



## VC-NET

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### **Time for a review**

This month has seen the announcement of two major strategic reviews of higher education in Australia and the UK. Not only is the timing similar but the language of the sponsoring ministers is also identical. In Australia the new Minister, Julia Gallard, called for a revolution in higher education citing the importance of nations investing wisely in knowledge, skills and innovation. Criticising the Howard government for being asleep at the wheel for more than a decade, she called for the creation of a globally competitive higher education system. Public funding of tertiary education declined by 4 percent in Australia between 1995 and 2004 compared with an average increase of 49 percent across the OECD. The Rudd government will change this. Initially, she announced moves to reduce tuition fees in shortage, strategic subjects but any major changes will await the outcome of a strategic review led by the former Vice Chancellor of the University of South Australia. This will report in December 2008 and will advise the Government on the key objectives for higher education in Australia and suggest how they could be achieved through reforming the sector and changing the regulatory and funding arrangements. This is taken to mean making them less intrusive.

In the UK the Minister, John Denham, spoke about the importance of skills and innovation in the national economy and called for the higher education sector to work with government to produce a framework for the expansion and development of higher education over the next 10-15 years. Denham suggests that a one percentage increase in the size of a country's tertiary education workforce can increase its GDP by around six percentage points, but bemoans the fact that so few 15 year olds in the UK (a mere 32 percent) expect to go on to study at university level. His rationale for the review (or series of review studies) is that the UK needs to be better positioned to face the challenges from international competitors in five key areas:

- Maintaining a leading role in world class research and being better at translating it into world-beating products and services.
- Building more effective relationships between universities and business and stimulating the growth in numbers of employees with high level skills.
- Adapting the delivery of teaching to a changed student population (as the number of 18 year olds falls) so that it is more flexible.
- Making the most of global opportunities and improving international co-operation and collaboration.
- Ensuring that the diversity in the higher education system is being effectively exploited and that institutions are encouraged to respond and change.

The UK move coincides with two related initiatives: an encouragement for communities to bid for funding to establish higher education centres or university campuses, in what the government calls "a new University Challenge" and the launch of a White Paper about innovation, called "The Innovation Nation". This sets out some ways in which the UK can become a nation where innovation thrives at individual, community and regional levels.

Both countries face the same competition in the production of skilled manpower, from China and India especially, and both see the same solutions – and use the same rhetoric to explain why they are necessary.

Sources: Australian Minister for Education's speech: 'A Higher Education Revolution: Creating and Productive, Prosperous, Modern Australia, 13<sup>th</sup> March 2008 at: <http://mediacentre.dewr.gov.au/mediacentre/AllReleases/> and details of the review at: [www.dest.gov.au/sectors/higher\\_education/policy\\_issues\\_reviews/reviews/highered\\_review/](http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/higher_education/policy_issues_reviews/reviews/highered_review/) The Speech by John Denham on 29<sup>th</sup> February is at [www.dius.gov.uk/speeches/denham\\_hespeech\\_290208.html](http://www.dius.gov.uk/speeches/denham_hespeech_290208.html) and the two Related documents are "A new University Challenge" at <http://www.dius.gov.uk/policy/documents/university-challenge.pdf> and "An Innovation Nation" at [http://dius.dialoguebydesign.net/rp/exec\\_summary.pdf](http://dius.dialoguebydesign.net/rp/exec_summary.pdf)

## **Canadian budget largesse extends to HE**

In a tax cutting budget that would turn British citizens green with envy the Canadian federal Minister of Finance has distributed benefits to universities as well as pensioners, farmers, industry and taxpayers at large. His budget speech included the following announcements:

- A Student Grant program that will reach 245,000 students a year, over 100,000 more than the current grants regime.
- A programme of Vanier Scholarships (named after a Canadian Governor General) which will be used to attract the best doctoral students from around the world to Canada. The program will receive C\$20 million a year for five years.
- The creation of Canada Global Excellence Research Chairs in four areas identified as priorities in the federal Science and Technology Strategy (the environment, natural resources and energy, health and information and communication technologies). The Government will provide C\$21 million to establish the Chairs which will be used to tempt leading academic researchers and their teams to Canada and will replace and extend the existing scheme of Canada Research Chairs.
- An increase in the sums available for research councils and in a fund to meet the indirect costs of research.
- Measures to allow foreign students to remain in Canada as permanent residents (since they are "people this country needs").

