## **EDITORIAL REVIEW # 5**

## Higher Education 2015 Steve Harris

## **Scope and Subject**

Coverage of the Higher Education Research and Reform Bill (2014) on ABC television, radio and online in March 2015, focusing on the ABC Editorial Policies and in particular the principles and standards relating to impartiality.

## Time span

2 March to 30 March.

## **Programs & Services**

Radio National Breakfast, AM, PM, The World Today, Triple J HACK, ABC720 Perth, 7.30, The Drum, Q & A, News Online.

## Sample submitted by ABC for review

Radio 26, Television 13, Online 15. (total 54).

## **Specific questions for review**

- 1. Were interviews, panel discussions, packages and online reports presented fairly, having regard to the indicators of fair treatment in the ABC Editorial Policies Impartiality Guidance Note?
- 2. Were interviews and panel discussions carried out in an open-minded fashion as described in the Impartiality Guidance Note in that the interviewer or host appeared to be open to the evidence and arguments irrespective of their personal views or predispositions? Did the interviewer or host appear to unduly favour one perspective over another?
- 3. Were packaged reports and published articles constructed as objectively as possible, reflecting an appropriate diversity of relevant experience, perspective and opinion? Were any perspectives either misrepresented or unduly favoured over another?

## The reviewer

Steve Harris has more than 30 years experience in journalism and media management, including roles as Publisher and Editor-in-Chief of The Age 1997-2001, Editor-in-Chief of the Herald and Weekly Times 1992-1997 and founding Editor of The Sunday Age. He introduced the first Code of Professional Conduct at the HWT Group and reviewed and rewrote the code at The Age, and recently undertook a review of Sensis/Telstra content management and standards. He is a J.S. Knight Fellow at Stanford University, and in 2010 was founding director of the Centre for Leadership and Public Interest at Swinburne University (now the Leadership Research Centre). He is a life member of the Melbourne Press Club. Has held board positions at the Victorian Arts Centre, Australian Children's Television Foundation, Australia-Indonesia Institute, Berry Street, Melbourne International Comedy Festival.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The Higher Education Research and Reform Bill (2014) in March was a pivotal chapter in national affairs. The legislation package encompassed reform and funding changes which were substantial enough, but they also came in the context of other political-economic dynamics: the fallout of the Abbott Government's first Budget, which included substantial and unexpected cuts -- including to higher education -- as part of a deficit-spending 'crisis' narrative; frenzied leadership speculation and the PM's 'near death' experience in early 2015; the Liberal National Party coalition not having control of the Senate and in the face of Labor and Green opposition needing the support of six of eight crossbenchers to pass the legislation; and an emerging national narrative that more innovation and competitiveness reform/investment was needed to offset the flattening of the resources boom and rising competitiveness in Asia.

The Government's basic intent was to reduce government spending on universities, and thus contribute to what it portrayed as an unsustainable government spending/ deficit legacy, but have this offset by deregulation so 41 tertiary institutions could set and pursue market rate fees. The underlying argument was that more funding flexibility, including students contributing a greater overall share, would avert the diminution of any cross-subsidies necessary to retain tertiary accessibility and equity for disadvantaged students, or the diminution of standards in teaching and research.

Education funding generally has been a major issue for much of Australia's history. Higher education has seen numerous debates and reviews about national investment in a more educated and competitive workforce, tertiary accessibility and equity, research and innovation, productivity and greater engagement with the Asia-Pacific region.

Equally it has been a major issue lacking bipartisan objectives across education standards, funding, access, research prioritisation, industry engagement and alignment etc.

Addressing the economic, educational and philosophical dimensions, as well as short and long-term imperatives, has not been enhanced by the short-term and adversarial nature of contemporary Australian politics.

An additional dynamic was the reality of some Government negativity, or sensitivity, towards aspects of the ABC, and the view of some Government members and commentators that the ABC too often evidenced a left-green-elite-inner city orientation.

The prevailing climate meant ABC coverage of the higher education issues involved numerous dynamics and the potential to bring many of the perception and political sensitivities into play.

This presented a challenge, and an opportunity. The ABC's Charter goes to the provision of 'innovative and comprehensive broadcasting services of a high standard...broadcasting programs that contribute to a sense of national identity and inform and entertain, and reflect the cultural diversity of, the Australian community'. Its stated objective is 'to be Australia's most trusted source'. And it receives substantial public investment in its resources and reach.

The review of the 54 program segments and reports submitted by the ABC for audit, as per the brief, looks at the delivery of 'impartiality' of individual programs, and matters of fairness, objectivity,

open-mindedness etc. It carries the caveat that the submitted segments were those publicly available through abc.net.au, and did not necessarily represent the entirety of the ABC's output on this subject. It is also accepted that in any endeavour or organisation, including this audit and within the ABC, there will be differences of professional judgment.

The review of each of the 54 segments was undertaken with the mindset of a one-time, first-time viewer/listener/reader, i.e. to approximate the perspective of an average member of the ABC audience.

The primary aim was to objectively review each segment on its individual merits, measured against the ABC's own stated objectives, policies, principles and standards, and to make observations to assist the continued pursuit of improved outcomes.

#### **OVERALL CONCLUSION**

A substantial number of current affairs interviews and reports on the Higher Education Research and Reform Bill (2014) broadcast on the ABC in March 2015 (all referred to in the audit as segments) complied with ABC policies and guidelines. However there were a number of instances of imbalance in focus, content gathering and presentation. Some were broadly satisfactory but contained lapses, or contained elements meriting reflection or review. Some were deemed unsatisfactory. These are summarised in <u>Part 1</u>.

The review brief invited any additional or general comments beyond individual program impartiality etc. To this end, the review takes a broader 'helicopter' look at whether the collective output embellished the ABC's 'most trusted' badge, and delivered on the Charter's requirement to 'inform' the community and contribute to 'national identity', to the maximum extent afforded by resources and reach. It submits there are opportunities for improvements to benefit both the ABC and national interest. This is addressed in *Part 2* of the review.

## Part 1.

## **Summary**

The Higher Education Research and Reform Bill (2014) became something of an 'ides of March' case study in the context of the political-economic dynamics referred to in the introduction. It was painted by various stakeholders as an issue pivotal to the future of a sustainable and competitive economy, living standards, tertiary education excellence, student equity and accessibility, teaching and research competitiveness, innovation, productivity and national reputation.

The review of the 54 individual segments was done against the Editorial Policies, Principles and Standards, especially those Sections 4.1, 4.4 and 4.5 relating to impartiality in content gathering and presentation, misrepresentation, imbalance, fair treatment and open-mindedness, and the related Impartiality Guidance Note for staff.

Segments deemed to have satisfactorily met the impartiality policies and standards are noted as 'Satisfactory'.

Segments which overall did not evidence a serious or consistent departure from impartiality policies and standards but contained a lapse noted as 'Satisfactory/Lapse'.

Segments which overall did not evidence a serious departure from impartiality policies and standards but raised other concerns or wider questions worthy of reflection and/or review are identified as 'Satisfactory/Review'.

Segments deemed to be a significant departure from the impartiality policies and standards are noted as 'Unsatisfactory'.

Overall, many of the 54 segments submitted by the ABC for review evidenced satisfactory levels of impartiality in keeping audiences up to date with the shifting political machinations, and commentary of various stakeholders, as the Government sought to secure Senate approval of its fee deregulation-funding cut package.

In most cases material was presented professionally within the parameters of the ABC Editorial Policies, Principles and Standards, and Impartiality Guidance Note. But there were some specific shortcomings and some areas requiring reflection or action, and these are spelled out in the review.

## These included instances of:

- an over-emphasis on the politics of the legislative package's passage compared with the socioeconomic and community impact of the package's adoption or rejection,
- · hosts allowing their apparent personal views or pre-dispositions to become apparent,
- overstating key points and setbacks, or exaggerating language, to intimate or reinforce a 'crisis' narrative,
- suppression of nuances and context in favour of over-simplification and dramatisation,
- lack of clarity and transparency about the context of audio/visual material,
- inadequate efforts, and transparency, to seek or offer a right of reply to direct criticism or assertion in a timely fashion.
- an imbalance between input from peak bodies (eg universities, business) and independent research/policy bodies,

- low-level pursuit of input from some key or affected stakeholders (eg small universities, young and mature students, foreign students, rural and regional communities, minority and disadvantaged groups, new arrivals),
- low-level pursuit and scrutiny of Labor and Green alternatives,
- an imbalance whereby some Labor statements (eg '\$100,000 degree fees') were aired without further analysis or challenge while the Minister's opinion about the risk of a prospective university decline and 'mediocrity' was judged to be 'far-fetched'.

