Ballarat University is leading a push to bring the majority of regional Victoria's TAFE institutes under one umbrella named after former prime minister Sir Robert Menzies.

The university proposes to join with six other TAFE institutes to continue offering courses that are facing closure following state government funding cuts. The network of TAFE institutes would include Ballarat, Central Gippsland, Goulburn Ovens, Wodonga, Bendigo Regional, Sunraysia and east Gippsland's Advance TAFE, spread across 28 campuses.

Ballarat University vice-chancellor David Battersby said he would meet the state government next week to discuss the "Menzies Affiliation" network. It has also been referred to as "Menzies University" but Professor Battersby stopped short of describing the alliance as a merger. It would take the former prime minister's name because he was born in regional Victoria.

Professor Battersby said the project could save some TAFE courses from closure.

Ballarat University will lose about $20 million in state government funding and will cut back up to 40 courses, including some horticulture, hospitality and business qualifications.

Recent state government funding cuts have accelerated plans to form the regional alliance in which institutes would share responsibility for delivering TAFE courses.

Professor Battersby said the colleges would retain their autonomy but join a collective with shared resources to provide courses each institute could not afford to teach alone.

He said the university began working with the TAFE institutes to offer degrees about two years ago.

The university then received $25.8 million from the federal government to help students in regional Victoria obtain degrees.

National Tertiary Education Union Victoria secretary Colin Long said he supported strengthening vocational training in regional Victoria, but stretched budgets would make it difficult.

"Making it work in a context of major budget cuts to TAFE is going to be a real challenge," he said. "All of the institutions suggested are financially stressed."

The Victorian TAFE Association estimates the state government has slashed $290 million from the TAFE sector, resulting in reduced funding for some courses.

But the state government has repeatedly said it would invest an extra $1 billion over the next four years in training that leads to "meaningful jobs" that support the state's economy.

Advance TAFE chief executive Peter Heilbuth said he hoped the proposal would save some courses that individual institutes could not afford to offer.

Meanwhile, Australia's universities will go into the red in the next few years if they are not allowed to set their own fees, the head of the Group of Eight institutions has warned. "If there's no growth [from international students], and the money we get for the Commonwealth students is limited to inflation, and we continue to have wage rises and other cost increases that soak that up, then in three years' time we'll have an accumulated deficit of close to $100 million," said Go8 chairman Professor Fred Hilmer, referring to UNSW, of which he is vice-chancellor.

The Grattan Institute think tank yesterday recommended that students pay a higher contribution to their education costs and governments redirect money currently used to subsidise higher education places.
Talking up the place next door

Many Australians can’t see beyond budget holidays in Bali, but academics say we must learn to engage Indonesians in their language. By Benjamin Preiss.

It is a dire prediction that comes with a warning that we are slamming the door on our biggest and strongest neighbour. Indonesian language studies will virtually disappear from Australian universities within 10 years, if the projections of those who are trying to nurture the subject prove accurate.

The language would be taught only in Victoria and the Northern Territory, according to a recent report by Murdoch University. But even in Victoria, the number of students studying the language is in rapid decline.

The report’s author, south-east Asian studies professor David Hill, says Australians are happy to holiday on the Indonesian island of Bali, but many see no need to establish cultural connections with the nation. “I think there is a profound unwillingness on the part of most Australians to see beyond the cheap beer and beaches,” he says.

Yet Indonesia has seldom been so central to Australia’s domestic politics, with debates over asylum seekers and the treatment of drug smugglers bringing the complex relationship between the two countries into focus.

And though Australia’s economic relationship with China dominates headlines, Indonesia’s fast-emerging economy is generating a rising middle-class with an appetite for education and travel.

The World Bank describes Indonesia — the world’s largest Muslim country with a population of 242 million — as a “confident middle-income country”. Asian culture experts say it has never been more important for Australians to better appreciate Indonesian culture.

The Murdoch University report shows Australia’s economic relationship with Indonesia will suffer unless the language decline is reversed. It says Indonesia is Australia’s 13th-largest trading partner but its economy is projected to boom in coming years, with growth levels surpassing those of China, India and Brazil. Its gross domestic product is now growing at an annual rate of about 6.5 per cent.

