

## A Research Report on

### Higher Education Reforms Communication Campaign. 'Our Universities: Backing Australia's Future'

#### **Development Phase.**

**PRN 5032**

prepared for

Australian Government.  
Department of Education, Science  
and Training

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## Contents.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY .....	i-v
BACKGROUND .....	1
THE RESEARCH KEY OBJECTIVES: DEVELOPMENTAL PHASE .....	2
THE METHOD .....	3
CONSTRAINT .....	5

### **THE REPORT IN DETAIL**

SETTING THE LANDSCAPE: AWARENESS OF, AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS HECS .....	7
REFORMS TO THE HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM .....	9
MORE DETAILED REACTION TO STIMULUS MATERIAL .....	11
TOWARDS AN EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION CAMPAIGN.....	19
A Strategic Framework.....	20
Media Channel Evaluation .....	22
Potential Message Content .....	25
SOME KEY ISSUES, CONCLUSIONS AND STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS.....	27
APPENDIX:	
- Group Discussion Guide	
- Depth Interview Guide	

## Executive Summary.

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### **The Current System.**

HECS is now a well-entrenched element within the higher education landscape and there is widespread awareness within the respective target audience segments of what the acronym means and broadly how the deferred payment system works.

This said, sources of information and advice about HECS, especially those that are school-based, are not particularly efficient and care should be taken in relying over-much upon them to act as conduits for detail about reforms to the system.

Furthermore HECS is a long-term issue for current and intending tertiary students and one to which they are resigned and believe they can adequately manage when the time comes. Consequently, it is:

- not a top of mind concern
- uninteresting of itself
- of relatively low priority.

### **The Higher Education Reforms.**

Awareness of such reforms is still sporadic and detailed or accurate knowledge sparse.

Among target audiences, what is known is greeted either with:

- resignation (if you want a supported place it will now cost you more later on); or
- a vaguely negative view upon the alacrity of universities to raise fees quickly and by such an amount and the permission of the Australian Government to let this occur.

At this stage of the discussion, the major take-out is that university education will cost more, with significant numbers feeling that more of the same is to come in future changes.

When shown some factual detail about the reforms, the attitudinal response was generally no more positive, the key elements of reaction usually being:

- an increased threshold but at the expense of reduced incentives.
- a more complex and bureaucratic system.
- a series of 'loans' which project different imagery than the previously more gentle 'contribution scheme'.

Areas of contention or questioning where more information is required or answers provided tend to include:

- can a loan for a supported place be taken out and paid up-front?
- does a loan attract an interest rate?
- how many scholarships are there and how difficult are they going to be to obtain?
- why do they only last for four years?

**However, a significant finding refers to the mention of full fee-paying places and loans available to tertiary students in future.**

Whilst there were certain questions about the loan limit (too small) and other mechanics, the real issue revolved around a perceived change in the nature and balance of the future student population.

TOWARDS more full fee-paying places

AWAY FROM (OR PUTTING PRESSURE ON)

Commonwealth-supported places.

Respondents are unsure to what extent this may be true but it is a generally held suspicion which needs to be placed in context or allayed, if at all possible.

If, in fact, Commonwealth-supported places were likely to be squeezed by the expansion of the number of full fee-paying places, many would see this direction as counter-productive to the national interest and particularly in regards to equity and opportunity, especially for those students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Levels of concern are expressed about the impact some of the reforms may have upon students debt levels and entry based upon academic merit.

*“it just means you’ll have a bigger debt which you’ll take longer to pay off.”*

*“de-motivating to those who try hard versus rich kids who just float through Year 12 (and are less focused upon a high entry score).”*

### **Input For Development Of An Effective Communication Campaign.**

**There is a compelling requirement for a communication campaign given:**

- **there is some misinformation which needs to be corrected.**
- **the topic of higher education (cost, access) is an emotive one.**
- **many within the target audience had eased into a comfort zone with HECS and are now uneasy about some effects of the changes.**
- **there is a need for some context to neutralise some current one-sided or negative perceptions.**

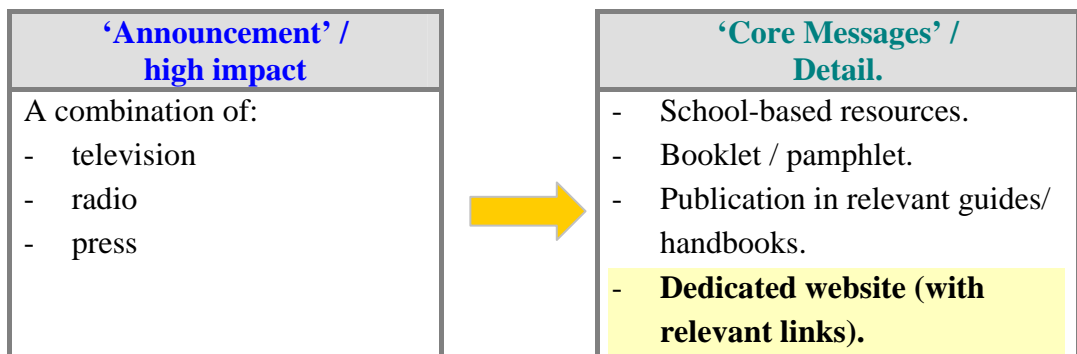
We see, from research so far conducted, the need for a campaign upon two levels:

- one which aims to provide **core messages** and the requisite degree of detail; and
- another which attracts audience attention to the changes and directs them to further sources of information.

The two levels are necessary as:

- the details must be accessible to those affected.
- ‘advertising’ cannot provide such detail and yet is important to ‘announce’ changes and give the topic profile.

Communication channels appropriate to each level of the campaign were identified as follows:



The actual combination and campaign scope will be a question of budget and what is practical within the timeframe.

Message content for the **core message** campaign must be comprehensive and clear but expressed simply...

- what has changed.
- who will be affected.
- details of options available.
- implications for me.
- details of further information / assistance.
- common questions answered.