Broadly, the segments focused on delivering a solid running account of the politics of the Government's attempts to win Senate approval, and the views of some stakeholders, ie the 'heat'. There was, with some notable exceptions, less focus and thus less success in gathering and delivering elevated knowledge and understanding of sustainable economic and education outcomes for the nation, ie the 'light'.

#### **RADIO**

## RN Breakfast (8 segments)

#### Segment 1.

Presenter Fran Kelly interviews Education Minister Christopher Pyne.

- March 5.
- Duration 9.30 minutes.

http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/breakfast/christopher-pyne-on-higher-education-reforms/6281994

Presenter Fran Kelly introduced the interview by stating the Government had picked a fight with the university research sector by tying the ongoing funding of the National Collaborative Research Infrastructure Scheme to its higher education reform legislation. This was a somewhat simplistic summation, given the primary 'fight' was to secure Senate approval, and the funds-reforms nexus was absorbed within that manoeuvring. However the collateral fallout of that was to put a question over research funding, so the summation was not entirely unreasonable. The presenter clip of Nobel Prize winning researcher Professor Brian Schmidt stating the situation was 'hazardous' and 'childish', especially as it was diametrically opposed to an imminent inter-generation report seeking to boost productivity. The presenter asked the Minister to explain the link between research funding and the higher education reforms, and the Minister stated that he wanted to restore a 'de-funding' of the former Labor Government but in the 'straightened' budget environment Ministers had to find savings to offset expenditure growth. The interviewer used the 'with respect' approach to press the Minister on why funding for 1700 important research jobs could not be found as a stand-alone, especially when substantial new funds had been found for other areas, such as anti-terrorism measures. The Minister reiterated that the funding was tied to offset savings and it would be a 'tragedy' if the legislation, and consequently the research funding, was rejected. The presenter commented that it would be 'more than foolish, it would be foolhardy' in the context of an intergeneration report on productivity. This comment was unnecessarily opinionated, ie the same point could have been made by stating, for example, 'many listeners might think it would be more than foolish...' but this was not a serious lapse. The presenter was able to establish, quite clearly, that the

Minister would not consider de-linking the research funding from the legislation, but would consider a proposal to cap university fee rises through a nexus with government funding. **SATISFACTORY.** 

#### Segment 2.

Presenter Fran Kelly interviews independent Senate member Glen Lazarus.

- March 16.
- Duration 4.30 minutes.

## http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/breakfast/glen-lazarus-independent-approach/6321728

Presenter Fran Kelly questioned the independent Senator as to whether his view had changed since previously voting against the legislation, at which time he had complained the Minister was bombarding him with messages bordering on harassment. The interview clarified that the senator remained opposed to a central tenet of the legislation (deregulation of fees), and that there had since been no real engagement with the Minister. The presenter further challenged whether the Senator was not listening to the university sector's relief that a 20pc funding cut had been dropped from the legislation. This might have been taken by some as a little opinionated, but it was quite respectful and fell well within ABC standards rightfully allowing for lively questioning to extract deeper information or understanding. The presenter established, perhaps helpfully, that the Senator was quite willing to talk if the Minister knocked on his door. **SATISFACTORY.** 

#### Segment 3.

Presenter Fran Kelly interviews independent Senator Nick Xenophon.

- March 16.
- Duration 4 minutes.

# http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/breakfast/nick-xenophon-on-higher-education/6321726

Presenter Fran Kelly introduced Senator Xenophon as the most experienced of the eight 'disparate' senators on the crossbench. She suggested the Minister was in the mood for compromise: the Senator demurred on the basis a central plank of the legislation (fee deregulation) was excluded from discussion. He promoted his wish for bipartisanship on the terms, and outcomes, of a review of the sector. The Senator said he admired the Minister's doggedness, but it did not mean he would get 'the bone', and said his threat to scientific research funding by aligning it with the legislation was 'student politics' and a 'serious miscalculation' which had only upset crossbenchers. **SATISFACTORY.** 

#### Segment 4.

Presenter Fran Kelly interviews Shadow Education Minister Kim Carr on Government's unsuccessful university deregulation bill and Labor's approach.

- 18 March, 6.51am.
- Duration 6.20 minutes.

http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/breakfast/kim-carr-on-higher-education/6327828

This was a professional interview where the Shadow Minister capitalised on the opportunity to make a series of strong political charges against the Federal Minister ('threats', 'intimidation', 'chicanery', 'tricks', call for replacement etc). The interviewer indicated she understood the 'politics' of his criticisms, perhaps suggesting to the audience they ought not be taken too seriously and did not further challenge them. She erred on the side of trying, respectfully but ultimately without much success, to elicit the Shadow Minister's views on the financial well-being of the sector and the question of national bipartisanship.

This segment in isolation gave voice to one vested interest in the debate, sometimes inevitable with such a daily program. Most politicians do not suffer from lack of opportunity to espouse their position and are expected to be more accommodating of robust give-and-take debate and criticism. But anyone else the subject of such negative criticism would, in all probability, be offered a right of reply, and the audience be advised that such an offer had been made, or that a response would come on a subsequent program.

Given the scrutiny and commentary around ABC 'impartiality', it would be prudent to evidence more focus and transparency around right-of-reply treatment when substantive or highly negative criticisms are involved. **SATISFACTORY/REVIEW.** 

#### Segment 5.

Presenter Fran Kelly interviews Michelle Grattan, national affairs correspondent The Conversation.

- 18 March, 7.47am.
- Duration 1.50 minutes.

http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/breakfast/politics-with-michelle-grattan/6327978

This regular segment with a respected veteran political journalist covered several topics, higher education comprising about one-third of the interview . The presenter introduced the discussion with comments indicating that the Government's commitment to re-introducing its higher education bill was flawed, as there was no sign of a 'deal', and 'people' wanted proper consultation and felt the government approach was inadequate. While such a conversation between two seasoned political observers is part of the daily diet and language of political insiders, the presenter could have been a little more specific about the 'flaws' and the 'people' and whether this was an external viewpoint she was expressing, or her own judgment. The presenter referred briefly to the earlier criticisms by Labor's Shadow Minister (Segment 4) but did not specifically pursue Grattan's view on their validity.

This segment met ABC standards but on the higher education issue it was a somewhat superficial exchange of opinion, doing little to advance understanding. There might have been merit in further exploration of the interviewee's view that a national inquiry might provide a way forward given her deep knowledge of the art and science of governments securing legislative reforms. **SATISFACTORY.** 

#### Segment 6.

Presenter Fran Kelly interviews crossbencher David Leyonhjelm (Liberal Democrat) on government higher legislation.

- March 17
- Duration 6.30 minutes

http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/breakfast/liberal-democrat-senator-david-leyonhelm/6324270

The presenter introduced the segment by stating that after some 'back-downs' the Prime Minister, as per an audio clip, was now of the view that there was no impediment to the Senate passing the legislation as early as the next day. But, she stated, the prospects of securing the necessary votes of six crossbenchers faced the reality that the Liberal Democrat senator was now against the legislation.

This was a professional and productive discussion. The presenter respectfully allowed the senator to clarify her opening assertion that he had spoken with the Minister the previous day, offering a polite 'beg pardon'. The presenter focussed on why the Senator appeared to have changed his mind after supporting the initial legislation, and he outlined his broad concerns about the philosophy and 'moral hazards' involved in higher education funding, and specific aspects of the Government's legislation and consultative approach. **SATISFACTORY.** 

#### Segment 7.

Presenter Fran Kelly interviews Education Minister Christopher Pyne on efforts to secure Senate support.

- March 17.
- Duration 12.10 minutes.

http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/breakfast/christopher-pynes-last-minute-senate-bid/6324388

Presenter Fran Kelly made introductory comments on the Government's last-ditch efforts to secure legislation seemingly set for failure as insufficient crossbenchers had been persuaded, reinforced by audio clips of comments of Senators Leyonhjelm, Lazarus and Xenophon.

The segment began with friendly and frivolous banter about St Patrick's Day and the Minister's attire, then moved to a professionally robust but respectful interview. The presenter challenged the Minister on whether he accepted the prospect of legislative defeat, had left it too late to negotiate with crossbenchers, would be best to step-back rather than risk another legislative defeat, and had miscalculated by packaging too many education and budget issues and thus set himself up for failure. These challenges were put clearly, respectfully, and without aggression. The Minister was given full opportunity to respond with only minor interruptions, and he responded firmly but calmly. The mature and intelligent exchange gave listeners a degree of understanding on the Minister's approach, and his response to criticism. **SATISFACTORY.** 

#### Segment 8.

Presenter Fran Kelly interviews Nobel Prize winning researcher Professor Brian Schmidt on the Government no longer linking researching funding with higher education legislation.

