THE CHAIR

Uni red tape stifling our success story

By FRED HILMER

WHAT would you think of a nation that had a really successful area of activity but so regulated and constrained the activity that its full potential was not realised, and its competitive position was threatened?

The right answer of course is "not much", but that is the story of universities in Australia today. Universities are an Australian success story. About 20 of our 40 or so universities are ranked in the top 400 worldwide. By way of comparison, only eight Australian firms are in the Fortune 500. Students from around the world flock here to obtain world-class qualifications. Education is now our major non-resource export. At the same time, our domestic students overwhelmingly obtain an education that underpins a personally satisfying and productive life, with great community benefits.

Within our universities there are plenty of "spires", high points of prestige, and publicity, that underpin the research and technology that provides economic, industrial and community benefits.

Yet for years we have been busy constructing what is now a dysfunctional, smothering array of regulation. We treat our universities as if they were fly-by-night ventures rather than respected colleagues of the best universities worldwide. And where in recent years universities have received more funding in total (reflecting welcome increases in participation), funding per student continues to decline, and our dependence on international student fees continues to rise. In business parlance, we are milking an area of social and economic strength rather than developing and investing.

If the situation is as bad as I have outlined, why have our rankings continued to be so strong? The answer is that university rankings are backward looking, reflecting work done 10, 20 or even 50 years ago rather than current performance. Nobel prizes, which strongly influence rankings, are usually awarded for work done many years earlier. Barry Marshall's discovery of the bacteria that cause ulcers was in the early 1980s, over 20 years before his Nobel prize. Citations and publications in top journals, another key ranking factor, also reflect work done many years ago.

If we look forward, the picture for Australian universities is not nearly as bright. US and UK universities, aided by currency movements, are aggressively recruiting international students. Our Asian neighbours are also developing first-rate institutions that underpin the research and technology that provides economic, industrial and community benefits.

We got to this position largely because of the inability of bureaucratic models to deal with complexity and change, coupled with a lack of understanding of universities by policymakers. To make matters worse, we have had rapid turnover of education ministers and reorganisations of the bureaucracy.

We, the leaders of universities, have no one to blame but ourselves as poor advocates for good policies. The instinctive reaction of vice-chancellors to bad policy, such as is reflected in the operations of TEQSA (Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency) and our national funding models, is to say "let's see if we can work with government to limit the damage." The required reaction, in my view, is "just say no!" and give compelling reasons for why not.

How then can we get out of this situation? We need to stop pretending that the university system is something that it is not. The standout pretence to which we pay lip service in public, though rarely in private, is that all universities are the same.

This fetish with sameness limits the benefits that universities could provide. Our students aren't all the same. Industrial and research challenges aren't all the same. Rather than sameness, we need differentiation. Differentiation means that a less academically gifted student learns in an environment conducive to successful learning. Differentiation means that gifted students are taken to the frontiers of knowledge. Differentiation means that gifted students have access to leading fundamental research.

Professor Hilmer is vice-chancellor of the University of NSW and chairman of the Group of Eight. This is an edited extract from a speech to the National Press Club last week.

"We treat our universities like fly-by-night ventures."
Unis: let the market decide

With universities demanding more money to cater for increasing student numbers, the federal government is trumpeting an Ernst & Young report, released yesterday, which says that despite all the other pressures, per-head funding for students in higher education has increased. However, instead of channeling more funds to universities, the government could do more for the sector by abolishing the regulations constraining the proper pricing of its products.

If government price controls on courses were loosened or even dropped, universities could charge more for the popular subjects, with good jobs waiting for graduates, such as law, medicine, business and dentistry.

One counter to those suggested reforms, raised again by the University of NSW’s vice-chancellor and chairman of the Group of Eight Universities, Fred Hilmer, at a National Press Club function in Canberra last week is that not all the jobs in medicine and law are well paid. However, education remains a scarce resource and failure to price it properly means that it will be misused, or the market will be distorted in other ways.

