

A sustainable higher education sector

The current government has introduced massive changes to higher education since coming to power in 1996. It has also cut sector funding in that time by up to \$7.7 billion in real terms. A combination of interventionist and autocratic involvement by government, insufficient funding, ministerial assaults on the independence of academic enquiry, and the attempted exclusion of students and staff as stakeholders has significantly weakened the long term prospects for the Australian higher education sector.

Australia needs long-term sustainable research funding, covering all types of research and facilitating the exchange of ideas and freedom of enquiry through an open research environment.

Postgraduate coursework qualifications are increasingly required for base-entry to professions, career development, personal development, and retraining. Very few Commonwealth Supported Places are provided at postgraduate level. Commonwealth Supported Places should be extended to all postgraduate coursework qualifications. This should not be at the expense of undergraduate places.

Indigenous postgraduate students remain one of the most disadvantaged of all equity groups, and are less likely to be enrolled in postgraduate courses than the non-indigenous student population. Further, there has been a drop in retention and completion rates in the last 9 years as significant changes to ABSTUDY and education policy have been made. Improvements in participation and completion rates among Indigenous students must be part of any long-term view of higher education in Australia.

A truly consultative process is now required to reverse the damage of the last 11 years and to set a new direction for a vital, sustainable and internationally competitive higher education sector.

Key Targets

- A significant increase in funding for the sector
- Genuine sector consultation
- Government commitment to freedom of enquiry and academic independence