- March 17.
- Duration 6.30 minutes.

http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/breakfast/scientists-relieved-government-backs-down/6324422

Presenter Fran Kelly began a straightforward interview with science researcher Professor Brian Schmidt by seeking more detail on his assertion that 'needless damage' had been done to scientific research. There was little substantive evidence offered and the presenter chose not to pursue it. It was reasonable to ask a leading researcher whether the Minister's comments about Labor's funding/opposition and his own record was justified, and the interviewee was broadly in concurrence. He also made some constructive suggestions about the importance of a bi-partisan, long-term funding framework. The interview concluded with the presenter cheerily drawing the professor's attention to a 20-year-old photograph on the ABC science web site, a somewhat trivial end to a serious discussion. **SATISFACTORY.** 

## HACK (Triple J) (3 segments\*)

#### Segment 1.

Presenter Tom Tilley interviews Shadow Minister Kim Carr.

- 16 March.
- Duration 12 minutes.

\*NB: Hack segments unavailable on web site. At time of audit, Triple J site did not have archival functionality.

This segment began with host Tom Tilley stating that while the Education Minister was making compromises to secure Senate approval, he would be talking with Shadow Minister for Education, Senator Kim Carr, to see if Labor had 'a credible alternative' on higher education. The segment then featured a straight-forward update by reporter Alice Workman on the Education Minister's efforts to win crossbench support, ie the splitting of fees-funding and agreement to withdraw the threat to funding of scientific research, but this was still unlikely to secure the necessary six crossbench votes. Describing the Minister's changes as 'little tricks' was unnecessarily pejorative, risking the reporter being seen to be judgmental, or less than impartial or open-minded. **LAPSE.** 

Following some lead-in music of Queen's 'another one bites the dust', presenter Tim Tilley said a former Labor government had introduced an uncapped demand system, but costs had correspondingly escalated, so he had earlier put the question of a 'credible alternative' to Senator Carr. The Shadow Minister defended Labor's per student spend, while not directly addressing the

question of imbalance between student demand and funding. The presenter justifiably pressed the Shadow Minister on where the dollars were going to come from, especially in a time of rising deficits, and took in some audio of earlier comments from an Australian Liberal Students Association representative about Labor's debt legacy and its education 'platitudes' not being matched by policy, and raising the fundamental issue of whether tertiary education ought to be funded by taxpayers or graduate students. The Shadow Minister did not provide policy detail, but said the answer was not to impose a 'great big new tax' or debt on students. Pressed on whether Labor was suggesting a tax on everyone to fund tertiary education, he said it was legitimate for a progressive tax system to fund a public good and that the 'Americanisation' of universities would mean higher fees. The segment closed with an outline of some of the text messages received.

The presenter endeavoured to extract detail from the Shadow Minister. Ultimately he did not succeed, but he pressed harder for more clarity on Labor's 'alternative' than almost all the segments reviewed in this audit. **SATISFACTORY.** 

## Segment 2.

Presenter Tom Tilley interviews Sydney University vice-chancellor Dr Michael Spence.

- March 18.
- Duration 15 minutes.

This segment came after the Senate's overnight rejection of legislation, and began with a report by Jo Lauder on various campus students celebrating their 'victory' with 'resign Pyne' pinatas, together with a mix of their views on education equity and costs, and closed with audio of the Prime Minister and Minister making it clear the legislative changes would be re-submitted.

Presenter Tom Tilley then conducted a useful interview with the Vice Chancellor about the outlook for the sector, reasons why the education funding debate had reached this point, and the roles of key players, including Government, Labor, crossbenchers and education leaders. The questions were informed and pertinent, and balanced: the Vice Chancellor was afforded the opportunity to comment equally on whether the Government had 'mishandled' and Labor had 'scare-mongered'. The program also had a balanced mix of pithy text line and phone commentary from listeners. This was a useful report, using both an instructive interview and audience comments, to indicate the choices facing government, taxpayers, students and universities. **SATISFACTORY.** 

#### Segment 3.

Presenter Tom Tilley discussion with Weekly Times national affairs reporter correspondent Rob Harris, and BuzzFeed politics reporter Alex Lee.

- March 20.
- Duration 13 minutes.

This segment reviewed the education legislation defeat. It began with a recap using a series of audio clips of various players in the issue. Then followed some Chumbawamba 'I get knocked down' music and an invite from the presenter for listener comment, especially on Labor's answer which was 'to spend more money on universities', and how listeners might feel about taxes being used this way if they were not university students themselves. This 'spend more money' comment might have been seen by some as over-simplification or dismissive of Labor's position, and might have equally been

seen as positive and not an unreasonable summation given the earlier interview with the Shadow Minister (Segment 1), and an emerging consensus that universities had been under-funded for decades. The question of non-university taxpayers more heavily subsidising university education was somewhat simplistic and provocative, but encapsulated an aspect of the unresolved debate about the cost/benefit of tertiary education.

The presenter's questioning went to the Government's handling of its proposed changes, and whether Labor's 'more spending' was 'lazy' in the absence of identifying where the money was coming from; the issue of who should pay for tertiary education, and the extent to which taxpayers should subsidise students; and, following some text and phone call-ins, whether universities were acting in self-interest or national interest.

It was a well conducted segment and underscored the general lack of light on some base questions. **SATISFACTORY.** 

#### AM

#### Segment 1.

Presenter Michael Brissenden and reporter Louise Yaxley on legislation facing defeat.

- March 16.
- Duration 3.30 minutes.

#### http://www.abc.net.au/am/content/2015/s4198185.htm

Presenter Michael Brissenden introduced the segment by stating the Senate was set to again reject the legislation, and referred to 'already fraught' relations with the crossbenchers. This was a somewhat subjective description, challenging the ABC Impartiality Guidance Notes referring to the avoidance of 'the desire to overstate key points, so that every development becomes a breakthrough, every setback a crisis...', but was not unreasonable.

Reporter Louise Yaxley then utilised a succession of quick grabs from key players, including Minister Pyne, Opposition spokesman Carr, and crossbench senators Lambie, Day and Leyonhjelm, and her own updates on other senators to make the point that Senator Day was the only confirmed crossbench backer of the legislation. The report effectively communicated the various viewpoints and supported the introductory statement that the legislation faced rejection for a second time. **SATISFACTORY.** 

#### Segment 2.

Presenter Michael Brissenden interviews Foreign Minister Julie Bishop on a range of issues, including the higher education legislation.

- March 16.
- Duration 2.30 minutes.

#### http://www.abc.net.au/am/content/2015/s4198248.htm

The interview focused primarily on portfolio issues around Indonesia, Bali 9 and Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, but included a 2.30 minute segment on higher education. The presenter might have informed listeners that in addition to being a senior Minister it was appropriate to ask Senator Bishop about an area outside her portfolio as she was a former education minister, although this emerged in the Minister's answers. The presenter preceded his interview with the comment that higher education 'seems to be the only area the Prime Minister hasn't changed his mind on'. This was an unnecessarily provocative comment, and risked listeners taking the view that the presenter, and perhaps by extension the AM program, thought the Prime Minister had changed his position on everything and there was an inherent negativity toward the PM. The thrust of the presenter's point could have been made more subtly without loss of impact, eg 'despite a number of government shifts, one area where the PM hasn't changed his mind on...'. The presenter then asked an initial question about the linking of the legislation with funding of scientific research, and allowed the Minister just nine words before interrupting her answer. The presenter's numerous interruptions to the Minister's answers in the preceding foreign affairs questioning, his comment about the PM and then this quick interjection gave an impression of aggression and/or lacking respect. In the often fast-moving and robust nature of programs like AM, it is entirely reasonable for presenters to use provocative questions (as distinct from comment) as a technique, and to press for specific answers to specific questions. But ABC Impartiality Guidance Notes require presenters to consistently evidence the maximum sense of objectivity on issues, presumably with an implied neutrality, to not overstate or dramatize matters, and respectfully allow people to answer questions without undue interruptions. Aspects of this segment did not fully reflect the Impartiality Guidance Notes. SATISFACTORY/REVIEW.

