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IRU STATEMENT 04/2015

2015 Budget Holding Pattern: The Long Road to Sustainable Reform

IRU supports the Government's determination to continue with its plan for major reform of higher education. This requires a major change in approach to develop a package that can gain the needed parliamentary support. This will not be possible for introduction in 2016.

The forward estimates provide a hypothetical base against which to construct a new approach. We need the Government to support the constructive discussions required to find a viable way ahead.

The budget is otherwise a holding pattern, waiting on the resolution of the reform impasse.

The need to resolve national research infrastructure drifts a further two years with the confirmation of annual funding for National Research Collaborative Infrastructure Strategy (NCRIS) to support current facilities through to 2017. The funding does not address the ever growing need for significant medium term certainty of investment that ends the annual frenzy to keep the facilities functioning.

Further the NCRIS funds have come from Sustainable Research Excellence (SRE), reducing university level capacity to support researchers. The Government is showing a worrying short term willingness to whittle away at research, retaining plans to reduce funding for research students and continuing Future Fellows via internal reallocation of ARC funds. Meanwhile the big issues remain: expanding research block grants, the fundamental basis for our research effort, and growth in the major competitive grant programs in line with the increasing number of valuable projects.

The Budget reveals little of the Government's plans to strengthen industry driven research. If anything the savings from the recently created Entrepreneurs Infrastructure Programme go in the opposite direction. IRU looks forward to Mr Macfarlane and Mr Pyne outlining a way ahead.

The budget also has many particular decisions affecting universities.

- The IRU leads universities in responding to the need to educate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians in the same way as all Australians and to build up understanding of Indigenous Knowledges across university activities. The Government's Indigenous Advancement Strategy (IAS) has so far been a step backwards, forcing universities to defend one complicated scheme to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students rather than reforming them. The decision not to renew Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Higher Education Advisory Council (ATSHEAC) is consistent with having a national approach as IAS - an approach that so far has not found a place for higher education, research and knowledges.
- The gain from the transformation of the Office of Learning and Teaching into a university led body is not clear, with problems of conflict of interest for which ever group oversees it, unless all universities together do so.

- HELP recovery from graduates living internationally is a useful tightening of responsibility to repay HELP when income is earned.
- The reduction in HEPP, for the preservation of Indigenous artefacts, links two unrelated needs. The future direction for HEPP is one important issue for resolution.
- Increases in charges to Aged Care regulator point to constant pressure for those regulated to pay for the benefit which has implications for universities and TEQSA.

END

For comment contact

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