Abbott's true colours

NO STATEMENT is more revealing of Tony Abbott’s true values than his assertion: “If anything the injustice is the other way.” We can debate various funding models, but surely the real justice is in the total resources of schools and what sort of society the system produces. We are condemning the majority of our children to a system that is increasingly producing inequality, social division and lifelong unfairness. According to the My School website for example, Geelong College spent $2674 per student in 2009 on capital expenditure while nearby Geelong High School spent $302 per student. Surely this is “injustice”, Mr Abbott. Australia already subsidises private education more than any other country in the Western world, and by implication Tony Abbott would further extend this extreme privilege.

Bryan Long, Balwyn
Leaders in epic fail on education

Politicians should resist middle class expectations about their entitlement to a highly subsidised private education.

The membrane that surrounds the political debate over school education policy is highly resilient. In this bubble, there are a number of verities, established during the Howard era, when Commonwealth school funding was skewed increasingly towards the private sector. Verity number one is that there is no such thing as an undeserving private-school parent. Indeed, parents who choose to send their children to private schools are now affirmed by both of the major parties in their belief that they should not accept the status quo.

That is, they are right to expect that the amount of public funding to non-government schools will always rise. The Labor and Liberal parties are committed to this. The Labor Party’s experience at the 2004 election, when its policy of shifting some money from a small number of the richest private schools to government schools established the enduring phenomenon of the “hit list”, was scaring.

The opposition now reflexively accuses Labor of creating hit lists without even the faintest piece of evidence, because it knows how much it can spook the ALP. As recently as last Sunday, a judiciously leaked “Labor hit list”, cooked up by private education providers, scared the daylights out of the Gillard government — which was the intent behind its publication. So potent and frightening is the hit list chimera for the ALP that it prompted the Prime Minister to tell a meeting of independent school heads on Monday that she revered big private schools.

Many will be familiar with the PM’s comments but they warrant reproduction here. “I’ve never looked at a big independent school in an established suburb and thought ‘That’s not fair’,” she said. In fact, she regarded those schools as a “great example”.

It was an extraordinary statement for a Labor leader, one that strains credibility.

Outside the bubble, where government schools are entrusted with educating two out of three Australian children, facilities and learning opportunities are substandard.
compared with the elite private schools that
the Prime Minister celebrates. This truth is at
the heart of the government’s own Gonski
report, which recommends a change in the
way public funds go to all schools.

Gonski proposes a system where money is
apportioned to schools based on educational
need, which should be good news for the
government sector and also for students
attending the disadvantaged private schools
that need to lift their performance. The
report suggests an extra $5 billion a year for
schools, on top of the current annual spend-
ing of $13.9 billion.

Julia Gillard’s modern take on educational
fairness was arresting, for sure. But at the
same conference, Tony Abbott managed to
come to her rescue, at least a little. Again, his
comments deserve to be repeated here.

“All independent school pupils receive under 70 per cent of the total
that is to say state and Commonwealth funding —
of a public school student,” the Opposition
Leader said. “Overall, the 66 per cent of Aus-
tralian school students who attend public
schools get 79 per cent of government fund-
ing; for 34 per cent of Australians who attend
independent schools get just 21 per cent of
government funding. So, there is no question
of injustice to public schools here. If any-
thing, the injustice is the other way.”

It’s important to note that Abbott’s state-
ment was made in the context of the imbal-
ce of federal and state funding on
education, with the Commonwealth contrib-
uting more to private schools and the states
stumping up for government schools.

Even so, it too was an extraordinary thing
to say. The Liberal Party does, of course, have
a heavy private-school constituency. But
government schools still account for two-
thirds of students — 2.3 million children.
They are responsible for educating a dispro-
portionate number of disadvantaged
children. Eighty per cent of disabled children,
and roughly the same percentage of children
from the lowest income households, non-
metropolitan areas and those with an indig-
enous background are enrolled in govern-
ment schools.

Abbott is likely to deeply regret his state-
ment all the way to the next election. It was a
genuine blunder, potentially his most dam-
aging during this term. The millions of par-
ents who send their children to government
schools and who know how much these
schools fall short compared with the best
private schools will surely be shaking their
heads, wondering how it can be that they are
the perpetrators of some sort of injustice.

Education is one policy area in which the
Labor Party, since the 2007 election, has
delivered real change — and the prospect of
genuine improvements for its support base.
It has spent $65 billion on schools in the past
four years. This represents a near-doubling
of the Howard government’s school educa-
tion budget. It has introduced a range of
measures to create national standards in
testing, the curriculum and professional
standards for teachers.

Gillard as education minister stared down
the teachers union over several controversial
policies, as she should have. She implemen-
ted the My School website, which improves
transparency and accountability for school
performance. Over time, My School will give
teachers, schools and governments consist-
ent information on student performance, en-
abling them to target areas that need
improvement. Already, the government has
used the data to direct extra funding for liter-
cacy, numeracy and teacher quality programs
to struggling schools.