Ensuring that all Australians have a chance at university education a worthwhile pursuit has been a hallmark of Labor policy in general and that of federal Tertiary Education Minister Chris Evans in particular. But emphasising inclusiveness above other considerations implies lower standards.

Letting the market offer a range of options still means the bulk of students will be educated to satisfactory standards, but it will also permit the emergence of specialist providers, including elite private universities with very high standards, along the lines of Harvard and Yale in the US.

Professor Hilmer estimates that if his university charged students studying to enter the better paid professions a surcharge of 25 per cent more than the current higher education contribution scheme payment, it would raise $30 million a year. That is enough to hire 250 staff, greatly improving the staff-student ratio at no cost to the commonwealth budget.

There are risks in deregulation, as the Gillard government has shown in introducing a voucher-style system for vocational training in Victoria, with the system running almost $500 million over budget in the past financial year. Price signals in a deregulated market could be muted because students can defer fees via HECS. The government has adopted one useful reform recommended by the 2008 Bradley review of higher education — dropping caps on student numbers at universities. It should now permit the universities to charge more and let the market decide how education resources should be allocated.
NSW may get strict on student teachers

Michaela Whitbourn and Joanna Mather

The NSW Coalition government is looking at limiting the number of people studying teaching at university to boost the quality of graduates, in a challenge to federal Labor’s move to lift restrictions on university places.

In a discussion paper by NSW Education Minister Adrian Piccoli to be released today, the state government says entry requirements to university teaching courses could be raised to ensure the “best and brightest” are attracted to the profession.

“There’s no reason why we can’t create the best education profession in the world,” Mr Piccoli said. “We do want to also lead Australia in terms of this kind of reform.”

Universities have been criticised for low entry requirements for education degrees. Teaching attracted the highest proportion of applicants with an Australian Tertiary Admission Rank — a national score used to rank and admit school leavers to courses — of below 50 this year.

After the Bradley review of higher education in 2008, Canberra uncapped the number of student places in courses, leading to a lowering of entry scores.

Mr Piccoli said the potential changes were “not designed to suit teachers, it’s not designed to suit universities”.

“This is a reform designed to suit students,” he said.

The discussion paper, which is open for submissions until November 2, suggests introducing a minimum ATAR score for teaching students, or limiting the number of work experience places in schools. All teaching students in Australia must complete a practical placement, and 18,000 places are required in NSW each year.

Mr Piccoli said NSW had no “direct control over universities and who they enrol”, but public and private schools could exert some control by limiting practical places.

“The medical profession does it,” he said.

Patrick Lee, chief executive of the NSW Institute of Teachers which oversees the accreditation of public school teachers in the state, said there was an oversupply of teaching graduates nationally.

“A lot of them never teach and [they have] low ATAR scores,” he said. He added that no state limited practical placements but the desirability of doing so was becoming apparent.

The discussion paper says the number of students admitted to study teaching in Singapore is capped and this has created “vigor competition” for places.

Finland and Korea also restricted access to the teaching profession to maintain teacher quality.

Business Council of Australia chief executive Jennifer Westacott said Australia was slipping behind high-performing East Asian nations and NSW could learn from school systems in those countries.
Poor marks given for student funding

Joanna Mather

Student funding is no better in real terms than 17 years ago and other countries are doing a better job at supporting higher education, the former head of Universities Australia says.

“Labor has done quite well, but could do better,” said economics professor and former Universities Australia chief Glenn Withers.

As revealed in The Australian Financial Review on Monday, an independent report commissioned by the government found funding per student will be almost $2000 higher in 2013, at $21,488, as a result of reforms to higher education under Labor.

The changes have included abolishing caps on place numbers and higher indexation of government grants to universities. Tertiary Education Minister Chris Evans released the report to counter criticism about under-funding of universities.

