...AND ANOTHER THING

Sport

SPORT not compulsory? Certainly feels like it when you turn on the television news.
Jill Barclay, Castlemaine

HOW come increasing funding for sports will improve results, yet increasing funding for teachers and schools will not?
Marc Burton-Walter, Somerville

FUNDAMENTAL to the concept of competition is uncertainty of the outcome. That’s what makes it so exciting.
Jim Commadeur, Glen Iris

SURELY the way to rank medal tallies is to allocate three points for a gold, two for silver and one for bronze. Seems bleeding obvious.
Lloyd Swanton, Wentworth Falls, NSW

NOW that Australia is not punching above its weight in the Olympics, perhaps sport will settle into a more appropriate spot in our priorities. Around 19th from the top will do nicely.
Valerie La May, Seymour

Politics

IS TONY Abbott looking after his mates Andrew Bolt and Alan Jones by wanting to repeal Section 18C of the Racial Discrimination Act? They will be free to offend and denigrate anyone they wish.
Robyn Lipshut, Tatura

WHY would any right-thinking member of a racial minority group vote for an Abbott government next year?
David Goodwin, Brighton East

Elsewhere

WHY, other than out of mere curiosity, has the US spent $2.5 billion to land on Mars? Would it not be better to attend to its own dustbowls and others elsewhere on Earth?
David Johnston, Healesville

MYKI has cost us about $1.5 billion. For just another billion we could have travelled to Mars. Maybe one day myki will take me all the way to Geelong.
Denise Chevalier, Thornbury

THE Grattan Institute continues the “user pays” argument and applies it to higher education. If “user pays” is the go, why do people pay taxes, and what role does government have in investing for the future?
Frank O’Connor, Rye

ALLEGATIONS of race fixing should come as no surprise; anyone who bets on the ponies has long been referred to by those in the know as “a mug punter”.
Gainore Atkins, Altona Meadows

VALE Robert Hughes, these fatal shores will sorely miss your insightful observations of our cultural conscience.
Alex Njoo, St Kilda

ISN’T the human race both marvellous and stupid. We can land the rover Curiosity on Mars, but here on Earth we can’t stop the carnage in Syria.
Ed Veber, Malvern East
Minister rejects uni push to set own fees

By BENJAMIN PREISS
HIGHER EDUCATION REPORTER

CLAIMS that universities are poorly funded and could slide into debt are “alarmist and inaccurate”, Tertiary Education Minister Chris Evans says.

Mr Evans warned that increasing university fees would push higher education beyond the reach of students from poor backgrounds and those in regional Australia.

His comments come after the leader of an elite group of universities urged the government to allow institutes to set their own student fees. Group of Eight chairman Fred Hilmer said some universities could lose up to $100 million unless they received more funding.

But Mr Evans said student debt would balloon if universities set their own fees.

“What we know about deregulation of fees is that we see a vast increased cost to the student and we don’t see any real competition on price,” he said. “We believe we are now funding universities adequately by increasing their income by 50 per cent since we came to office. That allows them a capacity to properly educate Australian students.”

He said it was crucial to Australia’s economic growth that 40 per cent of young people completed a degree. “I don’t believe and the Labor Party doesn’t believe that making education prohibitively expensive... is the answer.”

The federal government caps university fees under the current system. But Professor Hilmer said the current model should be scrapped.

The Group of Eight includes Australia’s most prestigious institutes including Monash and Melbourne universities.

Professor Hilmer, who is the University of NSW’s vice-chancellor, has previously said universities should be free to determine fees. He said his university faced a $100 million deficit over the next three years if international student numbers and federal funding remained steady.

“It’s unlikely UNSW is alone in this situation given that all universities are funded broadly in the same way and are facing the same uncertainty around the revenue stream from international students,” he told The Age.

The National Union of Students has rejected his push. Union president Donherra Walmsley said students would pay more for education if universities set fees.

Universities Australia chief executive Belinda Robinson said the funding model needed to be examined after major changes to the sector, including declining revenue from international students. She said Canberra’s decision to remove caps on undergraduate enrolments from this year had also presented challenges.
Learning is the key to state’s future wealth

We would be dunces not to invest further in education, writes Peter Dawkins.