#### Segment 3.

AM presenter Michael Brissenden interviews Leader of Government in the Senate, Eric Abetz.

- March 18.
- 3.40minutes.

#### http://www.abc.net.au/am/content/2015/s4199786.htm

The segment began with an introduction stating the Government's problems with the Senate had gone 'from bad to worse', with the voting down of legislation around the Australian Building and Construction Commission (ABCC) and higher education. The phrase was somewhat of a simplistic over-statement, contrary to ABC Impartiality Guidance Notes referring to the avoidance of 'the desire to overstate key points, so that every development becomes a breakthrough, every setback a crisis...'

The first half of the interview focused on the ABCC, and the fact that crossbenchers had not been persuaded to support it. The same point was made to introduce the higher education discussion. It would have been more complete to acknowledge that Labor and the Greens, and not just the crossbenchers, had voted the legislation down. This omission was addressed by Senator Abetz, but it ought have been stated upfront more clearly and more neutrally. The Senator was also questioned whether the Government's Senate issues were impacting its economic concerns. Overall the segment risked being seen as having a tone of prosecuting a crisis narrative, ie 'the smell of blood'. **UNSATISFACTORY.** 

## The World Today (3 segments)

#### Segment 1.

Presenter Eleanor Hall, reporter Louise Yaxley, on views of Senators Palmer, Carr, Wang, and architect of the HECS scheme Professor Bruce Chapman.

- March 4.
- Duration 4.30 minutes.

## http://www.abc.net.au/worldtoday/content/2015/s4190907.htm

The presenter's introduction stated the Government was intensifying efforts to pass its legislation, especially with crossbenchers, including as one element a proposal by Professor Bruce Chapman to contain university fee increases. Correspondent Louise Yaxley began her report by citing the continued opposition by Palmer United Party leader, Senator Clive Palmer, utilising comments he made (presumably at a press conference, which ought to have been reported to provide context) and clarification that, despite newspaper reports, one of his members, Senator Dio Wang, would vote with the party to reject the legislation. Senator Palmer, with laughter, said it would be 'suicide' for Tony Abbott to ignore the parents of one million tertiary students, and another million/s to come.

The introduction by Eleanor Hall, ie the Chapman proposal, was intimated to be a 'breakthrough', supported by an audio clip in which Chapman said there could be a trade-off by capping funding to universities if their fees went beyond a certain level, followed by a grab by Shadow Minister Kim Carr stating the British Government had found such a proposal would increase fees. There was no response from Professor Chapman on this, nor any comment from any of the crossbenchers as to whether such a proposition would in any way sway their thinking. A Ministerial spokesman was quoted as saying it was one of many ideas being discussed with crossbenchers.

The introduction highlighted the Chapman proposal as an element in government discussions with crossbenchers, but the segment 'headline' was not fully supported in the ensuing report. Perhaps there was an attempt to canvas too much in a single segment, and perhaps an undue emphasis on the 'newsworthiness' of the Palmer comments, which shortened the time to analyse/probe the Chapman proposal as a possible breakthrough. This segment did not breach ABC standards, but given The World Today's core objective to 'background, analyse, interpret', aspects of this segment did not optimally meet the program's objective and standards. **SATISFACTORY/LAPSE.** 

#### Segment 2.

Presenter Peter Lloyd, Reporter Sarah Donovan, on \$150 million funding of National Collaborative Research Infrastructure Strategy being conditional on passing of higher education legislation.

- March 5.
- Duration 3.50 minutes.

http://www.abc.net.au/worldtoday/content/2015/s4191636.htm

Presenter Peter Lloyd stated that leading scientists, through the National Research Alliance, were warning that 'ground-breaking research' and 1700 jobs would end, and national productivity be at risk, if the National Collaborative Research Infrastructure Strategy (NCRIS) was axed due to the Government saying funding was conditional on the passing of its reform bill.

Reporter Samantha Donovan interviewed Nobel laureate Professor Brian Schmidt and the Australian Academy of Science's Professor Les Field. The former's statement that researchers overseas could not believe the prospect of research ending due to lack of funding was accepted at face value. There was no supporting evidence. There was no reference to any specific 'ground-breaking research', although the two professors briefly mentioned broad projects around Murchison, marine observation and vaccine delivery. There was no supporting material on the introduction that national productivity was at risk. It was also not entirely clear to what extent the research at 'risk' was Australian-only rather than international collaborations. There was no clarity around the National Research Alliance -- this was the only time its name appeared in any of the 54 segments , despite its composition of scientific, university and public and private sector research organisations.

The report concluded with independent Senator Nick Xenophon stating he would not be moved by 'stupid brinkmanship' and 'extortion', and that he had made a compromise suggestion to the Education Minister which involved a more modest increase in fees. The segment carried a Radio National report in which the Minister sought to argue he had revived funding for NCRIS, but did not carry his earlier explanation that economic circumstances meant he had to offset such expenditures with savings. The segment did not pursue the question of why the NCRIS funding could not be treated outside of the higher education legislation, nor was there any Ministerial response to the comments by Professors Schmidt and Field, and Senator Xenophon. If the reporter endeavoured to seek the Minister's views but they were not forthcoming, that ought to have been made clear. It is obviously a judgment call as to which comments justify a right of reply or response, and this may potentially be addressed over a series of programs. The challenge is to carefully monitor and judiciously deliver this balance in a disciplined way, lest there be an ever-descending morass of tit-for-tat replies.

But as many perspectives of bias, unfairness or impartiality can be formed on the basis of a single program or segment, it is important individual segments appear as fair and balanced as possible, and ensure those subject to strong criticism or comment are seen to have at least been offered a chance to respond. This segment did not breach ABC standards, but in a small way illustrated the challenge (addressed elsewhere in the audit) of ensuring a perception, if not the reality, of efforts to seek a response or right of reply. And, further, not relying on the sometimes understandable but unsatisfactory effort to evidence a semblance of balance by using an individual's comments made elsewhere which provide a voice but do not go specifically to the precise content in question. **SATISFACTORY/REVIEW.** 

#### Segment 3.

Presenter Eleanor Hall, Reporter Jane Norman. Wrap-up of state of play as Government prepares to re-submit legislation.

- March 16.
- Duration 2.50 minutes.

#### http://www.abc.net.au/worldtoday/content/2015/s4198350.htm

Presenter Eleanor Hall referred to the Minister's 'threat to cut research funding' having apparently backfired with the crossbench. This was a somewhat simplistic representation of the situation, ie while the funding was aligned with the reform legislation, the Minister had stated previously (eg March 5 on Radio National) that Labor had 'defunded' the research funding and he was re-instituting it, a view broadly supported by Nobel laureate professor Brian Schmidt (eg March 17 Radio National). It would have been a more complete summary to state that the Minister had made a 'tactical threat to cut research funding', ie as part of his attempts to win crossbench support, just as 7.30 Report described the same day as a 'ploy'. The segment later played an excerpt from Opposition spokesman Senator Carr, and a motion he would put to reinstate the funding, a move the reporter Jane Norman characterised as a 'symbolic' ploy. Perhaps the Minister's positioning on research funding might have equally been seen as a 'tactical' ploy. The Opposition spokesman was not pressed on the Minister's view that Labor had de-funded the funding, or Professor Schmidt's comment that Labor had not left the research sector in a good state, and how this seemed to contrast with its current position. The report included straightforward recapping of the views of crossbenchers, utilising voice grabs of Senators Xenophon and Lazarus, for example, from other ABC programs like Radio National breakfast, and Foreign Minister Senator Bishop from AM. In this segment the source of those 'grabs' was not mentioned, unlike other Radio National programs (eg World Today 5 March) which referred to 'the Minister told Radio National that...'.

For a number of reasons, the source of material ought generally to be acknowledged, be it from a direct interview with the program in question, other ABC programs, other media, parliament, press conference etc. It goes to authenticity and context, and has the collateral benefit of potentially promoting the multi-dimensional nature of any ABC content. There does not appear to be a consistent policy, or delivery, around citation of material sources.

As with Segment 2, this segment also evidences the challenge for programs and reporters fairly using material which is taken from elsewhere, either as supporting 'evidence' of what the reporter is communicating, or as someone's response to what is being by others. Sometimes the material used is a perfectly fair and reasonable representation/response and provides sufficient balance, but there are occasions when the material only partially does the job. The constant test has to be whether the excerpted quote is one that directly and explicitly goes to X assertion or Y comment? Or is it a case of creating a perception of fair and reasonable responsiveness? Obviously the ABC cannot be expected to operate with court-of-law standards but a national broadcaster ought to be seen as the benchmark of media on standards.

