The leader of the group of the most powerful universities is pushing the government to allow rises of about 25 per cent in tuition fees for students going into high-earning professions, such as business, law and medicine, to offset federal “Scrooge-like” funding.

University of NSW vice-chancellor Fred Hilmer said the government should let universities charge increased fees from students in degrees with high private benefit.

“The impact on these students is significantly ameliorated by the HECS system, which requires repayment of fees only when and if certain income thresholds are reached,” the former Fairfax Media chief and government adviser on competition policy said.

The burden on students could be further offset by scholarships.

Speaking at the National Press Club as chairman of the Group of Eight universities, Professor Hilmer also criticised the government’s new higher-education regulator and “oppressive” red tape.

He issued a call to arms for vice-chancellors, urging them to “say no” to poor government policy in the same way the mining lobby did with its anti-carbon tax television advertisements.

At present there is a limit to how much universities can charge for tuition, and federal Education Minister Chris Evans has ruled out any relaxation of that provision.

Professor Hilmer said selectively raising fees was the only avenue available for plugging the gaps in higher-education funding.

He did not want the government to set a new ceiling but to let the market decide.

“To illustrate the impact, if at UNSW we charged the half of our students who enter well-paid professions a surcharge of 25 per cent of the current HECS payment, an additional $30 million per annum would be raised,” he said.

That $30 million would allow for 250 more staff to be employed, reducing student-staff ratios which average 21:1, and improving the quality of education.

Moderate fee deregulation could “readily create 3000 new jobs at little or no cost to the Commonwealth budget”.

Earlier this year, peak body Universities Australia circulated a consultation paper canvassing support for “fee flexibility”.

The paper, obtained by The Australian Financial Review, asked if vice-chancellors would support a doubling of student fees.

A spokesman for Senator Evans said the new regulator had the “strong support” of universities and as a new entity would take some time to “find its balance”.

Say no to red tape ... Fred Hilmer yesterday.
Trades Hall slams city over state budget cuts

Council hit on TAFE stance

NEELIMA CHOAHAN

THE Ballarat City Council has let down its community and its neighbouring councils by failing to strongly criticise the state government’s TAFE cuts, Ballarat Trades Hall has said.

Ballarat Trades and Labour Council president Brett Edgington’s comments follow Ararat Rural City Council’s decision to pass a motion urging the state government to reverse its $100 million cuts to TAFE funding.

The Ararat council’s motion included writing to the Premier, the Treasurer, the Minister for Higher Education and local members.

It also expressed concerns that the cuts would put up to 1200 jobs at risk and make TAFE unsustainable in small regional areas.

“The recent resolution passed by the Ararat Rural City Council is strongly worded and gets to the point of the damage inflicted on Ararat and its community,” Mr Edgington said.

“It is a pity that the Ballarat City Council has failed to pass a similar strong resolution to support not only its community but also its neighbours.

“The Ballarat council has not only let down its own community but also its neighbouring councils like Ararat, Stawell and Horsham.”

In July, the Ballarat City Council knocked back a motion to request meetings with local members of parliament to discuss the community’s need for skilled workers for future jobs growth.

Ararat Rural City Council chief executive Andrew Evans said support from other councils would put more pressure on the government to roll back the TAFE cuts.

A Ballarat City Council spokesperson said that at its meeting on June 13, the council resolved to call on the state government to review the Victorian Education Training and TAFE funding cuts to the University of Ballarat and recommit to supporting the training and skill needs of the Ballarat community.

“The council also requested an urgent meeting with the Minister for Education to discuss our community’s need for skilled workers for future jobs growth.”

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Aust universities sit on a ‘precipice’

By Dan Harrison

University leader Fred Hilmer has declared Australian universities are on a precipice, underfunded and smothered by regulation, and heading for decline without urgent and dramatic policy change.

Addressing the National Press Club yesterday, Professor Hilmer, the vice-chancellor of the University of NSW, said universities should be free to set their own fees for Australian bachelor degrees.

