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Higher education package deserves support

The Chair of the Group of Eight universities Professor Alan Gilbert has congratulated the Minister for Education Dr Brendan Nelson on a higher education reform package that, on preliminary analysis, provides Australia with a once in a generation opportunity to create an internationally competitive higher education sector.

“There is no doubt that Dr Nelson’s vision for Australia’s higher education sector is the most radical and comprehensive package of reforms to be put to the sector in fifteen years,” Dr Gilbert said.

“There are major benefits in the package for students. The introduction of the Higher Education Loan Program (HELP) effectively abolishes up-front fees,” he said. “The Group of Eight also welcomes the lifting of the HECS repayment threshold to \$30,000, and recognises that fee flexibility introduced in the package provides universities for the first time with the option of adjusting fees upwards as well as downwards.

“While the package gives universities the discretion to increase their HECS fees above their current level, competition and supply and demand factors should work in favour of students.

“While the major benefits as usual tend to be in the out years, the foreshadowed injection of \$6.9billion in public funds over the next decade is an acceptance by Dr Nelson and his colleagues of the Commonwealth’s responsibility for building world class universities in Australia.

“The higher education sector must put the current and future governments on notice that no renegeing on this major ten year commitment will be acceptable.” Professor Gilbert said. “it would a tragedy if the Senate rejected this package out of hand. The Go8 urges Senators to ensure that the opportunity is not lost to establish a sustainable basis for a competitive Australian higher education system”.

“The Government is to be applauded for the degree of flexibility the package introduces. The Minister’s commitment to diversity has been reflected

in provisions giving individual universities a range of options about student numbers, discipline mix and fee levels that have not existed previously.

“The equity provisions in the package, however welcome, are unlikely to meet the objective of ensuring that no Australian qualified for higher education is precluded from university enrolment by virtue of socioeconomic disadvantage.

“For example, while the government is providing 36,000 scholarships targeted at equity groups, these scholarships are only dealing with the tip of the iceberg. The Group of Eight will be keen to pursue this matter to ensure that access to university is based on merit and not on financial capacity.

“At the very least we would want assurances that the beneficiaries of these scholarships do not have their access to other sources of government support such as Youth Allowance reduced.

“The package’s complexity means it will take us some time to properly assess its impact on our members and students and the Group of Eight will make more detailed comment in due course,” he said.
