Universities Australia Election Statement

Australia’s ability to prosper as a productive, healthy and sustainable society depends crucially on its capacity to make the most of its people’s potential. The future is one of rapid change, with enormous social and environmental challenges, and economic restructuring. There will be explosive growth in knowledge and technology, and around the globe other countries are seeking to position themselves to be at the forefront of this change.

Australia’s universities are an essential and fundamental part of preparing for this complex and challenging future. We need to prepare people for the highly skilled jobs of tomorrow, and be leaders in developing and adapting new knowledge to revitalise our economy, strengthen our society and tackle the many problems we will face. Universities conduct around one fifth of all research and development in Australia and produce the highly skilled people that the country relies upon to drive innovation and productivity across all sectors.

Australian universities are highly regarded by world standards, but they have been under increasing pressure. The 2009 Bradley Review of higher education highlighted these pressures and made a series of recommendations to strengthen quality, raise education levels in the community, and improve accountability. Government policy has embraced the recommended agenda of growth, improvement in access, and standards-based regulation, and has provided welcome additional support which to date has particularly focussed on renewing infrastructure, resulting in many major building initiatives on Australian university campuses.

Increasing levels of higher education cannot come at the expense of quality, and Universities Australia calls for a strong and continuing focus on three areas to continue the project of renewal needed to enable Australia to fulfil its potential.

**Students:** While positive changes have been made, better income support levels are needed to enable both undergraduate and postgraduate students to participate in higher education without further detriment to their studies. Universities Australia would also recommend a review of the student amenities legislation to enable its passage. Clear signals and better and more stable policy environments are also needed to ensure that Australia can sustain its reputation as a safe, welcoming and high quality destination for international students.

**Research:** Over the past decade substantial new investments have been made in research and incentives for innovation, and recent moves have been made to improve and better align research infrastructure. However the need for research skills in the future is great, including the urgent need to prepare to replace a generation of academic staff, and other countries are escalating their research investments. Australia has considerable untapped potential, and Universities Australia recommends further action on lifting Australian Research Council and National Health and Medical Research funding for new research, expanding and improving support for research training, linking universities with business and innovation, and ensuring proper infrastructure support.

**Sustainable resourcing and manageable regulation:** The Bradley Review of higher education and the Cutler Review of the national innovation system saw their recommendations as sufficient only to prevent further slippage in resourcing for Australia’s universities. In the coming years Government policy should deliver fully on the funding recommended by the Bradley and Cutler Review through to 2013. Thereafter public funding for higher education should be increased to at least the OECD average as a share of GDP by 2020 if Australian universities are to implement the proposed reforms and enable Australia to sustain and enhance its position alongside the leading industrial countries. New and more consistent approaches to regulation and the application of standards are necessary. Regulations must be implemented carefully to protect students and assure the quality of education and research without unduly restricting flexibility or constraining university autonomy.
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Specifically, Universities Australia:

- Recommends that the government commit to the improvement of student income support. A HELP living expense loan should be provided to distinguish the student need from the unemployed need. Universities Australia would also recommend a review of the student amenities legislation.

- Recommends improved funding for research students to further increase both the number of PhD places funded and the funding per place for universities; resources to enable enhanced international collaboration including to improve the attractiveness of Australia as a career destination; and the inclusion of university academics on the Government’s Skilled Occupations List for independent migration to facilitate suitably qualified individuals settling in Australia.

- Calls for an immediate supplementation of $100 million to the Australian Research Council budget to keep success rates for the flagship Discovery program above 20 per cent. This will alleviate the current situation where many internationally outstanding research projects are unable to obtain funding, constraining Australia’s research competitiveness and undermining morale in the research community.

- Recommends that government should consider the extended role universities in regional locations play, making the important distinction between the operational needs and the student needs at regional campuses. Regional loading should be applied on a non-competitive basis through direct negotiation with each regional university (potentially through the Compact agreements) incorporating the net additional costs unavoidable in the provision of regional higher education.

- Recommends that a new $500 million per annum appropriation for basic university infrastructure be included in university grants. This annual appropriation should be evenly distributed among university campuses to support their general infrastructure needs.

- Recommends that governments make periodic reviews of base and relative funding for higher education to ensure that funding levels remain internationally competitive and appropriate for the sector. This is consistent with the Bradley Review recommendations to maintain the future value of funding for teaching and for research in the higher education sector, and should commence with the 10 percent increase in per student teaching and learning support recommended by the Bradley Review.

- Supports the development of a more deregulated and flexible higher education system along the lines recommended by the Bradley Review. In moving to this new environment government must ensure that institutions have the capacity to deliver what is promised.

- Supports the development of a single national tertiary regulator based on clear, consistent and credible standards. The regulator must be able to identify and deal with significant areas of risk, protect students and establish and assure the quality and reputation of Australian tertiary education. The Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) should phase in its approaches to academic standards to ensure their credibility, and align its work with related reforms, including the regulation of overseas student education and the revision of the Australian Qualifications Framework. The aim and effect should be to support the highest international standards without imposing a rules-based straitjacket.

30 July 2010