Currently, universities are free to set their prices for international students and for Australian students in postgraduate courses, but fee levels for local students in undergraduate courses are set by the Commonwealth.

Professor Hilmer – the chairman of the Group of Eight consortium of top research universities which includes the ANU – also flagged a more assertive approach to lobbying by the university sector, which he suggested had been too acquiescent in the face of bad policy.

“I think we’ve got to play in the public policy field a lot more aggressively than we have been,” he said.

“We’re getting close to a time when we’ve got to do pretty much what the mining industry did. Just say no, take out ads, and be absolutely vocal.”

“I don’t think we use the strength of our reputations sufficiently, and I think we’re going to have to, because we’ve got to get this environment changed.”

“I think we are sitting on a precipice.”

He said allowing universities to set their own fees for bachelor degrees for Australian students would allow universities to lower staff-student ratios at little or no cost to the Commonwealth budget.

He said if UNSW was allowed to charge half of the students in courses such as law, business, engineering and medicine just 25 per cent more, this would raise $30 million a year which would allow the uni to employ 250 new staff. These degrees carried “high private benefit” to the students who completed them, and the HECS system would ameliorate the effects of higher fees on poorer students, he said.

Professor Hilmer delivered a withering critique of the Gillard government’s higher education policies, which he described as “a mix of rose-coloured aspirations, oppressive regulation and Scrooge-like funding.”

He said about 20 of Australia’s universities ranked in the global top 400, yet were treated “as if they were fly-by-night ventures rather than respected colleagues of the best universities worldwide,” forced to submit to a “dysfunctional, smothering array of regulation.”

He said he had taken four months for the Gillard government’s universities regulator to approve a new course UNSW wished to offer. Previously, he said, such approvals took one week.

He said while Australian institutions ranked highly in international standings, these were based on past performance. “If we look forward, the picture for Australian universities is not nearly as bright,” he said.

A spokesman for the Tertiary Education Minister, Chris Evans, said the principles which guided the work of its universities regulator had been designed in close consultation with universities and with their strong support.
Michael among most skilled vocational kids

DUBBO College Senior Campus student Michael Townsend is among 500 of the nation's most skilled students who have been recognised for their efforts in vocational education and training in schools.

Acting Minister for School Education Senator Chris Evans, announced the successful recipients of the 2011 Australian Vocational Student Prize and the Prime Minister's Award for Skills Excellence in School.

The Australian Vocational Student Prize recognises students who demonstrate exceptional skills and commitment while completing a Vocational Education and Training in Schools program, or an Australian School-based Apprenticeship.

Winners of the Prime Minister's Award for Skills Excellence in School are selected from the top Australian Vocational Student Prize recipients and are awarded in state and territory, industry and Indigenous categories.

All 500 winners receive $2000 and a certificate recognising their achievements.

Both of these prizes promote and recognise vocational education in schools as a valuable pathway for students. Senator Evans said.
College, TAFE work together

By Jane Ross

GIPPSTAFE and Community College Gippsland are working together to provide as many tertiary and VET courses in South Gippsland as they can.

Community College CEO Paul Wilson told The Star on Friday the two institutes have formed a working party. There have been three meetings at senior management level since early this month.

The spirit of co-operation follows State Government funding cuts to the TAFE sector.

Both the college and GippsTAFE have campuses at Leongatha. GippsTAFE opened a smart new campus in Nerrena Road last year and the college has set up in the old Leongatha Primary School in Horn Street.

The co-operation extends to some sharing of resources and Mr Wilson hasn’t ruled out sharing facilities. The college may pick up some of the hospitality courses GippsTAFE won’t be able to offer next year because of the funding cuts, but there’s no certainty of that.

He said the aim is to offer the courses the community needs and for both the college and GippsTAFE campuses to remain viable, albeit separate businesses.

GippsTAFE is funded by the State Government and the college is a registered not-for-profit training provider. State funding to the college has been reduced too, but Mr Wilson said the college has lower overheads so the impact of less money will hardly be felt.

