

# Unis say 18 should be the new 25

Harriet Alexander  
Higher Education Reporter

UNIVERSITIES have warned the Federal Government not to squander its chance to overhaul higher education, saying the system is at a "tipping point", with a dangerous reliance on international students.

Universities Australia, which represents the nation's 38 universities, said their future was uncertain because market conditions could reduce philanthropic and

investment returns, the academic workforce was ageing, they relied on international students and they expected a fall in the school-leaving population.

"Universities in Australia have reached a tipping point," it said in a submission. "Urgent remedial action is therefore needed or we will fall far behind the countries in our region."

The submission recommended devoting 2 per cent of GDP to higher education by 2015, removing the income assessment from

scholarships and lowering the age of independence from 25 to 18 so younger students could receive income support.

The University of NSW vice-chancellor, Fred Hilmer, said the system was geared towards growth at all costs and universities had more incentive to increase students in lucrative disciplines such as business or law, where the HECS was highest, than areas with genuine skills shortages, such as engineering.

A "perverse" incentives system

meant funds were available for new buildings but not to fix old ones, and grants for research were not accompanied by the laboratories needed to conduct it.

"There are ticking time bombs that, if we don't deal with them, are going to make it... a seriously impaired system," Professor Hilmer said in a video on the UNSW website.

"The stability of our funding base has changed dramatically and we are now very like the mining industry where, if the

exchange rate changes, the ability of our universities to attract the foreign students that are absolutely vital is going to be severely affected. So what we're trying to do is fund long-term, enduring institutions on the basis of a short-term, volatile market."

Submissions to the higher education review being conducted by a former University of South Australia vice-chancellor, Professor Denise Bradley, closed yesterday.

The National Union of Students called on the Government to cut

HECS debts for students with low socio-economic status (SES) and to lower the age of independence initially to 21 and later to 18.

Students cannot receive income support until they are 25 unless they meet strict criteria.

"Both sides of politics... have shown that they're willing to intervene and strategically reduce HECS in terms of national priorities and we're saying low SES participation should be a priority," the union's president, Angus McFarland, said.

The submission from the University of Technology, Sydney said the quality of teaching and learning in Australian universities was going backwards compared with the rest of the world and Government funding needed to be set at a competitive level.

The University of Western Sydney called for a new student income support system that took into account the costs of studying, rent, transport and living as well as increased subsidies for indigenous students.

## BHP relents on longwall mining

Ben Cubby  
Environment Reporter

BHP Billiton has decided to restrict its search for coal under some of Australia's richest farming country, at Carroona, near Gunnedah, but farmers are continuing a 20-day blockade against the mining giant.

In a shareholders' report to be published today, the company says environmental concerns are the main reason for narrowing its search to ridge country surrounding the Liverpool Plains.

The news is scant comfort to the farmers whose land is still being targeted for coal mining against their will.

"With the effect of the subsidence from longwall coal mining, it would probably make farming as we know it impossible within 10 years," said Tim Duddy, a landholder whose family has farmed in the district for six generations.

Mr Duddy's family and neighbours have maintained a blockade against BHP Billiton prospectors since July 18. They say that drilling bore holes hundreds of metres into the earth could contaminate the underground aquifers that make the region's alluvial soil unusually rich.

Half of Mr Duddy's farm is in the area slated for further exploration, and his family faces the prospect of coal mine infrastructure within a few hundred metres of their house. Up to 300 farmers have joined the blockade.

BHP Billiton paid the State Government about \$100 million two years ago for the right to search for coal and will make a decision on whether to proceed with large-scale mining by 2011.

"While there are significant coal deposits under the floodplain, due to the sensitivity of the floodplain and associated agriculture to subsidence, these coal deposits cannot be efficiently extracted with current longwall technology," the general manager of BHP Billiton's Carroona coal project, Stephen David, said.

"Exploration drilling to date, and other survey work, suggests the surface topography and land use on the ridge country have potential to co-exist with some level of subsidence associated with longwall mining."

Longwall mining involves carving out huge horizontal slabs of coal underground and can cause widespread surface damage.

The Government is considering another application for a coal exploration licence on the Liverpool Plains. It has reportedly received a bid of \$600 million from the China Shenhua Energy Company for the licence, as well as bids from BHP Billiton, Xstrata and other mining companies.

## Dance loses vital, charming leader

Valerie Lawson

SHE spent her life in dance, first as a teenager with the Ballets Russes, then as a choreographer, director, teacher and coach.

Valrene Tweedie, who died on Monday in Sydney, was a vital part of the dance community until May when she was due to take part in a Ballets Russes symposium in Adelaide.

