment rate is 16 per cent, well below the 21.1 per cent state regional average?

Mansfield, in fact, has one of the lowest youth unemployment rates of any town in the Hume region – considerably lower than Shepparton at 22 per cent; Wodonga, Moira and Murrindindi at 20 per cent and Wangaratta at 19 per cent.

Is it also coincidence that Mansfield’s overall unemployment rate is 4.5 per cent, compared to the state average of 5.8 per cent?

I am somewhat bewildered as to why a government would sabotage a program that delivers such significant outcomes.

Bill Sykes (MLA, Benalla) has been quoted as saying that he will go into bat for our local youth if we can show that school based apprenticeships have a positive impact on employment prospects.

Time to wield the willow Bill!

Bruce McInnes,
School Based Apprenticeship coordinator
Mansfield Secondary College
Private college offering subsidies

JOHN ROSS

A PRIVATE management college is offering its own “subsidised” higher education places so students do not reject it on price grounds.

International College of Management, Sydney, is offering degrees at roughly the same cost as public university courses to students who pass entry score thresholds and an interview.

ICMS says it has “made the leap to self-subsidise” because the government had ignored recommendations to offer commonwealth supported places through private providers.

Managing director Frank Prestipino said ICMS had taken the approach after becoming one of the first NSW private colleges to have its enrolments handled by the state’s Universities Admissions Centre.

He said UAC inclusion meant potential applicants would be more directly comparing ICMS courses with university equivalents, and he did not want their choice to be “compromised through a funding deterrent”.

“I’m not proposing we compete with universities. I’m saying student choice may be compromised because of that funding arrangement available elsewhere, not with private providers,” he said.

The discounted rates will apply to the college’s hospitality, tourism, events, sports, retail, property and business degrees. Successful applicants could pay under $6000 a year instead of full fees of about $10,000 a trimester, although both groups can defer their fees through HECS-style loans.

To fund the approach, ICMS will convert some of the scholarships it has offered for the past 16 years. “It’s a balancing act, because we don’t want to take away the scholarship component, either,” Mr Prestipino said.

ICMS is one of six colleges enrolling students through UAC next year. The others are Champion College Australia and four colleges from the Think Education Group.

UAC information services director Kim Paino said the change made sense, “given the broader moves towards a seamless tertiary education sector”.

“It has real advantages for UAC applicants who can now apply to up to 24 institutions with one application,” he said.

Think Education marketing manager Tim Jordan said students had more options than ever and admissions centres needed to cater for choice.

He said UAC membership would give his colleges wider exposure, but would also involve considerable upfront administration.

“Our challenge as a national group is how to manage the differences between the NSW and Victorian systems,” he said.

“Every system has its own rules, dates and deadlines.”
PRIVATE colleges say the uncapping of publicly subsidised higher education places has helped rather than hindered them, as an increasing pool of would-be students rejects universities.

Private chains Navitas, Think Education and Study Group claim steady or accelerating growth at their colleges over the past three years, despite rapid expansion by universities taking advantage of relaxed enrolment caps.

They say the new funding arrangements have put higher education on the radar of many who would not previously have considered it.

Commonwealth statistics show a 17 per cent rise to more than 55,000 domestic enrolments for non-university providers in 2010-11. This coincided with heavy university recruitment after the government doubled the over-enrolment buffer to 10 per cent.

Private enrolments rose strongly in management and commerce, society and culture, creative arts and health courses.

Navitas said there had been a groundswell of interest in its higher education pathway programs. Growth of 14 per cent in its intake in 2009 had increased steadily to 20 per cent this year. Public relations manager James Fuller said generally smaller classes and a trimester timetable meant students had more support than they could expect at universities, while colleges such as video and audio specialist SAE Institute offered courses not available elsewhere.

Mr Fuller said Navitas was also seeing increased enrolments from students who had set their sights on a certain university but had not attained the entry scores. Pathway colleges enabled them to switch in second year.

Think Education said growth in the March intake at its APM College of Business and Communication had risen from 8 per cent last year to 18 per cent this year. Marketing manager Tim Jordan said many had transferred directly from university, seeking credit for their earlier studies.

