

Reshape by all means but keep the focus on what matters

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By **ALISON BARNES**

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Federal Education Minister Dan Tehan has given two important speeches in the past week about his government's agenda for higher education in which he referred to reshaping the architecture of the sector.

So what is the shape of things to come for Australian higher education under a Morrison Coalition government?

The key to answering this is to ask what the government's policy agenda actually is. Is it the development of a coherent, sustainable policy framework or is it a series of responses to specific policy issues: some real, such as regional tertiary education, and others largely concocted, such as a crisis of free speech on university campuses?

There is, however, a deeper issue that underpins the minister's approach to his higher education policy agenda, and it relates to how the sector is viewed by the government.

Many of the minister's statements indicate that his government sees universities as an extension of the public service: he speaks of partnerships and better alignment between what our universities do and the government's broader economic policy objectives.

In the government's eyes, the role of universities is to produce graduates who are better prepared to work in highly dynamic environments and produce research that can lead to the development of new products and innovation, all of which are intended to drive jobs growth, business opportunities and productivity gains.

Universities already perform these tasks, but in the government's reshaped higher education architecture, will they be considered primarily as another tool of labour market and/or industry policy? If so, is the government's architecture in danger of strangling the goose (university autonomy) that has been laying the golden eggs?

Tehan must be commended for championing the cause of tertiary education access, participation and attainment in regional, rural and remote Australia. His real commitment to this cause, however, will be judged by his response to the policy actions recommended by the Napthine review, which included providing demand-driven funding for university places in regional areas and substantial improvements in financial support for regional students, including a new tertiary education access payment and greater flexibility in qualifying for independent status for youth allowance.

While issues around regional tertiary education are real and need urgent attention, we suggest that the government's insistence on addressing a perceived crisis of free speech on university campuses is a policy solution in search of a problem.

There may well be merit in asking students about freedom of expression on campus but surely it would be equally legitimate, and more important, to ask them about the cost of a university degree or the level of student income support or whether they feel safe on their campuses.

Likewise, why limit asking staff whether they are afraid to discuss certain topics on campus when there are far more important and pertinent questions that would go directly to the quality of education and research? Such questions might canvass the adequacy of government funding for teaching and research, the impact of increasing class sizes and heavier workloads, the effect on academic staff of insecure employment.

Indeed, the National Tertiary Education Union is more than happy to share the results of our 2019 State of the Uni survey, which addresses some of these issues. To date, there have been more than 16,000 survey responses from both NTEU members and non-members.

Institutional autonomy and academic freedom are the DNA of Australia's world-leading higher education system. The NTEU is supportive of the intent of the voluntary code on academic freedom proposed by former High Court chief justice Robert French, but we believe (as demonstrated by the Peter Ridd case at James Cook University and the Roz Ward case at La Trobe University) that the best way to protect individual staff members' rights to freedom of intellectual inquiry or academic freedom is by enshrining relevant provisions in collective agreements.

The recent emphasis on the potential dangers of foreign interference at our universities must not result in an overly cautious, heavy-handed policy response. Although there is no question that universities should try to do everything to protect their information from cyber-attack, the newly established University Foreign Interference Taskforce must ensure that any policies or safeguards that it recommends balance the need for national security against the need for academic freedom and institutional independence. It is critical that any new measures do not have a severely chilling effect on university research and collaboration with overseas partners, and that overseas students studying at our universities are respected and do not become collateral damage in international tussles.

Perhaps the biggest question about the overarching logic and coherence of the government's higher education policy is that, while acknowledging the significant contributions the sector has and will continue to make to our economic and social prosperity, the government has made no commitment to increasing the level of public investment in the sector. Performance-based funding is not sufficient to cover rising costs, let alone increased enrolments. If the minister genuinely wants to reshape the architecture of our universities then he must start with the fundamental issue of implementing a sustainable, needs-based public funding system for our universities.

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