For the ‘announcement’, attention-getting component of the campaign, we have referred to the need to include more than simply directions to the website or other sources of information. Because of the diverse nature of the audiences and the intrusive aspect of the media channels the opportunity exists to:

- provide a context
- offer some explanation
- project as positive a message as is possible AND AS IS CREDIBLE.

There is the chance to obtain from creative agencies a range of ways of expressing the reforms in a positive context.

The interpretation from the developmental phase is that the following contentions appear difficult to support:

- increased opportunities for Australians to access higher education (unless it is via more full fee-paying places).
- increased equity and access for students from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

The proposed concept evaluation phase will be critical in establishing the message framework and tonal considerations which will most enhance the effectiveness of the campaign in providing adequate information about and confidence in the direction of the reforms.

## Background.

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The Australian Government has released a major policy statement concerning reforms to higher education<sup>1</sup>.

The greater part of these reforms will be implemented at the start of 2005.

**These changes will affect students beginning study in calendar 2005, but the majority of the changes will also apply to students already within the higher education system.**

The changes to higher education and the widespread effect upon students has dictated the need for an effective strategy to communicate such changes under the reforms. Broad audiences for such a campaign include:

- students themselves; and
- the general public – with regard to increased opportunities within the environment created by the reforms.

There was a requirement for independent market research to contribute to the development of the proposed communication campaign strategy and content.

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<sup>1</sup> Our Universities: Backing Australia's Future



## The Research Key Objectives: Developmental Phase.

This phase of research was designed to address the following information needs:

- 1.** To explore the following dimensions with regard to the higher education reforms...
  - awareness, knowledge and understanding of the reforms – and their impact upon individuals
  - identifying any motivations and barriers to achieve the aims of the communication strategy (and individual elements within it)
  - determine any points of differentiation (within audiences) and related communication opportunities or needs
  - identify any potential issues which may need to be addressed by public relations or other communication avenues.
  
- 2.** To provide directional guidance to DEST in offering detailed recommendations upon...
  - which communication objectives are achievable (particularly in relation to SES students and potential students)
  - which messages will have the greatest impact
  - how relevant information could best be presented to relevant target audiences
  - the most effective channels to convey key messages within any communication campaign
  - the likely audience response to the actual communications.

## The Method.

The nature of the objectives and the intent behind the developmental stage led to a qualitative research design using a combination of the techniques of:

- focus group discussion; and
- executive depth interviewing.

A total of **eleven focus groups** and **eight depth interviews** were conducted, the sample being configured in the following manner:

11 FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS	Melb. No.	Bendigo No.	Sydney No.	Adel. No.	Clare No.
<b>Current</b> students:					
- undergraduates					1
- post-graduates	1				
<b>Potential</b> students:					
- school leavers	1	1	1		
- employed seeking to change career/further their skills	1				
- employed seeking to compete better in the job market					1
With <b>parents</b> of current and potential higher education students			1	1	
With <b>students</b> classified as being from a <b>low SES</b> background		1		1	
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>

8 EXECUTIVE DEPTH INTERVIEWS	Melb. No.	Bendigo No.	Sydney No.	Adel. No.	Clare No.
With those defined as <b>influencers</b> (incl. peak bodies, career advisers, career reference centres, media and professional associations – spread across these classifications)	<b>3</b>	-	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	-

The fieldwork for this phase was conducted during the period July 5-15, 2004.

Members of the DEST client team attended seven of the focus group sessions whilst in progress to witness the discussion at first hand.

All metropolitan focus groups were also videotaped.



Group Discussion



In-Depth Interview

## C ONSTRAINT

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**Group discussions** and **executive depth interviews** seek to develop insight and direction rather than quantitatively precise or absolute measures. By reason of the size of the groups and sample, the special recruitment methods adopted and the study objectives themselves, it is clearly understood that the work is exploratory in nature. Clearly the findings are not projectable to any larger population. They should be viewed, therefore, in a qualitative rather than quantitative frame of reference and as being directional only.

**The Report In Detail.**

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## Setting The Landscape: Awareness Of, and Attitudes Towards HECS.

**Among the key target audiences for the proposed communication campaign, there is universal awareness of HECS and a sound understanding of the broad concept of what HECS is.**

*“better than having to pay it all up-front yourself.”*  
(post-graduate student)

*“you pay for it later when you start work and  
begin to earn a certain amount.”*

*“with HECS you’re paying (back) a lot less  
than it actually costs.”*

*“it’s a way of ensuring that anybody goes to  
uni who wants to.”*

*“the amount you repay is dependent upon  
how much you earn.”*

*“so people who weren’t rich could afford to  
go to university.”*

*“you pay back an amount that makes you poorer than  
those who can’t afford to go to university.”*

Despite the obligation HECS entails, there is a degree of recognition of what the current system provides and an understanding that a contribution to the cost of tertiary study / qualification is probably justified. Students and their families at least appear used to the current system. Whilst awareness of the detail about the size of any discount varies, there is also relatively widespread understanding of some incentive to pay HECS contributions up-front.

**There is far lower (negligible, in many cases) awareness of the ability to make voluntary payments and of any bonus which may apply to such payments.**

This level of general **awareness** does not necessarily translate into detailed **knowledge**, however, and varying target audience sub-groups differ in the level to which they feel **involved** on the topic of HECS or want to engage with it.