“Universities have lowered their entry scores, but (students) are not enjoying sitting in a 1000-seat hall without access to a lecturer,” he said.

Study Group said enrolment growth at its Australian College of Physical Education had averaged 14 per cent since 2010.

Marketing director Sarah Graham said she knew of students who had switched to public universities in first semester this year, only to switch back again in second semester. “The university offering hasn’t changed much, and it just becomes more difficult to service a broader range of students,” she said.

“(But) the total market has grown and to some extent it’s increased our ability to get the message across about the differentiating factors of smaller classes, more personalised attention, industry outcomes and so on.”

Most universities’ enrolments have expanded rapidly in the lead-up to the full uncapping of university places this year. Some expanded rapidly, over-enrolling by up to 30-40 per cent.

Universities say it was incumbent on them to support the federal government’s push to make higher education more widely available. But they say they have boosted support services as well.

“We believe we have a responsibility to achieve both access and success,” said Rhonda Hawkins, acting vice-chancellor of the University of Western Sydney.

Private college growth has not been universal. International College of Management, Sydney managing director Frank Prestipino said his domestic enrolments had declined with the uncapping of university places. “People are making choices (based) on a funding arrangement more than what they really want to do,” he said.

But FEE-HELP loans taken out by non-university students grew tenfold to just under $300 million between 2005 and 2011, according to an analysis in last month’s ACPET Journal for Private Higher Education.

Students ‘are not enjoying sitting in a 1000-seat hall without access to a lecturer’

TIM JORDAN
THINK EDUCATION
Group of Eight dominates as research funding increases

FUNDING for the indirect costs of research moved up to an average of 29.8c in the dollar compared to the 2008 low of 18c, according to higher education analyst Frank Larkins, who crunched the numbers to see how the federal government’s sustainable research excellence initiative was faring.

Researchers are now used to low approval rates for grant applications, currently at 22 per cent for the annual Australian Research Council Discovery round, and to receiving about half the sum they nominated.

But insult had been added to injury over the years because of inadequate funding for university overheads in research activities.

Professor Larkins conceded the government had taken “a significant step” in bridging the shortfall, but noted “further investments beyond those foreshadowed to 2014 will be required to achieve the target figure of 50c”.

His analysis also showed that since the criteria for calculating the SRE allocations changed to take in transparency costing and results from the Excellence in Research for Australia, funding for most of the Group of Eight universities increased.

Their allocation rose from 67 per cent in 2010 to 75 per cent in 2012, while the Innovative Research universities group dropped from 10 per cent to 9 per cent, and the Australian Technology Network universities from 7 per cent to 5 per cent.

Unaligned universities dropped from 16 to 11 per cent. Singling out the funding element that includes ERA performance — Threshold 2 — the G08 scored 85 per cent of available funds, IRUA 6 per cent and unaligned universities 5 per cent.

JILL ROWBOTHAM
Call to end ‘elitist attitude’

THE results of a 12-university trial to measure the real-life impact of publicly funded research will be closely monitored by the federal government, which plans to conduct its own feasibility study later this year.

Vicki Thomson, executive director of the Australian Technology Network of universities, said the sector needed to dump its “elitist” attitude towards pure research that considered applied research as second-grade.

“Research, no matter how excellent, that comes without impact for our society is research that is wanting,” Ms Thomson said.

“It’s a message that was also uttered last week by Chunli Bai, president of the Chinese Academy of Sciences. Professor Bai took time to visit the Australian Institute for Bioengineering and Nanotechnology, one of the products of the Smart State and Atlantic Philanthropies partnership that sparked the proliferation of mega high-tech research and industry.

Professor Bai, who was in Australia for a nanotechnology conference in Brisbane and a series of meetings, said while China was second only to the US in research output, much of the quality of that research and the lack of patents stemming from it was a cause for national concern.

He said the Chinese government was concerned not only by the lack of patents, or impact, resulting from that research, but also low levels of industry partnerships.

