Pyne backs down on cuts to tertiary education funding – for now

In essence, the original proposal tabled in May last year has unravelled and the Government will have to start all over again. This may not be a bad thing, because it will provide an opportunity to examine in more detail precisely what sort of higher education system we need and how best to fund it. The real tragedy is that the Government did not seem to realise the importance of the Australia’s science research programmes. And that is a real worry.

The Australian Academy of Science welcomed the back down
The Australian Academy of Science (AAS) was one of the first agencies to welcome the government’s back down. But while the decision to fund NCRIS for another year was welcomed, it is obvious that long term science research budgets are in a precarious position. For the moment the funding for 2015–16 will allow the continued operation of 27 facilities established under NCRIS. These support fundamental and applied research in everything from astronomy to deep-ocean measurement and medical research.

According to the AAS ‘These facilities are used by more than 35,000 researchers in Australia and overseas and directly employ 1,700 highly trained staff’. However, it is totally unsatisfactory for the funding of science research to be considered on an ad hoc year by year basis. There needs to be a long-term funding commitment for the essential infrastructure that gives researchers and industry in Australia the certainty they need. As the Chief Scientist Ian Chubb said earlier in the week, many of the brightest and best are applying for jobs oversees because of the uncertainty in Australia. This situation must change if Australia is to advance as a nation.

Government needs to prioritise funding allocations
Ironically in 2013 Australia’s median per capita wealth of US$219,500 was the highest in the world (Credit Suisse Research Institute, October 2013) and yet in 2014 the Government cut programmes and services as though we were going broke. We have the wealth, but we are not making the best use of it. We should be able to afford top quality health and education systems that do not discourage people from visiting their GP and provide educational opportunities for people from all socio-economic backgrounds. These goals do not appear to be at the centre of the government’s thinking.

A good dose of prioritisation would benefit government thinking, because no overall plan to provide funding has been released across the whole of government.

For example, why do we need eight submarines? Why are we spending more than 500 million/year to help one side of a Sunni/Shia civil war? How is it that we can find hundreds of millions of dollars to commemorate a battle we lost 100 years ago? Why do we have to cut our foreign aid budget? Why has the Commonwealth ceased to fund the sealing of water bores in the Great Artesian Basin? Has a cost benefit analysis been done on the money that has been and will be spent on spy agencies? And, why would we be funding a $250 million chaplaincy scheme when there is not enough legal aid money to support the very poor when they have to go to court? These are just some of the questions that need answering.

The government should sit down and work out what its priorities are, articulate how these will benefit the nation and how the programmes can best funded. Furthermore the results of the prioritisation should be presented so that the community can see the reasoning behind the decisions. To date the whole plan appears to be ‘we must fix the mess that Labor left us and get rid of the debt’. There is very little talk about what ‘we’ are trying to achieve, other than to balance the budget. If we are not careful we could finish up with a second rate manufacturing industry and having to rely more and more on the resource and agriculture industries. These are good stalwarts, but we should be doing more, otherwise we may become a nation of baristas and bartenders.