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OPINION PIECE

WHAT THE BUDGET MEANS FOR DEAKIN UNIVERSITY

Deakin is the most important institution in this city and we are lucky to have such a quality university in our backyard.

Not only does it stand for excellence in education, it provides significant benefits to our town as a big employer and through the students it brings to Geelong and the dollars they pump into local businesses.

The research activities at the university are literally the crucible of Geelong's future economy.

Be it cutting-edge medicine, hi-tech manufacturing or advanced robotics, all of these are being developed at Deakin.

All of this makes the decision by the Abbott Liberal Government to cut up to \$50 million from Deakin University — the equivalent of having someone take away one fifth of your household budget with no warning — a disaster.

To deal with these cuts, Tony Abbott is asking our universities to increase their fees. In the case of Deakin, this will particularly see courses such as engineering, science and environmental studies as the ones with the largest price hikes. This will disproportionately affect science-based studies. At a time when we need more students engaged in science in order to meet the needs of our future economy, this makes no sense.

From the point of view of Geelong's students, with bigger uni debts to repay a change to the HECS system will see higher rates of interest applying to these debts. All these changes mean we are hitting our next generation with a growing interest bill before they even contemplate buying their first house. It will leave students repaying these debts for decades and no doubt discourage many from studying in the first place.

The cuts to Deakin's funding will also inevitably risk its research capacity. Education Minister Christopher Pyne is on the record as ignorantly labelling a research function at university as "red tape".

This is compounded by the Budget abolishing the Education Infrastructure Fund in order to support its agenda of privatising state government assets.

It was this fund which provided the money for the new Carbon Nexus research facility at Deakin, which right now is generating high-end manufacturing jobs in Geelong.

And this puts into sharp relief the impact on our city of cutting research funding to Deakin. Geelong simply cannot afford it.

All of this culminates in the appalling choice which this Budget presents to Deakin. Either it keeps its fees at the current level and risks its future research program, or alternatively Deakin remains a research university but is forced to become less accessible to the students of Geelong.

Deakin has made clear that it intends to maintain its research function which is critical for the future of Geelong's economy. It will then do what it can to keep fee increases to a minimum.

For a city facing the challenges that we are, Geelong needs both an accessible university and a research university. Deakin should not have to choose and nor should Geelong.

But faced with a \$50 million cut that is the reality.

Since the Abbott Government has come to power we have watched it let go of Geelong's manufacturing and with it thousands of jobs. Through the Budget, it has then carved a hole in the safety net, placing even greater uncertainty on those in greatest need.

And now it has launched an assault on the most important engine of local economic growth: Deakin University.

Tony Abbott and the Liberals have placed themselves squarely against the interests of Geelong. And as astonishing as that is, unfortunately it is tragically real.

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