GO8.EDU.AU

2015: OUR GOALS FOR THE YEAR AHEAD

PUBLIC UNIVERSITY IS WORTH DEFENDING

OUR STANDARDS OF TEACHING AND RESEARCH, ARE ABSOLUTE

CEO’S MESSAGE

PAGE 1

THE PARADOX OF WORLD RANKINGS

PAGE 3

A-MAZING ROBOTIC PAC-MAN TO LIGHT UP VIVID FESTIVAL

PAGE 6

MAY 2015 | EDITION 3

GO8 NEWS

FEBRUARY 2015 | EDITION 1

Go8.edu.au
Another Federal Budget, another Budget lockup (distinguished this year only by its appalling lack of organisation) another delivery of financial uncertainty for the sector.

That’s what came to mind when working through the Budget papers [more laborious than usual this year as almost everything had been released beforehand]. Before I set out what I would like the Go8 to do in response, let me put into some context what keeps happening to our sector.

It’s always the political conundrum isn’t it? Every politician talks the talk. Every politician extols its virtues, supports research, and supports the best for our students; who are, after all, our priority.

Yet, when it comes to the crunch of whether to financially provide to a quantum that can deliver what is required, or to spend the money on something else that is front of mind in the marginal seats that a political party needs to win, well, that something else beats us every time.

Basically it’s Marginal seat votes 1 : University education and research 0... Again!

Will there ever be a year, we wonder, when our Universities are treated fairly – to use the Government’s favourite descriptor of its 2015 Budget? On Budget day the word ‘fair’ ruled over speeches and releases and statements. But it simply didn’t apply to us.

Just after the last election, I mentioned to media that we were about to see one of the best educated Cabinets in Australian history grace the Treasury benches, many of them recipients of the high quality education that a Go8 member university provides for each and every one of its quality students.

It is a quality education that has clearly served those former students well as they carved out their successful
careers, careers where they are now deciding, through their funding decisions, on the quality of the education and research we can provide for their children.

They are making the decisions that shape the future of the very Universities which gave them their opportunity in life. But their memories of what a Go8 education entails, and what is needed in terms of infrastructure, teaching quality, and research involvement to ensure Go8 quality, have clearly faded, for there was little recognition in this year’s Budget of the reality of costs.

Yes the Government has been thwarted by the Senate re the funding deregulation legislation, but it fully intends to keep its 20% funding cuts on the table. It may have found money for NCRIS, which was defunded by the previous Labor Government, but it has done so mainly at the Go8’s expense.

It is the Go8 which is the backbone of Australia’s research, and now it has had a further $262 million ripped out of research block grants over the next three years. All of you reading this know full well the consequences of such decisions, not least, as the Go8 told media on election night, to our international student market.

In 2013, the Go8 enrolled almost 350,000 higher education students. This included over 73,000 international higher education students, which is around one in every three international higher education students in Australia. That figure rises to over 90,000 students when our offshore students are included. Significantly we enrolled 47% of all HDR students and 34% of all postgraduate students in 2013.

It seems that Governments don’t fear the voter backlash from our sector that they fear from others. If they did, we would be treated very differently. And this is where I come to what the Go8 should do if we are not to keep suffering Budget pain regardless of who is in Government.

Surely it’s time to stand up and be heard, to be one of those organisations which advocates strongly in ways that cannot be ignored. And as a sector surely it’s time we cast off our measured politeness and became as forceful and vocal, and as front of mind, as the Business Council of Australia (BCA) or the Minerals Council of Australia (MCA).

We deserve to be listened to because we represent our students who are, after all, Australia’s future, and our research which is the backbone of Australia’s economic and societal future.

When an election campaign comes along we want Government and Opposition to be as concerned about our positions as they are the BCA and MCA.

The Go8 will be a strong, active and visible advocate in the lead up to the next election. We want the community to better understand why we are so important – to them every day in so many ways! Only then will politicians recognise that voters do care about our sector’s future in the way that really counts to politicians: through their votes.

This week we had one encouraging figure released; with Essential Research stating some 73% of voters think the Federal Government should increase the overall funding invested in our Universities. We will tell the voters exactly why that is so important. We can build on that, and we will.