E

CONOMIC historians will say that the first two decades of the 21st century in Australia were dominated by the resources boom.

They will also say that most Australians benefited from this boom. Alongside good monetary and fiscal policy, the resources boom enabled us to dodge the global financial crisis, and living standards rose in general, not just for those in the mining sector. We even managed to put a price on carbon, while other countries in the Western world were still reeling from the GFC.

Even the citizens of Victoria, a state without rich mineral resources, enjoyed rising incomes, albeit lower than in the mining states, due to the downstream benefits of the boom. But Victoria had its challenges. Its largest export industry, education, took a hit, alongside manufacturing, due to the hike in exchange rates and, for a period, changes in visa rules — a policy now being put right — which made Australia less attractive for potential overseas students.

What historians will say next, especially about Victoria, will depend on policy over the next few years. The benefits of a boom produce lasting effects if they are invested rather than consumed. In Victoria it is our human resources, rather than natural resources, that will shape our long-term future.

Innovation in education and training is the very best investment we can make.

The university sector and the school systems are strong, and the Global University City Index has Melbourne highly ranked as a great place for students. Unfortunately, vocational education and training has tended to have second-class status in Australia. Areas for improvement include outcomes for students from lower socio-economic backgrounds and early childhood development.

Getting education right has big payoffs. Greater skills bring higher wages and a more adaptable workforce. If others recognise our leadership, they will come here to study, generating jobs and benefits for the state. If Victoria was viewed nationally and internationally as the “Education State”, export earnings would rise, our status in Asia during the Asian century would be improved, as would our productivity, living standards and social inclusion.

There are, however, some risks. Modest economic growth rates combined with fiscal consolidation at the federal and state level could have significant negative impacts on education over the next few years. Rather than investing the benefits of the boom in education, there is a risk we would take a more shortsighted approach.

The TAFE sector provides a good example of the risks we face. The policy idea of “learning entitlements”, to expand the skilled workforce, was a good one. However, its effect on the budget in Victoria exposed some design faults, and the TAFE cuts now represent a serious threat to the quality of vocational education and training. At the federal level there are similar risks that budgets could be cut over the next few years, as major spending areas come under scrutiny.

Everything must be done to maintain a commitment to raise participation in tertiary education. Our long-term prosperity depends on it. Equally, research has demonstrated the importance of early childhood experiences in shaping our citizens of the future. We must not waiver in our search for the best outcomes. Victoria must take the lead in these debates. More than any other state, we depend on our human resources to generate our jobs and wellbeing.

When the terms of trade do eventually turn down, we must not look back on the first two decades of the 21st century as a lost opportunity. Demand for quality education and training in Asia will be huge in the future. Victoria has a huge opportunity to be the Education State. We could drive productivity and social inclusion, and put ourselves at the forefront of the Asian century.

Peter Dawkins is vice-chancellor and president of Victoria University. Registration for Victoria at the Crossroads, a conference staged by The Age, the Committee for Melbourne and Victoria University in August, is available at: vu.edu.au/events/conference-victoria-at-the-crossroads.

Peter Dawkins

08 Aug 2012, by Peter Dawkins

General News, page 11 - 259.04 cm²
Capital City Daily - circulation 165,061 (MTWTF--)

ID 157533907  BRIEF ACPE T  INDEX 1.3  PAGE 1 of 1
Builders switch on to a virtual world

PHILIP HOPKINS

A REVOLUTIONARY new training centre for the building and construction industry has been opened in Melbourne. It is only the third centre of its kind in the world and the first in the Asia-Pacific region.

The $14 million Building Leadership Simulation Centre, developed by the Master Builders Association, will use 3D technology, a 15-metre wide parabolic screen, 12 site sheds and a team of specialist actors to create a virtual workplace.

Here, participants will confront the challenges of a building site in a risk-free environment. It will be able to train up to 7000 industry professionals, apprentices and students a year. The new approach to training focuses on communication, leadership and problem solving.

The centre is in Brady Street, South Melbourne, in the heart of the Montague Precinct that is a part of the state government’s plan to transform 240 hectares of Fishermans Bend into a residential and commercial precinct.

