

Letter to Australian Higher Education section

This has been a big week for Australian Higher Education: digesting the outcomes of the first national assessment of the quality of university research (ERA) and hearing Julia Gillard's casual announcement of the demise of the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC). One might read this as yet another sign that research is much more important than teaching and students.

Higher education created \$10.6 billion of export earnings last year. It is doing tolerably well in an increasingly competitive global market – not just for good students but also, as the academic workforce ages, for talented staff. It is a \$20 billion industry, taken as a whole. As the ERA data demonstrate, some of our research is up there with the best in the world. But much of it could be better.

By axing the ALTC, the federal government aims to save itself \$22 million a year – a drop in the infrastructure bucket when compared to the size of the national rebuild that it has been abolished to support. In reality, some of these costs will be transferred to individual universities. The more collaborative, inter-university activities will wither and there is no doubt that, across the sector, vulnerable students and talented teachers will suffer.

Another reading of this move against the ALTC is that the government is withdrawing its investment in the R&D necessary for the HE sector to innovate. At just 0.1% of gross revenues, this investment in educational innovation was already shabby. Scrapping the ALTC sends clear signals to two audiences. Parents of potential international students will understand that the Australian government has lost interest in funding quality enhancement. And those who see ALTC's projects as enabling successful wider participation in higher education will smell a government ratting on the Bradley reforms.

What then should be done? The simplest thing would be for the Greens and independents to back higher education – for economic and social reasons – and insist on continued funding for the ALTC. Beyond that, we might suggest some imaginative thinking about expanding investment in the kinds of R&D that can improve all Australian universities. This is not just a case of putting in more money. It needs a rethink about innovation across the full gamut of university activities, so that we can become better at research, teaching and community engagement. At present, the system is held together by over-worked, over-casualised, ageing staff who do not need their lives to be fractured between research, teaching and service commitments. Higher education must find smarter ways of working. Experimentation is risky and risks should be shared. There is a legitimate role for government in part-funding such innovation, just as it does with all other major areas of Australian industry.

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