



# Uni cuts put our skills and prosperity at risk

**Dawn Freshwater**



**T**echnology is rapidly changing the way we live and work, impacting every aspect of our lives. Careers that were once considered secure, are being disrupted by automation and robotics, amongst other forces. Unsurprisingly there is a societal imperative that can be captured in the question: how do we prepare tomorrow's workforce, when research suggests that 65 per cent of today's schoolchildren will eventually be employed in careers that do not yet exist?

As one of the world's top 100 universities, we have the privilege and challenge of providing many of WA's best and brightest school leavers and the workforce with the knowledge and skills to face the future with optimism and ambition. The Federal Government's proposed higher education reforms put this at risk.

Our political leaders are correct when they say that science and innovation will drive future jobs and economic growth, and that investment in ideas, skills, know-how and innovation is critical for Australia's future success and prosperity.

This requires an education system, from early learning, primary and high school, through to our universities, which nurtures and supports our children to realise their full potential.

And importantly, to become active participants in the ongoing social transformation of our communities and their futures.

Despite this, at a time when knowledge and innovation are being

demanding from the current and future workforce, the Government wants to make it harder and more expensive for students to get ahead.

The Government is pushing for students to pay considerably more to study at university. Alongside this they plan another round of funding cuts on Australian universities, totalling \$2.8 billion over the next four years.

The Government's proposals will see WA's students paying more for their education — a fee increase of 7.5 per cent. Many permanent residents who are not citizens will be even worse off, as they will be required to pay the full cost of their degree.

As a society it is important that we view the cost of higher education in context — particularly during a time of ongoing public discussion about, for example, housing affordability for the next generation and increasing energy prices.

We must ask ourselves how increasing costs for higher education will interact with other escalating cost of living expenses.

Those graduates who struggle to find a high-paying job in our temporarily depressed State economy will also pay more — the Government plans to reduce the earning threshold at which graduates have to make repayments from \$52,000 to \$42,000.

Everyone in WA deserves to attend a world-renowned university, but if the Federal Government has its way, I fear they will be closing the door on this opportunity for many of our future leaders, investors and entrepreneurs, upon which this State depends to remain internationally competitive.

In 2012 UWA introduced an imaginative new course structure, which delivers more choice, flexibility and a better experience for our



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students through our broad undergraduate degrees and specialised and innovative postgraduate degrees for engineering, medicine, dentistry, law, teaching and other professions.

As a result UWA has exceptional retention and completion rates, offering graduates strong employment outcomes and graduate salaries.

On behalf of its students, the Australian university sector has been saying for years that we need policy certainty and stability, to be funded appropriately, and Australia needs further investment in research and research infrastructure.

The university sector does not simply exist to teach students; we seek to frame the future, to help our community to manage the pace of change, to learn to deal with uncertainty, and to solve problems and anticipate the problems and solutions of the future.

We are not advocating for the current model, indeed we support the goal of providing more choice and flexibility to students, but we believe there are better ways to do it, without adding more complexity and bureaucracy. We have before us the opportunity to bravely and boldly design the ideal higher education system for the future.

As a nation we must front up to these challenges if we are to deliver on the vision that each generation strives to improve on the last.

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