Professor Hill says many Australians fail to appreciate Indonesia’s vibrant and fascinating subcultures, its thriving film industry, underground music scenes and major jazz festivals. “It would be really fabulous if Indonesia could project these things more effectively.”

In his report, Professor Hill recommends that the federal government and opposition make an “explicit public commitment” to Indonesian language studies. It also calls on both parties to indicate how much funding they would commit to teaching Indonesian in Australia.

Advocates for Indonesian studies are startled by the waning interest in their area. Just 1067 students were enrolled in university Indonesian courses in 2010, compared with 1686 in 2001.

Victoria had the most students studying Indonesian in 2010, with 455 — down from 635 in 2001. NSW was second with 140 students in 2010.

But the decline in Indonesian studies appears set to continue in Victoria. Earlier this year La Trobe University announced plans to restructure its humanities department and stop offering some courses, including Indonesian. The university had just 23 students starting the language this year. Monash, Melbourne and Deakin are among the remaining Australian universities offering Indonesian.

Professor Hill believes a national strategy could help to reverse the decline. His study recommends that Australia’s education ministers set up a taskforce dedicated to promoting Indonesian teaching in schools and universities.

A spokeswoman for federal Tertiary Education Minister Chris Evans says the government is committed to strengthening the relationship between Australia and Indonesia through “cultural literacy and language proficiency”.

“At the university level, we are ensuring students wishing to expand their knowledge of Asian languages have the opportunity to do so by uncapping places for all domestic undergraduate students,” she says.

But Indonesia Institute chairman Ross Taylor says Australians generally have an outdated view of Indonesian society and this has undermined efforts to encourage local students to learn the language.

Australians tend to associate Indonesia with negative images, such as convicted drug smuggler Schapelle Corby’s imprisonment and people smuggling, he says. “Australi-
Schapelle Corby’s imprisonment has coloured perceptions of Indonesia.

ROSS TAYLOR, Indonesia Institute

We've got to really start to get the message out there about how important Indonesian is going to be to us.
Institutes may join forces

Uni talks of super TAFE due to cuts

NEELIMA CHOAHAN

THE University of Ballarat is in talks with six TAFE institutes to form a super TAFE as early as next year.

The move would see the University of Ballarat collaborate with Sunraysia TAFE, GippsTAFE, Advance TAFE, Wodonga TAFE, GoTAFE and Bendigo TAFE to offer Vocational Education and Training (VET) subjects.

University of Ballarat’s vice chancellor Professor David Battersby said the move may be an opportunity to rebuild the cash-strapped VET sector in the future.

“Tied like to think in the longer terms, particularly around VET, there is an opportunity to rebuild and to offer some of those programs which we had to cease or which are projected to cease as a result of TAFE funding cuts (in the recent state budget),” Professor Battersby said.

“There might be an opportunity to reinvigorate some of these programs by having large numbers of students across regional Victoria.”

Named the Menzies Alliance, the group would cover 80 per cent of regional Victoria.

Professor Battersby told The Courier the university was presenting a paper to the state government next month about the proposal.

He said the partnership was an extension of a 2009 arrangement which saw the six TAFE institutes offer University of Ballarat undergraduate degree programs at their campuses.

Last year, the university received $29.1 million from both the federal and state governments to implement the program. But, Professor Battersby said, the latest move did not constitute a merger.

“At it is across six regional institutes but not all the (28) campuses will be offering the programs (because some of those campuses are relatively small),” Professor Battersby said.

to offer VET programs collectively was driven in part by the $300 million cuts in funding

Australian Education Union, TAFE and Adult provision vice president Greg Barclay said they would need to have a closer look at the details.

“We need to know how it is being offered, who is being employed to do it and what industrial arrangements they are employed under,” Mr Barclay said.

A union delegation, he said, was set to meet with University of Ballarat officials next week to discuss the Menzies project.

“We are hoping the meeting will shed more light on the project,” he said.

“And that we will be given an opportunity to give feedback on any proposal that they may have.”
We should debate student assistance

Last month, it was revealed that the total debt owed on university student loans had reached $23 billion, the highest level since the Higher Education Contribution Scheme was introduced in the late 1980s – and that it was likely to continue rising by about $2 billion a year.