A snapshot by target audience is as follows:

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>School leavers / intending university students.</b></p> <p>Probably the least informed group overall.</p> <p>Usually feel little need to pro-actively think about the issue now.</p> <p>Often feel that their HECS debt will be manageable (hopefully) – however, repayment is a long way away.</p> <p>Payment up-front is not an option for many, so there is no CHOICE or decision to be made.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Current under-graduates.</b></p> <p>Awareness and knowledge is generally sporadic and variable.</p> <p>Still not confronted with the reality of considering repayment.</p> <p>Focused upon finishing their course/ further study rather than employment market.</p> <p>Already ‘in the system’ re acquiring their debt, so no good worrying about it.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Post-graduates / intending to return to study.</b></p> <p>Probably the most informed group (certainly regarding details of any of the reforms).</p> <p>Already aware of scale of HECS debt and some are “just piling a PELS debt on top of it.”</p> <p>Belief in value of qualifications overrides HECS obligations but size of debt a lifestyle consideration.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Parents (of school leavers / under-graduates)</b></p> <p>Provides a way for students to be able to study at university.</p> <p>Opinion often decided between parents:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- who can pay HECS up-front for their children.</li> <li>- who cannot.</li> <li>- who choose not to, either: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>... because of the number of children they have; or</li> <li>... they feel their children should handle the HECS obligation themselves.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

## Reforms To The Higher Education System.

Awareness levels here were sporadic and tended to parallel levels of knowledge of the current system (ie. those who were best informed about HECS tended to know some more about system changes and reflect a little more accurate knowledge as well).

There is some inaccuracy and misinformation as well.

What is more **generally** known is that:

- universities have sought to increase fees – or have already done so.
- the government has allowed this to happen.
- the increases are in the magnitude of 20%-25%.
- virtually all universities have taken this opportunity.

*“all except a couple of the little ones.”*

*“Tasmania and a few others.”*

There is only isolated reference to any increase in the repayment threshold (and yet a number of respondents across target audience groups, believed that the current threshold was higher than it is, at around \$30,000 per year).

On a **spontaneous** basis (ie. before being shown any stimulus material which included details of the reforms) reaction is usually less than positive.

*“raising HECS fees and making it more expensive to go to university.”*

Coupled with this fairly widespread perception, is the awareness of **full fee-paying places** not only being available but being promoted by tertiary institutions.



Whilst focus group members were unaware of the numbers of such places (or how many there may have been available before) there is a view that such places will impact negatively upon the higher education sector in a number of ways...

- this benefits those who can afford to pay for such a place (thus it is benefitting wealthier students, families).
- it may further increase the numbers of overseas students admitted to / studying at our universities (already a latent concern in some major mainland cities).
- it may impact the number of Commonwealth-supported places available for domestic students and, if this occurs, it will have an effect upon tertiary entrance scores for such places.

*“even if you get the mark, you don’t necessarily get a place.”*

*“that’s where people are getting disadvantaged – doing our kids a disservice – that’s the problem.”*

However, for full fee-paying places...

*“if you’re prepared to pay, you can go to uni.”*

**The impact here is two-fold:**

- **not only do many believe that a finite number of Commonwealth-supported places may be reduced, but**
- **it is a question of changing the paradigm where entry to such institutions / places was based upon academic merit.**

(There were a number of anecdotes and much speculation about how low the entry scores of full fee-paying students could be and for them to still gain entry.)

Most information received about the higher-education reforms to date was obtained from news media and, specifically, television, radio and press coverage, including some student protest over the nature of reforms.

## More Detailed Reaction To Stimulus Material.

[Respondents, in order to generate informed response, were shown a set of stimulus cards in order. A copy of these cards can be found in the Appendix at the back of this report.]

In response to the broad details of the system moving forward from 2005, there was a consistency of attitude...

- The increase in the repayment threshold was a positive move and appears to be a type of concession, although:
  - opinion was still polarised upon this point.
  - some believed that the higher threshold was only a graduate starting salary in a number of professional fields today anyway.
  - others perceived that such a move, whilst seeming generous may:
    - ... extend the length of the 'loan' (ie. take longer to repay).
    - ... may payment coincide with other family/lifestyle commitments, eg. buying a house, beginning a family.
- The threshold increase was frequently outweighed in respondents' minds by the apparent decrease in incentives to repay.

This could be construed as, again, extending the debt to some extent.

- Other provisions under the reforms appear more bureaucratic and to make the system more complex. Even though, at this stage, unsure of what they entailed, this was the interpretation of initiatives such as the:
  - Student Learning Entitlement (SLE)
  - the CHESSN component.
- The existence of a website is felt mandatory (especially by current / intending tertiary students).
- Scholarships sound positive but more detail is required before a judgement could be made about how significant a contribution they could make and to whom.

Two aspects contribute to the underlying perception of a move toward a ‘user pays’ system:

- the redefinition of HECS (a contribution scheme) as a ‘loan’ (or series of loans available); and
- the emphasis upon fee paying (and loans available for fee payers).

*“rewards those who have the money.”*

*“benefit to you if your parents can pay it up front.”*

**There is no contention evident that the new reforms will increase access to higher education options for those of low SES background.**

Students in this category themselves will rely upon attempting to gain a Commonwealth-supported place (as they are unable to afford full fee places), whilst others were unable to see any advantage for such students.

*“they’re denied the discount (as they cannot pay up-front).”*

The concept of taking one of the loans available and thereby accessing the up-front discount irrespective of socio-economic status did not emerge during discussion until specifically probed.

The name of the proposed website ([www.goingtouni.gov.au](http://www.goingtouni.gov.au)) received a satisfactory reception although, for the following reasons, would not be considered outstanding.

- Some felt the name sounded rather juvenile and basic, although...

*“there’s no doubting what it refers to.”*

- The imagery surrounding the name was not altogether positive...

*“kids’ image.”*

*“sounds little condescending.”*

*“like Spot goes to uni.”*

- The key finding of relevance relates to the intent and content of the site. Is it intended to only have the details of the higher education reforms? Or, will it also include other information of benefit to students considering moving on to university?

**This is because the site name ‘Going to Uni’ was felt to suggest that the ambit of information on such a site would include other detail (even including travel, accommodation, books and materials, and so on).**

The elements of the change to a Higher Education Loan Programme (HELP) were generally well-understood when shown to respondents. Despite broadly comprehending the detail, a number of consistent questions arose from attitudes toward the HELP feature of the reforms. These included:

- how does the new system work and in what ways is it different from the current arrangements under HECS? That is,
  - is the amount of the debt indexed or is interest charged?
- the language used raises suspicion. A ‘loan’ is seen in different terms from a contribution scheme. A loan suggests interest is required to be paid and is a type of financial contract which the borrower enters into.