Last week, University of NSW vice-chancellor Fred Hilmer told the National Press Club that overall funding to universities had increased to accommodate thousands of new students entering the system, but support on a per-head basis was declining.

Dr Withers said both Professor Hilmer and Senator Evans were right. In nominal terms, funding per student had risen, but in real terms spending per head had still not reached the same level as the last peak, in 1995.

“We have Hilmer as a glass-half-empty man and the minister as a glass-half-full person,” Dr Withers said.

“Each is correct, but selective in the numbers they use to support their view.”

Since big new funding injections from the commonwealth were unlikely, Professor Hilmer said universities should be allowed to charge increased fees for courses such as business, law, engineering and medicine because graduates entering those professions could expect “high private benefit” in the form of good salaries.

If, for example, students doing those degrees at UNSW were charged an extra 25 per cent, an additional $30 million would be available to employ staff and reduce class sizes.

Not all vice-chancellors agree with Professor Hilmer, and peak body Universities Australia has yet to release a formal policy on the issue.

Vice-chancellors attended a workshop on Monday at which fees and the need for other types of investment were discussed.

Universities Australia chief executive Belinda Robinson said no consensus had been reached but a policy paper was due by the end of the year.

Innovative Research Universities executive director Conor King said higher indexation had made the biggest difference to budgets.

“But it doesn’t mean things don’t remain a challenge for universities,” he said. “The previous indexation was pulling us backwards, the current is keeping pace.”

Editorial, page 54
MP opens 28 units for health students

BY JACK BAKER

La Trobe University’s Albury-Wodonga campus yesterday unveiled its new $3.4 million student residences.

Two buildings have been built specifically for students enrolled in the university’s Rural Health School. They will sleep 28 students, taking the campus’ total number of residential units to about 100.

Federal parliamentary secretary for higher education Sharon Bird officially opened the residences in front of a small crowd.

“These are great facilities and better than having people dispersed all over in private accommodation,” Ms Bird said.

She said the Zauner Construction-built accommodation had been built with students’ study needs in mind.

“As with most university accommodation the single room capacity with shared common areas is important, particularly if you have young people coming from more remote areas,” Ms Bird said.

“Affordable and appropriate student accommodation makes a crucial difference to a student’s chances of graduating. Good accommodation was also important for encouraging students to stay in regional areas.

“If you have a cohort of people who create friendships then they all want to stay in the region and you create a professional connection,” she said.

Campus head Professor Lin Crase said the new accommodation would hopefully lure students from bigger cities and get them to stay.

“The reality is, all rental property is markedly cheaper in a place like Albury-Wodonga than it is in somewhere like Melbourne,” Professor Crase said.

“So even though these are brand new facilities the rent that the university will charge will reflect the current environment of Albury-Wodonga and not Melbourne.

“It’s just another financial benefit for students who choose to study locally.”

The facility was funded by the government’s $59.5 million Education Investment Fund.

Federal Labor MP Sharon Bird inspect the new residences for 28 students at La Trobe University’s Albury-Wodonga campus with Professor Lin Crase. The federally funded development takes the number of on-campus units to 100. Picture: MATTHEW SMITHWICK
ANU has winning down to a science

By Emma Macdonald

The Australian National University has scooped the pool of Australian Research Council Laureate Fellowships, winning nearly $12 million and four out of 17 ARC Laureate Fellowships – more than any other Australian university.

Canberra ecologist Professor David Lindenmayer will receive around $2 million to bring on a team of young up-and-coming ecologists to join him in his ground-breaking work in surrogate ecology using particular species or landscapes as an indicator of what’s happening more widely. Professors Sue O’Connor and Tessa Morris-Suzuki, as well as Eelco Rohling from the University of Southampton, who will move to ANU to take up his research, also received fellowships.

These were announced yesterday by Federal Science and Research Minister Chris Evans as a $47 million boost to Australian research.