The federal Minister for Tertiary Education, Skills, Science and Research, Chris Evans, officially opened the simulation centre yesterday, announcing $1.9 million of federal funding for the centre.

MBA executive director Brian Welch said the venture had the capacity to reduce occupational health and safety incidents, improve building quality and cut construction costs.

“The BLSC is the single biggest investment Master Builders has ever made. After seeing the competitive edge that simulation technology was delivering to the biggest builders in Europe, we knew the Australian building industry could not afford to miss out,” he said.

Some of the biggest names in Australian construction — including Australand, Baulderstone, Metricon and Lend Lease — have signed on as foundation partners.
Stop students get cash boost

CROYDON and Bexley high schoolers, Ivy Tan and Patrick Ryan respectively, are among Australia’s top vocational students. Acting Minister for School Education, Senator Chris Evans, announced the successful recipients of the 2011 Australian Vocational Student Prize last week, with all 500 winners receiving $2,000 and a certificate recognising their achievements.
Top vocational students

CROYDON and Bexley high school students, Ivy Tan and Patrick Ryan, are among Australia’s top vocational students. Acting Minister for School Education, Senator Chris Evans announced the successful recipients of the 2011 Australian Vocational Student Prize last week, with all 500 winners receiving $2,000 and a certificate recognising their achievements.
TAFE cuts need explaining

I AM a western suburbs resident and I teach at Victoria University TAFE. I would like MP Andrew Elsbury to explain to staff and students how axing $300 million will not negatively impact on the ability to offer and access good affordable public education. And while we are at it, we can also talk about the big white elephant in the room, which is the massive cost blow-out in the private sector of Victoria’s Vocational Education and Training. This is where the funding “unsustainability” lies.

A lot of TAFE teachers work extra hours, unpaid, to meet a heavy work load and deliver quality outcomes. I am proud of my work at TAFE which I could not say when I was teaching the same course at two private colleges.

VU students and staff organised a Celebrate TAFE Day on July 24. Education Minister Peter Hall was invited but declined to attend. I hope you are more prepared to engage with your constituency.

Margarita Windisch, Yarraville.
MORE than 100 staff and students rallied at the Box Hill Institute of TAFE Nelson campus last week to plan a protest against $24 million worth of funding cuts.

The proposed state government cuts could lead to the loss of up to 200 full-time jobs at the Box Hill institute, price hikes for students and courses scrapped.

Victorian National Tertiary Education Union branch secretary Dr Colin Long said the changes would be “an act of vandalism against the public education system”.

“The cuts will be dramatic … places like Box Hill will be badly hit,” he said.

“We’re intending to fight these cuts until they are reversed or until we get rid of this government.”

But James Martin, spokesman for acting Higher Education and Skills Minister Martin Dixon, said the government was increasing its overall higher education spend by $1 billion in the next four years.

He said cuts would be made in “areas of over supply or that don’t necessarily lead to positive employment outcomes, such as fitness training and many lifestyle courses”.

“While TAFE institutes such as Box Hill are responsible for making their own decisions around course offerings and staff numbers, they are also ideally placed to capitalise on the government’s training reforms to grow their course delivery,” Mr Martin said.

The Box Hill group vowed to stage a rally outside the offices of Box Hill MLA Robert Clark before August 16, when TAFE campuses around Melbourne will hold a mass protest at the State Library and march to Parliament.

Box Hill Institute student representative Sasha Feldman (pictured) said many students were oblivious to the potential changes and some would be caught out by fee increases next year.

“This is going to be damaging for students who don’t want to go to uni. We don’t want to make courses more expensive,” she told the rally.
Nathan wins student prize

Nathan Boyle, of Merimbula, completed his year 12 studies at Eden Marine High School while completing vocation studies in business services.

Nathan has received Australia's top vocational award for 2011 after the awards were announced this week.

On receiving the Australian vocation student prize certificate and prize money of $2000 Nathan thanked Lorraine Bain from OTEN, Eden Marine High School and his parents for their support during year 12.

Nathan said the money will be a great help in his further studies as he strives for a Bachelor of Criminology and Crime Justice at Griffith University.