The Higher Education Loan Program (as it is now known) can be accessed by any Australian unable to meet their university fees up front. It is interest free, and requires graduates to start repaying their loans only when they begin earning about $49,000 a year. It’s estimated, however, that 22 per cent of that $23 billion will never be repaid, as some students inevitably move overseas or die, or fail to meet the income threshold as a result of starting a family or failing to find work.

Quibbles about the billions of dollars invested in the HELP scheme have been relatively few over the years since it is generally accepted that higher education benefits not just individuals but society more generally through increased skills, lower crime rates, and better health. But the Grattan Institute, a Melbourne public policy think tank, believes that taxpayer subsidies for most degrees could be pruned by up to 50 per cent without acting as a disincentive to rates of participation, and that this would potentially save governments up to $3 billion a year by 2016-17. The report, Graduate Winners? asserts that fee increases would have only a limited effect on student demand, since repayment of loans is income-contingent, and that even if students had to pay the full cost of their degree, many would be much better off financially than if they had not been to university.

Controversially, the report argues that only those courses with a demonstrated public benefit (such as nursing or engineering) are really deserving of public subsidies, and that tuition rates for disciplines such as medicine, and dentistry ought to be raised to take account of the fact that they generate the most in graduate earnings.

In these straitened economic times, and with the Commonwealth looking to trim public expenditure where it can, the Grattan Institute report will doubtless be read with interest by policy-makers. It is, however, weak on what constitutes “public benefit”. An orthodontist’s tax contributions over a lifetime will greatly exceed that of a performance artist, a marine biologist or medical researcher, but to suggest the subsidised education of the latter confers little or no public benefit is drawing a long bow.

Nevertheless, much of what it says, particularly with regard to using subsidies to bolster the number of graduates in areas of demonstrated skills shortages – and requiring top graduate earners to contribute more to their education – is worthy of wider debate.
FOR twenty years, Year 12 students have sat the Queensland Core Skills tests and for two decades, the system has not once been reviewed.

Education Minister John-Paul Langbroek announced the need for a review a couple of months ago, but no movement has been made to put that plan into action.

He said many students were opting for Vocational Education and Training subjects, which sparked the need for a review.

“In the last few years we’ve seen a reduction in the number of students studying straight OP calculated subjects versus the growing number of students choosing VET,” Mr Langbroek said.

“Whatever system Queensland uses must reflect the needs of students once they leave school.

“No decisions have been made around reviewing or changing the current state system.”

Mr Langbroek said, under instruction from Premier Campbell Newman, he was working to identify the best educational methodologies and outcomes for Queenslanders.
Student scientists hit the streets

Students and teachers of Gresford Public School have secured $2000 from the Australian Government to take science to the streets as part of National Science Week in 2012.

The event is a partnership with Dungog High School and will be held in Dowling Street, Dungog on Thursday, August 16.

Earlier in the year the Minister for Science and Research Senator Chris Evans announced the school’s project as one of 38 funded to deliver science events between August 11 and 19.

Gresford Public School principal Pauline Mitchell said the project has been coordinated in collaboration with Dr Lesley Wright from Main Creek, the scientist in residence at Gresford Public School through the CSIRO Scientists in Schools program.

“Dr Wright said the subjects covered in the demonstrations will include robotics, electricity, earth science, DNA and genetics, UV light, microscope demonstrations of bugs and plants, how to raise chickens and much more, including possibly competitions and prizes.

“The demonstrations will commence at 10am and continue until 12 noon and parents and the general public are very welcome to be involved,” she said.

“The stalls will extend from the IGA to the CWA on the eastern side of Dowling Street.”

Special guest at the event will be Ben Newsome from Fizzics Education in Sydney who will present his Big Science Big Fun Show.

Ben is a qualified science teacher and former environmental consultant, children’s summer camp director and CSIRO education team member.

His company has received praise and awards for its work in science education and is now a regular at prestige events such as the Australian Science Festival, Science in the City and Science in the Suburbs.

Ben’s demonstrations will be held in the CWA Hall from 10.30 to 11.30am and there will be seating available for the general public.

Organisers have also arranged for a big screen to be set up in Chillbillies Café next door so that there is potential for more people to enjoy the activities as well as have a morning coffee.

The show will also be video-recorded so that it can be used in future education initiatives and students in the area will be able to benefit from the day for years to come.