ANU vice-chancellor Professor Ian Young said the results were cause for celebration across campus.

“Today’s results build on a culture of research excellence that is based firmly in the university’s commitment to attracting and nurturing world-class staff,” Professor Young said. “I heartily congratulate all the ARC Laureate Fellows announced today, but especially the four researchers who will conduct their work at ANU.”

Professor O’Connor, an expert in archaeological research, was also named the 2012 Kathleen Fitzpatrick Australian Laureate Fellow. This fellowship is awarded to a highly-ranked woman from the humanities, arts and social sciences, and carries with it an ambassadorial role to promote women in research.

Her recent work discovering the world’s oldest evidence of deep-sea fishing rewrote the history books about how hunter-gatherer societies in the southern hemisphere functioned more than 40,000 years ago. Her project will look at “Understanding modern human dispersal, adaptation and behaviour en route to Australia”.

Professor Morris-Suzuki is widely recognised as a leading expert on recent and modern Japanese history, as well as conflict and resolution on the Korea peninsula and migration issues across the region. Her project will aim to develop a new framework for observing emerging forms of political activity in the region.

Professor Rohling’s research project “Sea Level Change and Climate Sensitivity” will look at past sea-level and ice-volume change and how rapidly sea levels might adjust through climate change.

Professor Lindenmayer, whose family moved to Canberra when he was nine, studied at Canberra High School and Hawker College before undertaking a science degree, PhD and Doctor of Science at ANU.

Crediting long family trips into the Australian wilderness and his father’s passion for birdwatching for sparking his interest in ecology, Professor Lindenmayer said he was stunned to receive the fellowship.

He would use the money to bring on several talented post-doctoral students to join him in his research, saying, “One of my big goals in life is to help build the careers of bright young people, nurture other young scientists, and keep our best talent in Australia.” He is considered a pre-eminent voice in conservation and biodiversity research with his work on surrogates leading to more effective management and monitoring of environments and biodiversity.
Student concern at university fee

University of Tasmania students have been hit with a new fee since they returned to classes this semester.

The student services and amenities fee was legislated by the federal Labor government in 2011 to try to overturn the demise and loss of funding to student services and clubs under the former Liberal government’s voluntary student unionism.

Students will now pay $131.50 a semester, or $263 a year, regardless of whether they attend university classes on campus or not.

We asked four people how they thought the fee would affect the university.

**University deputy vice-chancellor students and education**
**Professor David Sadler**

At the heart of higher education is the pursuit of intellectual excellence.

But it is important that university life is engaging and dynamic both inside and outside the classroom.

The purpose of the SSAF is to enrich campus life for students, according to what they most value.

Surveys of our students, by the university and the Tasmanian University Union, directly informed how SSAF would be allocated when it was reintroduced by the government.

Various student discounts, grants to support student club travel, student publications and career mentoring programs are just a few of the initiatives that will benefit.

It is our belief SSAF will allow campus life to further flourish, by giving students services and activities renewed vigour and we look forward to continuing to work closely with our students and their representatives to build more great experiences at UTAS.

**Tasmanian University Union president**
**Saleh BinTalib**

The SSAF will give us an opportunity to inject much needed funds to further enhance the on-campus student experience.

Student welfare services can also be expanded to ensure that students are looked after in times of need and do not fall through the cracks.

On-campus study areas and non-academic facilities can also see upgrades that make them top notch facilities — all of which will enhance the student experience.

**University student**
**Mitchell Newton**

The SSAF has already impacted on student morale before its implementation.

The university was exceptionally poor in informing the student body of SSAF, therefore many students are outraged by the fee.

Secondly, the university has not justified to students why it is charging the maximum amount legislated.

Furthermore, when identifying projects the SSAF would be spent on, the university has been exceptionally vague in describing what it will fund — not confidence inspiring.

SSAF, however, does have the ability to bring back many services lost on campus from voluntary student unionism and would go a long way to revitalising our campuses and improving the student experience to continue to grow the university as a competitive choice for entrants.

