

# Rebuild relationship with ministers, Australian universities told

Higher education sector should abandon small battles and focus on the long game, strategists say

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Australian universities need to put “irritations” behind them and focus on relationship building as they confront another three years under an adversarial government, according to sector experts.

Former civil servant Robert Griew said the relationship between the higher education sector and the Liberal-led Coalition, which unexpectedly retained power (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/coalition-win-ensures-more-same-universities>) in the 18 May election, had reached an “icy” stage.

Many in the sector had hoped for a win by the opposition Labor party, which had promised billions of dollars to restore the demand-driven university funding system, while the Coalition had committed only to modest funding growth from next year. The extra funding will not keep pace with inflation, let alone a looming bulge in the youth population, and is contingent on universities meeting as-yet-undetermined performance targets.

For its part, the Coalition was “frustrated” that the sector has been opposing government initiatives to rein in costs, said Mr Griew. The former associate secretary of the federal education department said there was now no point in campaigning against the capping of university places or unpopular initiatives such as performance-based funding.

Instead, universities should try to rebuild the relationship with the government by focusing on matters of mutual concern, he advised. “If I were advising the sector, I’d be saying jump into these issues with constructive solutions, and don’t take the bait on the little irritations that are inevitable in this relationship,” said Mr Griew, now a principal with management consultants Nous Group.

Boosting regional economies was a clear priority for the government, he said. Others included reducing policy conflicts between vocational and higher education, clarifying the role of private colleges and developing optimal arrangements for research activity.



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Reviews (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/sector-reviews-once-generation-moment-australian-he>) of Australia's provider category standards and qualifications framework also offered platforms for constructive dialogue, said Mr Griew, who acknowledged different views within the sector about these issues. "But that's a better conversation to have than showing the palm on reforms we don't like, or demanding more money, which – at the beginning of a term – no ministers have in their pockets," he said.

Former University of Canberra (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/university-canberra>) vice-chancellor Stephen Parker said the sector needed to have an "internal conversation" and then take constructive proposals to the government. "Negotiations of recent years have not been spectacularly successful," said Professor Parker, now education sector leader with KPMG Australia.

"I'm not saying they've been major failures, but business as usual doesn't seem the way to go. Overall, the strategy has been to protect existing territory and try to grab more. I don't think that's going to work any more."

Higher education consultant Justin Bokor said that, with the Coalition's re-election, the sector was more likely to draw funding cuts than handouts. The government had promised to cut taxes and produce a budget surplus, and had little money to spare – and higher education, which was not a vote winner for the Coalition and had been offered few election sweeteners, would be at the back of the queue for additional spending.

Mr Bokor advised the sector against going public with "grand plans" for reform and instead advocated taking such ideas to the minister. "[Frame them] around how to set the sector up to deliver for the nation as a whole, and the policy changes that might support that," he said.

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