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Vision lays a solid foundation

Ross Milbourne | February 25, 2009

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THAT the Bradley review and its recommendations are eliciting such strong views should come as no surprise. Those involved in the sector are passionate about the value and contribution of universities to the national economic and social agenda. We rightly assert that our place is critical in contributing to a nation that is internationally competitive and grounded in a sense of a fair go for all.

The Australian Technology Network group of universities, with almost 200,000 students, has long advocated the need for reforms that go to the core of our universities' business: our students, and therefore teaching and learning, and our research capacity. This is why the review may have come as a shock to some who believe that they and their universities, by weight of tradition, should be the main beneficiaries of national reform. Instead, this review has centred the debate on the needs of students as a means of human capital development, a notion the ATN supports and indeed advocates. We strongly believe that, rather than unpicking Bradley, we must embrace the totality of the report.

This package delivers a long-term vision for the nation's higher education sector and it does so in three fundamental ways: it rightly argues that university education must be widely accessible; it offers a framework that will enable universities to play to their strengths, thus ensuring diversity but not at the expense of quality; and it offers a funding model that puts increased government contributions at the core rather than further student contributions.

Denise Bradley and her team have put forward a document that has as its foundation a vision for a strong national university system that will deliver the human capital we need for the future. It is a vision in which all eligible undergraduates have access to an equal quality education regardless of socioeconomic status or geographical location. And it is a vision that recognises that a demand-driven student entitlement system, with appropriate quality assurances in place, is necessary in an environment where we must, as Bradley herself points out, broaden the base of university qualifications to meet the skill needs of the future.

The Bradley review is strong on social inclusion. We also support the setting of participation targets around attainment of a university degree and participation of low socioeconomic status students. We certainly recognise that achieving these targets (40 per cent for attainment and 20 per cent for low SES students) will be a big ask. But we must have aspirational targets that will drive policy settings at government and university levels.

It is because the main role of public policy is to create a strong cohesive society that the Bradley review recommends Australia maintain and enhance a world-class university system. It rejects the notion of a chronically underfunded system, except for one or two highly funded universities allowing access to only 5 per cent of the undergraduate student population and thus continually reproducing a small, elite privileged class.

As a key player in the research and innovation system, the ATN also supports the recommendations of the Bradley and Cutler reviews in relation to research. The full funding of research will allow those universities contributing to research to concentrate and deepen research strengths. The recommendation of an increase in the value of the postgraduate stipend is also essential if we are to build the intellectual base needed to make Australia competitive in this century and to build a future university workforce capable of delivering the teaching needs necessary for the future accumulation of human capital.

The Bradley recommendations are underpinned by a funding model that, if implemented, will begin to redress the parlous state of university resourcing. We note the strong financial commitments previously announced by the federal Government and also recognise the fiscal limitations facing government in the economic environment. However, we argue that increased recurrent funding for each student will allow for staff and student intakes that will provide the greatest economic stimulus in the present environment and also bring long-term benefits to the economy. A strong commitment for the next two decades and

beyond is required from all stakeholders - government, industry, the professions and universities - to ensure we have a sustainable, world-class university system. The recommendations lay the groundwork for that vision.

Ross Milbourne is vice-chancellor of the University of Technology, Sydney and, as of this month, chairman of the Australian Technology Network.

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