



## VC-NET

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### **Everyone gets more**

Governments are behaving strangely this Budget time; they are all giving higher education more money. Unusually happy press releases are emerging from university representative bodies. In South Africa HESA welcomes the latest Budget increase of 2.2 billion rands with its promise of funding for more science, engineering and technology students; in Canada the AUCC similarly applauds the federal decision to increase higher education funding by transferring more funds to the provinces, as well as increasing federal support for research and knowledge transfer. In England the HEFCE announces that it will fund 33,000 more students and at the same time increases research money by 6.4 per cent (when inflation hovers around 3 per cent). Even in Scotland, where funding has lagged behind its southern neighbour funding overall increased by 5.8 per cent with some research institutions gaining more; both Edinburgh University and the University of Dundee will receive increases in their research grants of over 10 per cent.

The reasons for this are strikingly similar; phrases such as “providing the country with a skilled and knowledgeable workforce”, “strengthening the knowledge economy” recur in the official announcements. With manufacturing moving to the Far East and China in particular, it is widely recognised that nations will require a much higher proportion of skilled workers to staff the higher value-added end of manufacturing and the service industries. All nations predict an increase in the number of graduate level jobs and a fall in the number of unskilled jobs.

In some countries one of the best ways to increase the proportion of skilled workers is by retaining the best foreign students, and the competition to attract and retain the best of them is becoming global. Oxford for example has just announced a programme of Weidenfeld Scholarships in which 25 of the brightest students, mostly from Eastern Europe, will be funded to continue their studies. Most significantly they will be given placements in the UK and mentors after they finish at Oxford.

Sources: Guardian, 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2007 “Oxford targets bright young things of eastern Europe”. Scottish Funding Council press release 22 March 2007. HEFCE publication 2007/06, Recurrent grants for 2007-08. AUCC “Universities applaud post secondary education and research increases” at [www.aucc.ac](http://www.aucc.ac) HESA statement at [www.hesa.org.za](http://www.hesa.org.za) “Higher education welcomes the Minister’s focussed attention”

### **Students are finding it tougher**

Two recent surveys of students in Australia and the UK throw light on how students are surviving financially. Their findings are very similar.

The Australian Vice Chancellors’ Committee has published a survey of how 19,000 students were managing their finances. This was the first review since a similar survey in 2000 and shows a “possible deterioration in undergraduate students’ financial situations”. Other changes noted were:

- A greater reliance on the income from paid work, which represented 75 per cent of their total income.
- A rise in the proportion of students taking out loans.
- In a country where a high proportion of students live at home, many more relied on non-cash assistance from parents or partners with the provision of meals, textbooks and accommodation.
- One positive trend was that students' budgets overall were better balanced than in 2000. Thus, they finished their studies with smaller levels of debt than in the previous survey.
- An increase in the numbers taking out loans.

The survey reported on the hours students worked. On average it was 14.8 hours per week for full time undergraduates and 40 per cent of these thought that this work was having a detrimental effect on their studies and led many of them to miss classes. A key question that the study does not answer is: what is the level of part time work that is acceptable and that does not affect the quality of a student's learning?

A more recent smaller study of 2,000 students in the UK by the THES and Sodexo looks at the student experience more broadly, but the conclusions are very similar; more choose to live at home and chose to study at an institution close to home; as many as 65 per cent of students relied on a student loan and 31 per cent do some paid work during term time. A majority of those who lived at home worked during term time (for between 11 and 20 hours per week), compared with only 12 per cent of those in halls in residence; this shows an interesting split of the student population into two distinct communities. An unexpected conclusion from the UK study was that 24 per cent of students will leave university with no debt at all, a big increase on the 8 per cent a mere two years ago. However some 40 per cent expect to leave with debts of more than GBP10,000 and 15 percent owing over GBP15,000.

In global terms both UK and Australian students are not as badly off as in some other countries. The Educational Policy Institute carried out a study in 2005 comparing the average level of graduate debt in eight countries and reported that Australian student debt levels were well below those in Sweden and the USA. An *average* American student might well expect to graduate with debts of USD 20,000, while in Australia and the UK the average figures would be about USD10,000 and just under USD 15,000 respectively.

Source: AVCC: Australian University Student Finances 2006. Available at [www.avcc.edu.au](http://www.avcc.edu.au) "Global Debt Patterns: an international comparison of student loan burdens and repayment conditions." Educational Policy Institute. Sept 2005. [www.educationalpolicy.org](http://www.educationalpolicy.org) The Sodexo University Lifestyle Survey 2006 available at [www.sodexo.co.uk](http://www.sodexo.co.uk)

## Ways of handling cheating

A recent article in the AUCC's journal "University Affairs" highlights some of the issues concerning cheating. Estimates of the extent of cheating vary widely and even the definition is not always clear. In the UK a snapshot study for UCAS suggested that a mere 5 per cent of students were copying things from the web. In the USA far higher figures are reported with surveys of students showing that between 53 and 70 per cent of students admitted to some form of cheating. Canada is not far behind according to recent research with 35 per cent of students admitting to cheating on written work. In the USA it has been at this level for many years before the advent of the internet.

The author of the article sets out three ways of tackling cheating, which include:

- Educating students about academic integrity by promoting codes of ethics. Some American institutions require all their students to sign up to an Honour Code which is then policed by an elected student body. Such a Code has been in existence at Stanford since 1921 and Northumbria has become the first UK university to follow suit (with similar backing from the Students Union).

- Detecting cheating and checking very early in a course, which requires staff to take time to check facts in assignments. Online detection services such as the Turnitin software (used by 80% of UK universities) “can be emotionally and academically messy” according to the University Affairs author. In Canada the National Federation of Students is unhappy with its use and argues that the use of detection software assumes that students are innocent until proven guilty.
- Disciplining offenders at university level where the offence is clearly identified and where penalties are well advertised in advance. Some universities even publicise their statistics of academic misconduct. Research at Duke University by Donald McCabe has shown that the immediate result of not spotting cheating is that more of it happens. His studies illustrate that many students will cheat if they think they can get away with it. He also proves that honour codes work and reduce the amount of cheating significantly.

Some argue that these three courses of action are conflicting. Operating detection software when you have asked all students to sign a code of honour really is showing a lack of trust.

In the UK a recent conference on the subject of cheating shows what a big issue it has become; fortunately JISC, a higher education agency, has established a Plagiarism Advisory Service which has been working with institutions for over five years to find solutions and has produced a Plagiarism Road Map that any institution can use to help plan its anti-cheating strategy.

Sources: The Guardian: “An idea worth imitating” March 20<sup>th</sup>, The Guardian: “The usual suspects” March 16<sup>th</sup>. University Affairs: April 2007 “Cheating themselves” at [www.universityaffairs.ca](http://www.universityaffairs.ca) The Plagiarism Advisory Service is at [www.jiscpas.ac.uk](http://www.jiscpas.ac.uk)

The editor, Svava Bjarnason, 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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