Senator Chris Evans, acting minister for school education, said 500 of the nation's most skilled students have been recognised for their efforts in vocational education and training in schools.

He said that the Australian vocational student prize recognises students who have demonstrated exceptional skill and commitment while completing a vocational education and training program.

Through their studies winners of these awards have gained a better understanding of the workplace and have developed industry specific skills that will help them get work in their chosen career Senator Evans said.

Nathan Boyle will use prize money to help him with his uni costs.
More accommodation for university students

New student accommodation is now open in Shepparton for students enrolling in La Trobe University’s Rural Health School. Parliamentary Secretary for Higher Education Sharon Bird this week opened the new 12-bed student accommodation in Shepparton, which is valued at $950,000.

“Affordable and appropriate student accommodation makes a crucial difference to a student’s chances of graduating,” Ms Bird said. “The new facilities are specially designed and built for Rural Health School students on placement in local hospitals. They are part of more than 286 beds in student accommodation we’ve built across six regional locations in Victoria at a total cost of more than $22 million.”

The Australian Government has delivered the Rural Health School with $59.5 million from the Education Investment Fund. “New graduates joining the health workforce to serve regional communities will deliver health and social benefits in large areas of northern Victoria,” Ms Bird said.

She said the Rural Health School project would increase the health workforce in northern Victoria by 211 health professional graduates a year and would also include building a health science facility and clinic teaching facility in time for the 2013 academic year.
MP: Hands off campus

ANGER OVER SWINBURNE’S SELL-OFF PLANS

Holly McKay

PRAHRAN MP Clem Newton-Brown has lashed out at Swinburne University’s plans to sell part of the Prahran campus.

In a letter to the National Tertiary Education Union, Swinburne’s vice-chancellor, Linda Kristjanson, states Swinburne will be “working through the approved Victorian Government processes for asset disposals and reinvestment with respect to the parts of the Prahran campus which are not required, so that Swinburne can reinvest the proceeds for the benefit of current and future students”.

But Mr Newton-Brown said the campus was primarily owned by the State Government, with some of the buildings owned by Swinburne.

“The Prahran campus will not be turned into apartments so that Swinburne can fund its development plans,” Mr Newton Brown said.

“Swinburne has under invested in buildings and facilities at Prahran for many years and now it seeks to sell land to fix this problem.”

Prof Kristjanson said recent changes to vocational education and training funding would have a $35 million impact on Swinburne next year.

“Swinburne needs to consolidate its TAFE and higher education delivery around its campuses at Hawthorn, Croydon and Wantirna in response to the current funding challenges,” Prof Kristjanson said.
Evans warns on TAFE funds

By Kieran Iles and AAP

THE federal funding model for Victorian TAFEs could be reassessed if the State Government continues to cut money from the sector, a federal minister said.

Tertiary Education Minister Chris Evans yesterday warned the Victorian Government’s move to cut $290 million from TAFE funding in the 2012/13 budget was counter-productive to federal plans to expand the sector.

The cuts sparked widespread protests across the state, including in Mildura, and resulted in 26 jobs being cut at the Mildura and Swan Hill campuses of SuniTAFE.

Senator Evans stopped short of threatening to pull federal funding but said there were “other levers” the commonwealth could use to pressure the Baillieu Government.

“The commonwealth cannot be expected to increase funding, pay reward funding and continue to invest in Victorian TAFEs if the money is going straight out of the budgets of those TAFEs as a result of the State Government pulling their money out,” Senator Evans said.

“We’d have to look at all options available to us if that was to continue.”

When pressed on the options that may be considered, Senator Evans said the government would not “pre-empt any punches”. He said the federal and state governments were locked in talks over the issue.

About $3 million in funding was axed from SuniTAFE’s budget when the cuts were announced in May.
Critical role of universities

The commitment to a quality university education espoused in your editorial is to be commended for it must lie at the centre of the task ahead ("The case for universities", 7/8).

The task of universities is to foster learning, innovation and ideas for their own sake, but they must also prepare our people for a constantly changing world.

Universities have a critical role to play in the task of transforming the economy by lifting our productivity through innovation and a skilled workforce, meeting existing skills shortages, modernising manufacturing and by building knowledge-based industries.