Mr Wilson said co-operation with GippsTAFE was in line with government expectation that the institutes work together.

Acting GippsTAFE CEO Ian Carroll said such co-operation allied with the Gippsland Tertiary Education Plan. The plan has been actively pursued for years by State Minister for Higher Education and Skills Peter Hall.

Mr Carroll said it’s no longer viable for either private or public providers to run small classes, nor did it make sense for the college and GippsTAFE to compete.

“We look forward to a close relationship and we are mindful of not trashing our respective brands.”

Mr Wilson said courses in horticulture, agriculture, equine, conservation and land management, community services, aged care, youth work, disability, and hair and beauty would not change at the community college.

While there will be some funding reductions in retail, business and some diploma courses, these will still be run.

He expects the working group to meet intensively between now and September when TAFE institutes are expected to report to the State Government about what courses they will be offering next year.

Meanwhile, VFF president Peter Tuohey has given an assurance that Victorian agricultural courses will continue to be offered despite cuts to the TAFE sector.

Mr Tuohey said he was given that good news on Friday by Mr Hall’s office.

Mr Tuohey said Mr Hall’s office had told the VFF the government would increase funding for Certificate III and IV agricultural courses, but there will be a reduction for Certificate II.
STUDENTS, staff and the wider community yesterday joined in a protest against the state government’s $300 million cuts to TAFE funding.

A rally held at the Victoria University Nicholson Street campus in Footscray sent a loud message that the cuts would have a devastating impact on education and training in Melbourne’s west.

The Weekly has reported a number of courses will be slashed, fees will skyrocket and more than 50 jobs will go as Victoria University — the largest education provider in the western suburbs — scrambles to deal with a $32 million funding black hole.

Community development teacher Margarita Windisch, one of the protest’s organisers, said the job losses and course cuts were devastating and would force down quality.

Higher Education and Skills Minister Peter Hall says the cuts are part of government changes to help more people receive training overall.

Western suburbs Greens MP Colleen Hartland says half of Victoria University’s TAFE students are on low incomes.

She used yesterday’s rally to launch a new postcard campaign against the cuts. “The postcards send a message to Premier [Ted] Baillieu that TAFE education changes lives for the better and that $300 million in funding cuts affecting 80 per cent of courses is unacceptable to us,” she said.

The Save TAFE postcards can be found at vicmps.greens.org.au/SaveTAFEpostcard

Benjamin Millar

Devastating: Margarita Windisch, addressing the rally, says the cuts will force down quality.
Hands off TAFE, crowd declares

BY BENJAMIN MILLAR

TAFE education changes lives for the better, and that $300 million in funding cuts affecting 80 per cent of courses is unacceptable.

— Greens MP Colleen Hartland

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Devastating: Margarita Windisch, addressing the rally, says the cuts will reduce quality.

Picture: Michael Copp
Swinburne’s gloves off

By KATH GANNAWAY

SWINBURNE University has dropped its softly-softly approach to the reasons behind the decision to close the university, laying the blame on government funding.

Local State Government MP Christine Fyffe however has laid the blame on poor management and self-interest, saying “Federal and state governments provide funding and Swinburne alone decides how to spend these funds.”

The announcement that Lilydale Campus would close from 1 July next year because of the non-viability of TAFE courses, and declining demand for higher education courses at the campus rated only two lines, 15 paragraphs into the Swinburne press release on 6 July.

Universities are reliant on government funding and have traditionally been loath to burn their funding bridges by being overtly critical of government policy.

Last week however, as pressure was put on the university board to justify their decision, Vice-chancellor Linda Kristjanson in written responses to the Mail expanded on the press-release two-liner.

She said the decision was driven by external circumstances identifying the $35 million budget impact on the viability of TAFE courses and the change this year to a competitive funding system for higher education which she said had led to a significant decline in demand.

Ms Kristjanson said the new TAFE funding arrangements had required a thorough re-examination of areas that were previously being run both profitably and sustainably.

