



A bonus the nation needs

For Australia to compete against the large industrial nations, we must focus on improving access to higher education, argues **Peter Lee**

In the thick of this recession it is easy to think only in the moment, but it is the job of leaders to examine where we have been and focus on a brighter future.

In her recent review of Australian higher education, Professor Denise Bradley has rightly identified that for Australia to continue to sustain a growing and successful economy, it will be vital to improve the education of its population. If you look at the demography of the nation, a bubble of baby boomers and a steady decline in the following generations, it is clear it will not be enough to continue to capture the same numbers of school leavers and encourage them on to university. We need to do better.

In South Australia only about 22 per cent of 25 to 34-year-olds have obtained a qualification to bachelor's degree level or above – a full 10 percentage points below the national average and just more than half of the percentage recommended as a 2020 target in the Bradley Review to build Australia's place in the world as an intellectually competitive nation.

Australia currently ranks ninth in the OECD on this measure, a move two positions down from a decade ago and a disturbing decline.

For some time now, as a nation we have relied on a whole lot of big-ticket resources, mainly agriculture and mining, but what we have neglected is one of our most significant ones – human resources.

UniSA's move to revamp its bonus points scheme is an important step in developing a culture of participation and achievement for higher education in South Australia and should be seen as such.

The scheme will acknowledge

the importance of English across all degree programs and will reward students for their skills in this vital area. What is novel about the new scheme is that we will also reward students for expertise in the fields that they choose to pursue as a career. It also recognises study in given subjects without restricting student choice. So a student studying art in Year 12 will earn bonus points to help them to stake their place in an arts-based degree program such as interior architecture or industrial

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design. This does not replace the need to meet a university standard Tertiary Entrance Ranking, and far from dumbing down the path to university, it is designed to encourage students' passions and expertise and give them incentives to carry those on into higher learning. It rewards their achievements and their dreams.

It is also backed up by convincing research.

A range of reports investigating the role of the TER commissioned by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations show that successful transition to university is enhanced when a student's discipline-specific knowledge gained in Year 12 can be applied in their university studies. This success relates to their motivation for study, program preferences and academic preparedness. The other important strategy will be to do

more in partnership with schools and communities to encourage students from low socio-economic backgrounds to continue their education – stay longer at school, undertake training or apprenticeships, or carry on to university.

There is no better time to plant these seeds.

The silver lining of this recession is that there is not the same amount of high-paid unskilled work available out there to lure young people into pursuing quick dollars rather than long-term expertise.

The time is right to invest in education.

Early research undertaken at UniSA has shown that big differences in life circumstances are actually ironed out at university. It is just more proof of the power of education to change lives and the important responsibility universities carry in delivering a smarter population to the nation across the economic divide.

Modifying notions of educational survival of the fittest and developing a stronger culture of support for students is not about lowering standards and should not be seen or practised as such.

We need to build the kind of education environment that rewards intellectual excellence, supports improvement and goal-setting and, most of all, starts to redress the very real impacts of poverty and remote location on the whole pool of clever kids that these factors serve to disadvantage. If we are to meet the challenges of the future in a highly competitive international environment, Australian universities need to get on the front foot in helping future generations of students to both imagine and realise their potential.

■ *Professor Peter Lee is the Deputy Vice-Chancellor of the University of South Australia.*