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Coalition to cut funds for poor students

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THE Coalition has angered university leaders, principals and teacher unions by announcing plans to cut a further \$1.5 billion from education, including programs to help the poorest students to succeed at school and enter university.

The planned savings - contained in a document released late on Wednesday - come on top of more than \$3 billion of other cuts to education programs, including trades training centres and computers in schools, which the Coalition announced in May.

The Coalition says it will cut \$330 million from a program to improve results in the poorest schools, and \$227 million from funding to help universities enrol students from poor backgrounds.

It will also reduce funding for apprenticeship programs by \$954 million.

University of Melbourne vice-chancellor Glyn Davis told *The Age*: "I think the whole sector has been disappointed at this suggestion ... at a time when we really are trying to get more Australians into universities," he said. "I would hope that if elected, an Abbott government would look again at the equity provisions and see that there's benefit in helping people."

Victoria University vice-chancellor Elizabeth Harman said she was also concerned at the scrapping of programs that assisted students from areas such as Melbourne's west. "VU supports these programs on the grounds of social equity and social justice. Australia is in need of greater skills in the labour force and everybody deserves the chance of a good education and a good job," she said.

The Coalition also proposes to take more than \$1 billion from the Education Investment Fund - set up to fund buildings for universities and TAFE colleges - to pay for technical colleges, internet services and changes to youth allowance.

The Australian Technology Network of universities, which includes RMIT, said this was a "retrograde step" and that the fund should not be regarded as "a slush fund to be raided at the whim of a political party in an election campaign".

Australian Primary Principals Association president Leonie Trimper said principals would be "totally opposed" to the proposed cuts to support for poor schools. "If the Coalition aims to find some savings, they're now looking in the wrong place," she said.

Australian Education Union federal president Angelo Gavrielatos condemned the cuts. "It is abundantly clear that an Abbott government would result in less funding and less opportunity," he said.

"These cutbacks would impact disproportionately on government schools, and the government schools serving the poorest communities."

Also yesterday, Opposition Leader Tony Abbott announced a plan to allow university students to reduce their HECS debts by doing voluntary work. Under the scheme students can earn credits of \$10 an hour up to a total of \$2000 a year.

Mr Abbott's education spokesman Christopher Pyne last year described such a concept as "deeply flawed" and "middle class welfare", saying only students who lived with their parents would have time to volunteer.

The volunteering plan was backed by Swinburne vice-chancellor Ian Young and Monash University deputy vice-chancellor Adam Shoemaker.

But National Union of Students president Carla Drakeford said it would further disadvantage students from poorer backgrounds.

This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/national/coalition-to-cut-funds-for-poor-students-20100819-12s1z.html>