“Basically it’s Marginal seat votes 1: University education and research 0... Again!”
FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Fee Deregulation: The Paradox of World rankings and Mr Pyne’s wicked problem

By Professor Pascale Quester, DVCA University of Adelaide

It is a paradox of our sector that world rankings, by and large the result of research performance and a measure of scientific repute, are typically translated in marketing messages aimed primarily at recruiting international undergraduate students in ever larger numbers. Given that only a small proportion of undergraduate students enrol with the ambition of completing postgraduate research studies, one might question the link between research excellence, as measured by rankings, and students’ choice in terms of tertiary education provider.

The answer, as expected, is money. A university’s virtuous cycle of financial sustainability goes something like this:

World rankings are used as a surrogate indicator of quality by international students, who will always apply for the highest ranking university they can aspire to.

whose fees have become an essential part of the research equation.

Beyond the ethics of such a phenomenon lies a real predicament. Not that the ethical questions about this approach can easily be dismissed: Can families (or government sponsors) of students from poorer countries really be expected to not only subsidise the education of comparatively wealthy Australian students but also the research targeted at solving our nation’s problems? To illustrate the point: how fair is it to expect a Bangladeshi student’s family to prop up, at great sacrifice to themselves, research on, say, obesity, clearly an affliction of the affluent West?!

How long can we expect to finance the higher education system on the back of willing international students who may or may not directly experience the benefits of the research produced by many highly ranked universities?

The predicament comes from the very predictable demise of this strategy in the medium term. Our Asian neighbours are investing heavily in their own Higher Education system. Far from seeking to extract money (let alone generate export revenue as only Australia seems to do) from it, they consider this investment in human capital much as they do other infrastructure investment. A necessary step towards development, better standards of living and, ultimately, prosperity and economic growth for all. They invest so that research and technology development occurs alongside, but not at the expense of, a growing capacity to educate their young. They do not, by and large, expect the next generation to subsidise research, nor do they feel the need to divert student fees to research which they fund properly according to their own strategic priorities. As their institutions take their rightful place in world rankings and some of them overtake many of the less performing Australian universities, why should international students continue to come to Australia?

If there is an answer to this one, I suspect it must come from marketing: We call it brand equity. Just as Harvard will probably always be able to trade on its name to secure high quality applicants regardless of the state of their home education systems, so too will those Australian Universities able to build and maintain brand equity be secure in their capacity to attract international students. And how will they do this? Right now, and infuriating as it may sound...they do so by investing more in research in order to lift their world ranking. Catch 22!

While the premise of Christopher Pyne may be sound, it ignores a rather large piece of the ‘knowledge’ puzzle. It has not been that long since I taught my marketing students that in a deregulated market, price should, first and foremost reflect value. It should cover costs, to be sure, but unless it equates to the consumers’ perception of value, a fundamental tenet of marketing is broken. If domestic students become consumers they will determine and compare the value we offer on the basis of their own experience and needs.
In doing so, many of them will be supremely blind to the demands of large research infrastructures or the substantial proportion of staff salary allocated to research. For a vast majority of them, research is but an unwelcomed distraction to what they really seek from a university, be it three years of stimulating and challenging education, a degree that delivers a career, or an opportunity to network and make friends for life.

Until such time as research costs are treated as a separate issue from higher education, research intensive universities will always be expected to trade-off their brand name, and charge students for an experience that may not be commensurate with the price they pay, simply because the margin they deliver is needed to underpin research. And unless they do so, these universities will stand to lose their ranking, and with it, the capacity to attract international students. If they do so, however, they will be blamed for short-changing the students, and suffer inevitably when students realise they are paying for something they do not want. A bitter case of “damned if you do and damned if you don’t”, and one with which the Go8 universities have wrestled for some months now.

For research intensive universities like us, the challenge presented by the reforms of the higher education sector is nothing short of an ultimate and quite possibly fatal test: Can we—should we—extract from students the means to produce not only a world class education but also research outcomes which this nation says it values and needs, like advances in medical research or technological innovation, but is unwilling to invest in.

