



THE CONVERSATION

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The education budget report card: 'F' for Fail

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Cuts to funding in education and research shows a lack of planning for the future. from www.shutterstock.com.au, CC BY-SA

Budget: The Longer View. The dust has begun to settle on Tuesday's federal budget – and some key issues and themes are emerging. What are they? This long-read essay is part of a special package intended to answer that question.

You could be forgiven for thinking that education was left largely untouched in Tuesday's federal budget. In Joe Hockey's [speech](#), education was only mentioned twice and simply in terms of higher education as a valuable service export.

The focus was almost entirely on child care, small business and infrastructure. This was contrasted with last night's budget [reply](#) by Bill Shorten, where the emphasis was on a future defined by science, technology, education and innovation.

Christopher Pyne's absence from the post-budget headlines is notable, given the central placement of his twice-failed higher education reform agenda in last year's budget.

It is only when digging into the Department of Education and Training's [budget statements](#) that the finer details on education become clear.

And the picture overall is not a particularly good one for the future of education in Australia.

In brief: schools are facing a A\$30 billion funding black hole from 2018; there is continued uncertainty for current and future university students; and there will be far-reaching impacts of further broad cuts to research spending and infrastructure.

What does the budget mean for early education?

There are some positive aspects in the families package, a centrepiece of the budget and widely covered in the media over the past couple of weeks.

The package includes a continued commitment to universal access to early childhood education, by providing 600 hours of **preschool education** for all children in the year before full-time school, with a further focus on supporting vulnerable and disadvantaged children.

While the current program is fully funded until the end of 2017, it is unclear what will happen after this.



Childcare funding shouldn't come at the expense of other funding to young families from www.shutterstock.com
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young families.

While it might be a little glib to reference Whitney Houston, our children really are the future, and it serves us all to provide them with the best start in life. There is much more that can be done.

What does the budget mean for school education?

Prior to the 2013 election, Tony Abbott declared the coalition was on a **unity ticket** with Labor for school funding. While the government has since committed to increasing school funding in line with indexation, such a move completely ignores the real growth of costs in school education.

As a result, this has meant that schools are now facing a A\$30 billion shortfall in funding from 2018. Unfortunately, this year's budget really just **tinkers** around the edges and provides little certainty for parents and their children, particularly students attending public schools in disadvantaged areas.

One such tinkering is the announcement to provide A\$16.9 million to the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership in a move to improve **teacher quality**. The irony of course is that the same institute received a A\$19.9 million cut in the 2014 budget.

Further tinkering can be seen in: the highly controversial school chaplaincy program

One concern is that it appears the child care package is linked to budget cuts included in last year's budget, including cuts to the family tax benefit, as well as the controversial changes proposed this week to paid parental leave.

Increased support for child care and early childhood education are certainly welcome, yet it should not be for the sake of coercing parents into the workforce or reducing other support for

that continues to be funded; the Direct Instruction roll-out in remote Indigenous primary schools and the generous support for private boarding schools who take Indigenous boarders; as well as the ongoing support for Independent Public Schools.



The money given to teacher education this year is less than the cut it faced last year from www.shutterstock.com
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While it might look striking for the government to say they have a **Students First** policy platform that focuses on teacher quality, school autonomy, strengthening the curriculum and parental engagement, you've got to put your money where your mouth is.

Without the funding to support equitable access to high quality education outcomes for all students, regardless of their backgrounds, then no amount of politics is going to make any difference.

What does the budget mean for higher education?

There were few surprises apart from a commitment to further uncertainty for the sector. There was zero mention on budget night about the future of fee deregulation, but Pyne has previously made it clear he intends to go for a third round.

The National Collaborative Research Infrastructure funding of A\$150 million has been saved from the chopping block for a year. This is the one that Pyne "fixed". Yet, it has come at the cost of A\$150 million to the Sustainable Research Excellence grants. These are a critical component of the research landscape in Australia.

Coupled with last year's cuts to the CSIRO and the "efficiency dividends" applied across the sector, the real value of investment in research and innovation diminishes year after year.



Fee deregulation is up for round three in parliament from www.shutterstock.com

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This sends troubling and mixed messages about the government's support for research. It is important to develop and sustain Australia's scientific research and capacity for innovation. Taking with one hand to give with another is not good policy.

As part of a broader A\$131 million cut to the Department of Education and Training, the Office of Learning and Teaching will be moved to a university-based institute and

provided with A\$28 million to promote excellence in learning and teaching in higher education.

Again, there is tinkering around the edges in higher education, including proposed cuts to the Cooperative Research Centres, which support research commercialisation and engage

research institutions with industry, alongside the removal of funding for The Conversation, which provides a platform for academics to share research and engage in public scholarship.

There are also plans to toughen compliance measures for vocational providers as well as a costly and complex exercise in pursuing student loan payments from Australians living overseas.

Perhaps the most controversial measure is the A\$4 million promised to Bjorn Lomborg's "Consensus Centre" climate change think tank. Originally meant to be hosted by the University of Western Australia, the centre is currently homeless after the Vice-Chancellor publicly backed away from involvement in the centre.

Time will tell how many of these measures play out, but if the past year's antics are anything to go by, we have more to come from Pyne's vision of higher education reform.

In the meantime, the ongoing cuts to research investment will have long term consequences for a country that prides itself on being at the cutting edge of innovation and scientific contribution.

Given the state of uncertainty that universities and students have faced since May 2014, it seems unlikely that there will be any positive change in the near future. This is not an ideal context for continuing to grow and support a sector that provides enormous benefits to Australia, economically, socially and culturally.

Reform requires vision

The budget is an opportunity to present a narrative to the Australian people about what kind of society we aspire to be.

To take this opportunity, governments need to be willing to step outside the election cycle, which breeds short-term thinking and look to the broader needs of the country in the coming years.

Yet any real reform requires vision that goes well beyond our current politics. It is for these reasons that this year, the government gets an "F" for Fail on its report card for education.