

Uni chiefs say full fees unnecessary

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Full fee paying places at universities will be unnecessary if a proposal to overhaul the higher education system is adopted, the lobby group which represents elite universities says.

The "Group of Eight Universities" have released a discussion paper on the future of higher education which proposes a new scholarship scheme.

Under the G8 plan, the Productivity Commission would determine the cost of providing particular university courses and institutions would be able to charge students up to 125 per cent of this cost.

Scholarships would cover the Productivity Commission-determined course costs and students would be able to take out HECS-style loans to cover the balance of their fees.

G8 chair Glyn Davis, of the University of Melbourne, on Wednesday said the new system would enable universities to meet student demand for particular courses without having to resort to charging full fees.

"If universities could respond to demand, they wouldn't need full fee paying places, and people moreover wouldn't be prepared to take them because they would have choices they currently don't have," Prof Davis told the National Press Club.

The G8 has also called for the establishment of a new Australian Tertiary Education Commission to plan and regulate post-school education and for new funding arrangements for research programs at universities.

National Union of Students president Michael Nguyen welcomed the G8's proposal for a new scholarship scheme but said universities should not be permitted to charge more than 100 per cent of the determined course cost.

He said the 25 per cent margin for higher fees could be used by prestigious universities as a form of "sandstone tax" on students.

"If the 25 per cent wasn't there, the system would be a lot fairer and probably would lead to a situation where students could have free education which is more equitable than the current situation," Mr Nguyen said.

Federal Education Minister Julie Bishop said the government would consider the G8 discussion paper but would not adopt policies which benefited large universities at the expense of regional institutions.

"A number of the initiatives would clearly benefit the group of eight universities, but as the federal education minister I am concerned to ensure that all universities across Australia have the opportunity to emerge as world class institutions," Ms Bishop said.

"And I wouldn't want to see any initiatives which would disadvantage some of our significant universities in regional areas or indeed smaller universities in metropolitan areas."

Opposition education spokesman Stephen Smith said Labor would consider the proposals in the discussion paper and welcomed the G8's call for the government to make greater use of scholarships in higher education.

"I believe the commonwealth has significantly under utilised the use of scholarships in recent times," Mr Smith said.

The group of eight comprises The University of Adelaide, The Australian National University, The University of Melbourne, Monash University, the University of NSW, The University of Queensland, The University of Sydney and the University of Western Australia.