Dungog Council’s economic development and tourism co-ordinator Ivan Skaines said this is another example of shire-wide collaboration.

“It is great to see Gresford Public School and Dungog High School working together to deliver an event that will benefit students and teachers from other local schools as well as the general public,” he said.

For further details of the event contact Pauline Mitchell at Gresford Public School on 4938 9304.
• Dr Lesley Wright with Gresford students Jack Hill and Katerina Lawrence.
TAFE cuts will keep hurting Mr Baillieu

OFTEN wonder if the Baillieu Government understands why cutting $300 million from TAFE has been met with widespread condemnation. From peak unions to local councils to the Prime Minister, students to university academics, and farmers to tradesmen, there is unanimous agreement the decision is wrong.

Today TAFE students and their parents from around the state will meet Chris Evans, the federal Minister for Tertiary Education, to air their concerns about the cuts, while tomorrow night the City of Geelong is holding a town hall meeting to help people understand their impact.

TAFE is a vital component of Victoria’s key export — tertiary education. Why would you bite the hand that feeds you?

Rather than supporting tertiary education’s potential to be Victoria’s equivalent to a mining boom, the Government delivered the biggest cut to TAFE in history.

The cuts will directly result in 2000 redundancies or more. Large numbers of courses are going to be cut, sharp rises in student fees are imminent and there will be closure of facilities. Some Victorian regions have simply lost the capacity to train locally in many fields of study, even for skills that are in high demand. In communities where skills enrichment is needed, they are reeling at the impact.

The Government’s justification for the cuts was a blowout in “lifestyle courses” and unsustainable growth in the cost of training, primarily delivered by a booming private sector. Growth figures in the order of 1000 per cent were seen for courses of questionable vocational merit and an unregulated oversupply. TAFE enrolment growth in the past three years was 4 per cent. This compared with 308 per cent, mostly in metropolitan Melbourne, for private training organisations.

The Government is right to seek to rein in the oversupply for these courses — as TAFE providers have been advising government on many occasions over the past three years. But the Government has got it wrong.

The new formula for funding training ensures there won’t be an oversupply in the future. There will be no supply in many areas of real courses leading to real jobs!

The cruel irony is there has never been a more important time for a viable and effective TAFE system to be running full-steam in Victoria.

The strong reactions of Victorians may have surprised the Government, but it did not surprise the TAFEs.

In December a poll of more than 800 Victorians and 200 business owners and managers found that more than 84 per cent thought the TAFE sector was too important to be cut and that the Government should be investing more money in TAFE.

While TAFE was asking the public what they wanted — the Government had adopted a different approach. What did they learn? Briefings from government indicated their predictive modelling of the cuts — done with the assistance of consultants — did not factor in “course withdrawal, campus closure, the cost of redundancies, and impact on fees”.

In short they got it wrong.

TAFE training did not blow out the vocational training budget, yet it is the key target of the budget cuts. Where is the electoral mandate for this action?

It isn’t rocket science to fix this situation within the current budget parameters.

TAFE is not seeking more money than currently budgeted for; it is seeking a redistribution of the available funds underpinned by the restoration of funding of $170 million a year to fund our community service obligations. Yes, obligations — not discretionary items.

The solution is clear; if there are skill shortages, let an open market encourage growth in enrolments and completions.

Or if there is oversupply in areas of study, fund only specific numbers of enrolments with TAFE and a limited number of high-quality private training providers.

Each year the Government should examine the evidence for what the state, communities and industry need from its training system, and fund it accordingly.

It is clear the Government must accept that it acted on bad advice and move on.

David Williams is executive director of the Victorian TAFE Association
Call for higher fees fails to make grade

LISA WACHSMUTH

MOVES to raise course fees would only make it more difficult for people to get a university education, Parliamentary secretary for higher education and skills Sharon Bird said yesterday.

Australian public policy think-tank The Grattan Institute this week released a report, Graduate Winners, which claims most university students should pay more, since they gain a high private benefit from their degrees.

Gratton Institute spokesman Andrew Norton said graduates had “attractive jobs, above-average pay and status” and should pay for the privilege.

However Ms Bird said any move to increase fees would reduce the equity now enjoyed in the higher-education sector.

“Our scheme works – in fact we are a world leader in this area – so I don’t see the need to go down that track to make it more difficult for people to access university.