The day she was due to travel, Tweedie collapsed and, some weeks later, was admitted to the Sacred Heart Hospice in Darlinghurst, where she died of cancer aged 83.

Tweedie, who danced as Irina Lavrova, was the first Australian to

*Nutcracker* for the Australian Ballet. She appeared in revivals of the work which told the story of how ballet in Australia developed through the Ballets Russes tours.

Her career began in 1940, two weeks before her 15th birthday, when she and four other girls auditioned in Sydney for the third Ballets Russes company to visit Australia, called the Original Ballet Russe. The audition was taken by the principal dancer of the Ballets Russes, David Lichine, and the impresario who brought the three Ballets Russes troupes to Australia, Colonel Wassily de Basil.

Without telling Tweedie's mother, de Basil released a statement to the press announcing that Tweedie was the only successful candidate and she would join his company on its tour to the US. Her mother initially objected, but Tweedie was determined and left Australia in 1940 to dance first in the US and South America, and then in Cuba.

Tweedie returned to Australia in 1952 and became the artistic director of the National Theatre Ballet.

For many years, Tweedie ran a ballet school near Central Station in Sydney, where hundreds of young dancers took class - among them, briefly, Murphy.

Tweedie said that when Murphy first asked her to dance Clara in *The Nutcracker* she was "scared to death".

But once into the season, she found performing again "wonderful".

*The Nutcracker*, she said, was "really close to my heart as a story".

David McAllister, the artistic director of the Australian Ballet, said yesterday, "We have lost an important figure in our dance community and a wonderfully beautiful and charming lady."



Poise and elegance... the ballerina who danced with the Ballets Russes, Valrene Tweedie, in her days as a dance student.



Her career began just before her 15th birthday... Tweedie is pictured on the right.



"A wonderfully beautiful and charming lady"... Tweedie at home in Double Bay.

### 'We have lost an important figure in our dance community.'

DAVID MCALLISTER, artistic director, Australian Ballet

join the Ballets Russes, which toured the nation in the 1930s.

She danced on stage for the last time seven years ago in Stephen Baynes's ballet, *Requiem*, representing a woman who had reached serenity as she approached death.

In her 70s Tweedie coached the Australian Ballet, judged competitions, taught as a freelance teacher and even attended classes herself.

The choreographer Graeme Murphy said, "She was part of the dance world until the end. She had a real passion to know who was doing what."

Murphy cast her as the ageing former ballerina, Clara the Elder, in the 1992 premiere season of his

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### Lyne House of Representatives by-election

# Get a move on Update your enrolment now

There will be a by-election in the federal electoral Division of Lyne on Saturday 6 September 2008.

The deadline for enrolling for the first time or getting back on the electoral roll has now passed.

If you are on the roll and need to update your address details there's still time but you'll have to get a move on. Complete an enrolment form and return it to the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) with your updated details by **8pm 8 August 2008** or you'll miss out on your vote.

Enrolling and voting in the by-election is compulsory for all Australian citizens aged 18 years and over who reside in the federal electoral Division of Lyne.

Check now if your enrolment details are current by visiting [www.aec.gov.au](http://www.aec.gov.au) any AEC office or call 13 23 26.

For an enrolment form visit [www.aec.gov.au](http://www.aec.gov.au) any Australia Post office, AEC office or call 13 23 26. Enrolment forms are also available at any Medicare office or Centrelink office.

If you are on the electoral roll but have moved to a new address, you must complete a new enrolment form and return it to the AEC by **8pm Friday 8 August 2008**.

**Division of Lyne House of Representatives by-election, Saturday 6 September 2008**



LYNE

Authorised by Tom Rogers, Roden Cutler House, 24 Campbell St, Haymarket NSW

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### Division of Lyne House of Representatives by-election

I have received a writ issued by The Hon. Harry Jenkins MP, Speaker of the House of Representatives for the election of a member of the House of Representatives for the electoral Division of Lyne in New South Wales. The following dates have been fixed for the purpose of the by-election:

Close of rolls: Friday 8 August 2008 at 8.00pm  
Close of nominations: Thursday 14 August 2008 at 12 noon  
Polling: Saturday 6 September 2008  
Return of the writ: on or before Wednesday 12 November 2008

Nominations of candidates for the Division of Lyne House of Representatives by-election must be received by the Divisional Returning Officer for Lyne at Shop 4, Manning Arcade, 20 Manning Street, Taree, before 12 noon on Thursday 14 August 2008. The sum of \$500 in cash or a cheque drawn by a bank or other financial institution on itself must be deposited with the Divisional Returning Officer at the time of the delivery of the nomination.

