

CONCLUSION

Australia has a strong higher education sector with an international reputation for excellence. We are deservedly proud of being a creative, capable and highly educated nation. However, there is no room for complacency. The international economy and employment markets are evolving, and we need to stay competitive. The government's vision is for a higher education system which prepares Australians for the jobs of the future and promotes excellence in research. As put by the Hon Christopher Pyne MP, Minister for Education, Australia faces a stark choice:

...either we spread access to higher education to more Australians and keep our country competitive with others in our region, or we support a higher education system that is unsustainable, that will decline into mediocrity, and eventually be left behind.¹

The reform package before the Senate is about more than just driving economic growth or boosting productivity. These reforms are primarily about enhancing individual and community wellbeing, expanding choice for students and allowing higher education providers the freedom to build innovative, creative—and above all sustainable—business models. They are about increasing access for regional students, students from low SES backgrounds, Indigenous and mature age students, ensuring that everyone has the same opportunity to reach their potential.

Sustainability has been of grave concern to the sector for some time, as evidenced by vice chancellors, academics and students. Successive governments have, for various reasons, been unwilling or unable to maintain the levels of funding required for the sector to flourish. These reforms are crucial for our higher education institutions, but are not just about raising fees, as critics have rather simplistically inferred. While this government believes the higher education system must be fair and equitable for all Australians, it does not share the naïve view that funding can just be sourced from a bottomless public purse. Students themselves, who enjoy a lifetime of benefits from the higher education they receive, must make a fair contribution. But thanks to the HELP system of deferred payment on student loans, no one will be asked to pay for their education until they are making a decent living.

The model being proposed is unique in the world for its innovation and fairness, and must be seen for what it is: a much-needed, socially progressive overhaul of an unsustainable system.

...this is socially progressive policy.²

1 The Hon Christopher Pyne MP, address to the National Press Club, Canberra, available at: <https://ministers.education.gov.au/pyne/address-national-press-club-canberra-spreading-opportunity-and-staying-competitive-why-we-need> (accessed 21 October 2014).

2 Professor Ian Robert Young AO, Vice-Chancellor and President of the Australian National University and Chair of the board of Group of Eight Australia, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 9 October 2014, p. 69.

The committee has diligently examined all aspects of this bill, including the concerns raised during the course of this inquiry. The committee is of the view that these reforms will promote excellence in education and research, and ensure a sustainable future for the sector, one that is, as put by Professor Ian Young, Vice-Chancellor of the Australian National University, 'equitable for students, graduates and the taxpayer'.³ The HELP system and Commonwealth Scholarship Scheme provide a socially-progressive funding approach which will expand access to higher education and create pathways for anyone who wishes to study, regardless of their background. People who might never have contemplated higher education before will now have a range of options to choose from, and a system of support in place to help them along the way.

This package of reforms follows extensive consultation with the sector. The committee also consulted widely in its deliberations, taking on board many suggestions on how the bill could be improved. As a result, the committee has made a number of recommendations to enhance the proposed reforms. These are set out throughout this report. The committee urges the Senate and the government to take its recommendations on board, and to allow the passage of this legislation.

Senator Bridget McKenzie

Chair

3 Professor Ian Young, AO, Vice Chancellor and President, Australian National University, *Proof Committee Hansard*, 9 October 2014, p. 68.