Canberra hasn’t learned its lesson

Cutting funding for improving teaching is a false economy

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Any savings from the anticipated loss of the Office for Learning and Teaching are insignificant. The complete abdication by the federal government, however, from any real interest — through funding, leadership or strategic engagement — in learning and teaching in higher education will be a significant and deeply disappointing decision.

During the past five years both major political parties have been complicit in the gradual erosion of Australia’s position as an international leader in its commitment to learning and teaching in higher education.

Any budget decision to remove the remaining morsel of funding would be the final, definitive yet inevitable move.

The OLT was already a greatly weakened entity compared with its predecessor, the Australian Learning and Teaching Council. The ALTC was shut down somewhat disingenuously by the Gillard government as a Queensland flood-saving, with the OLT established in its place. The OLT had little capacity for strategic leadership on learning and teaching issues and was reduced to running grants administration as a tiny branch of the federal Department of Education, isolated from the rest of the higher education division. Christopher Pyne’s decision last May that it morph yet again and become the National Institute for Learning and Teaching was never going to be an attractive proposition for any university that realistically weighed up its prospects for continuity and success.

The loss of funding for the OLT matters because it represents the end of direct engagement by the federal government in the learning and teaching space. Across almost two decades there has been a symbolic and financial commitment to the proposition that the student learning experience should be at the heart of the mission for every university and that teaching was a fundamental factor in the quality of that learning experience. The OLT’s demise matters because the funding drivers in the higher education sector have always been skewed to encourage every university to focus on research to the detriment of learning and teaching.

It is timely to reflect on why the ALTC and its predecessor, the Carrick Institute, were created. The government’s commitment dated back to the National Priority Reserve Fund in the early 1990s, and was followed by a succession of sector-led committees.

Reforms by Brendan Nelson in 2003 included funding for a new entity that would be independent from the federal Education Department and administer enough funding to act as a real incentive for universities to focus on teaching and learning. No one would dispute that funding drives behaviour. Yet research has had the only financial incentives. The goal was for the money for this new entity to contribute to a shift in that balance and encourage universities to see the importance of their primary mission to students.

The policy rationale was for the creation of a national centre that could lead universities in their commitment to improving learning outcomes. It was to be a hub that belonged to no one university or alliance but was to be an honest broker of considerable funding and a focus for national and international interest. Its staff would be able to lead, provoke and support learning and teaching development across the university sector in a way that an increasingly mobile bureaucracy, with largely generalist skills and limited networks and expertise in the sector, could not.

An important priority was the support of collegial approaches to development of learning and teaching. While individuals were funded and rewarded, so were efforts to work across universities in co-operative ventures that enriched the quality of the broader system. Through its funding, the federal government provided a symbolic focus that reinforced that teaching and learning in universities did matter. The likely abdication of federal involvement in providing the carrot for improving learning and teaching in universities is in sharp relief to the rhetoric of successive governments that rant about the importance and centrality of graduate outcomes and quality.

Budget night next Tuesday is likely to produce several policy outcomes for the higher education sector but none will be sadder or more damaging than the loss of funding and symbolic support for innovative ideas and excellence in learning and teaching.

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