

PREFACE

This report reflects much of the unease that has surrounded Australian universities in recent years. This unease cannot continue to be dismissed by the Government as attributable to poor management within the sector, or to the failure of universities to adjust to new ways of thinking about their role in society. Growing isolation from national decision-making, reduced funding and increasing student numbers have resulted in universities experiencing deteriorating conditions of teaching and learning. These developments pose a serious threat to the capacity of the higher education sector to achieve the outcomes needed to sustain Australia's economic and social development. Despite the increasing recognition of knowledge as a vital element of the global economy, universities remain in many ways underestimated and unappreciated.

This Senate inquiry into higher education has been a wide-ranging investigation, providing a forum for many interested parties in the university sector. The outcome is a significant report that focuses on many fundamental problems in the sector.

The Committee heard of incidences of administrative irregularities, breaches of professional ethics, victimisation, incidences of universities turning a blind eye to cheating by students and violations of academic freedom. Questionable practices in association with universities' commercial ventures and tensions arising between managers and academics were also brought to the Committee's attention.

Many of the problems and pressures that universities are experiencing are symptoms of the Government's inadequate funding and the parlous state of many universities' finances. The crude funding cuts to universities, supposedly in an effort to make them more efficient, have continued to the point where they are causing long-term damage to the fabric of the higher education sector. This has reached a point where Australia's international reputation as a provider of quality higher education services is now being questioned.

The pressure on students is an equally serious matter. In looking at the evidence, the Committee, questions whether quality can be sustained when class sizes are so large, particularly in tutorials. In some undergraduate courses tutorials have been completely abandoned. There is clear evidence that good teaching practice is under threat in many institutions and that today's students are receiving poorer quality education than previous generations did. The Committee also found that students are spending a higher proportion of their time in employment so as to maintain themselves in full time study.

It is not hard to see how reducing financial support for students and the higher education sector is contributing to the declining intellectual standards of our universities. However, it appears that the Government has little understanding of the connection between the maintenance of a proper skills base and the economic future of Australia. The majority of the Committee would argue that the mix of populism

and economic rationalism that characterises Government policy certainly poses dangers for our Australian society. If, as the evidence suggests, Australian academics are moving abroad to more lucrative and professionally satisfying positions, the potential for recovery and regeneration in the higher education sector will be greatly diminished. The damage cannot be rectified immediately. Increased funding for the sector will need to be appropriated over an extended period, as recommended in the report.

The extensive evidence to the Committee has allowed it to make other recommendations addressing a range of issues, including the matters of university governance and accountability. There is a need to improve audit trails within universities and to develop sources of information and advice to Government independent of the Department of Employment, Training and Youth Affairs. There is also a need to give a higher profile to the requirements of the sector and its place in the social and economic fabric of the nation. For this reason the Committee is recommending a national summit on higher education. The current crisis of confidence in Australian universities will not be addressed by the injection of funds alone. They will need the encouragement that comes from broad government and community support, combined with a plan that takes stock of our current situation and sets a clear direction and place for universities in our nation.

Our universities must be seen as an essential element in our economy and society in the 21st century, having the potential to secure a prosperous and fulfilling future for Australians.

The Committee is grateful to all those who provided submissions to the inquiry and who appeared before it at public hearings. The majority of written submission were thoughtful, comprehensive and well-researched. The Committee is conscious of the time and effort that individuals and organisations put into preparing them.

We commend this report to the Senate.

Senator Jacinta Collins
Chair

Senator Kim Carr

Senator Trish Crossin

Senator Natasha Stott Despoja