That’s on the ground. Meanwhile, the
political bubble remains intact, with the mid-
dle class being told that it has every right to
hold out its hand, expecting more and more.
NATIONAL Skills Week, now in its second year, will shine a spotlight on the hundreds of career opportunities and thousands of training places available to Australians.

Minister for Tertiary Education, Skills, Science and Research, Chris Evans, said the week was a time for a collaborative approach dedicated to raising the status of practical and vocational learning.

"To compete for the jobs of tomorrow, Australians will need to be increasingly more qualified," Senator Evans said at the national launch of the event last week.

"Better skills not only lead to better pay and employment outcomes for the individual, but an investment in skills is also an investment in higher productivity and a sustainable economy."

Senator Evans said the Federal Government was investing $15.6 billion in skills and training over the next four years to ensure all Australians are able to maximise their potential to participate in the workforce.

"The $700 million National Workforce Development fund is making it easier for businesses and employees to get the training they need," he said.

SkillsOne chief executive Brian Wexham said National Skills Week would provide a positive focus on Vocational Education and Training (VET).

"It will bring to life the positive messages, highlighting the talents, skills and the value of apprentices and trainees across Australia to the wider public and employers," he said.

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Senator Chris Evans
SKILLS WEEK
TIME TO ACT

Sarah Sharples

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Senator Evans said the federal government had established the Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency to directly engage with industry on current and future skills demands and how best to meet them.

He said the government was partnering with employers through the National Workforce Development Fund to help train new employees and upskill existing workers.

“For individuals, skills are the passport to a better job, a higher pay packet and a more rewarding working life. For businesses, skilled workers are the vital ingredient for sustained success.

“We want to make sure Australians from all walks of life are able to maximise their potential to participate in the workforce and share directly in our continuing prosperity.

“The opportunities are endless,” he said.

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Talent breeds success

SKILLS WEEK
TIME TO ACT

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Senator Evans said the Federal Government was investing $15.6 billion in skills and training over the next four years to ensure all Australians are able to maximise their potential to participate in the workforce.

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Senator Chris Evans
Public schools deserve our funds

TONY Abbott claims there is an injustice in the way private schools receive less public funding per child than public schools.

If people choose to opt out of the public system in favour of a private education, that is clearly their right. However, I do not believe the public should then be expected to fund this choice.

Public schools are clearly the public’s responsibility; we all own them. Private schools are not owned by the public.

They are often out of reach for many Australian families and should not, therefore, be supported from the public purse in the same way public education is.

Rob Watson, Alfredton
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Senator Chris Evans.

Passion for trade

MINISTER for Higher Education and Skills and the Minister responsible for the Teaching Profession, Peter Hall, will do the honours at the Victoria launch of National Skills Week at the Kino Cinema, Melbourne, on August 27.

Three young workers – Apprentice of the Year finalist, Sevag Parseghian, Trainee of the Year finalist, Stephanie Greene, and Justin Stankovic of East Coast Aviation in Traralgon – will share their experiences with guests as they tell their stories at the event.

The night will also see the premiere of Le Chef, a story about having a passion for your trade and what hard work can bring.

Work Place Connect chief executive Nicholas Wyman said by 2015, Australia would need 2.4 million new workers with Certificate 3 (apprentice level) qualifications, highlighting the need to engage more young people in skilled careers.

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Skills breed success

TRAINING FOR A BETTER LIFE

Sarah Sharples

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Picture: KYM SMITH
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The night will also see the premiere of Le Chef, a French culinary tale about having a passion for your trade and what hard work can bring.

Catering for the event will be handled by Victoria University Academy Sofitel culinary students.

Work Place Connect chief executive Nicholas Wyman said by 2015, Australia would need 2.4 million new workers with Certificate 3 (apprentice level) qualifications.

As such it was imperative to encourage and engage more young people in skilled careers. “Given the limited number of young people entering the pipeline, many businesses may find it hard to find workers in the future,” he said.
Train to sustain success

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Deb Tuckerman, Great Lakes Council, Judy Gagg, Brianna Salmon and Ella Gagg discuss education with senior consultant Sabrina Pit outside Gloria Jeans, Wharf Street Forster.

Talks on improving education options

AN overwhelming public response about accessing higher education in the Manning and Great Lakes regions has pleased organisers who are still keen to hear from more people.

Hundreds of people from the Manning Valley and Great Lakes have provided ideas on how to improve access to higher education for younger residents in the region in the first few days of a special project.

Great Lakes Council’s economic development manager, Deb Tuckerman said the large response is a sign that the community cares about creating an even better future for our young people.

“Our consultants have heard fantastic feedback through special focus groups held with students, parents and businesses, one-on-one meetings, workshops and community surveys.

“We very much appreciate people’s time in making themselves available for this really important project to drive the uptake of higher learning.”

More than 300 people completed surveys in the street during just two days of consultation.

Online surveys will remain open until Friday, August 31 available on Greater Taree City and Great Lakes councils website.