The general questions of citation of material sources, and ensuring fair representation and responses is worthy of reflection. **SATISFACTORY/REVIEW.** 

#### PM (4 segments)

#### Segment 1.

Reporter Stephanie Smail on Senator Lazarus's position on higher education post his exit from the Palmer United Party (PUP).

- March 13
- Duration 4.40 minutes

#### http://www.abc.net.au/pm/content/2015/s4197357.htm

Reporter Stephanie Smail presented a straightforward report on Senator Lazarus's departure from PUP meaning the Education Minister now having to negotiate with eight individual crossbenchers, Senator Lazarus's explanation of why he left the Palmer party, and his unchanged position on higher education legislation. The Minister stated he had not met Senator Lazarus to discuss the second attempt to gain legislative approval, and was surprised by this. The Minister was not pressed on whether he had made fresh attempts to speak with Senator Lazarus, or whether any such attempts had been rebuffed. **SATISFACTORY.** 

#### Segment 2.

Presenter Mark Colvin, Reporter David Mark, on funding of National Collaborative Research Infrastructure Strategy (NCRIS).

- March 13.
- Duration 5 minutes.

## http://www.abc.net.au/pm/content/2015/s4197361.htm

Presenter Mark Colvin introduced the segment with the line 'pass the Bills or research funding gets it', a somewhat provocative but not totally unreasonable characterisation of the Government's tactic of seeking to tie scientific research funding to its higher education reform legislation. He then went further and said the 'target zone' included '27 cutting-edge research facilities, thousands of jobs and potentially billions of dollars in high-tech research equipment, like electron microscopes. They're funded through the National Collaborative Research Infrastructure Strategy or NCRIS'. The phrase 'thousands of jobs' unnecessarily exaggerated the actual mooted figure of 1700, and 'target zone' phrase perhaps gave more dramatic substance than was justified if one accepted the funding-legislation nexus was a tactical manoeuvre and collateral damage, and/or if the manoeuvre failed it was not 100pc clear the funding would cease.

This segment then endeavoured to link political machinations with real-world consequences, with reporter David Mark visiting one NCRIS facility, the Australian Microscopic and Microanalysis Research facility (AMMRF). This was obviously a challenging topic to communicate on radio. It began with the reporter's expression of 'wow' and then interviewed the AMMRF's chief operating officer. It might be reasonably assumed from the introduction to the segment, and the interview, that Government funding was the sole source for 1700 staff and billions of dollars worth of research

operations, although it was not 100pc clear, nor was there any context on the totality of Government funding of scientific research.

While the segment endeavoured to convey an impression of complex equipment and research, the audience was not left with any real understanding of what the NCRIS and AMMRF was all about, nor how the work of 'thousands of cutting-edge researchers' using 'billions of dollars' of equipment was of national importance and benefit, eg new medicines, materials and industries. The segment was somewhat shallow but did not breach any ABC standards.

More broadly, innovation and science is obviously a national issue. The ABC has a science education unit, but there remains a challenge, for scientists, media and government, to more optimally articulate and inculcate public knowledge and understanding of costs-benefits of research and innovation.

The segment did not evidence serious breaches of policies and standards, but given its public investment and resources, there is a need and opportunity for the ABC to have sufficient expertise and focus to be a media leader in this space. **SATISFACTORY/REVIEW.** 

#### Segment 3:

Presenter Mark Colvin, Reporter Naomi Woodley. Update after Federal Government backs down on scientific research funding, and breaks nexus between university fee deregulation and university funding.

- March 16.
- Duration 5 minutes.

## http://www.abc.net.au/pm/content/2015/s4198731.htm

Presenter Mark Colvin gave a succinct and accurate snapshot of the Government's changes, that the Opposition still wanted all changes dumped, and key crossbenchers were still opposed to fee deregulation.

Naomi Woodley's report was a solid wrap-up of the Minister's stated reasons for guaranteeing the science research funding, including the context that the \$150m for NCRIS was part of \$9billion the government spent on scientific research, and his reasons for splitting the legislative package to better increase the prospects of support for fee deregulation. She rightly referenced material as coming from Question Time and a press conference given by the Prime Minister and a Universities Australia representative. The report made it clear the sector supported the latest move, but key crossbench senators remained opposed or unconvinced. **SATISFACTORY.** 

## Segment 4.

Reporter Stephanie Smail on Senate rejection of second bid to secure Senate approval of legislation.

- March 17.
- Duration. 3.30minutes.

#### http://www.abc.net.au/pm/content/2015/s4199426.htm

Stephanie Smail judiciously used, with appropriate sourcing, material from Sky News and Question Time to provide a succinct and lively report on the state of play, encompassing the Minister's continued optimism and positioning as a 'fixer', and key Labor players seeking to score political points against the Minister. This was a politically balanced report, allowing the Minister, Prime Minister and Foreign Minister to criticise the Labor legacy, while Labor figures lampooned the Minister. The report gave listeners a ringside seat to the political give and take of the issue. **SATISFACTORY.** 

## LOCAL RADIO (5 segments\*)

\*NB: These segments not available on ABC website.

#### Segment 1.

Presenter John McGlue, Reporter James Bennett, on Government de-linking fees and funding in the legislative package. ABC720 Perth

- March 16.
- Duration 6 minutes.

This segment began with the presenter noting 'what a difference a day makes', and the contrasting position of the Education Minister the previous day and the new announcement about splitting the fees/funding elements of the legislative package. The presenter stated that the Minister had previously said the two were 'inextricably linked' and stated 'ah but that was yesterday'. His statements per se were fair and reasonable, but he did so in a tone of incredulity. The presenter also referred to the changes as 'double back-flip with Pyne'. The subsequent discussion with James Bennett in the Canberra office on the situation and prospects for Senate approval was more straightforward.

The segment overall did not evidence a serious breach of policies and standards, but the overall tone came across as a personal and critical take. **SATISFACTORY/LAPSE.** 

#### Segment 2.

Presenter John McGlue, on Minister's legislative de-coupling. ABC720Perth.

- March 16.
- Duration 3 minutes.

The presenter recapped that the Minister had earlier announced a decoupling of the fees-funding nexus of the legislation, and played the Minister's press conference comments. **SATISFACTORY.** 

#### Segment 3.

Presenter John McGlue interviews Senator David Leyonhjelm, ABC720Perth.

- March 16.
- Duration 7 minutes.

The presenter introduced this segment, basically a straightforward discussion with Senator David Leyonhjelm on his views, with the comment that 'as back-flips go this was one of the most impressive you'll ever see'.

In isolation this was somewhat provocative but not unreasonable, but coming after his tone in Segment 1 it again ran the risk of indicating a lack of neutrality or open-mindedness. SATISFACTORY/LAPSE.

#### Segment 4.

Presenter John McGlue interviews Senator Dio Wang. ABC720Perth.

- March 16.
- Duration 3 minutes.

This was a straightforward discussion with Senator Dio Wang on whether the Government's changes would sway his vote. **SATISFACTORY.** 

#### Segment 5.

Presenter Geoff Hutchinson, interviews WA Vice-Chancellor Paul Johnson. ABC720Perth.

- March 18.
- Duration 20 minutes.

The presenter began by noting the Education Minister called himself 'the fixer', but had failed to win support, and played a clip of the Prime Minister's press conference describing some senators as 'feral', and calling on Labor to contribute to seeking a solution. This was followed by a discussion with the University of WA Vice-Chancellor, Paul Johnson, and some talkback.

The presenter commented several times that this was 'big change' which required persuasion of the community about its necessity, the Minister was putting together a flat-pack project 'with a hammer when he needed an allen key', some promoters of the change had benefitted from significant university investment and were not left with major HECs-type debts, and there had been criticism of the 'Americanisation' of universities. It reminded him, he said, of Labor's mining tax, ie the need to make the case, over time, to secure bi-partisan support in the contemporary Parliament and 'foisted' changes risked Parliament biting back. The presenter veered off the neutral script, allowing his own views to come through, ie intimating a personal view that it ought to be a government and taxpayer responsibility to educate its population and opposition to a user-pays system, and while the ideological argument was tough and there were views on both sides his stated view was that 'the politics of it has been really poor'.

This 'editorialising' gave the impression the presenter had a dim view of the Government and Ministerial policy approach and advocacy. This came through direct and critical commentary, and did not satisfactorily evidence neutrality or impartiality. **UNSATISFACTORY.** 

#### **TELEVISION**

## 7.30 (4 segments)

#### Segment 1.

Presenter Leigh Sales, reporter Sabra Lane, on Government addressing policy 'barnacles'.