The recent Grattan Institute report by Andrew Norton outlines a narrow definition of the benefits accruing to society from a university education and argues for a shift in the cost burden to students and their families without any increase in investment.

This is at a time when Australia is beginning to feel competition from countries traditionally considered to be the Australian market for higher education — China, Korea, Malaysia and Singapore — as they invest in their own higher education systems.

As your editorial correctly points out, universities are our most valuable public institutions. They represent the best investment choice a community can make.

It is time for the future of our universities to be elevated to the top of the list of public policy priorities and their central role in creating Australia’s future.

Belinda Robinson, chief executive, Universities Australia, Canberra, ACT
Outreach students are ‘virtual alumni’

ANDREW TROUNSON

SCHOOL students engaged in university outreach programs should be treated as “virtual alumni” because, even if they don’t go to university after Year 12, ongoing contact could be a critical factor in persuading them to enrol down the track.

“The gestation period can be quite long from having the idea planted in their heads and then acting on it because it is dependent on economic and social factors that universities can’t always influence,” University of Western Sydney’s pro vice-chancellor (students) Angelo Kourtis told the HES.

“Even though they may not come to the university, we need to treat them like alumni in these aspirational programs and really stay in contact and engage with them to see what the long-term impact of these programs are,” he said.

Social media would prove particularly useful as the number of students going through aspirational programs increased.

By year’s end, UWS will have had 3000 students involved in its Fast Forward outreach program.

The comments from Mr Kourtis came as equity practitioners urged a renewed focus on developing ways to evaluate the effectiveness of outreach programs, partly to identify best practice, but also to be able to defend the spending to government and administrators.

The federal government allocated $180 million for university school outreach across five years to 2014 under its Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program. But the age of many of the participants made it difficult to measure outcomes in the short term.

UWS launched Fast Forward in 2004 with eight schools in Sydney’s disadvantaged western suburbs. It has grown to take in 52 schools.

Data suggests the program is delivering dividends. Of the Fast Forward students who graduated in 2010, 65 per cent went on to university, up from 55 per cent in the 2009 cohort. About two-thirds of these went to UWS.

University participation rates are double the average for 19 to 21-year-olds in the greater western suburbs and is similar to the average in high socioeconomic areas such as Mosman, Hunters Hill and Woollahra.

Students who go on to other education, such as TAFE, are treated by UWS as a success.

Mr Kourtis said by the end of the year UWS would have the “critical mass” of students coming through the pipeline, allowing a more thorough evaluation of the program.

Students are selected for the program by the school with a focus on academic potential, but also on those at risk of dropping out or not choosing post-secondary study.

UWS teaches study skills, engages parents and provides free final exam preparatory courses as well as free access to the online tutoring service Your Tutor.
Global research performance more important as export shrinks

IN December 2008, the Bradley review said Australian higher education was too dependent on international students and had to “broaden the focus of its international education activities if it is to remain globally competitive”.

Denise Bradley urged the development of “a long-term sustainable strategy for global engagement”, with more emphasis on Australian students going abroad, 1000 publicly funded international PhD scholarships and international research collaboration.

The 2009 federal budget dumped the 1000 scholarships. Without an increase in base funding to cover teaching costs, institutions remained locked to a growth trajectory in international education. Three years later, it is clear the global agenda is changing. The Bradley formula is being implemented on a de facto basis by necessity rather than choice, and in a messier manner. The change is driven by a combination of market forces and global collaborative trends.

Dependence on international revenues is falling along with student numbers. Research collaborations are up, especially in China. And, while study abroad remains low and Asia is largely off student radars, the coalition idea of a reverse Colombo Plan suggests this could change too.

In the year to June, international student commencements fell 8.7 per cent in higher education and 10.1 per cent in VET. International enrolments fell from 425,555 to 389,356 and by 6.5 per cent for students from Malaysia, 8.1 per cent (China), 8.7 per cent (Vietnam) and 24.4 per cent (India).

Despite reforms emanating from Michael Knight’s review of student visas late last year, the market is yet to bottom out. Meanwhile, the number of Chinese students entering the US is growing more than 20 per cent a year.