“We would especially like to hear from local businesses, young people, high school teachers and parents.”

Mrs Tuckerman encourages everyone to have their say and continue to check on Great Lakes or Greater Taree City Council websites for further project updates.

The project is funded by the Commonwealth Government.
College now a step closer to new home

TAREE Community College is one step closer to moving into the old Britax building, with the investment of $216,000 by the NSW Government, announced recently by the Minister for Disability Services, Andrew Constance.

The minister visited the facility earlier this month with Member for Myall Lakes Stephen Bromhead.

“The site will be the most up to date, specialised training, education and community facility in the region and will cater for more people with a disability to attend the college.” Mr Constance said.

Taree Community College has been operating for 30 years catering for up to 5500 students each year including 29 people with a disability.

“The additional floor and space will provide more opportunities for everyone in the community including people with a disability to participate in vocational and educational training and higher education in the one facility.” Mr Constance said.

Executive officer for Taree Community College, Sally Holt, said the funding is a welcome boost for the college, but much more is needed to make their dream of moving into their new premises, a reality.

“This funding will certainly enable us to get started”, Sally said.

“We have been liaising with local builders and tradesmen, but we really need a lot more to see the project through to completion.”

We are hoping for some federal funding for this worthy project.”
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Hundred protest funding cuts

Nearly 100 protesters gathered outside Box Hill MLA Robert Clark’s office last Wednesday to rally against proposed cuts to Victoria’s TAFE system. Students and staff from the Box Hill Institute gathered outside Mr Clark’s office and presented a letter on behalf of the crowd.

Uncapped government funding of private institutes caused the Victorian higher education system to blow out by $400 million in the 2011-12 financial year. The Box Hill Institute will be hit with $24 million in funding cuts, and up to 200 jobs will be lost if cost-cutting reforms are implemented. “The previous government played a major role in creating this situation … but this government has taken the baton and run far harder than anyone expected,” said institute senior educator Michael Zangmeister.
Train to sustain success

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Students take cuppa to a new level with high tea

LOOKING for a new way to start your working week? Then head to Bacchus Marsh Grammar and start it in style with a high tea. The school’s vocational education and training hospitality students are running a series of high teas on Monday mornings as part of their VET program assessments.

Students are offering the whole community the chance to sample a variety of hot drinks, sandwiches, scones and sweets for $10. All funds raised will help support the school’s Relay For Life team. High teas will be held on August 27 and September 3, 10 and 17 from 11am-12.30pm.

Anyone wanting to attend, email school@bmgs.vic.edu.au with “High Tea” in the subject line or phone Cathy Perconte on 5366 4800. Places are limited.
Calls to restore TAFE funding

BY BENJAMIN MILLAR

PRESSURE is building on the state government to reverse funding cuts after thousands of TAFE teachers and students last week marched on Parliament.

Last Thursday’s rally followed the delivery of a petition containing more than 1000 signatures to Premier Ted Baillieu.

The petition of Victoria University staff and students and western suburbs residents calls on the government to abandon about $300 million in funding cuts that are expected to heavily affect students from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

Western Metropolitan Greens MP Colleen Hartland, who delivered the petition to the Premier last Tuesday, said the 1000 signatures were just the tip of the iceberg of people who wanted TAFEs to be well funded and to continue providing quality education in the west.

“Victoria University staff and students are already feeling the pain of the TAFE cuts as redundancies take effect and courses are cut,” she said.

Ms Hartland told Parliament about 50 per cent of Victoria University students were on a low income and may no longer be able to access education.

Federal Tertiary Education Minister Chris Evans warned that Victoria’s share of vocational funding was being placed at risk by its cuts to the public TAFE sector.

But state Higher Education Minister Peter Hall said the government was making a record ongoing investment in vocational training while introducing essential reforms designed to save the system from collapse.
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To compete for the jobs of tomorrow, Australians will need to be increasingly more qualified.
Talent breeds success

SKILLS WEEK
TIME TO ACT

Sarah Sharples

BETTER skills equal a better life for individuals and a better nation for us all.

That’s the equation the federal government hopes to hammer home during National Skills Week 2012.

Tertiary Education and Skills Minister Chris Evans said the week aims to showcase the many career opportunities that are out there and inspire Australians to take up training and get the skills they need for jobs.

In its second year, National Skills Week will run from August 27 to September 2.

With Australia continuing to see an increased demand for skilled labour, Senator Evans said job-seekers will need to be increasingly better qualified to compete for the jobs of tomorrow.

“Better skills not only lead to better pay and employment outcomes for the individual, but an investment in skills is also an investment in higher productivity and a sustainable economy.”

A certificate III or IV is estimated to increase lifetime earnings by more than $324,000 while a person with a diploma or advanced diploma can earn around $400,000 more over their working life than those with a Year 12 certificate.

Senator Evans said the federal government had established the Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency to directly engage with industry on current and future skills demands and how best to meet them.

He said the government was partnering with employers through the National Workforce Development Fund to help train new employees and upskill existing workers.

