

Conclusion

The committee considers the policy known as *Backing Australia's Future*, and its implementing legislation, to be unconscionable in almost every respect. At its core is the intention of diminishing the role and status of universities through heavy-handed regulation. Universities are to be reduced to being 'higher education providers': selling a service to a purchaser, the Government, on terms dictated by the Government, and at the non-negotiable price the Government is willing to pay. While the Government proclaims its interest in quality, diversity, equity and sustainability, universities will be subject to treatment which will diminish their academic freedom and restrict their course offerings as well as reducing access for poorer people. The legislation will compromise the capacity of the sector to grow and to meet the increasingly complex needs of the nation.

The nation's higher education system is being turned upside down by the provisions of this bill. Such a radical attack on the fundamentals of our universities was never foreshadowed or discussed during the Government's review process. The sector and the community have not given their consent to the uprooting of the nation's university system. The Government does not have a mandate to implement such changes.

This committee is of the view that the bill is so badly flawed that it does not deserve a second reading. If, however, the Senate should grant it one, the bill would require wholesale rethinking and redrafting.

The Government has repeatedly urged the rapid passage of their bill, supposedly in the financial interests of the sector. This is sheer scare mongering. There is continuing funding in the HEFA Act. Universities will not be left in the lurch if the bill does not pass this year. There is time to get this right.

The committee fears that the legislation will introduce a 'brave new world' of compliant institutions stripped of their autonomy and academic freedom. Commonwealth Grant Scheme must ensure both financial security for universities and guarantee their independence. There must be a strong element of trust and respect between and among the institutions of government and free institutions which mould a cohesive civil society. The current bill shows scant respect for universities, to the extent of avoiding the use of the term 'university' on the pretext of drafting convenience. The bill must therefore uphold the autonomy of universities and allow the constituent parts of universities to make their own decisions and make their own arrangements of their affairs, without government meddling.

The legislation must consider the needs of students whose skills and learning are the key to the future of the nation. There is a bitter irony in the fact that a generation benefiting from a relatively easy access to university education through generous scholarships and proper funding is now denying these same opportunities and funds to its children and grandchildren. This is occurring so that the beneficiaries of affordable education over 20 years can extend their prosperity at the expense of future

generations. The bill must be recast to offer proper student income support. It should recognise that education is an investment in people, in community service, and in economic and social stability.

The evidence gathered by the committee has revealed desperation among universities, indicated in most cases by vice-chancellors who face a humiliating trade off between money and maintaining control of their own affairs. The promise of increased funding is dangled before their eyes, but they are aware that the cost is subservience to bureaucratic control. An impression was gained that the more optimistic vice-chancellors believed that something would be worked out in time for the bill to pass the Senate: that the Minister could be appealed to; that good sense would prevail. Vice-chancellors live in a world of rationality and regard for evidence-based learning. Some of the flavour of this is picked up in evidence given by Deputy Vice-Chancellor Alan Robson of the University of Western Australia

We accept some elements of the package as proposed and we oppose some of them. We would hope to improve some aspects of the package and remove others. However—and this is very important—a simple rejection of the package in total and defaulting to the status quo is not a responsible option. Policy reform is critical and there is no time to delay.¹

None of the improvements or deletions of uncomfortable provisions have come to pass, and as this report is tabled it is the AVCC, not the Government, which has made the concession: and one which offends to a degree against principles discussed in the paragraph above on autonomy.

There is a small irony in the fact that what the vice-chancellors have compromised on is the representative role of governing councils and senates, which are to be transformed into boards of directors, if the bill is passed. The limited numbers of universities having parliamentary appointees will also lose these, as the vice-chancellors have agreed. It is appropriate, however, that these agreements will need to be approved by parliamentarians in the Senate. This committee will recommend that they reject this proposal and every other nefarious attacking clause in the bill which threatens universities and all those who benefit from their service to the nation.

1 *Hansard*, Perth, 30 September 2003, p.70