Melbourne researchers awarded ARC funding grants

University of Melbourne researchers have received $37.2 million to assist with a range of projects, from looking at new ways of measuring greenhouse gases critical to Australia's obligations to reduce carbon emissions, to the development of bionic devices that can soon be used to treat disorders such as epilepsy, Parkinson's disease and depression.

The funding is part of $360 million in new research projects announced by the Australian Research Council (ARC) and the Federal Minister for Science and Research, Senator Chris Evans last week.

The funding includes $24.8 million for Discovery projects, $8.3 million for Discovery Early Career Researcher Awards, and $3.2 million for Linkage Infrastructure Equipment and Facilities.

University of Melbourne Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research), Professor James McCluskey said the grants recognised the range and reach of research projects conducted at the University of Melbourne as well as investments in early career researchers and major research equipment.

Professor McCluskey welcomed the funding and said the grants and quality of the projects was testament to the University of Melbourne's status as Australia's leading research university, backing up its performance in recent international university rankings.

"The support from the ARC is based on a rigorous competitive process and reflects the outstanding quality of research at the University of Melbourne," he said.

"This funding is welcome and is a great investment in the future. We are pleased to be at the forefront of many new projects and ideas."

Academics oppose Vic power shift

Joanna Mather

Academics and the tertiary union have stepped up their campaign to force the Victorian government to abandon legislation that would remove guaranteed representation by students and staff on the governing bodies of TAFE and universities.

The Baillieu government’s Education Legislation Amendment (Governance) Bill is due to be debated in Victoria’s lower house this week.

It will allow universities to trim council membership numbers to reflect corporate-world norms and to select members based on required skill sets, such as financial and risk management capabilities.

Until now elected students and staff have held as many as five seats on university councils, which can be as large as 21 members.

Strongly opposed to the change, the National Tertiary Education Union has gathered signatures from 225 of the state’s professors and associate professors condemning the bill.

The union has taken out an advertisement in Monday’s The Age newspaper to publish an open letter which argues the bill is “a fundamental threat to the autonomy of universities”.

It will “destroy, overnight, the centuries-old constitutional tradition that protects universities from direction by the state and interference from commercial and sectional interests”, the letter says.

NTEU president Jeannie Rea said the bill would allow the Victorian government to stack university and TAFE councils with “cronies”.

“The Baillieu government demonstrates a fundamentally myopic conception of what universities do, somehow believing they should just be there to provide job training rather than a rounded education which prepares students to think independently and deal with the demands of a complex and rapidly changing world,” she said.

At present, each council has between 14 to 21 members, including two or three elected staff and one or two elected students.

The bill amends the eight state-based acts that establish Victorian universities to remove the requirement that councils include elected student and staff representatives.

Under new arrangements there would be a balance of members appointed by the government and council. This configuration would mean four government appointees,
Academics protest against power shift

From page 23

three university staff including the vice-chancellor and chair of the academic board, and four members appointed by the council.

Councillors may still appoint students and staff, so long as they contribute to the requisite skills mix.

University chancellors, who chair university councils, are divided on the consequences of the changes.

Monash University chancellor Alan Finkel said it was important to remember that the new requirement relating to the balance between government and council appointed membership “in no way equates to government control of universities”.

He wrote to students and staff last Friday to announce that a working group had been created to figure out how to best ensure student and staff voices were heard by council.

“Under the legislation, if we take no action, from January 1, council would have 11 members, which we believe would be too small to provide the diversity of views and mix of skills required to effectively govern the university,” Dr Finkel said.

“We formed the provisional view that 13 to 15 members would be an appropriate number.”

There is a different view at the University of Melbourne. In late October, University of Melbourne chancellor Elizabeth Alexander wrote to the university community stressing the importance of student and staff representation and the council’s opposition to the changes.

She said she had written to Victorian Education Minister Peter Hall to outline concerns that removal of representatives would “inevitably cause resentment at both staff and student levels, giving rise to tensions which do not currently exist”.

Moreover, such a move had the potential to be viewed as an unjustified incursion on the workings of the university.

