



Introducing the new Minister

An adroit parliamentary performer, with substantial economic and legal credentials, the new Minister, Julie Bishop, has already had some experience of higher education having served as a member of Murdoch University Senate, and acted as Chair of the University of Western Australia’s Town Planning Appeals Tribunal. She also brings to her Ministry wider engagement with community through support of business, cultural and sporting organisations. Rumour has it that she works hard and is feisty when she needs to be in the hard knocks of politics. The question is how will she take on the difficult questions of higher education, and the problems faced by universities in particular? Perhaps most importantly, how can she promote higher morale in a sector that has been ‘over-reformed’ and ‘over-governed’?

It is not often that a genuine consensus emerges across the university sector, but there is one that is heard everywhere. Universities and their staff have been drowning under the weight of new programs, such as the ‘Learning and Teaching Performance Fund’, the Higher Education Workplace Relations Requirements (HEWRRs) and the imminent arrival of the new research assessment exercise, the Research Quality Framework (RQF).

Naturally, governments will always want to ensure accountability for monies advanced, and some want to shape the outcomes to accord with their own personal political objectives. The difficulty with the current sets of program initiatives is that all have demanded an inordinate commitment of time and resources by institutions to implement such schemes.

There is an element of good sense in most initiatives, but they have been swamped with excessive, and at times inconsistent, interference from Government. Can the Minister wean the Government away from such mindless interference? From our point of view there is no justification for the HEWRRs legislation which is a direct attack on the professional and industrial working conditions of all members.

There are critical issues that demand attention – from both the Minister and higher education. The first of these concerns is the lack of an effective Government response to the skill shortages. Higher education and universities have a responsibility to assist Government in developing both immediate and long term responses to these problems, particularly since so many of the shortage areas are in the professions. We cannot simply assume that short term vocational training provided by employers will necessarily solve such problems.

At the same time we also need to ensure that quality of service is maintained, particularly in the professions such as teaching, nursing and engineering. Solving the skill shortage is an urgent matter of public interest. Attracting students to university is being made harder by ever rising costs; costs increasingly borne by students. In universities the overall cost of a degree can be anything from \$15,000 (for a 3 year

Arts degree) to over \$200,000 for a full fee paying medical place. The Government cannot back away from its responsibility to fund specialist programs aimed at areas of skill shortage and innovation.

Secondly, it is now time to address the pattern of declining investment in research and innovation. Countries throughout our region have recognised how important investment in R&D is in promoting economic and social advances. Australia will be left behind unless Government, business and universities co-operate in redressing the imbalance. Ignoring the issue any longer is dangerous. There are enormous spin-offs

for government and the community from public investment in R & D. One bright light has been the announcement by the Government for a review of public support for science and innovation. With the RQF around the corner, it seems that Government may well have finally decided to act. Let’s hope they do so without the excessive red tape that has characterised recent policy initiatives. 🗨

There is an element of good sense in most initiatives, but they have been swamped with excessive, and at times inconsistent, interference from Government. Can the Minister wean the Government away from such mindless interference?