

Thursday 13 March 2008



Higher Education Review: an opportunity to set new direction

Universities Australia Chair, Professor Richard Larkins and Chief Executive Officer, Dr Glenn Withers welcome today's announcement by the Deputy Prime Minister, the Hon. Julia Gillard MP of an independent, evidence-based review of Australia's higher education system, to be chaired by Emeritus Professor Denise Bradley AC.

"Universities Australia shares with the Government a desire for a new direction in higher education policy," Dr Withers said today.

"The Minister's address is a refreshing and positive recognition of the contribution of universities to the nation – in innovation, high level skills and productivity – and provides a real sense of commitment and purpose," Dr Withers said.

"The Review also provides the opportunity to affirm and enhance the contribution universities make to national goals in a systematic and informed way," Dr Withers said.

"The Review will need to ensure consistency with the Government's parallel Innovation Review. It will also need to ensure that the examination of the funding arrangements looks at both private and public contributions and their balance compared to other OECD countries," he said.

Universities Australia has proposed early options to stop the slide backwards in real support per student in 2008: adjustment of Commonwealth grants for real cost changes is essential. Infrastructure backlog could be assisted by supplementation of the Higher Education Endowment Fund through national savings.

In terms of social inclusion measures to improve student equity and access, Universities Australia has recommended to Government the following priorities:

- a staged reduction in the age of independence for Youth Allowance from the current 25 years to 18, so that university students are not assessed on the basis of their parents' income and assets; and
- removal of the assessable income component for all scholarships and bursaries, regardless of their funding source.

"This review of the higher education system for the longer term should not distract from the need to address very immediate needs of the university sector including income support for students already in the system. Such needs can be addressed now without prejudicing the outcomes of either the Review or the Government's wider economic and social goals. Indeed there is much that universities can do to assist even more with these goals and in the immediate future," Dr Withers said.

"Universities Australia supports the Government's broad objectives of diversity, choice and the highest quality in our higher education system and welcomes the open and consultative approach signalled by Deputy Prime Minister in her announcement of this review," Dr Withers said.

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1 Geils Court
Deakin ACT 2600

GPO Box 1142
Canberra ACT 2601

Phone 02 6285 8200
Fax 02 6285 8211

contact@universitiesaustralia.edu.au
www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au

For media inquiries contact:
Rebecca Harris

Universities Australia Director of
Communication & Government Relations
Ph: 02 6285 8206 • Mob: 0400 166 691

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