So far, no one has asked the question of who should pay for the real cost of the sort of research this country expects from universities. Industry, while claiming that it wants closer collaboration, is often unwilling to invest financially to adequately cover the true cost of research. Meanwhile, the country—and its taxpayers—remain curiously unprepared in the face of the one truly wicked problem raised by Minister Pyne’s reforms: should students really be expected to bear the cost of the research this nation needs. And perhaps more critically, if the students are not prepared to do so, then who will?
AIRY, OPEN STRUCTURES IN ORGANIC, BOTANICAL SHAPES HANG SUSPENDED IN DR TRINH VU’S MONASH OFFICE, Lit FROM WITHIN. INTRIGUING ART INSTALLATIONS OR FABULOUS LIGHT FITTINGS? TAKE YOUR PICK: “MY WORK IS ALWAYS IN BETWEEN ART AND DESIGN,” SHE SAYS.

Downstairs in the high-ceiled foyer of the Monash Art, Design and Architecture building in which Dr Vu works as both artist and art academic, her *Blue Skies* sculptures of white paper and plastic float serenely overhead like fringed, fluffy clouds. In neither case is there much hint of the adept use of technology and months of painstaking calculations behind these creations.

Dr Vu uses 3D modelling software to develop digital images inspired by plant structure. A steady supply of source material in the shape of dried seed pods and cones comes courtesy of friends and colleagues aware of her love of the spirals that occur in nature.

Turning the characteristics of natural shapes into buildable concepts draws not only on Dr Vu’s artistic skill but also on an aptitude for maths and physics. And it gains a lot, too, from her distaste for the easy path.

In developing her ideas to the point where she can laser-cut sheets of paper or use 3D printing – a process more usually associated with engineering – in her quest to create complicated forms, Dr Vu comes up against limitations in technology and challenges in design.

Nothing could please her more.

“I like problems!” she says. “And I push my luck. I think this is the job of the researcher. We have to find out what we can do and what we can’t.”

The extent of what might be termed Dr Vu’s can-do approach is made clear by a story from her early days as an art student in Adelaide. A recent refugee, she was still struggling with English when she stumbled into a room filled with something that had another language all its own: computers. Intrigued by their mysterious potential, she left with a stack of manuals and proceeded to rewrite them in order to understand them.

She promptly added computer graphics to her studies and supplemented that later with more courses in technology.

Having a foot in this harder-edged world brings both benefits and opportunities. Thanks to the Synapse residency program, organised by the Australian Network for Art and Technology, Dr Vu is preparing to spend a semester at the Monash Centre for Additive Manufacturing, known for its world-leading work printing jet engines. She will be there to help with testing the finer details of 3D printing with metal powders, but proximity to the high-powered printers with capabilities she has not yet explored extends the promise of a new direction in her own work.

“It’s difficult to predict what the next step will be, but for me it’s not the end result, it’s more the journey to get there,” she says. “Along the way I pick up new ideas, and then it’s about how I can best make use of each new idea.”
A giant robotic Pac-Man game with glowing LED adorned ghosts, designed and built by UNSW students, will feature in Sydney’s Vivid light festival.

The game is being constructed by members of CREATE, a UNSW student club that brings together students who enjoy making things, from across campus.

Vivid is the southern hemisphere’s largest festival of light, music and ideas and features innovative art and technology installations around the city from 22 May to 8 June. The Pac-Man game will be part of the Intel display in Martin Place.

CREATE president Nathan Adler, says the team has begun work on the three metre-maze and the robotic characters, which can be operated by festival goers or move autonomously.

"Intel approached us to come up with an idea for the display. We thought the project would be a fun and entertaining way to combine robotics and a game everyone is familiar with,” says Nathan, who is in his final year of a combined Bachelor of Engineering / Bachelor of Commerce degree at UNSW.

He says Intel was keen to engage with the ‘maker movement’ that is growing rapidly in Australia and around the world. “The maker movement is a community of entrepreneurs and innovators who enjoy creating new technology and products using elements of electronics, design, computing and robotics,” he explains.

The Pac-Man game design will use laser-cut and 3D printed materials, programmable LED strip lighting, on-board microprocessors, a 2.4GHz network and image recognition.

Funded by Intel, the project is also supported by UNSW Art & Design, which has given the team access to facilities such as Makerspace, an incubator for collaborative construction based at UNSW’s Paddington campus.

CREATE runs free workshops and social events, as well as hosting a 3D printing service and regular electronic sales. Previous projects have included quadcopters, robotic arms and model vehicles.