- March 2.
- Duration 5.10 minutes.

## http://www.abc.net.au/7.30/content/2015/s4189923.htm

Presenter Leigh Sales characterised the PM as 'clinging doggedly' to power after 'frenzied speculation' and moving to scrape off policy barnacles, 'something he promised to start doing back in December'. This was a strong but reasonable portrait. Political correspondent Sabra Lane then gave a general update on opinion polls in the wake of leadership speculation, and included clips of the PM vowing to 'get on with governing', supported by Ministers Robb and Cormann, and previously critical MP Dennis Jensen. After recapping the status of GP co-payments, Lane moved to higher education, stating the Government wanted to 'deregulate student fees, allowing universities to charge what they like, and cut university funding by 20 percent'. While this was baldly true in a headline sense, it would be equally reasonable to provide more context and characterise the deregulation of fees and reduced funding as, for example, 'an attempt to address issues of university economics and government spending reduction'.

The point is not that the reporter's summation was entirely unreasonable, but in the prevailing environment of turbo news, short-handing and over-simplification, characterisations which do not fully convey a whole picture can quickly develop their own momentum as 'conventional wisdom' and language, and thus shape or determine the national conversation. This reinforces the simplistic, adversarial and shallow elements which are barriers to improved knowledge, national conversation and understanding, key pre-requisites for any resolution. The ABC has a role and opportunity to take the journalistic lead in forsaking some day-to-day drama and punchiness in favour of more substantive conversations.

The report then went to state that 'a key adviser to the Government is urging' the Education Minister to drop fee-deregulation and consider demand-driven fees, the adviser being Andrew Norton of the Grattan Institute. A minor improvement would have been to make it clear that Mr Norton was (not is) a key adviser, having been part of a higher education review panel in 2014 which looked at demand-driven funding. Perhaps a minor oversight in the scheme of things, but context, however subtle, is a key asset in content integrity.

The segment overall did not contain any clear breach of ABC impartiality standards, but the general point about the challenge of not allowing the simplicity to get in the way of accuracy and contextual integrity ought to be an on-going reflection within the ABC, and is discussed further in Part 2. **SATISFACTORY/REVIEW.** 

#### Segment 2.

Presenter Leigh Sales. Discussion with two Vice Chancellors and National Union of Students representative on higher education deregulation and funding issues.

- March 11.
- Duration 13.45 minutes.

#### http://www.abc.net.au/7.30/content/2015/s4195884.htm

Presenter Leigh Sales interviewed the VCs of Sydney and Melbourne, Professors Michael Spence and Glyn Davis, and NUS's Rose Steel. This was a solid discussion of some core issues underpinning the deregulation-funding debate, and at almost 14 minutes was one of the longest segments of those submitted by the ABC for this audit.

The VCs represented two of the G8 universities in Australia. More balance and diversity could have been provided by including a representative of one of the 33 smaller tertiary institutions . The presenter intelligently moved quickly from dealing with the university response as to why it was not reasonable to include scientific research funding within a legislative reform package, and focused on matters around funding, equity, access, and public benefit. The presenter's questions and moderating skill, and a willingness to allow thoughtful and respectful speakers to give full answers with no interruptions, allowed for an intelligent and informative discussion. It provided context and depth to what lay behind the blow-by-blow political reportage, and highlighted how the nation had embraced a demand-driven ethos for universities but was now paying the price of successive governments saying demand had outstripped funding capacity, and the challenge of finding the optimal short and long-term solutions.

This was a good example of allowing intelligent questioning and discussion on important issues as much time as can be afforded, given the prevailing oversupply of simplistic, conflict and celebrity driven news and judgment. As discussed in Part 2, the ABC has a unique role and opportunity to be the go-to source for understanding issues, especially those which are complex or ambiguous, and to play a leadership role in so-called 'wicked' problems. **SATISFACTORY.** 

#### Segment 3.

Presenter Leigh Sales, Reporter Sabra Lane. Government unbundles its higher education reforms in latest attempt to secure Senate support.

- March 16.
- Duration 7 minutes.

#### http://www.abc.net.au/7.30/content/2015/s4198877.htm

Presenter Leigh Sales introduced the segment with 'another day, another back-flip', a strong but succinct and not unreasonable characterisation, with the Government dropping a 'ploy' to link scientific research funding to the passage of other legislation and taking a 20pc cut to university funding off the table 'for the time being'. The references to a 'ploy' and 'for the time being' are highlighted as they show how easy it is to provide relevant context without being at the expense of impact or brevity. The majority of reports at the time, including many on the ABC, often adopted the simplistic 'research funding/jobs face axe' phraseology, and the dropping of the university funding

cut was generally minus the important caveat that this was temporary as the government had stated its intention to bring it back for re-consideration later in the year.

Sabra Lane's report began by seizing the opportunity of the Prime Minister, 'not backward in sometimes taking on unsavoury choices' visiting an onion farm in Tasmania and astonishingly taking a bite out of a raw onion. This allowed Lane to comment that despite the most recent tactical changes the Minister's efforts could still end in tears. The unusual footage of the onion incident and key players in the Minister's negotiations was then followed by brief clips of criticism by the Opposition leader, an update on crossbenchers still not convinced to change their opposition, and a suggestion by Victoria University's vice-chancellor for any excessive university fees to be effectively capped by off-setting cuts to government funding. **SATISFACTORY.** 

#### Segment 4.

Presenter Sabra Lane. Crossbenchers explain voting on higher education legislation.

- March 17.
- Duration 11 minutes.

## http://www.abc.net.au/7.30/content/2015/s4199628.htm

Presenter Sabra Lane interviewed Senators Lambie (independent, against) and Leyonhjelm (Dem Lib, for) to explain their votes in the Senate rejection of the legislation. This was a straightforward interview with two of the eight crossbench senators offering divergent views. The interview began with Lane respectfully asking Senator Lambie about her health, given she had been in hospital before leaving to attend the senate vote. Some in the media might regard this as irrelevant, or evidence of 'softness', but many in the community welcome such evidence of sensitivity within the contemporary political/ media environment. The segment provided both Senators ample opportunity to explain their attitudes on the legislation, the Minister's tactics and relationship with crossbenchers, and the Prime Minister's comment that some crossbenchers were 'feral'. It allowed viewers to make their own judgment about their mindset and views. **SATISFACTORY.** 

## <u>THE DRUM</u> (3 segments)

#### Segment 1.

Presenter Julia Baird. Education Minister backs down on research funding.

- March 16.
- Duration 6.20 minutes.

#### http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-03-16/the-drum-monday-march-16/6323754

The education segment comprised the mid-section of this program, sandwiched, perhaps with unintended irony, between a Pacific cyclone and speed-dating in Japan. The panel comprised former NSW Liberal leader Peter Collins, the co-chair of the National Congress of Australia's First Peoples, Kirstie Parker, and Guardian Australia's political editor Lenore Taylor.

The panel was balanced and moderate. Presenter Julia Baird made the most provocative remark when she said it was panellist Lenore Taylor's task to assist in walking through the 'complex inner

labyrinth of Christopher Pyne's mind...no small task', but while some might have taken this as a derogatory comment, it could equally be taken as a compliment.

The presenter invited comment and referred viewers to the Drum website for a blog by University of Canberra Vice-Chancellor Stephen Parker, posted earlier that day. (http://www.abc.net.au/news/stephen-parker/5933366).

It was not clear why Professor Parker was not on the panel to discuss his critical take on the 'ideology' of the Government on higher education and his differences with the Group of Eight sandstone universities, and how the electorate ought to reflect at the next election. His views were not taken up in the discussion, which seemed to be a missed opportunity.

The Parker blog did elicit some robust commentary on the website, including one observation that neither an individual vice-chancellor, the Group of Eight, nor the universities generally did not speak for the whole higher education sector, and the question whether the ABC had sufficiently sourced and aired the appropriate balance of views. The blog received more than 400 comments, many multiple comments from individuals.

The blog was accompanied by a photograph of a sandstone university with the caption: *The main beneficiaries of fee deregulation will be Australia's sandstone universities, the Group of Eight.*Without attribution, or quote marks to suggest this statement comes from the accompanying vice-chancellor article, this risked the public seeing the caption as a bald statement of fact, and perhaps an accepted ABC assessment or view.

