

Policy Statement

Possible consequences of changes to government's university degree funding

The Royal Australian Chemical Institute (RACI) commends the Australian Government's focus on encouraging students to undertake University courses that can accelerate Australia's post Covid-19 recovery. Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) university qualifications will provide key enabling skills to deliver these outcomes.

Chemistry is an enabling science that underpins a large number of work-ready qualifications as well as being a qualification and career in its own right. Chemistry, like Mathematics provides core capability and understandings that allow engineered and technical solutions to society's challenges.

The National COVID Coordination Committee has indicated that science and technology is at the core of mitigating the economic and social impact of the pandemic in Australia.

For this reason, the RACI believes that all STEM subjects should be encouraged equally in terms of cost to students.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, we have seen that those with scientific knowledge, as well as understanding and capability in analytical and chemical manipulation have been essential in order to provide balanced scientific insight on untested claims. Chemists have contributed to the shortfall of chemical products such as hand sanitiser, the search for treatments and even support efforts towards vaccine development.

The RACI believes that science and technology are not mutually exclusive to humanities and the arts. Exposure to these subjects are both beneficial and, in some cases, required by STEM students for their career pathway. The promotion of STEM qualifications should not be at the detriment of other professions that contribute to technology-based solutions.

The RACI has concerns that the budget neutral initiative announced by the Government potentially puts the quality of teaching and the student experience of a hands-on, practical subject at risk.

The commitment to introduce CPI indexing to university funding year on year is welcomed, as is funding to increase access to education for regional, remote and Australian Indigenous students, increasing student places by 100,000 by 2030, but this should not be offset by a reduction of learning and teaching budgets.

If reductions in learning and teaching budgets puts pressure on laboratory opportunities and other hands-on experiences because of the cost of consumables, equipment and safe supervision, the long-term graduate outcomes and employability of students will suffer.

With the aim of producing job ready graduates, the RACI wants graduates to be well rounded and experienced chemical practitioners in all aspects of their trade, including laboratory techniques and a strong appreciation for chemical practise, as is expected in other professions including medicine, engineering and allied health.