

Higher education reform

JULIA GILLARD SAYS THE COMMONWEALTH GOVERNMENT WILL INCREASE THE PROPORTION OF YOUNG AUSTRALIANS WITH AN UNDERGRADUATE QUALIFICATION, FUND UNIVERSITIES ON THE BASIS OF STUDENT DEMAND AND ESTABLISH A NATIONAL REGULATORY AND QUALITY AGENCY FOR HIGHER EDUCATION. **STEVE HOLDEN** REPORTS.

The Review of Australian Higher Education commissioned by Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Education Julia Gillard has called for structural reforms and additional investment for the higher education sector to the tune of more than \$6 billion over the next four years.

Speaking at the Universities Australia Conference in Canberra in March, Gillard said the full detail of the Commonwealth government's response would be released in May at the time of the Budget, but said she would increase the proportion of young Australians with an undergraduate qualification and wanted to put Australia in the top group of Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development nations for investment in university research and knowledge diffusion.

Chaired by Professor Denise Bradley, the Review called for an additional investment of \$6 billion for higher education over the next four years. The Review also called for a voucher system so that 'funding will follow the student.' Handing the final report to the Deputy PM in December, Bradley said, 'The student income support system needed a much more fundamental look than we had realised.' On the question of lifting the cap on university fees, however, Bradley told Heather Ewart on ABC TV's 7:30 Report that was something to address 'some time in the future.'

Receiving the report, Gillard observed, 'Even in these tough days, it's very important to be laying the foundations for long-term reform.'

The Review called for:

- 40 per cent of 25- to 34-year olds to attain a bachelor-level qualification by 2020

- 20 per cent of undergraduates to be from low socioeconomic backgrounds by 2020
- increasing base funding for teaching in higher education by 10 per cent
- reforms to the student income support system
- an increase in Research Infrastructure Block Grants by \$300 million a year
- \$80 million extra a year from 2012 for sustainable higher-education provision in regional areas
- a feasibility study for a new national university for regional areas
- a framework for higher education accreditation, quality assurance and regulation
- an independent national tertiary education regulatory body
- adequate and indexed levels of funding for teaching and research
- a reduction in Higher Education Loan Program debts for graduates in teaching by \$1,500 a year for five years, and
- a single Commonwealth, state and territory ministerial council with responsibility for all tertiary education and training.

As the Review noted, 'Because other countries have already moved to address participation and investment in tertiary education, as a means of assisting them to remain internationally competitive, the recommendations in this report, if fully implemented, are likely to do no more than maintain the relative international performance and position of the Australian higher education sector.'

Speaking at the Universities Australia Conference, Gillard outlined the Commonwealth government's position. 'By 2025, 40 per cent of all 25- to 34-year olds will have a qualification at bachelor level or above,'

she said, adding that she also agreed with Bradley's call for a demand-driven funding system. 'All Australian universities will be funded on the basis of student demand from 2012,' she said. The current cap on over-enrolment will be raised from 5 to 10 per cent from 2010 and then wholly removed in 2012, she said. The government will also establish a national regulatory and quality agency for higher education.

'I want to make it absolutely clear that we will not be walking away from (the Bradley Review's) warnings or from its major recommendations,' Gillard said, but noted that, 'Budgetary constraints will affect the immediacy of our response. We can't implement it all today or tomorrow.'

The vice-chancellor of the Australian National University (ANU), Professor Ian Chubb, said the Commonwealth government was on the right track on agreed compacts for universities built around a student-centred approach to tertiary education and a focus on quality and exit standards.

'Minister Gillard's unambiguous message that there won't be a system of micro-management, but agreed compacts and transparent oversight by the new independent national regulatory and quality agency is a very welcome announcement,' Chubb said. 'It means we are able to move on from what I've previously called the "one-size fits all" approach. The focus on objective and comparative benchmarks of quality and performance is essential.'

'It is a major breakthrough that all universities will be funded on the basis of student demand from 2012, and the move to raise the cap on over-enrolment from 2010 is a much needed immediate development – if costly.'