The strategic intent of The Drum is unclear but presumably there is a desire for more interactivity between programs and audience/s. However there did not appear to be any real 'connect' between the on-air and on-line discussions, nor any indication that the website editors/moderators had invited responses from those being criticised, be it from the former and current government, other universities, students, or even the ABC itself.

The segment overall did not evidence a serious breach of impartiality policies and standards, but aspects of it merit some reflection. **SATISFACTORY/REVIEW.** 

#### Segment 2.

Presenter Julia Baird. Senate rejects legislation.

- March 18.
- Duration 5.15 minutes.

## http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-03-18/the-drum-wednesday-march-18/6330394

The education segment was the opener of this program. The panel comprised former Labor advisor Darrin Barnett, senior fellow of the Institute of Public Affairs Chris Berg, and Sydney Morning Herald investigative reporter Kate McClymont.

The presenter introduced the program with an acceptable 'third time lucky' comment on the Government's vow to re-submit its higher education legislation, followed by a balanced series of

clips of reactions to the Senate's rejection, including a Government and opposition senator and three crossbench senators.

The panel was balanced and moderate in their single comments.

The presenter invited comment and referred viewers to the Drum website for a blog, posted the previous day, by Andrew Norton, higher education program director of the Grattan Institute. (http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-03-17/norton-focus-should-now-be-uni-funding-certainty/632492).

The presenter gave no indication of the nature of the blog, which called for a different legislative approach and a bipartisan inquiry. It elicited 84 comments. Neither the blog nor the responses were part of the discussion. This appeared to be a missed opportunity to optimally engage and leverage the views of one expert and the audience/s.

Segments 1 and 2 did not present any issues of impartiality or imbalance. More broadly, however, there are potential issues with The Drum positioning itself as 'making the loudest noise' in the exchange of views on- air and on- line. The apparent ABC strategy of endeavouring to deliver and receive content across multiple media forms, such as The Drum and QandA, is one being pursued by all media, ie to more efficiently and effectively aggregate, curate, disseminate and exchange content across multiple forms -- visual, audio, digital and physical.

This in itself is not a concern of this audit. But pursuing the 'loudest noise' carries the implication of having provocative, opinionated and possibly extreme views to garner the most impact in ratings, 'hits', or controversy. While there was no particularly provocative or opinionated material in the two segments submitted, the cross-check questions are how or whether the pursuit of 'noise' fits within the ABC's charter to inform the community, how 'noise' sits as an objective within Drum's parent division of ABC News and whether 'noise' is conducive to delivering fairness, balance, impartiality and open-mindedness?

If the desire is to have 'noise' and maximum digital traffic via provocative views and free-for-all bulletin boards or chat-rooms, it follows that there will be some elevated ABC risk. Provocative and adversarial positioning and discussion/chat will be preferred or facilitated; under-moderated blog discussions may descend into vitriolic debate between anonymous participants; false or misleading material may go unchallenged. This risk also comes in the context of a broad consensus that a surplus of 'noise' is the biggest impediment to quality national conversation, knowledge and outcomes.

The Drum's mission of 'noise' may be merely a case of ABC marketing hype -- in which case it is an 'over-statement' lapse -- but care needs to be taken to ensure any pursuit of 'noise' and/or digital audiences is supported by sufficient 'moderation' and 'editorial management' focus and resources to ensure there is no diminution of the ABC objectives and standards. The same standards in broadcasting (eg moderating panellists, content and audiences to ensure a balance of views, respect, opportunity for responses) ought to apply equally to digital blogs and chat-rooms. There would seem to be inconsistencies in 'moderation' and transparency, eg the screening of political voting intentions of a QandA studio audience, but no apparent screening of digital audiences, eg

QandA and The Drum etc. Any screening and transparency ought to be equally and consistently evidenced across all platforms.

On a smaller matter, The Drum website does not carry transcripts of its television content, inconsistent with other news/current affairs programs. There does not seem to be any valid reason why this is not a consistent ABC service provision.

The segment overall did not evidence serious impartiality issues, but aspects of it evidenced some lapses and raised issues which merit review. **SATISFACTORY/REVIEW** 

#### **Q&A** (1 segment)

## Segment 1.

Host Tony Jones. Program on 'Depression, Drugs and Another Planet'. Panellists Education Minister Christopher Pyne, Shadow Minister Trade and Investment Penny Wong, Nobel Laureate Professor Brian Schmidt, writer and performer Ruby Wax, film-maker and activist Michael Franti.

- March 30.
- Duration (higher education component) 21 minutes.

## http://www.abc.net.au/tv/qanda/txt/s4186192.htm

The program title of 'Depression, Drugs and another Planet'. Whether this was someone's mischievous sense of humour to include higher education, the subject of higher education occupied about 21 minutes, sandwiched between discussion about suicidal pilots, drugs, mental health and the universe. On the higher education subject, the Minister was an obvious panellist; Senator Wong was not the Shadow education spokesman, but was justifiably legitimate as the Opposition leader in the Senate (and should have been introduced as such: this was her main 'qualification' on this subject rather than as Shadow Minister for Trade and Investment); Professor Schmidt was appropriate as a leading researcher and a frequent commentator on university research issues. Two panellists from overseas did not bring specific expertise or experience to this subject, although Michael Franti (US) offered some first-hand observations on the US university system, and Ruby Wax (UK) injected the question 'Is this Australian politics?' during one rapid-fire exchange between Mr Pyne and Senator Wong.

The viewing audience was advised on screen that the studio audience comprised Coalition 37pc, Labor 35pc, Green 14pc and Other 14pc. These figures are based on a pre-participation registration form which asks people to declare their voting intention, and thus can only a rough and unreliable indicator of political leaning and thus a rough and unreliable measure of perceived audience 'balance'. Information on political party membership is also sought on the registration form, although this is not disclosed.

If audience 'mapping' is deemed a useful tool to evidence 'balance', then some consideration might be given as to why the focus is on political mapping only. It seems narrow and tokenistic against the program's notion of 'democracy in action' and invites a viewing prism which may not be relevant or

helpful. On some issues, mapping of gender, age, ethnicity, geography or income might be of equal or greater relevance to 'balance' than political voting intentions.

Studio participants are also not asked to declare any relevant vested interest in the matters being considered, eg membership of activist groups, employment, commercial ties, grants etc. While the accuracy of any information would still depend on the integrity of the participant, it would be just as relevant as other information sought, and might allow the host to provide a little more context when introducing some questioners, and provide more transparency to the audience/s. The point is whether the stated voting intentions of audience members is too narrow and unreliable to be credible evidence of 'balance', whether a political 'map' adds a positive element in discussion of a broad range of issues or over-politicises any perceptions, and whether more sophisticated audience mapping is a truly worthwhile pursuit or an ultimately unsatisfactory attempt to evidence 'balance'.

It also appears that Twitter account holders, invited to submit comments during the show (some of which are selected to appear on the screen) are not subject to prior vetting or profiling. This seems a weakness or inconsistency given the impact which on-screen tweets can have. Presumably there is moderating of abusive or offensive tweets, but it is not clear what degree of moderating is aimed at maximising contributor diversity and impartiality, and minimising any bias, 'organised' partisan tweeting or 'troll' activity.

The studio audience in the inner-city studio appeared to be mostly young, presumably with direct interests in higher education fees and equity, and reasonably expected to be mostly opposed to any higher education reforms leading to higher fees/debts, regardless of any stated voting intention. Twitter contributors would also seem to have an in-built 'bias', ie young students and/or active social media users.

This was a typically fast-moving QandA 'dinner- table' type discussion, with a mix of serious discussion and give-and-take banter between the host and panel members, informally referred to by their christian name. The host was, inevitably, forced to occasionally interrupt panellists in a bid to ensure everyone had an opportunity, and to stay as focused as possible on the matter at hand. However it did not appear that this restricted either Minister Pyne or Senator Wong from having plenty of opportunity to make their views known, and to respond to questions and comments.

Some conservative viewers might have taken offence when the host seized on a comment from Michael Franti about the focus on commercial research benefits, such as an improved Viagra, and how some politicians might find it helpful. He asked whether 'Christopher' might want to say something at that point. But this was in character with the atmosphere of the program. Similarly the good-natured banter between Wax and Pyne about life in space and the prospect of a love-child.

While QandA's stated objective is to 'thrash out' issues, it is seemingly not intended to be a totally serious and conclusive discussion on a given topic. It seeks to have an engaging and informative discussion in a more informal mode, using a mix of relevant/interesting panellists and a cocktail of serious questioning and banter to add some real-world flesh and insight in contrast with the staged performances and spin at forums, press conferences and parliament.