“The system gives equity and it doesn’t prohibit anyone from undertaking university study - we’ve got a good mix as it is.”

Mr Norton said higher education tuition subsidies would cost taxpayers about $7 billion by the middle of the decade. He said tuition subsidies should only be paid when they created public benefits, like a public health course.

The National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) has labelled the Grafton report “seriously flawed and potentially damaging to Australia’s economic future”.

NTEU president Jeannie Rea said: “The report’s proposal to introduce a narrow ‘public interest’ test would see $3 billion (from 2016-17) being slashed from universities, and at least a 50 per cent increase in student fees, without there being any overall increase in investment in higher education.

“Australian students already pay amongst the highest fees to attend university in the world, with only students in the United States, Japan and Korea paying more.”

Debate on the deregulation of undergraduate course fees – now set by the federal government – was sparked by University of NSW Vice-Chancellor Fred Hilmer at a National Press Club address late last month. Professor Hilmer said universities should be free to set their own fees which would enable them to charge more for high-profile courses like law, medicine, engineering and business.

But University of Wollongong students have slammed the push to deregulate fees.

“Comment such as this is based on, and encouraging, the assumption that the sole reason for people to study for these degrees is to get a highly paid job at the end of it,” Wollongong Undergraduate Students’ Association president Peter Hughes said.

“Have Your Say
SMS: 0409 011 060

Our scheme works – in fact we are a world leader in this area – so I don’t see the need to go down that track to make it more difficult for people to access university

Sharon Bird
Payment by degrees

Cayla Dengate

UNIVERSITY students should pay more or less for their degrees based on how useful they’ll be upon graduation.

Think tank The Grattan Institute says all higher education subsidies should be reduced and a new system introduced where graduates of useful degrees, such as public health, would pay less than degrees that provide individual advantages, such as law.

Grattan higher education program director Andrew Norton said the current higher education subsidy was about $10,700 per student and was predicted to cost taxpayers around $7 billion by the middle of this decade.

“It varies from degree to degree but generally the subsidy pays for about 60 per cent of each degree and the student pays 40 per cent,” he said.

“While society on the whole benefits from higher education, it’s not clear what this investment of public money provides.” Norton said dropping subsidies would result in a uniform increase of university degree costs.

There’s evidence students will enrol in courses whether there’s a subsidy in place or not,” he said.

“Graduates do well out of higher education.

“They have attractive jobs, above-average pay and status.

“They take interesting courses and enjoy student life.

“It’s good value for money and they’re currently getting it for a lot less than it’s worth.”

However, Queensland University of Technology equity director Mary Kelly said any increase in university costs could hit the most vulnerable students.

“Low-income people and mature-age people can be debt adverse, so a constant price increase would affect their participation,” she said.
Awards to inspire young scientists

CHILDREN fascinated by science have
the chance to win a share of thousands
of dollars for their school as part of the
Young Scientists of the Year Award.

Pupils from schools across the country
are invited to submit reports of science
projects relating to this year’s Energy
and the Environment award theme, which
recognises that 2012 is the International
Year of Sustainable Energy for All.

Science and Research Minister Senator
Chris Evans said Australia’s young
scientists were vital to the future
prosperity of the nation.

“Our young scientists could one day
help perfect the use of solar energy, cure
diseases or even find ways to help protect
our communities,” Mr Evans said.

Mr Evans said to get more students
taking up science at university, there
needed to be early engagement.

“Opening the maths and science door
to today’s pupils early in their education
will help meet the growing demand for
skills in the changing economy.”

The National Association of Testing
Authorities (NATA) Young Scientists of
the Year Award is open to three primary
school age groups; seven and eight years,
nine and 10 years, and 11 and 12 years.

The winner’s school in each age group
will receive a $3000 donation with an
extra $300 cash prize for each winning
pupil or group.

Invitations have been sent to all primary
schools in Australia. Entries must be
received by September 21 and will be
judged by a team of NATA scientists,
with winners announced mid-October.

For more information visit www.nata.
Unis must be allowed to set own fees, says Hilmer

**Jen Rosenberg**

**EDUCATION**

Australia’s universities will go into the red in the next few years if they are not allowed to set their own fees, the head of the Group of Eight institutions is warning.

