With his appointment as chairman of Universities Australia this year, Glyn Davis is back on top again. The vice-chancellor of University of Melbourne made number one on this list in 2008, the year then prime minister Kevin Rudd made his pal co-chairman of the 2020 Summit. Under Davis, the peak body is tackling an issue vice-chancellors wouldn’t have dared touch in the recent past – student fee reform. The potential for fee rises or even price deregulation is the big issue in higher education. The Grattan Institute’s Graduate Winners report published in August sparked stormy debate by recommending the federal government wind back subsidies for university students to save $3 billion. The result would be an increase in what students pay for their degrees, an issue upon which vice-chancellors are divided. Work is being done behind the scenes by various university groups to influence any future Coalition policy, which puts opposition spokesman on higher education Brett Mason in the frame. While the Gonski review of schools funding is the main game nationally, universities are preoccupied with Labor’s Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency. When she was tertiary education minister Julia Gillard promised ‘light touch’ regulation, but TEQSA’s approach has been described as draconian, and new reporting requirements onerous in the extreme. In broader terms, chief scientist Ian Chubb’s efforts to lift participation in science and maths is getting serious attention from the federal government.

Joanna Mather
The softly spoken University of Melbourne vice-chancellor is a heavyweight in the eyes of colleagues and politicians. Having created the so-called Melbourne model, where US-style generalist undergraduate degrees are followed by professional master’s degrees, Davis has turned his attention to reshaping national policy. As Universities Australia chairman his lofty ambition is to unite the nation’s 39 vice-chancellors on key issues including student fees, entry scores and research funding. “He has delivered at Melbourne and is now doing so for the sector through ambitious positioning work on attitudes to universities,” a well-placed insider says of the former political scientist.

As chief commissioner of the new quality watchdog, TEQSA, Nicoll is spearheading a quality assurance and audit regime that has some vice-chancellors fuming over red tape. “TEQSA’s teeth are really being sharpened,” says one source of the enhanced powers that Nicoll can use to clamp down on providers who fail to meet standards. “They are asking a whole range of questions of universities that haven’t been asked before and already changing how we do things.”

Even though an election is probably more than a year away, university chiefs are lining up outside the door of the opposition spokesman for higher education, seeking to exert influence over Coalition policy. Coalition governments are rarely regarded as ‘friends’ of universities but it’s time to butter up to the other camp. Mason is viewed as a genuine supporter of higher education but there are big questions over whether he has enough influence to keep the number crunchers at bay.

It’s not that Evans has made a massive difference in terms of new policy, but the Minister for Tertiary Education, Skills, Science and Research has protected Labor’s higher education reforms – including the uncapping of places and better indexing of government grants – from the razor gang. “The political whirlwinds blow, the gossip swirls around him, and he just gets on with the job in his mega-portfolio, says one colleague. But Evans wields true power if he can make his own mark rather than simply delivering on Julia Gillard’s ideas.

The former ANU vice-chancellor has increased his influence in his role as chief scientist by talking up workforce and knowledge gaps, and selling the need to put science, technology, engineering and maths back on the agenda for bright students in schools and universities. In response to his performance report, the May budget included $54 million to encourage greater uptake of the subjects in schools and universities. The lion’s share, $20 million, is going to university-led outreach projects for schools.
FUTURE ENERGY DEMAND

Students dig deep for solution

Peter Klinger

Five students from five Perth universities. Five solutions to solving the world’s future energy demand.

Royal Dutch Shell has earned a reputation as the most gas-focused of the world’s energy super majors. But when it called on university students to share their views of how the world’s future energy needs could be met, the answers could not have been more diverse.

“I believe we are able to supply a significant amount of energy needed through hemp,” Gareth Jones, from the University of WA, told the Shell Global Energy Forum on Wednesday night. “Hemp will play a critical role in shifting the planet’s fuel sources from unsustainable towards sustainable, renewable and environmentally friendly.”

Mr Jones was one of five students to receive $1500 from Shell for his address of the topic “Where should the world get its future from”. The topic was based on Shell’s forecast of a global population of nine billion by 2050, an accompanying doubling in energy demand and pressure on curbing carbon emissions.

Shell Australia vice-president Peter Robinson said he was “pleasantly surprised” by the diversity of the energy solutions proposed by the winning students.

“It underscores that there is no silver bullet,” Mr Robinson said at the conclusion of the forum, which was moderated by WestBusiness and attended by Federal Tertiary Education Minister Chris Evans as well as leaders from Perth’s oil and gas industry and five universities.

Rebecca Grennell, from Edith Cowan University, said the world’s oceans were “an ignored form of concentrated energy” but conced-
The key to our energy future lies in harnessing renewable and recyclable resources that are geographic specific.

Hemp will play a critical role in shifting the planet’s fuel sources from unsustainable towards sustainable.

The future for energy storage and transport will be hydrogen.

The ocean is an ignored form of concentrated energy. Only 48 of the 206 countries in the world have no coastline.

Nuclear power has a tried and tested history. The recent accident in Fukushima does not change these facts.