Whilst unsure of the ramifications, the use of the term ‘loan’ sounds more formal, harsh and commercial.

- the suggestion of loans available for both Commonwealth-supported places and full fee-paying places leads some to believe that the pendulum is swinging to a policy position where the government and universities are favouring more full fee-paying places.

*“looks like a halfway house to a full fee-paying environment – you pay full fees and take out a loan for it.”*

- there remains uncertainty as to whether a student in a supported place could access a loan in order to pay up-front and access the discount for doing so.
- a number of stakeholders included in this research were sceptical about the loan limit for full fee-paying students (\$50,000) being adequate to cover certain courses and, thus, the arrangement limits student choice.

*“won’t go far when they’re talking about medicine at Melbourne costing \$210,000.”*

Detail about loan repayment guidelines was similarly well-understood and drew little negative comment (other than the increased threshold being a positive aspect and the reduced bonus a slight negative).

The Commonwealth Learning Scholarship Programme is well-received (scholarships are akin to motherhood – none is really opposed to them) however it, too, prompts a number of questions:

- How many are available and how widely are they to be distributed?
- How difficult will they be to obtain and what are the qualification criteria for:
  - students living at home (means tested or Youth Allowance)?
  - mature-age students (Austudy provisions)?
- To what do ‘general’ costs relate to, ie. must they be study-related, eg. books?
- Why are these only for four years? (Again, this is seen as limiting those seeking to study longer or double degrees.) What happens if you wish to interrupt your course?

Will the availability of such scholarships benefit students of low SES background in accessing tertiary study?

Opinion was divided in that:

- \$6,000 per year is still regarded as “not a lot of money”.
- the word ‘scholarship’ is identified with a degree of academic excellence or achievement. Will this be a further condition?

*“not just for poor kids but really bright poor kids.”*

The website, irrespective of comment about its name, is considered mandatory as an information / communication channel, especially for students who are acknowledged to be web-savvy and often visit such sites as a first resource when seeking information of this type.

The Commonwealth Higher Education Student Support Number (CHESSN) has only hazy relevance for many target audience individuals. It sounds like a more complicating and bureaucratic element within the reforms and its operation was difficult to imagine in practice.

At this stage, respondents were asked for their overview perspective of the reforms (ie. having had the opportunity to consider the factual material presented to them).

It is fair to assert that these changes are not really regarded as any **improvement** in the higher education system, and, for others as either a retrograde step or a movement towards something similar to the United States system “where you save for uni from the cradle.”

What are the major threads within such attitudes? They include the following:

- reductions in incentives appear to outweigh any ‘benefits’ (eg. increased threshold).
- general increase in cost / price (and size of the increase often makes the institutions seem rapacious).

- a re-branding and ‘window-dressing’ approach to make the changes appear palatable; a rearrangement for the worse.
- no well-founded belief in this system delivering greater fairness and equity.

*“says to me that we’re moving to a system where the rich pay and the poor miss out.”*

**Furthermore, this tends to cause greater apprehension than engender comfort and optimism for the future shape of higher education in Australia.**

An underlying reason for this is that most don’t fully understand how many tertiary places exist, in what categories they fall and how such decisions are made. Essentially, whether misinformed or not, perceptions can be identified as follows:

Previous / Current System.	System Post-Reforms.
<p>1. HECS was an obligation but was essentially accepted that part of the cost of tertiary education should be repaid at some stage when theoretically affordable.</p>	<p>1. HELP retains the HECS framework but these are now loans.</p> <p>However, the cost of education (scale of debt) is now much larger and may be less manageable.</p>
<p>2. Whilst full fee-paying places were thought to exist, the majority of university places were Commonwealth-supported places.</p>	<p>2. There seems an emphasis upon full fee-paying places which may jeopardise the number of supported places.</p> <p>Furthermore, there may be an even greater influx of foreign full fee-paying students (not wholly desirable).</p>

Previous / Current System.	System Post-Reforms.
<p>3. Enter scores were a way of equating academic merit with the demand / popularity or ‘quality’ of the course involved.</p>	<p>3. The issue of full fee-paying places introduces new dynamics into the equation.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Enter scores for supported places become artificially inflated due to greater competition for those places (which many believe may be shrinking or, at least, not growing).</li> <li>- Full fee-paying students can ‘jump the queue’ by gaining entrance with lower scores.</li> <li>- Some students (fortunate enough to afford fees) may gain a fee-paying place in years one or two and then articulate to a supported place (perhaps further reducing the pool of supported places overall).</li> </ul>
<p>4. Inherently more fair for all- as much more based upon merit / achievement.</p>	<p>4. The new system appears to favour the wealthier schools / families / students as the options (to pay fees, to pay up-front for a discount) all seem to favour these groups who have more <b>choice</b>.</p>

This is not to suggest that there are not some likely positive outcomes – students may be more motivated to choose courses and subjects more carefully, to be more assiduous in completing courses – however, this is balanced by the belief that the cost of a tertiary education and the size of relevant debt may act as a disincentive to some students and their families to pursue education at university.



It is also relevant to air the views of some stakeholders in regard to any commitment made by universities with regard to 'their side of the bargain'. In return for a fees hike, what is their attitude to:

- quality / relevance of tuition in certain courses / subjects?
- student / teacher ratios?

*"how much more accountable are universities going to become?"*

## Towards An Effective Communication Campaign.

First, the following is evident from the developmental research so far.

- Knowledge of the **current** system is superficial in terms of detail.

Target audience individuals know as much as they need to know. As long as they are not paying up front, HECS is met with **resignation** – a longterm issue which involves a certain level of debt which I assume and expect will be manageable when the time comes. I will begin to think about it then.

