

IRU STATEMENT 03/14

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Opportunities to fine tune an effective system

The Kemp Norton review of the higher education demand driven system, released today, confirms that the system is working well to give all Australians capable and interested in university education that opportunity. Recent data indicate that 48% of students are the first generation of their family to access university, with the level at all IRU members more than 50%.¹

The Report is a thoughtful exploration of the achievement to date and the challenges ahead to maintain a responsive, flexible higher education system backed with sustainable Government investment.

“The IRU has strongly supported the demand driven system and opposed calls to re-impose caps on places. We have pointed to the expansion of university places for important science, technology and health fields, all of which require high levels of Government funding to be viable” Professor Dewar, IRU Chair and Vice-Chancellor of La Trobe University said.

“The demand driven system has seen a small but clear increase in access to university from under represented groups. The Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program is an important element underpinning universities’ success in using additional places to improve participation”.

The IRU urges the Government to endorse the major conclusions of the Report, including the important statement that “we do not recommend measures leading to a reduction in total university income per student”. The coming budget will be a major test for the Government to respond constructively to the Report’s proposals while meeting its broad economic objectives.

The IRU urges the Government to adopt the recommendation to include pre-bachelor qualifications within the demand driven system. This will give universities and students the flexibility to choose between these useful foundation qualifications and immediate entry to bachelor study. It will also support IRU members to expand Diploma of language courses.

The report’s recommendations open up discussion on many important issues. These deserve full consideration, which the IRU will now do. On initial analysis:

- extending the system to all approved higher education providers is a useful medium term objective consistent with the Bradley Review. The Report rightly insists that any extension must be on the same terms as apply to universities where all undergraduate places are funded and regulated;
- more work is required to address the problem of the badly structured mix of funded and fee based places for post graduate qualifications. The IRU does not believe that the Report’s recommendation to restrict funded places to a small set of course areas plus an arbitrary set of legacy courses is a viable solution;
- the proposal for a 10% HELP loan fee has the appearance of an accounting trick more than a substantive improvement. The IRU urges the Government instead to consider the proposals in Mr Norton’s Grattan Institute report to improve repayment of HELP debts;
- removal of the 20% target for low SES enrolments could put at risk the drive to ensure capable people from all backgrounds are encouraged to enrol in higher education.

¹ Source: 2013 University Experience Survey



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