The government said the legislative change would give universities and TAFEs greater flexibility to determine the size and composition of their governing bodies.

Similar changes occurred in NSW last October, with universities able to reduce their boards’ size (known as councils or senates) to as few as 11 members, a figure more aligned with corporate practice.

Announcing the Victorian move last month, the Mr Hall said the government had been approached by several universities to make the changes.

“Staff and students are absolutely still able to be on university councils and TAFE boards, as long as they have the necessary skills and experience,” he said.

Under the legislation, TAFE boards would lose their capacity to independently recruit local business and industry figures, according to Victorian TAFE association executive director David Wiliams.

He said TAFE chief executives would no longer be able to serve as board members.

Mr Williams said the bill required each TAFE board appointment to be approved by the education minister of the day.

He said at present, just over half of board members were appointees approved by the minister but in the future all will have to get the green light from the government.

“The board can suggest to the minister who should be these extra members but the minister will make the appointment,” he said.

“So everybody who ends up being on a TAFE board will be a ministerial appointee.”

Mr Williams said TAFE supported the removal of student and staff representatives because boards were not meant to represent the interests of a particular group but make decisions based on the strategic interest of an organisation.

Mr Williams said the changes would also mean that commercial deals valued over a yet-to-be-determined dollar amount would need to be approved by the government in the future, reducing institutes’ ability to act as quickly as other businesses.

The changes came despite the government’s promise to free up institutes to compete with the burgeoning private vocational education and training sector, he said.

Under present arrangements TAFEs and institutes are unincorporated bodies, but they will become statutory corporations.

As such, institutes’ governing boards will be accountable for running them “economically, efficiently and in a commercially prudent way”, the bill says.

“The boards will be reconstituted along corporate lines, with all directors appointed by government, some after receiving advice from the boards themselves,” the bill says.

“Selection will be based solely on having the skills, experience and qualifications to undertake the important and onerous responsibilities of being a director of such a board.”

At present, just over half of board members are appointees approved by the minister, but in the future all will have to get the green light from the government.
David Williams, executive director of Victoria's TAFE Association. Photo: VINCE CAUGIURI
Massive change looms for universities

Our higher-education sector is set for a massive transformation, whether we like it or not. Just as the newspaper and retailing industries are facing disruptions from the internet, so will the education sector. It will be challenging to existing institutions but potentially hugely beneficial to Australians — if we get the policy settings right.

For centuries, the university model has been oriented around the provider. Students have had limited choice and have had to meet the timetable, location and pace of busy lecturers juggling multiple courses and scarce lecture theatres. Our entire funding and regulatory system has been built around this model.

With the advent of high-speed, ubiquitous internet access, this is set to change profoundly.

The key factor is the ability of the internet to separate the student from the physical campus. Once this separation occurs, multiple providers can become immediately accessible. Instead of students having one or two choices of universities, there could be potentially hundreds, including the global brands.

Completing macro-economics from Chicago’s School of Economics could be just as easy as doing it at the University of NSW. And they could do it at their own pace, fitting it around their work and family commitments.

Not every course in every university will go online. Multiple models with develop and face-to-face teaching and collaborative learning will remain in most cases. But the trend towards online is accelerating. In the United States, Harvard, MIT, Stanford and others have started offering free online courses and have captured two million participants in two years. In Australia, one in five students already does at least part of their course off campus.

The enhanced competition and capabilities would give unprecedented choice, flexibility and customisation to students. This is a revolutionary time in university history, but the full benefits for Australian students can only arise if government adjusts its policy settings. Five changes are necessary.

First, the national university regulator, the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, needs to put aside its on-campus mindset and embrace the online environment. As the University of New England’s vice-chancellor Jim Barber has said, TEQSA needs to shift “its emphasis from specifying how teaching should be conducted [input standards] to what teaching should achieve [outcome standards].”

Focusing exclusively on input standards can stifle innovation and keep costs high. In the US, accreditation has become more focused on learning outcomes and more accepting of online delivery. It needs to happen here also.