Follow the progress of the Pac-Man project on the CREATE Facebook page. The game will be on display in Martin Place Sydney from 22–24 May and from 29–31 May.
FROM THE OUTSIDE LOOKING IN

Higher education and the Budget

Judith Sloan
Professor at Melbourne University and contributing economics editor at "The Australian"

I have been hanging around universities for a very long time. Some of my views – I regard myself as a free market classical liberal – do not find favour with some of my fellow academics. But I have always felt welcome; indeed, some of my best university pals disagree with me on a raft of topics.

From time to time, various Vice-Chancellors have had to stick up for me. I remember the reaction of one VC upon receiving a ten-page letter of complaint about me, phoning to tell me that he had read the letter and thrown it in the bin. On another occasion, another VC wrote back to the complainants – in this case it was more rent-a-complaint – upholding my freedom of speech. These were men of conviction and courage and I thank them for their support.

I was therefore aghast, but also amazed, to witness the capitulation of the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Western Australia to the demands of the angry mob to withdraw the university’s acceptance of a grant to establish a new research centre.

It was against this backdrop that I entered the Budget lock-up. While I obviously take a keen interest in the overall budget settings, I always take an interest in any announcements related to higher education. But after last year’s Budget bombshell higher education package announcement, this year was always going to disappoint.

Budgets are as much about resource allocation between competing ends as they are about economic policy. With many of the spending commitments locked in by legislation – for periods of time, at least – there is not really as much room for a government to manoeuvre as some might think.

It is not clear that this government – and perhaps not the previous one either – is particularly convinced that higher education should stand in front of many other worthy activities to which government funding contributes. If anything, the view remains that there is more scope for students to contribute to the cost of higher education. All those arguments about the productivity-enhancing impact of higher education spending has fallen not on deaf ears, but certainly on ones that are a bit hard of hearing.

Trapped in last year’s lock-up, I can still recall getting to the special pamphlet outlining the proposed higher education measures, the combination of which were close to revolutionary for Australian universities and higher education institutions. There were so many moving parts, the sums of money were so substantial, most of the changes were unexpected.

With many of the spending commitments locked in by legislation – for periods of time, at least – there is not really as much room for a government to manoeuvre as some might think.
To be sure, there was a view that something would have to be done, either to confirm or alter the cuts to higher education funding announced by the previous government. But the deregulation of undergraduate fees was something that very few observers saw coming.

The contrast with this year’s Budget could not be more dramatic. Some months back, the government had decided to separate out any sector-specific package of measures from the Budget. This was probably wise, given the fate of many of last year’s measures, and not just in respect of higher education, that have been ditched, modified or are in abeyance.

Of course, this state of affairs is not very satisfactory for the many leaders and managers in higher education. It is close to impossible to plan and to produce forward budgets. Decisions about course offerings and student intakes are likewise difficult and complex.

So where have we got to with the changes affecting higher education? As the months passed by and Minister Christopher Pyne attempted to ‘fix’ things, we saw the imposition of a real interest rate on HELP debt abandoned.

We saw various sweeteners added to the package, including a cut to size of the reduction in undergraduate student subsidies, a financial package for regional universities and a debt holiday for graduates with small children. The size of the savings was whittled down to the point that a figure of around $600 million was suggested at one stage.

So where does higher education reform stand now that the Abbott government’s second Budget has been delivered? The ballooning HELP debt and the falling proportion of those who are making any repayments are of growing concern to the Department of Finance. Even though the HELP book is counted as an asset by the government – estimated to be close to $53 billion in 2017–18, up from $30 billion this year – the declining proportion of former students who are making repayment is likely to prompt some policy changes in the future. Possible changes include the income threshold above which repayments must be made, the calculation of this threshold to exclude certain deductions and the required rate of repayment.

Arguably, the financial risk issues related to HELP should be sorted out prior to any shift to fee deregulation, full or partial. Without any changes, a possible consequence could be much higher student debt and even lower rates of repayment, leading to an accumulation of effective bad debts for the taxpayer.

There were various minor changes affecting higher education in the Budget, including to the funding of research infrastructure. But after the excitement of last year, it was a pretty dull affair for the higher education community.

The future is still unclear; there just doesn’t seem to be any alternative to waiting for a clearer picture to emerge.

In the meantime, the universities might think about improving their image as tolerant and fair-minded institutions.
NEW $1M JOINT INVESTMENT TO KICK START MEDICAL RESEARCH

Sydney Medical School at the University of Sydney and philanthropic organisation The Balnaves Foundation are giving next-generation medical leaders a kick start via a new $1m program to boost the competitive grant funding success of early career researchers.

