FED: Oakeshott angry over university cuts

CANBERRA, Oct 25 AAP - Key independent MP Rob Oakeshott is disappointed the federal government is stripping about $1 billion from universities and making cuts to research.

The federal government's mid-year economic and fiscal outlook trimmed about $1 billion from the higher education sector including almost $500 million from delaying funding increases for research.

Mr Oakeshott said the cuts were a huge concern.

"We have got to reach a point some time soon that education is seen as an investment not a cost," he told ABC radio on Thursday.

"I'm really disappointed with some of those cuts because they deny certainty to a sector that needs it."
FED:Oakeshott angry over uni cuts

Key independent MP ROB OAKESHOTT is disappointed the federal government's stripping about one billion dollars from universities and making cuts to research.

The federal government's mid-year economic and fiscal outlook trimmed about one billion dollars from the higher education sector including almost 500 million dollars from delaying funding increases for research.

Mr OAKESHOTT says the cuts are a huge concern.
He's told ABC radio we have to get to a point soon where education is seen as an investment not a cost.
AAP RTV lpm/crh
Universities fear state trying to take control

By BENJAMIN PREISS
HIGHER EDUCATION REPORTER

PLANS to deny students and staff their right to guaranteed places on university councils have sparked fears the state government is seizing control of universities by stealth.

Melbourne University chancellor Elizabeth Alexander has lashed out at the government about the changes in a letter to students and staff, which said she had told the government about her concerns to no avail.

“We are disappointed by the action of the government and its apparent unwillingness to respond to our objections,” she said.

Under present rules university councils and TAFE boards must include elected student and staff representatives. But according to legislation passing through Parliament this week, these representatives could only be appointed by the council or board if they demonstrated the “necessary” skills.

If universities wanted to retain students and staff on councils, the government would then appoint an equal or greater number of its own representatives, a spokesman confirmed.

Ms Alexander said the changes were an “unjustified incursion”.

“We stressed that removal of these representatives was likely to disrupt the relationship of council to the university as a whole and inevitably cause resentment at staff and student levels, giving rise to tensions which do not currently exist.”

A government spokesman told The Age earlier that it was inappropriate for students and staff be represented “as of right”.

Higher Education Minister Peter Hall said students and staff could sit on university councils, but had to show they had sufficient experience.

He said the government had acted on “extensive consultations” with tertiary institutions.

National Union of Students president Donherra Walmsley said the proposed rules infringed upon universities’ autonomy to “run as they see fit”. “I think this is an attempt by the state government to overtake universities by stealth,” she said. "Why they would need to have such a hand in day-to-day running and direction of universities is unclear.”

Victorian universities are each governed by their own separate acts of State Parliament. The Age understands the changes would apply to all universities.

Jill Blackmore, the director of Deakin University’s Centre for Research in Educational Futures and Innovation, said the government wanted more control over universities because they were so crucial to the state’s economy. The government was treating universities like private businesses by sidelining students and staff, she said.

b.preiss@theage.com.au
BLOATED UNIS MUST TRIM

FAT TO PERFORM BETTER

It’s a case of the ‘admin tail wagging the academic dog’

ADAM CREIGHTON

IN the forest of reforms that are aimed at boosting the nation’s economic efficiency, one of the biggest and lowest-hanging pieces of fruit remains unpicked: emancipation of higher education from the shackles of bureaucracy.

Australian universities are bloated with superfluous staff that thwart lecturers’ ability to teach and suck up funds that would be better spent on research. They are riddled with inefficiencies and perverse incentives that hobble their ability to produce rounded, competent graduates.

Take the University of Western Sydney, Australia’s largest, with a head count of 2487 staff in March this year. The university employed about 1100 staff in the vice-chancellor’s office, the corporate strategy and services division and the academic and research division (which undertakes no academic research).

Recently retired UWS property economics lecturer Norman Haker estimates that a further quarter of the staff in the teaching faculties were administrative, which implies that university-wide 56 per cent of staff were administrative.

It gets worse: cleaning and security are typically outsourced, so are not included in the above tally, and academics themselves are lumbered with copious paperwork that saps about one-third of their working hours.

“The administrative tail is wagging the academic dog.” Mr Haker tells The Australian.

“Examination lengths, assessment processes, course and subject content and delivery are now being dictated by administrators who are not currently responsible for teaching, research or publication”.

Administrators are not poorly paid either; last year, they soaked up almost half the university’s $340 million wage bill.

An Ernst and Young report into the future of Australia’s universities, released earlier this week, showed absurd administrative burdens were the norm. Only one of the Australian universities it examined had a ratio of support and administrative staff to academic staff of less than one.

The report says professional service firms in the private sector typically have two or three times as many frontline staff as support staff, implying universities would need to sack about half theirs to approach what might approach common sense. Yet universities still have the temerity to tell government and taxpayers that they need more money, citing bullying lecture theatres and cramped tutorials. They could free up millions of dollars every year by sacking unproductive staff.

The expansion of publicly funded higher education has proved a powerful engine of social mobility for young Australians, launching smart, hardworking kids from working-class backgrounds into jobs their parents could never have had. But public support for higher education need not require funds to flow directly to the universities. The federal government could directly subsidise students’ tuition fees and leave alone the administration of universities.

University News told The Australian: “The administrative tail is wagging the academic dog.” Mr Haker tells The Australian.

“Examination lengths, assessment processes, course and subject content and delivery are now being dictated by administrators who are not currently responsible for teaching, research or publication”.

Administrators are not poorly paid either; last year, they soaked up almost half the university’s $340 million wage bill.

An Ernst and Young report into the future of Australia’s universities, released earlier this week, showed absurd administrative burdens were the norm. Only one of the Australian universities it examined had a ratio of support and administrative staff to academic staff of less than one.

The report says professional service firms in the private sector typically have two or three times as many frontline staff as support staff, implying universities would need to sack about half theirs to approach what might approach common sense. Yet universities still have the temerity to tell government and taxpayers that they need more money, citing bullying lecture theatres and cramped tutorials. They could free up millions of dollars every year by sacking unproductive staff.

The expansion of publicly funded higher education has proved a powerful engine of social mobility for young Australians, launching smart, hardworking kids from working-class backgrounds into jobs their parents could never have had. But public support for higher education need not require funds to flow directly to the universities. The federal government could directly subsidise students’ tuition fees and leave alone the administration of universities.

Competition would soon prompt universities to slash their bureaucratic burdens, freeing up skilled workers to move to industries where they can add vastly more value. That would be a win for everyone: universities, administrators and society.