- Awareness of detail of the reforms and the new system post 2005 is sporadic and sketchy, dominated by **fee price rises**, and hence greater expense / debt for those in or seeking a supported place.
- When exposed to the factual detail of the reforms, attitudes tend to be neutral to negative for the reasons outlined earlier.

Consequently, there is a need for an effective campaign on at least two levels:

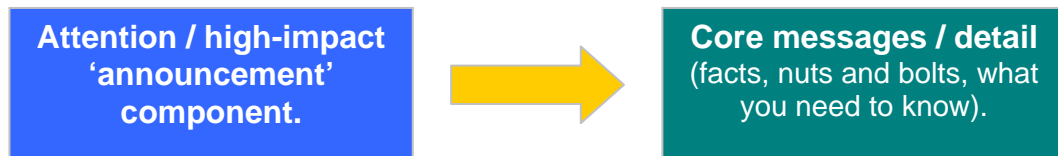
1. to **inform** target audiences of the changes which will affect them and the detail to inform choices and decisions regarding options which may be of benefit to them. A sub-objective here is also to correct any misperceptions or misinformation which may exist.
2. to **provide a context** for the changes and inculcate a more benign view of their impact, eg. why are such reforms occurring and what will the benefits of this be? THIS CAN ONLY BE DONE IF THE LOGIC AND FACTS CAN BEAR OUT SUCH A CONTENTION.

We will approach this section of the report via three sub-sections:

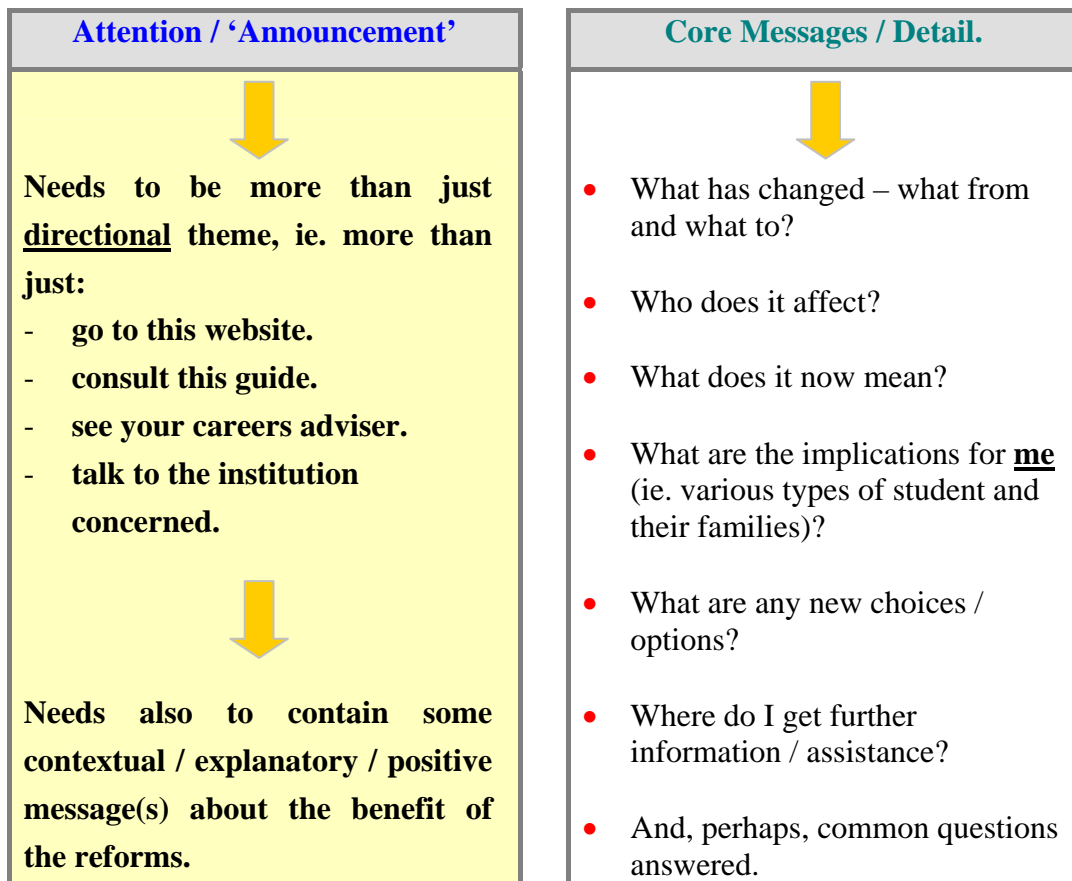
- A Strategic Framework;
- Media Channel Evaluation; and
- Prospective Message Content.

**A Strategic Framework.**

We see the structure and shape of the campaign as being relatively simple and common-sense in its design. It would look diagrammatically as follows:



What should each element of such a campaign contain?



The rationale behind the requirement for some additional messages content along with any directional information is based upon:

- motivating audience members to seek out the core detail

...but also...

- highlighting that change is occurring.
- attempting to neutralise negative sentiment.
- conveying a message to the broader audiences (parents, grandparents, general population).

**Media Channel Evaluation.**

It is useful initially to examine where most respondents received the information they already had about the current and proposed systems.

Current System	New System
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- School-based sources.</li> <li>- Word of mouth (student→parent).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- News media.</li> </ul>

Obviously, it will be important to utilise school-based ‘media’ and news media as part of this communication campaign as well.