“The government is looking at reform of research and development,” Professor Bai told the HES. “It is looking at policies to create strong links between science and industry.”

While in Brisbane, Professor Bai was an adviser to the AIBN until he stepped into the top job at the Chinese Academy of Sciences last year.

‘Research, no matter how excellent, that comes without impact is research that is wanting’

VICKI THOMSON
AUSTRALIAN TECHNOLOGY NETWORK
TAFEs doing it tough

JOHN ROSS

WHILE Victorian TAFE budget cuts have dominated the headlines, other states’ public trainers are suffering a similar downturn, according to an analysis of the latest national training figures.

The study by the University of Melbourne’s Leesa Wheelahan found that TAFEs were in trouble in South Australia, Queensland, NSW and the ACT, as well as Victoria.

She found a national decline not only in TAFE market share but also in their enrolments and students, led by Queensland, SA and Victoria.

Dr Wheelahan said the latest national agreement, which qualifies states and territories for extra federal training funding, was “founded on a contradiction”. The agreement requires states to develop “implementation plans” to help them operate in a more competitive environment.

“On one hand it requires states to protect TAFEs,” she said. “On the other, it requires states to introduce policies that will inexorably undermine TAFE.”

Her analysis took into account changes in full-fee income as well as government training funds.

Dr Wheelahan found TAFE student numbers had fallen nationally by 7 per cent last year, eclipsing the 6 per cent fall in Victoria. Student numbers in NSW and Queensland had fallen by 9 per cent.

But private college student numbers had risen 56 per cent nationally last year, driven by increases of 111 per cent in Victoria, 87 per cent in NSW and 32 per cent in Queensland.

TAFEs’ national share of enrolments had fallen to 68 per cent, down from 84 per cent in 2007.

A spokeswoman for federal Tertiary Education Minister Chris Evans said no implementation plans had been finalised. She said the states would not receive payments until the plans were in place.
Pathway to success

the yardstick for unis

AS universities tread their first steps along a newly opened pathway of uncapped student numbers, it has never been more important for them to discover whether they are meeting the expectations of the communities they serve.

Many have described this policy as a bold move, one that drastically changes the orientation and status of the nation’s higher education sector. Others have seen it as a threat to academic standards and scholarly rigour, their catchcry being: open the doors and quality will suffer.

What most commentators overlook, however, is that wider participation is not a radical policy setting, nor is it a new political objective.

The principles of open access to universities and of opportunity based on merit, not status, have been key objectives of successive federal governments, both Coalition and Labor, since the post-war period. While the practical expression of this shared commitment has ebbed and flowed, this rare ideological accord reflects longstanding expectations that Australia’s universities should be the nation’s pre-eminent agents of socioeconomic change.

Government policy and community expectations converge in the belief that attending university is, and should always be, a life-changing experience.

But no objective commentator could argue that a comparison of the performance of a student at an elite and well-resourced private school and one from a public school in a disadvantaged area reflects only their relative academic ability. Nor is it possible to claim that other social, family and economic factors do not affect academic performance or preparation for study at university. Students learn within a system of education in which they are the recipients of what is available. They are also vulnerable to the influences and strictures in their own lives. There is no better measure of the quality of a university than its performance in assisting all students to succeed to graduation irrespective of the level of preparation they have enjoyed.

This year more than 63 per cent of the University of Western Sydney’s incoming student cohort are the first in their immediate family to attend university. Of the total first semester intake, over 23 per cent are classed as being of low socioeconomic status. The Australian Tertiary Admissions Ranking score of these commencing students is diverse, as are their cultural background, social circumstances, political views, life experiences, work commitments and family composition.

At the heart of the debate about widening participation is the reality that, while not all students will have had equal preparation, family support or financial security, each one deserves and should expect that universities provide the best chance for them to succeed.

This is the right that politicians from both major parties have sought to enshrine in our higher education system over the past 65 years.

Importantly, we are enabling countless young Australians to test themselves against their own expectations. This is the measure towards which universities must direct their focus. Australians expect no less.

RHONA HAWKINS

Rhonda Hawkins is acting vice-chancellor at the University of Western Sydney