The ‘Early Career Researcher Kick Start Grants’ is a new three-year joint initiative made possible through a significant commitment by The Balnaves Foundation. The gift will build on a successful seven-year investment program by the medical school, which is solving a major challenge facing all early career researchers.

“Early career researchers are the lifeblood of all successful medical research projects and face an increasing battle for grant funding due to their limited body of work, lack of experience and intense competition,” says Professor Bruce Robinson, Dean of Sydney Medical School.

“But they face a classic dilemma: they need research expertise to receive grant funding, but they need grant funding to develop research expertise.”

Currently only 15 per cent of all National Health and Medical Research Council grant applications are successful, a figure that has declined steadily over the past five years. Today, 28 early career researchers from Sydney Medical School have received ‘Kick Start’ grants to fund pilot projects that will help them compete for future competitive grant funding, and help shape the future of medical research in Australia.

“The partnership between Sydney Medical School and the Balnaves Foundation will provide a crucial building block, upon which early career researchers can take a significant leap forward in their career and contribute towards meaningful health outcomes,” says Neil Balnaves AO, Founder of the Balnaves Foundation.

“It is an example of how philanthropic partnerships can significantly help to address key national issues and provide support for outstanding medical research in Australia.”

“Young people often have ‘out of the box’ ideas and this type of research is often where breakthroughs occur. We want the novel ideas of these 28 young researchers to have the opportunity of coming to fruition and are excited to follow their progress over the next few years,” says Mr Balnaves.

The joint program is modelled on the Sydney Medical School’s seven year investment to build the capacity and necessary experience for early career researchers to succeed.

Since 2008, Sydney Medical School has tracked the success of 37 early career researchers it has supported with seed funding to progress their research careers.

Highlights include:

- 100 per cent success rate – all 37 early career researchers secured competitive grants from Category 1 and/or Category 2 funders within 2 years

- Over $4m secured through competitive grants, representing a 282 per cent return on investment

- 57 per cent secured fellowships obtained predominately through NHMRC and other Category 1 funders – well above the national trend of 32 per cent

- 79 per cent secured roles at the University of Sydney

Through this philanthropic gift, the Balnaves Foundation plays an important role in the University of Sydney’s INSPIRED Campaign, which aims to raise $600 million by the end of 2017.

“Young people often have ‘out of the box’ ideas and this type of research is often where breakthroughs occur.”
Professor Ian Young
AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY VICE CHANCELLOR

We are relieved that NCRIS has been restored as that is core money for the university, but we are working out the magnitude of the potential impact of the loss of Sustainable Research funding. We are disappointed that one research program has come at the cost of another.

Dr Michael Spence
UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY VICE CHANCELLOR

It is deeply disappointing that there is no coherent solution for the problems that threaten the quality and competitiveness of Australia’s higher education sector.

Flaws in the demand-driven funding system have increased the tension between quality and quantity, and between the research and teaching functions of our universities. Research funding cuts and policy uncertainty threaten the international ranking performance of our best universities, and put Australia’s largest services export industry at risk.

With the mining boom over, the key to sustaining high living standards lies in developing our capacity to solve complex problems, create new technologies and industries, adapt to change, and maximise opportunities for trade with Asia.

There is no long term vision for higher education in this budget, and the challenge for both sides of politics is to work with the sector to develop one before the next election.

Professor Max Lu
UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND ACTING VICE CHANCELLOR AND PRESIDENT

Although we welcome the bridging funding provided in the 15/16 budget for NCRIS, it is a terribly short-sighted decision to cut the Sustainable Research Excellence (SRE) funding, which would undermine the national research excellence and future capabilities.

Research block funding including SRE is fundamental to underpinning our national aspiration of building more world-class universities to provide knowledge and innovation leadership to the world. This cut into the research funding makes a mockery of the game plan for sustained economic growth, job creation and exports beyond the resource boom, that is so critically dependent on our research and innovation capabilities”

Professor Warren Bebbington
UNIVERSITY OF ADELAIDE VICE CHANCELLOR

The government has kept faith with its plans for universities, but its capacity to realise them remains impaired in the Senate. And it has commenced trimming research block grants, which already leave universities significantly short of research costs.