“For individuals, skills are the passport to a better job, a higher pay packet and a more rewarding working life. For businesses, skilled workers are the vital ingredient for sustained success.

“We want to make sure Australians from all walks of life are able to maximise their potential to participate in the workforce and share directly in our continuing prosperity.

“The opportunities are endless,” he said.

SPECIAL WEEK

In its second year, the week is designed to highlight the huge variety of opportunities and careers available through vocational education and training.

An additional 2.4 million workers will be needed with qualifications at certificate III or higher by 2015, says Skills Australia.
Apply now for community funding projects

The state government is again conducting the Community Building Partnership program in 2012. It will provide vital community infrastructure for the benefit of local communities throughout the state. Community organisations and local councils are once again encouraged to apply for funding to build and improve community facilities in their local area.

Under the partnership, the state government will contribute to the cost of building important community projects to improve the delivery of community services. The program will deliver new and refurbished facilities for communities across New South Wales and construction will support local jobs.

Applicants should demonstrate how their project will benefit their local community through the building or improvement of facilities to deliver positive social, recreational or environmental outcomes. Applications from local councils or their Section 355 Committees are required to at least match their approved grant amount with funding from their own or other sources. Projects must be ready to commence by mid 2013 and be completed before the end of June 2014.

Information for applicants is available from my Electorate Office or can be downloaded from www.community-buildingpartnership.nsw.gov.au. Applications may only be made online during the application period and organisations are encouraged to visit the website early to ensure they are eligible to participate and to check the details they will be required to include in their application. Applications for funding will be open from 27 August until Tuesday, October 30, 2012.

The new Resource Allocation Model (RAM) for NSW public schools is at the very heart of the Local Schools, Local Decisions reform. The RAM takes into account that students and school communities are not all the same and they have different needs and will need different levels of support.

This reform is about a more equitable allocation of the resources we spend on our public schools.

Funding that goes directly to schools is increasing, meaning that more than 70 per cent of the total public school education budget is going directly to schools, up from the current 10 per cent. The RAM provides the certainty of funding for schools to employ teachers in order to adhere to the class sizes policy. Funding will ensure that principals need not worry about the cost of a teacher, allowing them to choose teachers based on teacher quality and skills required to best meet the needs of their children.

School funding allocation will be divided into two components. The first will quarantine funds for staffing purposes only and these resources cannot be used for anything else. The remaining component will fund all other operational requirements of the school and any discretionary needs, which may include employing additional staff.

Under the new model, schools will see more of the total public school education budget and they will have more authority over how it is spent. It is a big change and long overdue recognition of the capability and professional judgement of the leaders in our schools and of the importance of local decision-making in ensuring NSW continues to have a great public school system.
Teachers in New South Wales already do an amazing job, but as we prepare our students for the challenges of the 21st century, we need to think very carefully about how we can ensure the teachers in their classroom are world class.

The research from around the world is clear. The quality of the education you offer our young people is only as good as the teaching in the schools. To offer our young people the best education, we need the best teachers.

We have new national teaching standards and curriculum, a new model for funding NSW public schools and a new wave of teachers emerging from our universities. We know from looking at other high performing education systems that there are a lot of things we could do differently and better.

The Great Teaching, Inspired Learning discussion paper looks at all the key stages of a teacher’s career and asks some hard questions about every aspect of the teacher career lifecycle from getting the right kind of person choosing teaching as a career, through to incentives and rewards for those outstanding teachers encouraging them to stay in the classroom. The discussion paper is available at www.schools.nsw.edu.au/greatteaching with an online forum running from August 24 to October 5, 2012.
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“Given the limited number of young people entering the pipeline, many businesses may find it hard to find workers in the future,” he said.
We are privileged – take from us and give to state

I have two children attending a top private school which has about 2000 students. I would have absolutely no problem if $50 a year of funding for each child was reallocated to public schools (“Abbott: public schools get too much”, August 21). Just from our school alone this would raise $100,000 each year which I’m sure any public school could put to much better use than an already well-established and extremely well-resourced private school.

I look forward to being able to nominate for an OAM a private school principal who publicly and persistently lobbies for increasing the proportion of funding to government schools and decreasing the proportion received by well-established private schools. In this political climate this would be a brave person who would be a worthy role model for all children (and many parents).

Rebecca Clarke Mona Vale

Peter Widders (Letters, August 21) suggests that all things with a Big Lobby can use their narrow self-interests to determine government policy. How the raping of sovereign lands for private profit bears similarities to private school education is beyond me.

Private schools do have a voice in a democracy but it does not have the same influence as the considerable majority of the public school parent voters. However, they do educate children at a considerable discount to the taxpayer. Anyone with a basic understanding of macroeconomics will know that decreasing or removing the partial funding of private education will only lead to a greater burden on the federal government’s dwindling tax revenues.

Perhaps Ms Gillard can raise the GST rate to Finland’s 23 per cent to pay for this educational equality and excellence.

