Uni fees return

From 1 July, universities will be allowed to set a compulsory fee, capped at a maximum of $250 with indexation each year, for student amenities and services. The move reinstates what used to be called a student union fee until the Howard government introduced voluntary student unionism, which came into effect in July 2006. Announcing the change, Commonwealth Minister for Youth Kate Ellis said the 2006 prohibition on higher education providers requiring a person to pay a compulsory fee for facilities, amenities or services that are not of an academic nature went too far and students have been paying the price ever since. She stressed, however, that the changes would not include a return to compulsory student unionism and said the provision that prohibits a university from requiring a student to be a member of a student organisation will remain.

Universities Australia, the peak body representing the university sector, welcomed the announcement. ‘Universities have struggled for years to prop up essential student services through cross-subsidisation from other parts of already stretched university budgets, to redress the damage that resulted from the Coalition government’s disastrous voluntary student unionism legislation,’ said Universities Australia Chief Executive, Dr Glenn Withers.

Shadow Minister for Youth Sophie Mirabella said the compulsory fee was ‘a major blow to young students in Australia.’ ‘The bottom line is that this is a tax on students,’ Mirabella said.

The Minister for Youth said universities will be required to meet national benchmarks relating to access to student support services and fulfil new representation and advocacy protocols, which will be a requirement of Commonwealth Grant Scheme funding from 2010, with the $250 fee to be spent on student amenities and services over and above those required by the benchmarks.

World’s governments are failing

IS EDUCATION FOR ALL LIKELY BY 2015? NOT IF CURRENT EFFORTS ARE ANYTHING TO GO BY, REPORTS STEVE HOLDEN.

Governments across the world are failing to tackle deep and persistent inequalities in education, according to the UNESCO 2009 global monitoring report, Overcoming Inequality: Why governance matters. The report says a ‘vast gulf’ in educational opportunity separates rich and poor countries, and blames the political indifference and weak domestic policies of the governments of poor countries and the failure of rich countries to act on commitments.

Gender enrolment gaps remain large across much of South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, while disadvantages based on language, race, ethnicity and rural-urban differences also remain deeply entrenched.

Releasing the report, UNESCO’s Director-General Koichiro Matsuura pointed out that, ‘When financial systems fail, the consequences are highly visible and governments act. When education systems fail the consequences are less visible, but no less real. Unequal opportunities for education fuel poverty, hunger, and child mortality, and reduce prospects for economic growth. That is why governments must act with a greater sense of urgency.’

The report describes the aid effort of rich countries as a ‘collective failure’ to act on commitments. Donors attending last year’s High-Level Event on the Millennium Development Goals made encouraging declarations, but the report calculates the aid financing gap for achieving basic education by 2015 to be around US$7 billion annually, and current trends indicate that aid investment is at best stagnant.

According to the report, aid commitments for basic education have stagnated since 2004, calling into question medium-term financing commitments. In 2005, donor countries pledged to increase aid by US$50 billion by 2010, but current aid commitments point to an impending shortfall of US$30 billion against this pledge, almost half of it in sub-Saharan Africa.

Children come from all over Ethiopia to attend city schools like the Menelik School in Addis Ababa because they cannot find an appropriate school in their home village beyond Year 4. Photo by Petterik Wiggers © UNESCO and Petterik Wiggers.
Private funding flows

The Commonwealth Schools Assistance Bill passed the Senate in December on the last scheduled sitting day of 2008, after the Coalition Opposition agreed not to block the legislation, which allocates $28 billion to independent and Catholic schools over four years. The Opposition’s plan to block the Bill had threatened funding for this year.

The Opposition had objected to a funding condition in the Bill that schools would be required to agree to a national curriculum, details of which are yet to be finalised. The Opposition had proposed a change to allow schools to teach an ‘accredited equivalent’ to the national curriculum. The Independent Schools Council and the National Catholic Education Commission, which have been involved in developing the curriculum, supported passage of the Bill.

Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Education Julia Gillard called the Opposition support ‘one of the most humiliating backflips in Australian politics,’ but Coalition education spokesman Christopher Pyne said the Opposition only supported the Bill after Industry Minister Kim Carr explained how reporting individual school results can lead to school improvement.

‘Senator Carr today put on the (parliamentary) record that the national curriculum would not mandate teaching methods, it will not mandate teaching techniques,’ Pyne said. ‘The reality is what you say at a doorstep or at a press conference is not something upon which courts rely to determine the intention of government: they do use the Hansard to do so.’

Meanwhile, private schools raised their fees by an average of 7 per cent for this school year, with some, such as Lauriston Girls’ School in Melbourne, rising by as much as 14 per cent. Lauriston now charges $21,980 for a Year 12 student.

According to the Australian, the nation’s most expensive school is Geelong Grammar, which now charges $28,886 for a Year 12 student, up 8 per cent on last year’s fee.

Despite increasing government funding for independent and Catholic schools since the mid-1970s that has arguably contributed to an increase in enrolments, non-government schools appear to have used government subsidies to reduce staff-to-student ratios rather than fees.

New York state of mind

Joel Klein, the head of the New York City (NYC) school system, was in Australia late last year as the guest of Deputy Prime Minister, Commonwealth Minister for Education and Klein fan, Julia Gillard, to explain how reporting individual school results can lead to school improvement.

Klein was not, however, without his critics. According to Save Our Schools convener, Trevor Cobbold, National Assessment of Education Progress tests conducted by the United States Department of Education show that average student achievement in NYC has stagnated while state tests show both increases and declines, but no consistent improvement.

Gary Stager, an educational consultant, Visiting Professor of Education at Pepperdine University in the US, PhD graduate from the University of Melbourne, journalist and blogger, meanwhile, wrote in his blog, Stager-to-Go, ‘(rather than) “share his reform experience,” I might have suggested (Klein) visit Australia to learn a thing or two about education.’ ‘The Rudd-Gillard government...may accomplish what their conservative political opponents never dreamed of,’ he wrote.

In brief

Gaza crisis

Israeli attacks in January on two United Nations schools in Gaza run by UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) led to 48 deaths. According to International Committee of the Red Cross Director of Operations Pierre Kraehenbuehl, ‘There is no doubt in my mind that we are dealing with a full-blown and major crisis in humanitarian terms. The situation for the people in Gaza is extreme and traumatic.’ Thousands of Palestinians sheltered in UNRWA schools during bombardments. UNRWA says it has provided GPS coordinates of all its installations in Gaza, including schools, to Israeli authorities. According to ABC Radio, about a third of those killed in the conflict are children, with most deaths the result of Israel’s ground offensive.

Bridging the digital divide

Global not-for-profit organisation, One Laptop per Child (OLPC), has distributed more than 500,000 XO laptops in 31 countries. Now OLPC Australia is working with governments in Australia and the Pacific region to provide more of the laptops developed by OLPC to help primary school-aged students learn and connect to each other via the internet to bridge the digital divide. OLPC Australia is also seeking your support to provide laptops for students in rural and remote areas, including Aboriginal communities and the Pacific Islands.

LINKS: www.laptop.org.au/participate