At the current rate of funding, and with the loss of a chunk of the lucrative international student market, the University of NSW will have a deficit of $100 million, Fred Hilmer, the university’s vice-chancellor and chairman of the Go8, said.

“If there’s no growth [from international students], and the money we get for the Commonwealth student is limited to inflation, and we continue to have wage rises and other cost increases that soak that up, then in three years time we’ll have an accumulated deficit of close to $100 million,” he said.

University funding has come under renewed scrutiny with the release yesterday of a report by the independent policy group The Grattan Institute recommending that students pay a higher contribution to their education costs and governments redirect money used to subsidise higher education places.

In comments to the *Herald*, Professor Hilmer built on his recent speech at the National Press Club about the hurdles universities face in remaining viable and competitive. Without adequate resources, UNSW would stop spending on facilities and the quality of education would deteriorate to unacceptable levels, he said yesterday. Class sizes would continue to rise and smaller courses would go.

“At the moment the university is spending $60 million to $80 million in learning systems. If we don’t spend that money we aren’t going to be players today in the world. It’s not a rapid death; it’s death by a thousand cuts. We will keep operating and we will find it harder and harder to maintain the quality of facilities and services.”

Australia has one of the lowest spending rates on higher education as a proportion of GDP than most other OECD countries at 0.7 per cent.

The Tertiary Education Minister takes umbrage at the suggestion that the government is not committed to investing in higher education, saying the rate of funding per student had risen since 2007 rates, in addition to the new funding for unlimited students. Senator Chris Evans said Australia would not follow the path of the United States where student debt levels from rising fees have become an unmanageable burden.

“We don’t want to get to that situation. It is true that some of the elite unis would be able to charge more and still attract students and Professor Hilmer is probably part of that group, but the reality is we have 39 universities trying to provide a broad education to hundreds of thousands of Australian students and it’s about the health of the system not just about one university.”

It is the health of the economy that most concerns Belinda Robinson, chief executive of Universities Australia and she is not confident we are doing enough to address it.

“We’re at risk of suffocating the very industry that offers the most potential for us to meet this transformation challenge through ill-conceived, ill applied regulation. It’s through universities and public research more broadly that we will be producing the technology that we need to be able to maintain our international competitiveness and producing the people we will need to address that challenge and unless we do we may well be left behind by a very very determined and assertive Asian region.”
Students, staff up in arms over mooted changes to HECS funding

JULIE HARE
ANDREW TROUNSON

FIVE years ago when arts-economics student Alex McLaren was wondering what to study at university, the last thing on his mind was how much his HECS debt would be. "It just wasn’t a consideration. I chose my course out of interest," he said.

A product of the public school system with a university educated mother, Mr McLaren has been surprised by the vitriolic reaction on social media to yesterday’s Grattan Institute report, which proposes the substantial removal of government subsidies for university study. The report, Graduate Winners by Andrew Norton, argues that given the high personal benefits stemming from university study, it makes economic sense to decrease subsidies in most disciplines.

Administrators and students alike have hit out, with Central Queensland University vice-chancellor Scott Bowman likening it to a “funding regime of which North Korea would be proud”.

“This report is an absolute irrelevance to a university like ours with large number of disadvantaged and mature age students,” Professor Bowman said. “It is unworkable for a developed nation like Australia and would make our educational performance match our gold medal tally.”

Australian Catholic University vice-chancellor Greg Craven slammed the report’s focus on numbers while failing to recognise the wider community value of higher education. “This seems to be a calculator with a personality disorder,” Professor Craven said.

Under the current system, subsidies vary according to discipline. For instance, a science student pays $4250 a year, while the government contributes $19,482. Law, economics, accounting and commerce students pay $9425, while government puts in $1861 (16 per cent), medical and dentistry students pay $9425 but the government contributes $20,284.

As such, the government will have paid $5580 towards Mr McLaren’s education when he graduates at the end of the year. He will also have accumulated a HECS debt of around $40,570 which he will start repaying when his salary reaches $49,000. But under the Grattan model, Mr McLaren’s debt would be $100,000.

Colm Harman, an educational economist from the University of Sydney, said the logic of charging students different fees based on the public returns on their degree was "extremely challenging".