Richard Thomas Naremburn

Given the recent attention to education funding it has become apparent that the term “independent schools” is an oxymoron of undoubted magnificence.

Geoff Eagar Toowoon Bay

Tony Abbott’s reference to “injustice” in the funding of non-government schools reflects the language of the old 1950s-60s Catholic campaign for state aid. Catholic schools were once the poor underfunded cousins of Australian education, but 40 years ago the Karmel Report established the principle of federal government funding for virtually all schools. By shifting the focus more to students and student performance, the Gonski report has the potential to provide a new way forward to tackle social disadvantage in terms of both social equity and national interests.

Surely we are not going to miss this opportunity by simply returning to the disputes and rent-seeking debates of the past?

Geoffrey Sherington Willoughby East

The simple truth is that funding from the taxpayer, both state and federal, varies dependent upon what school your parents choose. We don’t ration out border control on such a basis. Let all students enjoy the same funding and if parents want to supplement this rather than buying other goods or services then that should be tolerated.

Noel Hadjimichael Roseville

As far as I can see Julia Gillard and Tony Abbott have different slants on the same policy. One says give money to the rich school and the other says take it from the poor schools. The effect is the same. More money for the haves and less for the have-nots.

David Neilson Invergowrie

The proportion of the education pie going to educate my children is less important than the quantity of pie they are to receive. Thus I have no problems about funding private schools so long as both state and federal governments significantly increase the amount they spend on public schools and the children that attend them. Additional funding is especially needed to adequately support special needs children.

Luke Weyland Strathfield

Hardly a day seems to go past without an announcement about more government spending. Private schools are the latest beneficiary. If only the revenue side of the budget was keeping up, but with falling mineral prices flowing through to lower mining tax receipts, Wayne Swan’s promised budget surplus is looking more uncertain. Surely it’s time to put the cheque book away?

David Crommelin Strathfield
Costly learning curve for overseas family

EXCLUSIVE

JULIE HARE

WITH annual school fees of about $23,000 a year for their two boys, Fauziah and Roslan Yaacob faced a constant struggle to make ends meet. The family had come from Singapore in 2009 so Mr Yaacob could study building and construction at the Gordon Institute of TAFE in Geelong.

But the fees weren’t for a fancy private school. The Yaacob family was paying for their children, Farriv, now 15, and Rayyan, now 18, to attend public schools in Melbourne’s Werribee.

Now on a bridging visa as they await a decision on permanent residency, with $4900 in unpaid fees and debt collectors knocking on the door, the family has no option but to have Farriv homeschooled. A report released today by the Victorian Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission says international students such as the Yaacobs are being discriminated against.

As a signatory to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the federal government has guaranteed that primary school education should be compulsory and freely available.

Victoria is not alone. Every state in Australia makes international students pay fees for their dependants to attend public school. The VHREOC report says fees of $7370 are charged for primary students in Victorian schools, and $9770 for junior secondary students.

Acting commissioner Karen Toohey said the fees were a huge cost impost on families who may often arrive unaware they will be charged to send their children to school. “There is an aggregated negative effect from policy decisions involving international students,” she said.

“We invite them to come here to study but then they are limited in their right to work, to healthcare, to transport concessions and to education for their dependants. “The net impact of all those restrictions is that it makes Australia less desirable as a destination.”

Simon Evans, the pro vice-chancellor (international) at the University of Melbourne, said the issue was significant.

“The fees impair the right to basic education and have the potential to separate families if children must be sent home in order to access education,” he said.

Simon Marginson, a professor of higher education from the University of Melbourne, has long campaigned for improving the human rights regime for international students. “On issues such as transport costs and children’s school fees, there is no valid reason for discriminating against international students,” he said. “… such practices are just profit-gouging.”

A spokesman for Education Minister Martin Dixon said the government would consider the report.
... but there’s an upside for the university sector

JILL ROWBOTHAM

THE university sector is getting plenty right, even though it faces challenges in internationalising the system and in funding, according to the EduWorld report.

There was “an effort to acknowledge the government’s intention to focus the market on the student — for the student’s advantage — and inherently for Australia”, among the 12 respondents, it said.

“For the consumer, it will be great,” one respondent said of the lifting of enrolment caps, who also delivered a vote of confidence in the Excellence in Research for Australia audit published for the first time in February last year.

“Thankfully we’ve come to ERA rankings... it’s a legitimate source for how we fare in that space.

“That’s what government asked for — students want to know why to come here, what does higher education in Australia stand for?”

The local university system was also seen as “big”, both in terms of being important — “I think we have punched above our weight for a long time” — and in terms of its economic contribution as a major exporter of educational services.

The report said the strength most often mentioned was the “quality” of the system, along with the ease of access for domestic students and the wide choice of courses offered.

A “small size advantage” accrued to the sector and there was “good collegiality and a lot of sharing and efforts to identify ways that we can apply things as a sector” one respondent said.

And Australia was on the right track in terms of progress in creating a “global citizenry” via the university system and its curriculum.

