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While there is much to admire in the Rudd Government's education policies, there is one decision looming that seems more reactionary than 'revolutionary'.

The mooted \$10.7 million funding cut to the Carrick Institute for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education – more than one third of the planned budget for 2008 and beyond - seems extraordinary given Labor's interest in education and the quality of teaching and learning.

The timing could not be worse. The Carrick, as it is referred to across the University sector, is much admired for bringing tertiary teaching and learning to the forefront of the academic mindset of this country.

Until the Carrick initiative, most academics held research at the masthead. Reputations were built, promotions earned and rewards reaped predominantly on the basis of research performance. Teaching has been regarded as a less prestigious activity, regardless of the fact that the nation depends greatly on the successive waves of human capital substantially built on the foundation of great university teaching.

It is not that the Carrick changed all that overnight. Rather, valuing teaching and learning has been a key admonition of the university world and its stakeholders, and in the community, for decades. The Carrick has provided a sector-wide imperative – a funded agenda of national proportion and imprimatur that has captured the minds of my contemporaries.

Carrick awards, grants, fellowships and project funding has injected the sector with newfound appreciation for curriculum, innovative teaching methods, assessment reform, reformulation of academic disciplinary and interdisciplinary teaching, collaboration between institutes, integration of new and emerging technologies and new modes of teaching to match.

Carrick has also publicly recognised and rewarded university teachers who excel - whose enthusiasm, skill and innovation is well above the general standard. By doing so it has raised the general quality and the status of university teaching.

The Carrick is just hitting its straps. With excellent direction and governance and super-strong support from the sector, the Institute deserves the wholehearted support of government, not is emasculation.

Education Minister Julia Gillard should reject advice that the Carrick budget be cut. To do otherwise puts in jeopardy an initiative with the university sector that will be vital to the Government's ambitious agenda.

In fact I would urge Government not simply to reconsider cutting the Carrick down by a third, but to think of building the Institute further as the national hub for innovation and productivity in teaching and learning.

To do this would mean a major restructuring of the Teaching and Learning Performance Fund. The TLPF has proven to be inconsistent in its underlying model and methodology, divisive among the universities and marginal in its impact on the quality of teaching and learning. This is in sharp contrast to the Carrick, which seems to have its basic dimensions right. The Minister could roll the TLPF into the Carrick with a view to establishing a competitive grants scheme that would do for teaching and learning what the ARC has done for research – focus on discovery, innovation, transfer of excellent models and provide an ongoing driver of quality.

Imagine a Carrick Commonwealth Grants Scheme of say \$120m. There could be no better way of capitalising on the engagement of the sector in teaching improvement, innovation, curriculum reform, and international leadership in delivery of higher education. Such a Carrick scheme would require the equivalent of the ARC College of Experts and a professional support structure – all of which are achievable given the great start that the Carrick has given us. A grants scheme of this kind, with say a thousand grants running at any one time would add another dimension to staff development and advancement.

For academics across the country to regard a Carrick Grant as having the same level of leverage or professional development as does an ARC or NH&MRC Grant would be a tremendous fillip for Teaching and Learning. A Teaching Portfolio of Carrick grants, awards, and high level publications of innovation and teaching outcomes, good student evaluations and peer reviews would provide a basis for an academic's advancement that would serve to rival their more research-oriented colleagues in quality and reputation.

Elsewhere, I have raised questions of the sector's need to replace around one half of our ageing staff over the next decade. Preparing new staff for the profound work that they do in engaging our students in high quality teaching and learning is fundamental. The Carrick is in the process of stamping its imprimatur on an incoming generation of academics, providing them with a highly professional basis for their development, ultimately to the benefit of successive generations of our students and graduates.

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