- We assume the **public relations** component will handle the message dissemination via news media.
- **When considering school-based resources, it should be remembered that target audience members (eg. school leavers and their parents), don’t really consider these to have been as effective in the past as they might have been.**

A number of potential communication channels were spontaneously mentioned during the research. These included the following (in no order):

Information	Advertising
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Websites / internet.</li> <li>- Booklets, pamphlets.</li> <li>- Libraries (school).</li> <li>- Careers Advisers (school)</li> <li>- Institutions themselves:                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>... (websites)</li> <li>... physically, eg. faculty offices.</li> </ul> </li> <li>- Inclusion of flyer with HECS statements</li> <li>- Open Days.</li> <li>- Course handbooks.</li> <li>- State-based tertiary guides.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Radio.</li> <li>- Transit Media.</li> <li>- Television.</li> <li>- Print:                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>... newspapers</li> <li>... street press</li> <li>... magazines</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

Obviously, budget considerations dictate that not all media can be utilised and choices / priorities must be made. Further constraints upon the campaign include:

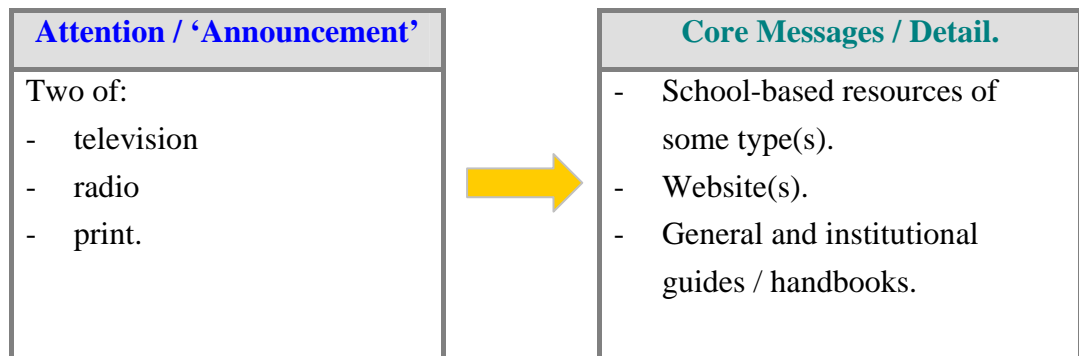
- timing (including the availability 'live' of the dedicated website).
- resources (ie. the ability to attempt to cover all bases, whether in physical or print form).

**The first evaluation to be made by DEST should encompass an audit of what is available /possible in existing printed media in which editorial / detail could be placed.**

This will determine what opportunities may already have been missed and which are available.

Then a decision needs to be made about what dedicated materials need to be produced for satisfying the core detail requirements.

From respondents' attitudes, it would appear that at least the following elements be considered:



'School-based resources' refers to the fundamental nature of this communication channel and includes:

- material for careers advisers and other (particularly Year 12) teachers;
- some pamphlet / flyer for students and parents; even
- posters.

**The importance of the high-impact ‘announcement / attention getting’ campaign component is underscored by the fact that HECS is a lacklustre and uninteresting topic for the vast majority of students – as well as being relatively remote.**

*“I wouldn’t go onto the internet to look up anything about HECS. It’s not that much of a big deal to me as long as I get into uni. So I probably wouldn’t go to that site.”*

*“you’d need something a bit different because HECS is just so boring.”*

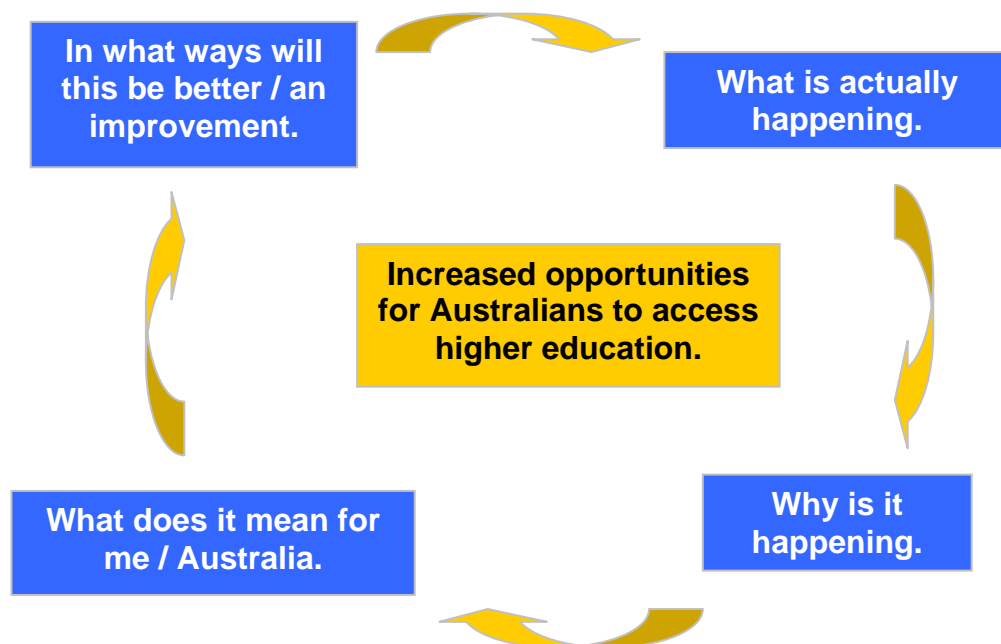
Ultimately, media choices for advertising will be determined by budget and audience reach and frequency of exposure requirements (eg. if the broader population was important this may incline planners to the use of television).

### Potential Message Content.

There are two principal issues here as well:

- actual content; and
- tone of campaign / messages.

We have already pointed to some headings for the content of core messages and detail regarding the nature of the changes. As regards the ‘announcement’ aspect of the campaign, messages need to be developed around the following themes:



The **expression** of these themes could take a number of forms and the extent to which this is ultimately achievable will be dependent upon the outcome of the concept evaluation research phase.

**This is especially true in relation to the CREDIBILITY of any message with what is a relatively intelligent and educated series of audiences.**



Accordingly, there are a number of propositions which could be put forward but they would need to be both **supportable** and **credible**, eg.

- the system is changing:
  - to be globally competitive
  - to ensure greater quality and choice
  - to adequately fund future / more tertiary places.
  
- or, it could be a **branding** strategy:
  - moving from HECS to HELP – help for those who can afford to pay and help for those who cannot.