Ian Campbell, Electoral Commissioner  
Monday 4 August 2008

**Division of Lyne House of Representatives by-election, Saturday 6 September 2008**



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## Oakeshott cuts both ways for Nats

Mark Davis  
and Alexandra Smith

THE independent state MP Robert Oakeshott's decision to seek a switch to federal politics has presented the Nationals with a headache at the federal level but a chance to increase their representation in State Parliament.

Mr Oakeshott announced yesterday that he would stand as an independent candidate in next month's by-election for the federal seat of Lyne, which is being vacated by the former Nationals federal leader Mark Vaile.

If elected, he would pursue issues including locals' desire for more doctors and dentists, funding for Pacific Highway roadworks and "maximum dollars for our region" from the Federal Government's new infrastructure fund.

"The Oakeshott indepen-



Robert Oakeshott... wants to move to federal politics.

dent team recognises we will be outspent by other campaigns by at least 20 to one," he said.

"However, we believe in our community, we have a proven track record of 12 years in State Parliament of delivering for our community and we are excited and enthusiastic about the opportunity that is before us."

The Nationals federal leader, Warren Truss, accused Mr Oakeshott of helping Labor, which will not stand in Lyne.

"No doubt he will have considerable support from Labor and other forces in his campaign," Mr Truss said.

Mr Oakeshott secured 80 per cent of the two-party preferred vote last year in the state seat of Port Macquarie, which makes him the favourite to win the by-election, on September 6.

That would hurt the Nationals federally, keeping their numbers in the House of Representatives at nine (after Mr Vaile's departure) and creating more pressure for a Queensland-style merger with the Liberal Party.

But Mr Oakeshott's decision means the Nationals are almost certain to secure another seat in State Parlia-

ment. Their candidate for Port Macquarie is likely to be Leslie Williams, a nurse who stood against Mr Oakeshott last year.

Labor and the Liberals are both unlikely to contest the state seat. A Nationals win would raise the coalition to 36 seats in the lower house - 14 Nationals and 22 Liberals.

The Premier, Morris Iemma, said Labor should not waste its time or money contesting a candidate in Port Macquarie. "It's a National Party stronghold... the last time we ran the seat I think the vote was 26 per cent."

A date has not been set for the state by-election because Mr Oakeshott has not yet resigned from his state seat.

It is unlikely to be before October 18 because of the Lyne by-election, the local government elections and school holidays.

## Martian soil may not have life after all

Richard Macey

WEEKS after being billed as fit for growing asparagus, it now seems the red soil of Mars may not be quite so friendly after all.

After days of growing speculation about an important discovery, NASA finally revealed a secret yesterday.

Its Phoenix lander, which touched down in May, has found not the chemistry of life, but perchlorate - a toxic, highly corrosive compound used in household cleaners, explosives and rocket fuel that can destroy organic matter.

NASA's announcement halted rumours triggered when the journal *Aviation*

Week reported that the White House had been alerted about a find concerning the "potential for life" on Mars.

One Australian scientist speculated that the discovery may have involved chemistry found in waste excreted by life.

In June Phoenix scientists announced that initial tests by one instrument revealed Martian dirt was "the type of soil you'd probably have in your backyard" and "you may be able to grow asparagus" in it.

But the mission's chief scientist, Peter Smith, yesterday said a second instrument "has revealed un-Earthlike aspects of the soil chemistry". "This is surprising," Dr

Smith said. His team was checking to ensure the perchlorate was not contaminating accidentally carried to Mars by Phoenix.

Jon Clarke, a Mars Society Australia geologist, conceded his punt that Phoenix may have detected some by-product of life was wrong.

But although perchlorate was "a very toxic compound, like bleach", its discovery did not rule out Martian life.

"It just depends how much is there," he said. Chile's Atacama Desert was one of the few places on Earth where it formed naturally, Dr Clarke said. "It is an intensely dry place. It even looks like Mars." But with water from

melting snow "people have been growing crops in the Atacama Desert. They have grown beans and sweet corn, all sorts of stuff. I have been there and eaten it."

Dr Clarke said perchlorate's discovery could solve a 32-year-old Martian mystery.

In 1976 NASA's two Viking landers reported evidence of life. When the landers added water and nutrients to soil samples they gave off tell-tale gasses typically excreted by well-fed microbes. But when no trace of carbon was detected, scientists presumed the nutrients had merely reacted with some unknown, lifeless chemistry. That chemistry may be perchlorate.