However, the university risks further alienating its students if it does not engage them in the decision-making process, achieve greater transparency and tangibly show us that we get our money’s worth.
THE abolition of student union fees in 2006 led to dramatic losses of student services across the nation, particularly in the areas of health, welfare and advocacy.

The 2011 Higher Education Legislation Amendment appeared at first blush to be a welcome restoration of resources for student.

The victory was tempered by the fact that the SSAF was to be charged by, and payable to, the university.

Ownership of the funds allows the university to control how and where they are spent.

The NTEU believes that the Tasmanian University Union should have an independent voice and be able to play an active role in directing the spending of the money.

The university has established the consultative arrangements (as required by the legislation) to determine the allocation of the funds, and we hope that these arrangements lead to more certainty for the TUU and improved services for students across the university.
Fee free training promoted

STATE government minister Tom Kenyon was in Port Lincoln on Friday to let industry leaders know more about the fee free and funded training courses available to people living on Eyre Peninsula.

Employment, Higher Education and Skills Minister Tom Kenyon said the State Government's Skills for All reforms of vocational education and training aim to lift skill levels, lift workplace participation and increase productivity by offering training for existing workers and those trying to break into the workforce.

“If you're just starting out, want training to help you get a job, or if you're thinking about improving your skills to gain a promotion or changing your career, there are opportunities for you,” Mr Kenyon said.

About 400 training courses on offer are free, including every Certificate I and Certificate II course, as well as accredited reading, writing, numeracy and computing courses and courses determined as priorities for the state.

About 700 Certificate III and IV courses and 400 Diploma and Advanced Diploma courses are also being funded, including 600 courses never funded before.

“Students at Diploma level and above also will be eligible to defer their course fee payments until they get a job and start earning under the VET Fee Help scheme,” Mr Kenyon said.

For more details go to www.skills.sa.gov.au or call 1800 506 266.

VISIT: Employment, Higher Education and Skills Minister Tom Kenyon (right) was in Port Lincoln last week to promote training and upskilling. He is pictured at the Port Lincoln TAFE Campus looking through the engineering facilities with TAFE educational training services manager Anna Papazoglov, metal fabrications lecturer Terry Sibenaler and manufacturing and engineering education manager Lyndon Giles.
Kenyon endorses Skills for All

Minister for Employment, Higher Education and Skills

Tom Kenyon visited Whyalla on Thursday to endorse the Skills for All program.

Through Skills for All, 14,000 people living in Whyalla, Port Pirie and the Far North have the opportunity to sign up for hundreds of fee-free and funded training courses on offer through the state government’s Skills for All reforms of vocational education and training.

Mr Kenyon said the Skills for All program was aimed at increasing skill levels, lifting workplace participation and increasing productivity by offering training for existing workers and those trying to break into the workforce.

“If you’re just starting out, want training to help you get a job or if you’re thinking about improving your skills to gain a promotion or changing your career, there are opportunities for you,” he said.

“About 400 training courses on offer are free, including every certificate I and certificate II course, as well as accredited reading, writing and numeracy and computing courses and courses determined as priorities for the state.

“About 700 certificate III and IV courses and 400 diploma and advanced diploma courses are also being funded, including 600 courses never funded before.

“Students at diploma level and above will be eligible to defer their course fee payments until they get a job and start earning under the VET Fee Help scheme.

“Under these changes, more people will be able to get into training with the provider of their choice.”

Mr Kenyon said the Skills for All reforms would have significant impacts on the training needs of the region where the mining, retail and health and community services sectors required skilled workers.

“About 90 mining related qualifications will be funded under Skills for All and of these 23 are fee-free at the certificate I and II level,” Mr Kenyon said.

To find out more about career choices and training options through Skills for All visit www.skills.sa.gov.au or call the infoline on 1800 506 266.