



Technology unis reach staff shortage crisis point

Rachel Lebihan

Technology universities are calling for sweeping reforms to the higher education funding system in order to tackle critical labour shortages and retain a skilled academic workforce at a time of heightened global competition.

The Australian Technology Network of universities outlined a litany of problems in a position paper put to federal Education Minister Julie Bishop and opposition education spokesman Stephen Smith in the past week.

The ATN is pushing for improvement in three main areas: targeted funding to meet skills shortages, infrastructure investment, and a reformed income support system to improve access.

High on its agenda is a commitment from government to increase the higher education endowment fund by \$5 billion from 2009, a higher education contribution scheme-debt repurchase or remission scheme — whereby the government agrees to forgive some HECs debt if students go into a particular profession — and the integration of the scholarship scheme and income support system.

But Ms Bishop was not swayed from her usual stance that the universities should be doing more to help themselves.

“Universities should focus on internal efficiencies to ensure they best utilise the significant public funding provided by the Australian taxpayer,” she said.

Ms Bishop added that universities should develop stronger links to business and alumni to boost philanthropy.

The ATN is calling for 500 extra postgraduate scholarships over two

“The US, Canada, the UK and Europe are facing the same issue.”

years and an increase in the postgraduate stipend from \$19,616 to a minimum of \$25,000 a year.

“Unless we increase them . . . we will not be able to attract people to go into postgraduate places,” ATN chairwoman and vice-chancellor of RMIT University, Margaret Gardner said. “The US, Canada, the UK and Europe are facing the same issue: How do we renew the academic workforce, so competition is before us.?”

The ATN also wants successive increases in government contributions to nominated fields by one-third over the next five years — to keep pace with the rate of

inflation.

Regarding income support, the ATN is seeking for university provided scholarships to be exempt from income tests.

“We’ve got a situation where we’ve assessed that a student needs to get a scholarship, and yet that is treated as income which stops them getting the full benefit of that scholarship — so often they’re worse off,” Ms Gardner said.

“Basically we feel that we’ve got a problem where people are giving scholarships with one hand and taking them away, or the impact of them away, by rules around social security with the income support system.”

Ms Bishop said student income support was under constant review. Any further reforms of student support would be considered in the budget context.

The opposition welcomed the release of the ATN paper, which it said highlighted the long-term decline in investment in maths, science and engineering, and the need for HECs remissions in these areas.

“Federal Labor has already committed to invest \$111 million to encourage young Australians to study and teach maths and science,” Mr Smith said.