EDITORIAL P13

University of Queensland arts-economics student Alex McLaren
The case for universities

Institutes of higher learning must rediscover excellence

A REPORT from the Grattan Institute arguing that university courses should no longer be subsidised from the public purse is to be welcomed, if only for its shock value. To declare that a university degree benefits the graduate alone, and that universities serve no public purpose, is the final decadent step on the utilitarian path higher learning has been following for decades. A bachelor degree has become just another accessory to help a graduate shine in a crowded job market, much like the cufflinks on a crisp, white shirt. Surely nobody these days believes the journey of the mind could be an end in itself or that fostering a higher sense of purpose makes the graduate net contributors to society. No one would agree with Robert Menzies that educated minds are the motive power of human progress. Well, yes, we do, actually.

The Hawke government’s reforms of the late 1980s, driven by John Dawkins, produced at least one benefit: the Higher Education Contribution Scheme, making students responsible, in part or in whole, for the cost of their education. Universities were obliged to adopt a more business-like approach that has brought some benefits. Yet corporatisation, often poorly executed in a closely-regulated market, has a considerable downside. Academics complain, with some justification, that they have become little more than servers behind the counter, overburdened with red tape. Students, as paying customers, call the shots, reversing the pedagogic order.

The most damaging consequence of the Dawkins reforms, however, was the doctrine of inclusiveness, and the insistence that higher education is a universal right, not a privilege accorded to our most intelligent citizens.

Naturally, everyone with the intellectual ability to benefit from higher learning should be able to do so, and HECS is a great leveller. Yet what should we make of the fact that, in 2008, the best part of a million Australians were enrolled to study at bachelor level or above while in 1987 there were fewer than 143,000? Should we meekly accept the Bradley inquiry’s target that at least 40 per cent of 25–34 year olds should hold a bachelor or higher degree by 2020? It is fantasy to suggest that such a target can be achieved without lowering standards, yet reformers, like surgeons, should not make the patient worse.

Universities remain our most valuable cultural institutions and a proper source of public investment. It would be absurd, not to say philistine, to withdraw public funds from universities while we continue to invest in other cultural institutions with a proclaimed public purpose, such as the Australia Council, orchestras, the ABC or, dare we say, institutes of sport. It is clear that universities must rediscover a mission of excellence. We must demand quality from administrators and teaching staff, but, most importantly, quality from our students. The best institutions must be encouraged to rise above the flattened post-Dawkins landscape, providing tiers of learning and specialist hubs. We cannot allow academies to turn into intellectual filling stations, where a credit card is swiped in return for knowledge. Now is not the time to abandon John Henry Newman’s idea of the university: “A place where inquiry is pushed forward, and discoveries verified and perfected, and rashness rendered innocuous, and error exposed, by the collision of mind with mind, and knowledge with knowledge.”
The Hunter has produced one of 20 Australian apprentices and trainees identified as future industry leaders.

Andrew Godwin, an apprentice with Maitland’s Hunter Valley Training Company (HVTC) has been awarded a scholarship to attend Today’s Skills Tomorrow’s Leaders – a national leadership development program in Canberra from August 12 to 17.

The leadership program is an initiative of employer association, Group Training Australia, and covers areas including setting a vision and goals for life and career, work/life balance, being more fulfilled at work, overcoming challenges at work and staying motivated.

Mr Godwin, 23, from Waratah, is completing the third year of a certificate III in engineering (mechanical trade). His host employer is WDS Mining, which has a machine service workshop at Cameron Park.

Mr Godwin is also completing a bachelor of engineering at the University of Newcastle.

He said he was surprised but thrilled to be selected.

“I wanted to do the program to get more of an insight into a future managerial role and, as I am juggling work and university, to get some guidance on work-life balance.”

HVTC chief executive officer, Robert Fuller, congratulated Mr Godwin on being one of only five people from NSW and 20 nationwide to be selected for the program.
Call for uni fees hike

SYDNEY

UNIVERSITY students should pay more for their courses because of the above-average salaries they receive after graduating, a federal government-funded think tank says. The Grattan Institute says that higher education tuition subsidies will cost taxpayers $7 billion by 2015, and be a burden to those who haven’t undertaken further studies. The think-tank’s higher education program director, Andrew Norton, says students should therefore pay more for their courses.  

AAP