Professor Richard Larkins, Chair of Universities Australia, said, 'The 350 delegates at the conference showed their clear approval of Minister Gillard's announcements, and we feel this will be the beginning of real, positive change and support for universities in Australia.'

With so much agreement, you might think it's all onward and upwards, but before the March conference, divisions had appeared. While the Australian Technology Network (ATN), representing Curtin University of Technology, Queensland University of Technology, RMIT University, the University of South Australia and the University of Technology, Sydney, generally supported the recommendations, the Group of Eight, representing ANU, Monash University and the Universities of Adelaide, Melbourne, New South Wales, Sydney, Queensland and Western Australia, were worried that the government might accept the review as a whole. According to a report by Luke Slattery in the *Australian*, the Group of Eight said the Review was a 'road map to mediocrity' that was not properly thought through and costed, and could not deliver dramatic increases in quality and output.

University of NSW vice-chancellor Fred Hilmer said the Review did 'not clearly acknowledge the fundamentally important principles of excellence, differentiation of mission and the importance of a university education for its own sake,' according to Slattery's report. 'There is little recognition in the Bradley report of the special and key role played by research intensive, internationally well-ranked institutions.'

Speaking at an ATN conference, Bradley said, 'I am aware of the arguments about the strategic importance of greater concentration of internationally-competitive research performance, but I think that there are good national reasons for us to adopt a model which continues to encourage some spread across institutions' rather than 'too much concentration of research capacity in too small a number of what will inevitably be capital city institutions.'

Merit pay for the US

Yes we can: in his first major speech on education, United States President Barack Obama last month called for performance-based pay for teachers as well as longer school days, and years, to improve student achievement.

'The future belongs to the nation that best educates its citizens,' he said. 'We have everything we need to be that nation...and yet, despite resources that are unmatched anywhere in the world, we have let our grades slip, our schools crumble, our teacher quality fall short and other nations outpace us.... Too many supporters of my party have resisted the idea of rewarding excellence in teaching with extra pay, even

though we know it can make a difference in the classroom.'

That resistance has largely centred on the mechanisms by which the performance of teachers might be measured. Performance, according to US Education Secretary Arne Duncan in an interview for Associated Press, includes student test scores. 'What you want to do is really identify the best and brightest by a range of metrics, including student achievement,' he said.

Obama's economic stimulus plans include \$216 billion for education, \$20 billion of which targets funds to low-income school districts for the purpose of boosting academic achievement.

Schools and alcohol

The National Centre for Education and Training on Addiction (NCETA) at Flinders University is examining alcohol education in schools in a research project commissioned by the Commonwealth government, and wants interested teachers, parents and students to become involved by providing a short written submission or completing an online survey by 3 April. The research project will also involve interviews with school personnel and students from government, independent and Catholic schools in all Australian states and territories.

The project, part of the Commonwealth government's 'Youth Binge Drinking

Initiative,' will investigate existing research on alcohol education programs aimed at deterring and reducing alcohol use by secondary school students. It will also involve consultation with experts and key stakeholders about their experience with school-based alcohol education programs. NCETA will then make recommendations to the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations.

To get involved, visit www.nceta.flinders.edu.au or contact NCETA by phoning 08 8201 7575 or emailing nceta@flinders.edu.au

'Appalling spree of terror'

Three armed teenagers were arrested by police last month after an attack at the Auburn campus of Trinity Catholic College in Sydney's west that Parramatta Children's Court Magistrate Gary Still described as an 'appalling spree of terror.' The three teenagers aged between 15 and 17 pleaded guilty to six charges. Two of the three teenagers applied for bail, but Magistrate Still refused the application.

Meanwhile, nine students – eight of them girls – as well as three female teachers were killed at Albertville Realschule in Winnenden, north of Stuttgart in southwestern Germany, when 17-year-old former student Tim Kretschmer entered the school grounds and began shooting. Kretschmer also killed three members of the public as he fled, before killing himself when he was cornered and wounded by police.