Answering the criticism of the loss of the very students Swinburne Lilydale was set up to cater for, and the tourism and hospitality leaders have identified as being needed to address critical skills shortages in the region, she said the government’s reduced subsidy meant many popular tourism and hospitality courses were reduced to as little at $1.50 a student contact hour.

“By comparison, most trades are paid at more than $10 a student contact hour,” she said.

“We can no longer offer these courses at Lilydale or at any of our other campuses under the new funding arrangements.”

Mrs Fyffe however said the majority of the Lilydale campus was not TAFE.

She said university enrolments at Lilydale had stagnated over the last six years and that Swinburne’s profit was down long before the government made the TAFE funding changes.

“Since removing the vice-chancellor from this campus to Hawthorn in 2006 there has been a very obvious lack of interest by Swinburne in the Lilydale campus.”

Ms Fyffe said it was important that Lilydale had a higher education facility and added she would continue to work with Yarra Ranges Council and the Higher Education minister “to find a way forward”.
Ag TAFE courses to continue

THE State Government has given assurances agricultural TAFE courses will continue, despite cuts made to the TAFE sector in the May budget.

Victorian Farmers Federation president Peter Tuohey received the assurances at a meeting last week with the Office of the Minister for Higher Education Skills, Nationals upper house leader Peter Hall.

Mr Tuohey said it was reassuring the government intended to increase funding for students undertaking study in Certificate 3 and 4 ag courses, but unfortunate Certificate 2 funding would be reduced.
Hilmer hits at funding and red tape hurting unis

Dan Harrison

THE university leader Fred Hilmer has declared Australian universities are on a precipice, underfunded and smothered by regulation, and heading for decline without urgent and dramatic policy change.

Addressing the National Press Club yesterday, Professor Hilmer, the vice-chancellor of the University of NSW, said universities should be free to set their own fees for Australian bachelor degrees. They are now free to set prices for international students and for Australian students in postgraduate courses, but fee levels for local students in undergraduate courses are set by the Commonwealth.

Professor Hilmer – the chairman of the Group of Eight consortium of top research universities, which also includes Sydney, Melbourne and Monash – also flagged a more assertive approach to lobbying by the university sector, which he suggested had been too acquiescent in the face of bad policy.

“...Fred Hilmer is critical of education policies.
Unis hit by reform red tape: Hilmer

JULIE HARE
HIGHER EDUCATION EDITOR

THREE years of reform of Australia’s universities has left them drowning in red tape, crippled from funding shortages and struggling against an incoherent research policy, UNSW vice-chancellor Fred Hilmer told the National Press Club yesterday.

Professor Hilmer said universities were treated like “fly-by-nighters” under a new regulatory regime that was so dysfunctional the University of NSW had to prove it owned its buildings and had a library and teaching spaces to get just one new diploma approved.

That approval process took four months instead of one week and is valid for just five years.

“Meddling in decision-making of what have historically been autonomous, self-accrediting organisations … if not stopped, will be a costly mistake,” Professor Hilmer said.

He said over-zealous regulation and red tape was strangling innovation and diversity while adding costs with no discernible benefit.

Professor Hilmer said if he were minister for education he would deregulate undergraduate fees and adopt a long-term national research strategy, as well as cutting red tape and compliance.

“We treat our universities as if they were fly-by-night ventures rather than respected colleagues of the best universities worldwide.”

Chief Scientist Ian Chubb told The Australian that while he was vice-chancellor of the Australian National University he had advocated for “a national regulator with teeth”. Instead, the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency had become “just a mouthful of teeth and nothing else”.

But Tertiary Education Minister Chris Evans said TEQSA had been developed in close consultation with university bosses.

“TEQSA is new and as such will take time to find its balance,” Senator Evans said, adding that he encouraged universities to “engage strongly with TEQSA to help it develop approaches that respond to diversity”.

See video of Julie Hare interviewing Fred Hilmer
www.theaustralian.com.au