Do not lower the bar on real estate

HOME ownership in this nation is considered so desirable it is known as The Great Australian Dream. It is seen as the crucible of security and the bastion of the family, notions celebrated in one of Australians' favourite films, The Castle. So cherished is home ownership that as many as seven in 10 households own or are paying off their homes, one of the highest rates in the industrialised world. Buying a home is by far the biggest financial investment most people will ever make, so it is crucial that they can have confidence the real estate market is fair, transparent and appropriately regulated.

The Age, then, believes a proposal by the National Occupational Licensing Authority that jailed drug traffickers and violent criminals no longer be banned from later becoming real estate agents is flawed and should not be adopted. The authority is also proposing police checks on auctioneers, property managers and agency sales staff also no longer be required. The suggestions are part of a push to create a national regulatory system for various trades. The rationale is to reduce red tape and facilitate labour mobility. These are laudable aims, but the effect here in Victoria would be to diminish probity standards in the real estate market.

While The Age embraces the principle that criminals can and should be rehabilitated, we do hold that there ought to be exceptions. Real estate agents must be seen to be of unimpeachable character, given the risks home buyers take and the long-term commitment they make.

We agree with the Real Estate Institute of Victoria's robust argument that the proposals would bring undesirable people into the industry and create undue risks for home owners.

The legislation would be introduced by the Minister for Skills, Senator Chris Evans. A spokeswoman for Senator Evans says the proposals are based on "extensive expert advice from both industry and regulators" and would "bring major benefits for the economy, workers and employers". This seems a curious and unsubstantiated argument that, further, fails to adequately take into account the group whose interests ought to be paramount in this context - home owners.

We urge Victoria's Minister for Consumer Affairs, Michael O'Brien, to take the counsel of the REIV and fight the proposals, which will be finalised later this year. It would be a better idea were the national scheme to raise the probity bar by adopting Victoria's rigorous approach to the licensing of real estate agents.
Lab alert over money freeze

Scientists are worried budget cuts will damage projects and send talented people offshore, write Geoff Maslen and Benjamin Preiss.

AUSTRALIA’S researchers are feeling rattled. You can take Anna-Maria Arabia’s word for that. As chief executive of Science and Technology Australia, she has a feel for the mood in the nation’s laboratories — and just now the feeling is glum.

There’s alarm that the federal government may be about to freeze grants that support some of Australia’s most innovative science — a step that could jeopardise 1700 jobs.

The nation’s universities and research establishments have been swept by speculation that federal cabinet is considering the measure — which would affect new grants allocated by the Australian Research Council, the National Health and Medical Research Council and other funding bodies — as part of its effort to slash government spending and create a budget surplus.

The two councils control more than $1.5 billion each year between them, allocating the money to researchers mostly in three-year blocks. As their funding runs out every three years, the researchers must reapply for another round or lose their positions. The uncertainty is generating anxiety and anger among those who are vulnerable.

“There needs to be some recognition by all parties that the research effort does require a long-term commitment,” said Ms Arabia. “Stop-start funding doesn’t work.”

She believes Australians value the work carried out by researchers, with the country considered a leader in medical and astronomy research.

“We’re trading in raw hope here. People get that the medical health research effort is crucial to their everyday existence. Everybody knows that doesn’t happen overnight. It’s decades of work and commitment.” A funding shortage would force researchers to find work outside Australia or to stop working on vital projects, Ms Arabia said.

In all, she said, the government spent about $9 billion a year on research and development, much of which went to the CSIRO and universities.

The Group of Eight Universities, representing the nation’s main research-intensive universities, has warned that a halt to funding would slash $320 million from university and research institute budgets. In a letter to the Prime Minister, the group’s head, Professor Fred Hilmer, said if the government cancelled rather than just postponed new funding commitments, the loss would amount to more than $1.3 billion.

“Either way, the effect on Australian research would be dire,” Professor Hilmer said. “Such funding cuts would see at least 1700 highly trained and creative people from the higher education sector lose their jobs. This is more than the recent job losses at Toyota, Ford and BlueScope Steel combined.”

Now there are suggestions the government will tell universities they should meet any funding shortfall from their own budgets.

Michael Gallagher, Go8 executive director and a former senior official in the federal Education Department, said universities had no capacity to absorb extra financial burdens.

“Yet in a bizarre demonstration of ignorance of universities and how fragile they are, some ministers have claimed universities are flush with funds even though they are laying off staff and the international student market is collapsing,” Mr Gallagher said.