Australia is rapidly losing market share. Education export revenues have fallen to the level of five years ago, putting pressure on institutional budgets and making higher domestic charges or fee deregulation more attractive. It also forces a realignment of priorities.

It does not mean institutions are reducing total international activity. Global research performance is even more important in a shrinking export sector in which competition has been intensified. Research outputs boost global and ERA rankings.

The US National Science Foundation data show that, between 1995 and 2010, the number of scientific articles jointly authored by international partners multiplied 2.34 times. But joint papers involving Australians multiplied much more: 3.35 times.

In 2010, Australians published 4223 papers with the US, 2854 with Britain, 1815 with China, 1496 with Germany, 1057 with France and 789 with New Zealand. Australians were the fifth most important collaborating partner in China behind the US, Japan, Britain and Germany. Britain’s number of joint papers in China (2277) was not much larger than Australia’s (1815).

Australia also had 404 joint papers with Singapore, though collaborations with South Korea (270) and Taiwan (194) was surprisingly low.

Australia’s pattern of research collaboration is still overly concentrated on the Atlantic countries and Western Europe. But there’s no doubt the global agenda is becoming broader.

Simon Marginson is a professor at the Centre for the Study of Higher Education at the University of Melbourne.
DEBATE on fee deregulation hit the boiling point this week as University of Western Sydney’s acting vice-chancellor hit out at elite universities, describing their lobbying on fees as lacking integrity.

Angry that the Group of Eight, led by University of NSW vice-chancellor Fred Hilmer in a recent speech, is publicly spruiking for the removal of fee caps at the same time universities are attempting to agree on a joint position, UWS acting vice-chancellor Rhonda Hawkins has broken ranks and called for a more open debate on the issue.

“The euphemisms about fee flexibility and fee deregulation have to be debunked. It is a fee increase,” Ms Hawkins told the HES. “It lacks the integrity of an open and public debate.”

The attack was triggered largely by the release on Monday of a report by the Grattan Institute which called for a 50 per cent reduction in government subsidies for university fees.

Andrew Norton, higher education director of the institute who authored the report, argues that the level of personal benefit emanating from a degree is greater than the public benefit and therefore the individual should bear the brunt of the cost.

But Ms Hawkins’s attack also calls into question the ability of Universities Australia to develop a unified policy to take into the next election.

She said although there appeared little prospect of further increases in government funding, she questioned whether it was fair to simply charge students more. Fees already were at a “tipping point”. If they were to rise further it risked locking out debt-wary poorer students.

Ms Hawkins said Professor Hilmer and the Group of Eight were entitled to air their views, she questioned whether it was fair to simply charge students more. Fees already were at a “tipping point”. If they were to rise further it risked locking out debt-wary poorer students.

Ms Hawkins said Professor Hilmer and the Group of Eight were entitled to air their views, she questioned whether it was fair to simply charge students more. Fees already were at a “tipping point”. If they were to rise further it risked locking out debt-wary poorer students.

Simon Marginson, professor of higher education at the University of Melbourne, labelled the Grattan report rigorous, intellectually coherent and “politically astute because its timing is excellent”.

But he said the report had positioned itself on the far right of a 60-year debate about the “economic externalities” of education.

“It’s adopted a position which says there are almost no social or collective benefits of higher education and an educated society that are not realised as benefits to individuals. Even its definition of the social benefits is largely limited to the taxation of individual earnings,” Professor Marginson said.

Greg Craven, vice-chancellor of the Australian Catholic University, who on Tuesday described the report as “a calculator with a personality disorder”, said he supported fee deregulation but not transferring cost to students.

The case for fee deregulation was not about downplaying the benefit of higher education, as he believed the Grattan report did, but about creating diversity.

“Fee elasticity is a really serious issue,” he said. “If you misdiagnose the problem, you start going down a rabbit hole about public benefits that convinces nobody. The effect of that will be to close an important debate down.”

Professor Marginson said if the report’s argument were taken to its logical conclusion, governments should reduce subsidies also for primary and secondary education. “Does the Grattan think they should be high-fee based as well? If not, what is the difference between schooling and higher education?”