



SENATOR KIM CARR
Labor Senator for Victoria

Shadow Minister for Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Industry
Shadow Minister Assisting the Leader for Science

15 January 2015

Mr Ian McPhee PSM
Auditor-General
Australian National Audit Office
GPO Box 707
Canberra ACT 2601

Dear Mr McPhee,

I write to draw your attention to the Higher Education Reforms Communication Campaign, which was launched in December. This campaign comprises television, print and radio advertisements, and has so far involved contracts worth more than \$8 million. The campaign was certified by the Secretary of the Department of Education, Ms Lisa Paul AO PSM, on 25 November 2014.

On 9 December 2014, I wrote to Ms Jane Halton PSM, Secretary of the Department of Finance, expressing the Opposition's concerns about the content and purpose of higher education advertising campaign. Ms Halton promptly replied, stating that the Department of Finance does not have a role in respect of compliance with advertising guidelines, and that my letter had therefore been referred to Ms Paul. To date, I have not received a formal response from Ms Paul, although her Department has advised media outlets that it stands by the legitimacy of the campaign.

I am now writing to request that you examine whether the advertising campaign complies with the *Short-term Interim Guidelines on Information and Advertising Campaigns by Australian Government Departments and Agencies (June 2014)* (the Guidelines), under which it was approved.

It is unquestionably the case that claims made in this advertising campaign are untrue, and I contend that these claims constitute a breach of the Guidelines. Specifically, the claim made in television advertisements, on the campaign website (www.highered.gov.au) and in print that "the Australian Government will continue to pay around half your undergraduate degree" is demonstrably false.

The Guidelines specify that:

13. *Where information is presented as a fact, it should be accurate and verifiable. When making a factual comparison, the material should not attempt to mislead the recipient about the situation with which the comparison is made and it should state explicitly the basis for the comparison.*

The claim that the Australian Government will continue to pay around half of undergraduate degrees costs for students fails on all counts: it is neither accurate nor verifiable, and it attempts to mislead recipients of the advertising.

I suggest that the only 'need' this campaign serves is a political one for the benefit of the Prime Minister, Minister Pyne and the Coalition Government, and as a response to the widely reported negative response to the Government's higher education plans from the general public.

This campaign is clearly designed for political purposes, to provide misleading and meaningless assurances to prospective students and the broader public. The advertising campaign makes no mention of the core policy objectives of the Government's bill: to deregulate university fees and reduce Commonwealth funding to universities by 20 per cent.

For these reasons I contend that the campaign also contravenes point 19 of the Guidelines which states:

19. *Campaign materials must not try to foster a positive impression of a particular political party or promote party political interests.*

This campaign is clearly designed to provide false comfort to prospective students by misleading them as to the student/Commonwealth contribution ration and omitting vital information such as full fee deregulation and university funding cuts.

In light of the clear evidence that the Government's higher education campaign is not only party political, but is potentially seriously misleading young Australians and their families, I request that you investigate this matter at your earliest convenience.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Kim Carr', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Senator Kim Carr