“We’re heading in the right direction... (but) not there yet.”
Offshore students told not to come

IMMIGRATION officers are sabotaging Australia’s education marketing overseas, rejecting would-be students and suggesting they are better off taking courses in their home countries, education providers complain.

“People are being told in visa rejections, ‘Don’t come to Australia, stay where you are, it will be cheaper’,” said Stephen Nagle, director of private provider Holmes Institute.

“(Meanwhile), we’re out there, selling Australia.”

Mr Nagle estimated immigration officers in offshore posts were rejecting 25-30 per cent of students wanting to come to Holmes, which provides English language courses as well as vocational and higher education.

“So some countries have been really taken offline — Nepal has about an 80 per cent rejection rate — and people have stopped applying for vocational education and training,” he said.

The private education peak body has documented 224 visa rejections in which immigration officers stood accused of applying the new “genuine temporary entrant” test in a subjective and punitive way. “It depends on who’s processing your visa, it depends who’s interviewing you,” said Ingeborg Loon of the Australian Council for Private Education and Training.

Before last November, would-be students enjoyed a simpler, more objective test, she said.

The new test flows from the June 2011 Knight report, which urged a crackdown on students keener on migration than education. Yet education providers also were promised a streamlined visa approval system.

Sue Blundell, from the peak body of English language colleges, English Australia, said offshore use of the new test was akin to refusing visas to would-be tourists with the line: “You’ve got beaches in your country, why would you want to come to Australia?”

The Immigration Department will meet industry leaders on Friday to discuss the issue, but a department spokesman denied the new test made it harder for genuine applicants to obtain a visa: “It addresses whether the individual circumstances of an applicant as a whole indicate that their intention is for a temporary stay in Australia.” Immigration officers played “no role in directing potential students to particular courses, whether in Australia or in their own country,” he added.

Peak bodies are pressing the department for a breakdown of visa refusal rates for each education sector and each overseas mission.

Markets included in industry complaints include Brazil, the Czech Republic, Colombia, India, Indonesia, Pakistan, Spain, Thailand and Turkey.

“We’re hearing all this anecdotal evidence (of problems) and we’ve got (the department) on the other side saying, look at the global data, the rejection rates are very low,” said Ms Blundell.

In one case, an immigration officer in Bangkok told a woman keen to come here to study English that her failure to canvass “study options” in Thailand suggested she was not genuine.

Mr Nagle cited the case of an overseas student of Australian politics who wanted to come to study “rock English” after Wayne Swan invoked the lyrics of US singer Bruce Springsteen.

“How could a student demonstrate the knowledge of rock English to further their career as a political analyst?” he said. “We are losing the market for people who just want to come to Australia for the sake of learning English.”

The Knight report pointed out the disparity between the cost of many Australian courses and the unlikelihood of a career payoff back home. He singled out vocational education, saying it made more sense for Australia to export courses to the region instead of importing students.

The government assured quality providers that visa approvals would be much easier as long as they took responsibility for students’ migration track records.

If applicants failed the new entry test, the flexibility of the streamlined system would be frustrated, said Phil Honeywood of the International Education Association of Australia.

Universities must wait until a report next month on visa refusal rates to know the true effect of the streamlined system.
Finland a lesson in learning

LIFELONG education and flexible movement between work and study are part of Finland’s innovation success that Australia would do well to emulate, Group of Eight policy adviser Martin Grabert says.

“Their higher education sector has to accomplish a set of objectives to allow people to jump between education sectors and between companies easily,” Dr Grabert said.

“The lifelong learning education system is key to their future competitiveness. The requirements (of business) are dynamic and they change a lot. You have to match supply to demand, not the other way around.” He said the polytechnic sector was crucial in creating a skilled workforce, along with employers who invested heavily in training.

Dr Grabert is principal author of a new Go8 paper on the university-innovation nexus in the tiny Scandinavian nation, which has a population of 5.4 million and is home to technology giant Nokia.

Australian academic Ian Dobson, who has been working at the University of Helsinki for the past three years, said polytechnics were efficient because students were job-ready within 3½ years, usually, compared with universities’ five years.

“The main thing about Finland is the primary and secondary education is so strong,” Dr Dobson said.

The comments come as the debate about innovation intensifies. This month, CSIRO chairman Simon McKeon blasted the federal government over the prospect that the research and development tax credit could fall victim to its plan to cut the company tax rate.

And last week the Prime Minister’s manufacturing taskforce called on Canberra to increase outlays in its $9.4 billion science and research budget for applied knowledge in manufacturing.

It called for “a large-scale reprioritisation of resourcing and effort to unleash the power of market pull” as well as “science push”.

But another lesson of the Finnish experience was the responsibility of the private sector to spell out what was required, Dr Grabert said.

“You can’t just stand up and say, ‘What we get from schools or TAFEs or universities is rubbish.’ You have to go through a cumbersome process to articulate your actual needs for a period of 10 years or as far (forward) as you can, and incorporate this in the system, which makes a flexible response easily achievable for the system.”