At this stage, the audiences would appear resistant to a message along the lines of increased opportunities (unless through full fee-paying options) or increased equity of access for students of low SES background.

Tonal issues are also important for the attention-getting phase. There was a widespread request that the tone be:

- direct and straightforward
- honest and upfront
- simply conveyed.

This does not mean that it must be serious and grave. Whilst the message is not exactly light-hearted, there is no view that the tone could not be quirky or different without trivialising the content. Again, tone will be a key focus of the next evaluation stage of research. The key issue will be effectiveness.

*“an ad that will make a person watching it once remember (what was said).”*

## Some Key Issues, Conclusions and Strategic Recommendations.

The scope of the reforms, their widespread impact and the breadth of the target audience (eg. parents, families) dictates that an effective communication campaign is necessary.

This is further underscored as the image of the higher education (university) sector is undergoing change...

*“they’re being run more as businesses today and not as concerned with pure education.”*

Our key **conclusions** include:

- Sympathy with the reforms is low. Whether this is because respondents don’t understand the structural framework or simply resent the direction of such changes, is as yet unclear.
- Levels of current knowledge about the existing and future systems is highest among post-graduate students and lowest among school leavers.
  - As a result, it is important that any communication initiatives be lively and relevant as the topic is boring and of low interest to school leavers.
- Any campaign (especially supplying system detail) needs to be clear and simple as the reforms are perceived to have made the system more complex and bureaucratic.

**Strategic recommendations** derived from the developmental phase of research can be highlighted as follows:

- We believe ‘changes’ is a more credible term of reference than reforms.
- The topic is one upon which most target audiences wish to be informed (or feel they should know about) but it is not one upon which they tend to be pro-active in seeking information.
- Consequently, we see value in a strategy which aims to supply all relevant detail in appropriate media but which has a high-impact component to:
  - convey a powerful positive theme; and
  - direct audiences to core system detail information.
- The website is of central importance to information dissemination and to the campaign as a whole. Timing of the campaign is dependent upon completion of development of the website.
- It may be worthwhile testing some additional alternative names for the website in the next research round.
- Links between the proposed website and other relevant sites should be explored and implemented, where practicable.
- The website needs to be designed to be user-friendly and easily-navigable.

*“Commonwealth sites are now so big – it’s really hard to find anything.”*

- **Tone** and **message content** remain the twin foci of the ‘announcement’ media.
  - it must ‘cut through’ and confront the general lack of appeal of the topic.
  - it must attempt to engender a positive context for the reforms but do it in a credible manner.

*“students are smarter than the average Joe – if the details aren’t there they will junk the whole message.”*

## Appendix.

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- Group Discussion Guide
- Depth Interview Guide.

**Department of Education, Science and Training.  
Communication Campaign Upon Higher Education Reforms.  
Developmental Phase.**

**Qualitative Market Research  
Discussion Guide – Revised**

*Introduce self and outline broad purpose of session. Reassure about confidentiality of response and the value of frankness of opinion. Word appropriately, where needed, for intending and current tertiary students.*

**Current Tertiary Students.**

- Could you tell me about the types of courses you are currently studying so I have an idea of the mix within the room? (*Ask each and list*).
- Now could I ask how you are currently financing your studies? (*Explore fully*)

**Ask All**

**[SHOW CARD A.]**

- What do you understand about HECS and how it works?
  - How does it affect you / will it affect you, do you feel? (*Probe how*)
- How do you feel about HECS?
  - What do you understand your obligations to be under HECS?
- Are you aware / have you heard about any changes or reforms to the higher education system in Australia?  
If yes:
  - And what were those changes about? (*Probe fully*)
  - And where / how did you become aware of them?
- And have you heard anything about any changes to HECS or entitlements and responsibilities of students under that system?  
If yes:
  - Could you briefly explain what you know about these changes?
  - How do you believe these may affect you, if at all?

**[SHOW CARD B]**

Take a look at this card.

- First, thinking about the **current** system, how aware were you of those provisions before today?
  - And, looking at the **changes for 2005**....
    - How many of those were you already aware of?
- Ask All:
- And what is your attitude to those changes?
  - What **impact** do you think such changes will have upon tertiary students generally?
  - **And what impact do you feel they will have upon you (or your family)?** (*Explore fully here*)
- How do you feel these will affect those from a less advantaged background?
  - What do you think of the name of the website? (*Explore fully*)

**[SHOW CARD C. Allow to read, and then say...]**

These are details of the **new loans available**.

- Are these details easy to understand?
  - Do you have any questions about them?

**[SHOW CARD D.]**

In order for you to understand the broad detail of these new initiatives, this card explains more about:

- repayment of loans
- the scholarship programme
- the information website.

*[Allow time to read, then ask.....]*

- Are those details easy to follow?
  - Do you have any queries about these?

- What would be your overall view of these changes to the higher education system? (*Explore fully*)
  - What do you feel will be difficulties, if any, in people understanding them? (*Probe which and what aspects*).

Now this is where I would like some help from you.

- The Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training needs to communicate these changes to higher education students and their families.
  - Where do you now get most of your information about uni details such as this?
  - How should they best go about this / what approach do you feel is needed?  
(*Allow time to express any rationale here*)  
If not already mentioned:
    - ... And what would be the most **effective** communication channels, do you think? (Should there be more than one? Which ones?)
    - And what would you say are the most important **messages** they would need to get across? (*Explore fully*)

**[SHOW CARD E.]**

- Looking at these messages...
  - which do you feel are likely to be more / most important:
    - ... for current students?
    - ... for potential students?
    - ... for parents / families?
    - ... for the general community?
- And what about the tone of these messages. What would be most appropriate here (eg. serious versus lighter-hearted)?
- Do you understand how and why there are, under the new reforms, increased opportunities available in higher education? (*Probe fully*)
- Thinking once more about how best to inform the relevant target audiences, what format do you think such a campaign should take?

