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END THE EDUCATION WARS, SAYS AVCC

In a major speech at Macquarie University today, the President of the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee, Professor Deryck Schreuder, called for an end to the 'higher education wars' which have stalled reform of the university sector.

In delivering the 75th Wyndham Memorial Lecture for the New South Wales Institute for Education Research, Professor Schreuder said that higher education policy has been under debate since the Dawkins' reforms of the late 1980s, and that while such debate was healthy the time had now come to provide universities with a consistent and supportive policy and funding framework which provided for diversity, strength and growth.

"Universities had welcomed much of the Government's response to the Crossroads review, announced in the May Budget. Many in the higher education sector felt that it presented a viable and innovative package for the future, but this optimism has become more qualified since the Government's draft legislation was presented to Parliament, Professor Schreuder stated.

"Despite previous commitments to reducing red tape and streamlining university governance, the Minister for Education, Science, and Training, Dr Brendan Nelson, is now supporting moves which would allow an unprecedented level of interference in higher education, Professor Schreuder added.

"If the legislation is passed in its current form it could stifle the creativity, independence, and flexibility which are essential characteristics of universities. But if the Government's reforms are delayed for another few months the outcome may be just as bad.

"The Minister has shown he is willing to consult with universities and has modified some elements of the Government package. We sincerely hope he is still of an open mind.

Professor Schreuder also said "that the Government needs to address three issues if the reform package is to be of genuine benefit to universities and Australia as a whole: it should return to its early, more flexible approach to industrial relations contained in *Backing Australia's Future*; it should rework the regulations associated with the proposed Commonwealth Grants Scheme to better reflect the spirit of the Government's reform package; and it should make a strong commitment to equity by providing an enlarged pool of funds, especially for scholarships.

Professor Schreuder made the same comments while giving evidence to the Senate Inquiry into Higher Education Funding and Regulatory Legislation this morning.

"We have reached the centre of the Crossroads," Professor Schreuder said, "and it is vital we choose the right way forward. Australian universities need the best package of reform possible."

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