He said the Australian Qualifications Framework was restrictive, “making it difficult to meet the requirements for specific aspects which go a bit further than a TAFE or something a bit shorter or something in between. In Finland something like that does not exist.

“The key message is keep talking: the government in Finland triggers a lot of discussion and collaboration between the private sector and the universities. This strict separation we are pursuing is not evident at all.”

JILL ROWBOTHAM

‘You can’t just stand up and say, “What we get from schools or TAFEs or universities is rubbish” ’

MARTIN GRABERT
GO8 POLICY ADVISER
Our place in the Asian Century

FUTURE TENSE

JILL ROWBOTHAM

A CROWD of 600 saw in the Chinese Year of the Dragon at La Trobe University in January and had its Eagle Bar bursting at the seams. Attendance was well up on the 150 who attended last year, the first time the celebration was held.

Many of this year’s revellers were Australian students intrigued by the colour and movement, and happy to add to it, says La Trobe senior deputy vice-chancellor John Rosenberg.

Professor Rosenberg was among a dozen university-based international education specialists interviewed for an EduWorld qualitative report on the future of the sector.

He says the story of Chinese New Year and similar initiatives — La Trobe also celebrates the start of Ramadan and the Hindu Diwali festival — support his argument about internationalising education in Australia: part of what’s required is simple steps such as these, and more of them.

“Most Australian universities would have a very diverse overseas student population. That multicultural, multinational on-campus environment is fantastic for both Australian and international students,” he said.

La Trobe has 6000 international students from about 90 countries, comprising 20 per cent of the total.

The imperative to sustain the export market in higher education — the need to make money out of overseas students — can co-exist with a well-founded approach to internationalisation, he said.

“We have to be continually cognisant of the fact that it’s really hard for international students to come to Australia, so we have to be sure of the quality of the support services, such as adequate accommodation when they arrive and ensuring they’re able to obtain part-time work in a safe environment, where they are paid appropriately.

“If the state government would finally give international students transport concessions, that would help as well.”

Things are improving at La Trobe: the number of Indians enrolled has doubled to about 650, although it is still down on the level four years ago.

But he said getting internationalisation “right” meant more than shoring up numbers by delivering a good education and sustaining a welcoming, supportive experience. It also means nudging local students to be more exotic when selecting overseas exchange semesters, bypassing traditional US and British options for China, India or Sri Lanka.

Southern Cross University pro vice-chancellor, international and enterprise, Chris Patton, who was also surveyed for the report, said its credit the sector understood it was time for a change.

“We’ve moved past the stage where there was a linkage between education and permanent residence, which was incredibly simplistic, towards deeper engagement,” he said. “The talk is about the Asian Century and what is Australia’s place in the world and that we had better capitalise on that. So one of the things we are getting right is the recognition that there’s a need to turn the corner.”

He said universities were at different stages along the way to comprehensive internationalisation. “There are some that are more specifically reliant on recruiting international students and others at the weightier end of the spectrum who have for decades been pursuing research linkages with some purpose and outcomes.”

ONLINE: More reports

La Trobe University's John Rosenberg says the quality of support services for international students is important

DAVID GERAGHTY
Clever minds must find equitable solutions

SHARON BELL

ALTHOUGH we should be wary of binary oppositions, an equity v. excellence policy conundrum is emerging under the rubric of fee deregulation.

Before we accept it as inevitable, we should ask: Why do we need to increase university fees and what is the likelihood that deregulation would introduce a tipping point that further distorts access and success?

As this debate becomes more strident, perhaps those of us in senior roles should remind ourselves of the privilege and responsibility we carry as part of our professional baggage.

As we begin to see patterns emerging from uncapped undergraduate student load, we need to be confident that equity and access for all remains an established part of the fabric of our sector.

We need to engage in the close analysis and monitoring by equity group, institutional type, discipline and course level to understand whether our sector is delivering socially just educational opportunities.

The relationship between fees and participation by equity groups is not simple and may operate more as one of a bundle of factors, including knowledge of the sector and career aspirations.

There is talk of a fee tipping point that may affect the participation of the less privileged or subtly drive self-selection into lower-fee, lower-debt vocationally oriented disciplines.

There is evidence the recent changes in Britain show that fee sensitivity may be greatest among poorer males and mature people, especially women.

It is where multiple disadvantage is at play that equity gets interesting. It’s also where our reporting systems are least developed, enabling us to slip into untested assumptions, such as that these women are part of a leisure class of students for whom non-participation is equivalent to forgoing an indulgence.

Those I know have often suffered half a lifetime of disadvantage, and higher education is quite literally a lifeline.

It is fascinating that one equity category that has taken energy to prosecute has been women in non-traditional areas of study and higher degrees. It is arguably a category that demands extension to all equity groups.

When the recent base funding review confirmed that Australian fees were already high in comparison with international benchmarks, why do we enthusiastically consider fee deregulation?