Second, we need to lower the regulatory barrier for the best overseas universities to operate courses in Australia. In particular, we should remove the necessity that a university must do research as well as teach in every field. Let the best come in with course offerings and judge them on their performance. This would also allow Australian institutions to concentrate on what they do best.

Third, universities should be allowed to differentially price (within the HELP student loan scheme), even within a single degree. The internet age will enable a proliferation of learning models. Individuals should have the option of determining which best suits them for the costs involved.

Fourth, public subsidies should support a learning outcome, rather than be determined by the type of institution a student attends and structure of course. If a course is accredited, then a student (within reason) should be able to access a limited public subsidy. The method of delivery or ownership structure should be irrelevant. The education outcome should be the policy objective, not the education process.

Finally, learning should be able to be accessed more cheaply. The government has just reviewed the base funding required to deliver courses, but it was entirely rooted in traditional methods of delivery. Over the medium term there is potential to significantly reduce the costs of learning in many courses from online provision. For example, the American National Centre for Academic Transformation has helped reduce course costs by an average of 37 per cent in dozens of universities without compromising learning outcomes.

None of these policy suggestions is straightforward and each would be challenging for many existing institutions. But the internet revolution is not going away and we need to start the discussion around how to maximise its benefits.

Australia has exceptionally good public universities and there is no reason they cannot adapt and remain the dominant players throughout Asia. The opportunities to capture growing Asian demand for education services through our online offerings are enormous, as my colleague Andrew Robb has outlined.

The key for Australia and its students, however, is not whether we produce every course, but whether Australians can access the best learning at competitive prices.
The internet is able to separate students from the physical campus.

Photo: BOHDAN VVARCHOML
‘Vandals’ dump core uni subjects

All economics study at the University of Western Sydney next year will be dumped except for one introductory course for first-year business students, and those enrolling in Islamic studies won’t be able to learn Arabic after cutbacks forced by a lack of demand.

UWS will also cut Spanish, Italian and financial planning, blaming falling demand for these subjects over the past four years. But critics say it’s an “act of academic vandalism” and “a knee-jerk reaction” to changing preferences among school-leavers.

Steve Keen, a high-profile economist who is among more than 30 staff destined to lose their jobs, says the federal government’s demand-driven system, which allows universities to enrol as many students in a course as “qualify”, is to blame. “Instead of increasing competition, the demand-driven system is destroying it,” Professor Keen said.

His theory is confirmed in an email to staff from vice-chancellor Jan Reid. In it, she says falling student demand and an uncertain political climate are behind the cuts: “Eighty-three per cent of our income is from our students,” she writes. “This year, with the intense competition from other universities in the ‘uncapped’ environment and flat international student numbers, we received $14 million less than we planned for, and 2013 will be no less straitened.”

There are indications that the federal government could cut projected allocations for higher education in the budget, and this will flow on to all universities, further exacerbating the competition for undergraduate enrolments. “We know other universities in Sydney have dropped their cut-offs dramatically to take more students and will undoubtedly continue to do so.”

Roy Green, dean of the business school at the University of Technology, Sydney, said it was “disappointing to see any university remove economics from a business degree”. “It provides the conceptual foundation, theory and context for understanding how business works,” he said.

The closure of the three languages will leave UWS offering just Japanese and Chinese. It will need federal government approval to shut Arabic as it is listed as a “significant language”.

Deputy vice-chancellor (academic and research) Wayne McKenna also said that UWS’s partnership with the Centre for Excellence in Islamic Studies, along with Melbourne and Griffith universities, would not be compromised by the closure of Arabic. Nor would its bachelor of arts with a major in Islamic studies, even though the website encourages students to take a sub-major in Arabic.

Professor McKenna, asked if any other subjects were vulnerable for closure, said: “Not that I am aware of.” He later said there would be “no more surprises . . . comparable to economics”.

‘Instead of increasing competition, the demand-driven system is destroying it’

STEVE KEEN
ECONOMICS PROFESSOR, UWS