These announcements go some way to meeting the concerns of Canada's University Presidents and Vice Chancellors, who had been lobbying for policies that will help to boost the numbers of graduates, which have fallen behind competitors. The US, for example awards twice as many masters degrees per capita as Canada and 35 percent more doctoral degrees in the crucial age range of 25-39. The AUCC welcomed the budget's recognition of the importance of investing in education and skills.

Sources: Budget speech of the Minister of Finance on 26 February 2008, see [www.budget.gc.ca/2008/speech-discours/speech-discours-eng.asp](http://www.budget.gc.ca/2008/speech-discours/speech-discours-eng.asp) and for the AUCC view see [www.aucc.ca/publications/media/2008/oped\\_gazette\\_02\\_25\\_e.html](http://www.aucc.ca/publications/media/2008/oped_gazette_02_25_e.html) and [http://www.aucc.ca/publications/media/2008/budget\\_02\\_26\\_e.html](http://www.aucc.ca/publications/media/2008/budget_02_26_e.html)

## **Nigeria insists on staff having a PhD**

The Nigerian National Universities Commission (NUC) has ruled that all lecturers in public and private universities must possess a PhD by 2009 or lose their jobs. The qualification will not be necessary for assistant lecturers but is required for any staff charged with examining. The proposal is accepted by the community in principle, but is not thought to be realistic in the timescale, due to the shortage of existing PhD staff to train and test new doctoral candidates. It is suggested that the 20 year period of military rule starved Nigeria's universities of funds and they are only now recovering.

The worst sufferers of the ruling could be the growing number of private universities, since their staff without PhDs will have to leave to study in the public sector in order to obtain their PhDs. Already there are 34 private institutions compared with the 57 State and Federal universities and the NUC believes that the number should be greatly expanded if Nigeria is to meet the demand for higher education. A decision to hold to the PhD requirement could make that ambition much harder and act as a deterrent to new private providers. Even though the private institutions are able to offer staff better salaries than the public sector and can usually provide a strike-free environment, it is hard for them to provide the long term job security and perks that come with a state funded university post.

Sources: University World News, Africa Edition. 30 March 2008. [www.universityworldnews.com](http://www.universityworldnews.com) "This Day", Lagos. 12 December 2007.

### **How not to fund research?**

The Chronicle of Higher Education in the USA has revealed an extraordinary tale of research allocations to universities being awarded at the gift of members of Congress on a wholly non-competitive basis. They report that at least \$2.25 billion has been awarded to 920 institutions solely at the wish of individual members of Congress in the last year. This is a fourfold increase on the sum ten years ago. While some of this funding goes towards infrastructural development – building classrooms, campus roads and other construction projects – two thirds (US\$1.6 billion) went towards scientific research at 500 institutions. Although this represents only 5 percent of all the federal money that goes to research, it is still a significant sum, particularly as the budgets of the National Institutes of Health and the National Science Foundation have declined in real terms in the last few years. Only one in five applications for funding from each agency is expected to be granted in 2008 compared with one in three in 2001. This trend is likely to increase reliance on 'earmarked', non-competitive funding.

The Chronicle reports that attempts to persuade universities in receipt of substantial peer-review grants to turn down research money allocated in this way in favour of increased funding for competitive grants have previously failed and would probably fail again. Both universities and congressional representatives are unlikely to reject guaranteed earmarked money in favour of uncertain peer-reviewed grants. Moreover there is no guarantee for the universities following such a course that a similar amount of funds would be redirected into competitive grants. A recent proposal for a one year moratorium on non-competitive grants – supported by all three senators running for the presidency – was rejected by the Senate on 13 March, heralding a continuation of the status quo for the time being.

Source: The Chronicle of Higher Education. March 28 2008. 'Colleges Earmarks Grow, Amid Criticism' <http://chronicle.com/weekly/v54/i29/29a00101.htm> For details of the proposed moratorium see: Senate Rejects Earmark Moratorium <http://edition.cnn.com/2008/POLITICS/03/13/earmark.vote/>

The editor, Jay Kubler, and author, John Fielden, are always pleased to receive comments on the usefulness and content of this briefing service. News from other Commonwealth countries, which might be of wider interest, is also most welcome. They can be contacted by e-mail on [vcnet@acu.ac.uk](mailto:vcnet@acu.ac.uk) or by fax on +44 (0)20 7387 2655.

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