Surely we can turn our clever policy minds to more creative solutions than asking students for “more please” and slating this back to narrowly defined concepts of individual private benefit.

What if diversity was premised on ensuring that institutions at the periphery of cities and rural regions were supported to be the best of their kind in the world?

Would it be ethical to use increased student contributions to invest in improving research?

How would this be justified, except at the margins of a very small proportion of students in honours or capstone programs who genuinely operate in the teaching-research nexus — those not being taught by the large army of casual academic workers in the sector? How do we justify the higher cost of high-status, research-intensive universities under the guise of diversity when the greatest increase and need is among students in outer metropolitan and rural institutions?

Surely we can turn our clever policy minds to more creative solutions than asking students for “more please” and slating this back to narrowly defined concepts of individual private benefit.

What if diversity was premised on ensuring that institutions at the periphery of cities and rural regions were supported to be the best of their kind in the world?

Would we dare to proclaim the excellence of our higher education sector as premised on equity and inclusion? Thirty-nine bronze medals rather than two gold?

Sharon Bell is deputy vice-chancellor at Charles Darwin University.
Passion for trade

MINISTER for Higher Education and Skills and the Minister responsible for the Teaching Profession, Peter Hall, will do the honours at the Victoria launch of National Skills Week at the Kino Cinema, Melbourne, on August 27.

Three young workers - Apprentice of the Year finalist, Sevag Parseghian, Trainee of the Year finalist, Stephanie Greene, and Justin Stankovic of East Coast Aviation in Traralgon - will share their experiences with guests as they tell their stories at the event.

The night will also see the premiere of Le Chef, a story about having a passion for your trade and what hard work can bring.

Work Place Connect chief executive Nicholas Wyman said by 2015, Australia would need 2.4 million new workers with Certificate 3 (apprentice level) qualifications, highlighting the need to engage more young people in skilled careers.
NATIONAL Skills Week, now in its second year, will shine a spotlight on the hundreds of career opportunities and thousands of training places available to Australians.

Minister for Tertiary Education, Skills, Science and Research, Chris Evans, said the week was a time for a collaborative approach dedicated to raising the status of practical and vocational learning.

“To compete for the jobs of tomorrow, Australians will need to be increasingly more qualified,” Senator Evans said at the national launch of the event last week.

“Better skills not only lead to better pay and employment outcomes for the individual, but an investment in skills is also an investment in higher productivity and a sustainable economy,” Senator Evans said.

Senator Evans said the Federal Government was investing $15.6 billion in skills and training over the next four years to ensure all Australians are able to maximise their potential to participate in the workforce.

“The $700 million National Workforce Development fund is making it easier for businesses and employees to get the training they need,” he said.

SkillsOne chief executive Brian Wexham said National Skills Week would provide a positive focus on Vocational Education and Training (VET).

“It will bring to life the positive messages, highlighting the talents, skills and the value of apprentices and trainees across Australia to the wider public and employers,” he said.

Every year the diversity and depth of talent is showcased at the Australian Training Awards, with each state and territory acknowledging its best candidates in VET via the State Training Awards.

Winners of the state awards then become nominees in the Australian Training Awards, which this year will be held in Melbourne on November 16.

Australian apprenticeship ambassador and hairdresser to the stars Renya Xydis said an apprenticeship in any occupation provided jobseekers with real world skills, as desired and needed by industry.

This is the week to discover the career opportunities a new skill could bring. For more details and to find out the events and activities taking place, go to www.nationalskillsweek.com.au

It will raise the status of practical and vocational learning and allow us to acknowledge the contribution of our skilled workers to our economy and community.
Skills breed success

TRAINING FOR A BETTER LIFE

Sarah Sharples

BETTER skills equal a better life for individuals and a better nation for all. That’s the equation the federal government hopes to hammer home during National Skills Week 2012.

Tertiary Education and Skills Minister Chris Evans said the week aimed to showcase the many career opportunities out there and inspire Australians to take up training and get the skills they need for jobs.

National Skills Week is August 27 to September 2. With Australia continuing to see an increased demand for skilled labour, Senator Evans said job-seekers would need to be increasingly better qualified to compete for the jobs of tomorrow.

“Better skills not only lead to better pay and employment outcomes for the individual, but an investment in skills is also an investment in higher productivity and a sustainable economy,” he said.

A Certificate III or IV is estimated to increase lifetime earnings by more than $324,000 while a person with a diploma or advanced diploma could earn around $400,000 more during their working life than those with a Year 12 certificate.

He said the federal government had established the Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency to engage with industry on how to meet current and future skills demands.

Tertiary Education and Skills Minister Chris Evans is urging people to train today for the jobs of tomorrow.

Picture: KYM SMITH

Now in its second year, Skills Week is designed to highlight the huge variety of opportunities and careers available through vocational education and training.

An additional 2.4 million workers will be needed with qualifications of Certificate III level or higher by 2015, says Skills Australia.
Train to sustain success

EDGAR D’SOUZA

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