**Thank and close.**

**Department of Education, Science and Training.  
Communication Campaign Upon Higher Education Reforms.  
Developmental Phase.**

**Qualitative Market Research  
Depth Interview Guide.**

*Introduce self and outline broad purpose of interview. Reassure about confidentiality of response and the value of frankness of opinion.*

- Today, I'd like to ask you about the higher education reforms recently announced by the Australian Government. When I mention these reforms, what aspect springs to mind first? *(Collect all responses)*
  - And is there anything else that you can recall?
  
- What do you feel has been the motivation behind these reforms? *(Explore fully)*
  
- And what effect do you feel they will have on the higher education system in Australia?
  - Do you see them being positive or not?
  - And why do you say that? *(Probe fully)*
  
- Are you aware of the current provisions and obligations for recipients under HECS?  
And if not already mentioned:
  - And how will the HECS landscape change for students in 2005?  
*(Explore here)*

**[SHOW CARD B]**

Please look at this card.

- Looking at the changes for 2005...
  - How many of these were you aware of?
  - And what is your attitude to those changes?
  - What impact do you think such changes will have upon current and intending tertiary students generally? *(Probe fully)*



[SHOW CARD C. After having read, ask....]

- Do you feel these details regarding the new loans available are easy to understand?
  - Do you have any questions about them?

[SHOW CARD D.]

In order for you to understand the broad detail of these new initiatives, this card explains more about:

- repayment of loans
- the scholarship programme
- the information website.

[Allow time to read, then ask.....]

- Are those details easy to follow?
  - Do you have any queries about these?
  
- What would be your overall view of these changes to the higher education system? (*Explore fully*)
  - What do you feel will be difficulties, if any, in people understanding them? (*Probe which and what aspects*).
  
- The Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training needs to communicate the changes and reforms to their target audiences, ie. higher education students and their families.
  - What would you feel is the most **effective** means of achieving this? (*Explore fully, probe all responses*).
    - ... What would be the best **approach**?
    - ... And the most appropriate **channels** to use?
  - And what key messages do you feel need to be conveyed? (*Probe here*)
    - ... In what way do you feel these are likely to differ by target audience, eg.
      - school leavers?
      - current / postgraduate students?
      - parents / families?
      - the general community?
    - ... And what would be suitable / effective / appropriate in terms of **tone** for such messages?

**[SHOW CARD E.]**

- Which, among these possible messages, do you feel are the most relevant / important?
  - And why do you say that?
  
- What are the ways in which these new reforms increase the opportunities available in higher education? (*Probe fully*)
  
- And how do you feel they benefit those from a less advantaged background in accessing higher education options / alternatives?
  
- Finally, do you have any other comment about:
  - the higher education reforms? (*Probe*)
  - the proposed communication campaign to inform respective audiences? (*Probe*)

Thank and close.

**Card A.**

**Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS)**

**Card B.**

<b>The Current System</b>	<b>The System Next Year (2005)</b>
<p>Amount students contribute through HECS is set by the Government.</p> <p>Option of paying HECS up front (part or in full) for 25% discount.</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>OR</b></p> <p>Defer repayments until income reaches a minimum level.</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>CAN ALSO</b></p> <p>Make voluntary repayments (and obtain 15% bonus on payments over \$500).</p> <p>For full fee-paying places, also:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- <b><u>Postgraduate</u></b> students can defer fees through Postgraduate Education Loan Scheme (PELS).</li></ul>	<p>New range of student loans, called HELP (Higher Education Loan Programme) including new loan for undergraduate fee-payers.</p> <p>New 7 year Student Learning Entitlement (SLE).</p> <p>Institutions determine student contributions within ranges set by the Government.</p> <p><b><u>Decrease</u></b> in up front payment discount from 25% to 20%.</p> <p><b><u>Decrease</u></b> in bonus for voluntary payments from 15% to 10%.</p> <p><b><u>Increase</u></b> in income repayment threshold from \$25,348 to \$35,000.</p> <p>New Commonwealth Learning Scholarships.</p> <p>‘Going to Uni’ website.</p> <p>Students need Commonwealth Higher Education Student Support Number (CHESSN).</p>

**Card C.**

**Higher Education Loan Programme (HELP)**

There are **three** elements to this programme:

**HECS – HELP**

- Students can take out a loan to cover their student contribution for Commonwealth supported places.  
(If paid up front, a 20% discount may apply).

**FEE – HELP**

- For students who pay fees for their higher education tuition.
- Can access a loan for the full amount of tuition fees.
- Can borrow to a limit of \$50,000.

**OS – HELP**

- New loan scheme for students who wish to study one or two study periods overseas.
- Loans can be up to \$5,000 for each six month study period.

## **Card D.**

### **Repayment of HELP Loans.**

- Only required to make compulsory repayments when their repayment income exceeds the minimum repayment threshold.
- New threshold \$35,000 (2004-2005).

(10% bonus on voluntary repayments of \$500 or more.)

### **Commonwealth Learning Scholarships Programme (CLS).**

Available to certain full-time undergraduate students.

- Designed to assist low-income background students.
- Can cover general costs (\$2,000 per year for up to four years).
- Can cover accommodation costs (\$4,000 per year for up to four years).

### **‘Going to Uni’ website for students.**

- A web-based information resource where students can access information on courses and higher education providers.
- The use of a Commonwealth Higher Education Student Support Number (CHESSN) will give access to their individual Student Learning Entitlement usage, loan history and any other higher education entitlements.

## **Card E.**

### **Key Messages.**

- What are the changes that will affect:
  - current students; and
  - potential students.
  
- Details of study options available, eg.
  - HELP Loans
  - Scholarship opportunities (CLS).
  
- The introduction of the Student Learning Entitlement (SLE).
  
- The need for a student number (CHESSN).
  
- The availability of the information system website ([www.goingtouni.gov.au](http://www.goingtouni.gov.au)).
  
- Information about increased opportunities people will have to access higher education.