“We have a national research facilities program with the synchrotron and spectrometry but the government ran out of money and asked the universities to absorb the costs. For Sydney University alone that amounts to $3 million for just one facility.”

“The government might try pushing research funding onto universities because they don’t understand their financial situation — they clearly can’t read the accounts — but it will have a devastating impact if the flow is cut off and it is the basic research that underpins the global university rankings for Australia the politicians are so proud of.”

Even those who have hugely benefited from government largesse are alarmed at the prospects of a funding freeze. Australia’s Chief Scientist, Ian Chubb, won a $54 million allocation from the Prime Minister in the May budget to help boost the number of students studying science and mathematics. He said a freeze would be contrary to everything Ms Gillard and her government had said about the need for an educated nation.

“The consequential impact of a freeze would be quite substantial to the point where hundreds of researchers would be forced to leave Australia and find jobs in other countries. Also, where would such cuts put us competitively internationally?” he said.

“As we pointed out in the Health of Australian Science report to the government, 50 per cent of our research publications are bylined with international co-authors. This collaboration is a very significant part of what we do in our research and it has many beneficial effects by bringing that know-how back into Australia, as well as providing the opportunity for our scientists to work...”
with people overseas who are the best in their field.”

Universities Australia chief executive Belinda Robinson said it would be an “astounding about-face” if the government were to cut or delay research funding.

She quoted Science and Research Minister Chris Evans as saying innovation was a major factor that would drive Australia’s future. “This aspiration would be rendered meaningless if the government were to reduce or delay research expenditure,” she said.

In response to such concerns, the government has been coy. A spokeswoman for Senator Evans said the government was looking at all grant schemes to ensure taxpayers were getting value for money.

“There is a brief pause in some grant programs while this information is being collected. However, all the background work — preparation of guidelines, application procedures — is continuing in the normal way,” she said.

One of those worried about a funding freeze is Milton Hearn, who won a research grant from the Australian Research Council worth $8.5 million over nine years after establishing a special research centre for “green” chemistry at Monash University in 2000. The centre is moving into a new $70 million complex (with $28 million from the federal government) and its 120 researchers are helping develop chemical processes and products that eliminate almost all environmental risks.

Professor Hearn said green chemistry was critical for the future of industry and the environment.

“We believe the return on the ARC investment is about $60 million while the benefit of the centre to the nation is between $350 million and $500 million.”

Centre deputy director Philip Marriott is another researcher waiting to find out if he will get a linkage grant involving a collaborative project with industry. He says a funding freeze would affect the project and the future of two of his post-doctoral students.

“I worry that a freeze would cut the heart out of a generation of researchers and once you lose those links, especially with postdocs, it takes another five or six years to build up that experience again,” Dr Marriott said. “It’s frightening.”

Hundreds of researchers would be forced to leave Australia and find jobs in other countries.

PROFESSOR IAN CHUBB, Australia’s Chief Scientist

Anna-Maria Arabia: Research requires a long-term commitment
Reprieve for Indon language program

BERNARD LANE

THE Indonesian language program at the University of NSW has been given a stay of execution after a national outcry joined by opposition foreign affairs spokeswoman Julie Bishop.

Last week, UNSW said it would not take new students next year because enrolments were too low “to justify maintaining the Indonesian program”. The news dismayed Indonesian academics, partly because it came at a time when both sides of politics have been talking up the challenge of the Asian Century and the need for Asian language learning.

Ms Bishop argued that UNSW should be working harder to promote Indonesian and drew a link between language programs and Australia’s national interests. Last night, she welcomed news of a reprieve for the Indonesian program, stressing “the strategic national importance of such facilities”.

Yesterday, the dean of arts at UNSW, James Donald, said the university would keep enrolments open for new students next year. He said the lone Indonesian lecturer had made it clear she would not be retiring for “the next couple of years at least”. Faced with her retirement, and just 16 students in Indonesian compared with 1100 in Japanese, UNSW had felt it could not justify replacing her, Professor Donald said. This was why UNSW had decided last week to send any new students of Indonesian across town to the University of Sydney.

As news of the UNSW reversal spread yesterday, there was speculation the federal government had intervened.

Under a 2006 policy, Indonesian and Arabic were designated “nationally strategic languages”, meaning universities must seek approval for any closure.

There was no intervention at UNSW, according to the arts dean and the department of tertiary education. “I’ve been briefing the department and I’m actually writing Julie Bishop a letter explaining to her what we’re doing,” Professor Donald said.

He could not guarantee UNSW would replace its Indonesian lecturer when she reached retirement.