

## MEDIA STATEMENT 11/2011

8 December 2011

### **IRU universities: a leading part of Australia's world class university system**

In his David Davies Memorial Lecture (7 December 2011) Christopher Pyne, Shadow Minister for Education, Apprenticeships and Training advances three main points to his theme of 'excellence in universities':

- that we should retain a focus on universities as places for education and creation of knowledge;
- that we should support a variety of ways in which universities achieve their missions; and
- Australia needs to concentrate on pushing a small set of its universities into the highest level of international university rankings.

The IRU strongly supports the reiteration of the importance of education to what it means to be a university. The IRU universities were created to ensure the opportunity to experience a university education was a real possibility for Australians living beyond the immediate range of the older universities. IRU universities are located in outer urban area and major provincial cities across Australia to do precisely that, connecting best practice in the world in different education and research spheres to supporting regional development. This ensures that the full value of a university is not restricted to older inner city enclaves.

The IRU universities sit within the broad range of Australian universities. We combine many areas of research intensive activity with serving a diverse set of students where those students live. We are the choice for many people whose families have not traditionally considered university education and are the leading universities for Indigenous students. Other universities across Australia have their own mix of characteristics, some distinct and others overlapping with the IRU. In terms of research the universities outside the Group of 8 achieved 45% of the internationally rated research outcomes from the Excellence in Research for Australia assessment.

The value of this is shown in the international rankings used to benchmark international standing.

There are at least 10,000 universities across the world<sup>1</sup> of which the international rankings identify the leading 400 to 500. Inclusion in those lists indicates a university of significance.

Only 400 universities can make the top 400, with the criteria variable and in some cases very sensitive to small changes in the data. Many countries are focussed at getting more universities into the lists as a sign that their universities are reaching world standards. As they succeed in raising the level of their university systems to match those of advanced countries the pressure to be among the top places increases.

Against this pressure Australia has increased the number of universities in the Academic Ranking of World Universities (AWRU), the leading ranking for research capability, from 13 in 2003 to 19 in the 2011. The other two lists include 21 and 23 Australian universities in 2011.

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.whed-online.com/>

The growth has not been at the expense of those ranked most highly. Our share of world top 100 universities on the AWRU has increased from two in 2003 to four in 2011. Governments of both sides have strengthening the overall research base Australia through funding the best research wherever it is found. This has fostered a stronger research focus throughout the sector with less complacency from those most highly ranked. That policy should continue as the basis for allocating research funding.

One half of Australia's universities are listed, with IRU members dominating those located outside of inner city areas. The only conclusion is that the Australian university system has breadth in the number of world leading universities plus many other universities keen to distinguish themselves.

To judge that achievement it is useful to consider the benchmark for a good outcome for Australia as part of a developing world university sector. Australia's percentage of world GDP is not much over one percent, its proportion of world population is even less at under half of one percent. On that basis to have more than 1 or 2 universities in the first 100 would be a major achievement, more than ten in the top 400 to 500 equally significant.

Hence while much of Mr Pyne's speech is a valuable contribution to discussion about our universities his simplistic target for 8 universities to be within the top 50 should not be a measure of the Australian university system. It simply does not do justice to the Australia's need for quality effective universities throughout our country.

The IRU welcomes discussion about ensuring an effective world quality university sector in Australia. We look forward to engaging further with the Coalition and the Government about this.

## Contact

**Conor King**

Executive Director IRU

**m:** 0434 601 691

**w:** [iru.edu.au](http://iru.edu.au)