

**University Colleges Australia Conference 2012**

**Hyatt Hotel Canberra**

**The Hon. Sharon Bird, Parliamentary Secretary for Higher Education and Skills**

**Introductory Speech**

**Acknowledgements**

Thank you, Barbara Green, President of the UCA, for your warm welcome, and thank you Dr Dutton for the invitation to address your conference today.

**Introductory Remarks**

The institutions your association represents make a very valuable contribution to the quality of the student experience at our universities. Residential life on campus has been a formative part of the university experience for generations of Australian students. It is apparent from the [ACER report](http://uca.101media.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/acer_ausse_researchbriefing.pdf) on the Australasian Student Survey that, in general, students who live on campus tend to feel more engaged, better supported and have a better general development than their off-campus peers.

The rich collegiate tradition at your institutions provides that sense of community and support that is also so critical for resident students who hail from remote areas, Indigenous communities, low socioeconomic (SES) backgrounds or overseas. University student residences are also an important part of the equation in which taking an active part in courses and engaging with tutors and lecturers ‘equals’ completion of studies. On behalf of the Government, thank you for your valuable contribution.

**Student numbers are up**

In this landmark year for higher education, there has been unprecedented demand on the back of the Government’s drive to make university more accessible. Student numbers are up. Growth is not confined to undergraduate places. Government funded postgraduate research student numbers are up too.

Universities are now open to more Australians than ever before, an exciting development that will have far-reaching impact on the lives of many, some of whom will be the first in their family to enter university. It is very gratifying to see that under the new demand driven system there is a growth in applications from previously under-represented groups – students from low socioeconomic (SES) backgrounds, regional and remote areas, and Indigenous students. Growth in the numbers of domestic undergraduate applicants from low SES backgrounds has been particularly marked – 18.9% higher in 2012 compared to 2009. Offers to undergraduate applicants from regional and remote areas have also increased. It was particularly pleasing to see that growth in the percentage of offers to Indigenous applicants (37.9%) was more than double that recorded for non-Indigenous applicants (16%). Now that we’ve encouraged all these new students to enter university, we want to see them stay, finish their degrees and then enter the workforce, capitalising on their learning and skills.

**Matters of quality**

Australian universities continue to be recognised as among the world’s best and we are determined not to let this reputation slip. With the increased pressure on universities from growing enrolments, we are taking steps to ensure that Australia continues to deliver world class higher education. In January of this year, the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) took on a regulatory function in addition to its quality assurance role. As an independent body, it has the power to regulate university and non-university higher education providers, monitor quality and set standards. It is widely regarded as a world-first, and has an important role as we compete for quality higher education services in the increasingly aggressive Asian market. TEQSA will see to it that we constantly review and ensure our reforms get the results we want. In the interests of transparency we will continue to work with the universities on indicators for quality teaching and learning for the *MyUniversity* website.

**Teaching excellence**

The Government has established the Office for Learning and Teaching with $58.7 million in award and grant funding to promote excellence in university learning and teaching.

**Government support for university placements**

We look forward to working with our universities in the years ahead to achieve the target 40% of 25-34 year olds holding a bachelor’s degree or above by 2025. I note that women have already attained this target. Current funding provides for more than half a million Commonwealth supported places, including the 150,000 additional students now attending university. An OECD report released a fortnight ago produced figures consistent with recent ABS data, confirming that we are on track as we broaden the higher education landscape to make it more socially inclusive. An additional $4.5 billion in Government funding supports increases in student places (2012-2015) from the demand driven system and over $3 billion in indexation over the same period. The funding includes $736 million to support the enrolment and retention of students from low SES backgrounds. Other assistance includes increased regional loading to help meet the higher costs of delivery outside the metropolitan areas. This year the government has met its commitment to double the number of Australian Postgraduate Awards (APAs) places, providing funding for 3,500 commencing places, bringing the total number of APAs to nearly 9,800 – up nearly 5,000 on 2008.

**Support for students with cost of living expenses**

The Government continues to support students with their cost of living expenses. To make sure a high quality university education is open to all Australians who are motivated and have the ability to undertake it, the Government has improved student purchasing power. The comprehensive reforms to student payments the Government implemented in 2010 have directly increased access to financial support for students from low and middle-income families. Revising our definition of the age of independence downwards, from 25 to 22 year of age, has opened out the entitlement to higher education scholarships. More generous parental means testing and a substantial increase in the personal income threshold will make a difference for students receiving payments. The incentives introduced for regional students, like relocation scholarships and an extension of concessional workforce participation arrangements; appear to be having a positive effect with the numbers of student receiving youth allowance growing.

**Best practice in university student accommodation**

The Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) provides support for student accommodation through financial incentives to developers of affordable housing through the National Rental Affordability Scheme (NRAS) which a number of universities have used to develop their student residences further. The scheme offers tax and cash incentives to providers of new residences on the condition they are rented to low and moderate income households at least 20% below market rates. In the Tertiary Education and Skills portfolio, we’ve also supported student accommodation through the Education Investment Fund (EIF).

Over July and August this year, I had the opportunity to visit Mildura, Shepparton and Wodonga in Victoria, to open new student accommodation facilities for students enrolling in the La Trobe University Rural Health School. The new student housing was part of more than 280 beds in student accommodation we’ve built in six regional locations across Victoria, costing over $22 million. I know that this investment will support so many students as they take part in providing much needed health services in our regional areas.

**International Students**

Last year was the 25th anniversary of the opening of Australian education institutions to international full-fee paying students. Today the Government works successfully with your sector to maintain the quality, integrity and sustainability outcomes that the overseas students enjoy. Our legislative (Education Services for Overseas Students) reforms help to make a difference to the experience of our international students. The protections, introduced in the early 1990s, that have underpinned the burgeoning international student sector are recognised around the world. We continue to be engaged on accommodation issues for international students, such as cost, availability and location. We have strengthened regulation on he re-registration of providers. Of a total of 1100 providers who met the criteria in 2010, 200 left the system. Protections under the Tuition Protection Service (TPS) which began in July will ensure that international students continue to view Australia as a great place to study. The TPS strengthens what was already the most rigorous protection scheme for international students in the world.

**Concluding remarks**

With Australia’s universities becoming more socially inclusive than ever before, the Government is providing broad spectrum support to the sector so its students can make the most of a terrific, life changing opportunity. We look to our universities to continue their traditions of excellence in all aspects of the university experience – quality teaching, world-class facilities, and support to students through to graduation. The role of university colleges and other residences in the equation cannot be under-estimated. Congratulations on the contribution your sector makes to the quality of the experience for student residents on campus. We look forward to finding constructive ways to tackle the issues we face during this period of transformative change in higher education.