It does seem to pride itself on its audience size, and as with the earlier comments about the 'noise' aspiration of The Drum, the pursuit of ratings and attention can mitigate against content integrity, balance and diversity, or elevate risk for the ABC.

While the studio segment did not evidence any departure from ABC standards, utilising real-time Twitter commentary poses additional challenges.

In this segment, some 54 Twitter comments appeared on the screen, and could be broadly characterised as 23 benign/general; 22 negative to the legislation/Minister; and 9 either supportive of the legislation or Minister, or critical of Labor. It is not known what Tweets came in, nor clear what selection criteria are employed, nor whether the priority is given to clever or provocative tweets cf others which may be less entertaining but more substantive. In this case the comments were unsurprising, and the breakdown of views not a surprise given the topic, the studio audience profile, and the broad audience.

Running Twitter commentary during an actual ABC show can have its own influence on the content (eg something picked up by the host or panel) or on viewers (eg viewers may see the program's selection of Twitter comments as reflective of the audience, the program, or the ABC.) And all this without the pre-program registration or moderation applied to the small studio audience. It may be that the ABC needs to consider making it clearer that such comments do not reflect the views of the ABC or its management.

The increase in Twitter, Facebook, chat-room, blog traffic is also at the point where the ABC cannot continue to merely state on its web site 'Warning: This page shows un-moderated tweets, so if you see a tweet that you think offends, please report it to us so that we can review and take appropriate action'. Competition and consumer regulatory bodies now regard anyone engaged in any form of 'publishing' or re-publishing to be responsible for whatever material they solicit, use or pass on, and expect them to be pro-active in having clear and transparent guidelines and standards, monitoring procedures, and quick remedies in place to mitigate against undesirable or unfair behaviour, reputation damage or commercial loss, misleading or deceptive comments etc. If it doesn't do so already, the ABC ought to be endeavouring to meet the same standards, and striving to be a media leader. While the public will become more familiar consumers of digital services and thus develop a more sophisticated understanding of the context of material, there should always be a consistent bias toward clarity, transparency, context, ownership and accountability.

Overall the QandA segment did not contain any major issues of impartiality etc, a number of areas around the pursuit of balance, transparency and digital engagement merit reflection.

SATISFACTORY/REVIEW.

#### **NEWS BREAKFAST**

#### Segment 1.

Co-host Michael Rowland. Kim Carr linking university reforms to science jobs.

- March 16.
- Duration 7.45 minutes.

http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-03-16/kim-carr-linking-uni-reforms-to-science-jobs/6321874

Co-Host Michael Rowland interviewed Shadow Minister Kim Carr on Labor's Senate motion to 'decouple' the Government's funding of scientific research and higher education reforms. This segment afforded Senator Carr the opportunity to criticise the Minister for, in his words, intimidation, blackmail, moral bankruptcy and lying. The host endeavoured to provide some balance by challenging the Senator to identify the 'lies' (but did not follow through on the lack of real evidence in the answer); to explain what was wrong with the Minister's comments about universities needing to pursue excellence and avoid competitive stagnation etc; and explain Labor's cuts to education funding.

It is inevitable that live news programs involve decisions based on who is willing and able to participate on a given day. It is also a major challenge for live hosts to manage any risks of real or perceived imbalance, unfairness etc on the run. This puts a special onus on program managers to monitor content and, if necessary, advise viewers/listeners that (a) invitations had been, or would be extended, to a person or organisation and (b) ensure that over a reasonable timeframe opposing viewpoints and reasonable right-of-reply opportunities are afforded. There was no indication in the segment that the Minister had recently appeared on the program, been invited to appear or would be offered an opportunity to respond to the criticisms (ie to evidence the program wanting to be seen to be as reasonably balanced as possible).

It may well be that such attempts are not always realised, but with transparency of endeavour there can at least be an enhanced perception that 'balance' is being pursued. In the apparent absence of same, it is easy for some viewers to see an isolated segment as providing a partisan 'free kick' and evidencing a political pre-disposition or lack of impartiality, neutrality and fairness etc.

Live program producers might reflect on whether disciplines can be instituted to ensure that, when a single interviewee makes, for example, a one-sided attack, viewers can be told whether the alternate view has perhaps already been aired and therefore this was just the second book-end, or that the person/organisation being attacked would be given fair and reasonable opportunity to respond, or that a statement by X on the subject is available on the ABC website (in the same manner as Four Corners often deals with responsive material which is not aired in the program proper). The segment did not evidence a serious breach of impartiality standards or policies, but aspects merit review. **SATISFACTORY/REVIEW.** 

#### Segment 2.

Co-hosts Virginia Trioli and Michael Rowlands. Interviews Nick Xenophon on linking scientific research funding to university reforms.

- March 16.
- Duration 4.46 minutes.

http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-03-16/senator-nick-xenophon-says-linking-uni-reforms-to/6321902

Following Shadow Minister Kim Carr's comments (Segment 1), co-host Virginia Trioli stated Labor had described the research-reform linkage as 'blackmail', then co-host Michael Rowlands interviewed independent Senator Xenophon. This was a straightforward interview to ascertain the Senator's views on the linkage and prospects of Senate approval etc.

There were no issues per se with the interview, but having afforded the Shadow Minister and an independent Senator the opportunity to criticise the Minister and put their version of the 'facts', the earlier comments regarding perceived fairness and balance within a program (see Segment 1) are underscored.

On a question regarding the Minister's comments about what percentage share of costs was currently paid by students, Senator Xenophon said he had different figures to that of the Minister, and suggested the ABC Fact Check Unit could look into it.

While not a submitted topic of this audit, the reference to the Fact Check Unit is relevant, indicating that the Unit had a potentially useful role to play in a major issue like higher education, when opposing versions of 'fact' are being paraded.

At the time of writing, there was no evidence the ABC Fact Check Unit followed up on the matter raised by Senator Xenophon. It was more surprising the ABC Fact Check Unit did not contribute anything on higher education in March 2015, either as a Fact Check or a Fact File, despite extensive reportage of argument and varying assertions about student funding, fees, equity, excellence, scientific research funding, innovation in science and medicine etc.

The Unit had previously looked into whether Labor was blocking some of its own education savings measures ('correct', August 2014), the Minister's statement that without reforms Australian universities could slide into mediocrity and be overtaken by Asian competitors ('far-fetched', September 2014), and the Minister's statement that Labor had cut \$6.6billion from higher education ('incorrect', February 2015).

There might be argument about some of the Fact Check unit conclusions (eg to judge the Minister's opinion as 'far-fetched' appears emotive and arguable), and it is not apparent that when such critical judgments are made, there is a right or reply option, or the file is subsequently and continuously reviewed/updated. In February, for example, Fact Check stated that a response from Universities Australia was not available before 'deadline'. The approach ought to be that beyond the issuing of a Fact Check or Fact File, there is no 'deadline' to presenting the most accurate and

balanced 'fact' picture, and to reflect the reality of fresh information and data becoming available over time.

The ABC also does not appear to fully capitalise or embrace the Fact Unit's role. In none of the programs which formed part of this audit did any ABC presenter cite any of its content to reinforce reportage or commentary, or use it as the basis for questioning. If the ABC wants to elevate the ABC's remit as independently accurate and 'trusted' etc, and believes Fact Check has a useful role to play, then it ought to look at the effectiveness of the Fact Check unit, and ways of better utilising it.

The segment did not evidence serious issues of impartiality, but aspects of perceived balance, and the contribution of Fact Check, merit some review. **SATISFACTORY/REVIEW.** 

#### Segment 3.

Co-host Michael Rowlands. Universities seek rethink.

- March 18.
- Duration 5.53 minutes.

http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-03-18/universities-call-for-a-rethink-of-higher/6328142

The introduction of this segment was not available on the website link, but co-host Michael Rowlands interviewed the CEO of Universities Australia, Belinda Robinson. She made some predictions of what would happen if under-funding of universities was not addressed, including possible campus and course closures, increases in class size, reductions in student time and support, academic tenure etc. This outlook might have been challenged, given the ABC Fact Unit (September 2014) had described as 'far-fetched' the Minister's view that without reform universities would slide into mediocrity. The co-host also quoted Liberal Democrat Senator David Leyonhjelm as saying Christopher Pyne was 'not the best Minister' to deal with. The Senator in fact said (7.30 Report, March 17) that in terms of consultation, 'The Minister is not the best of the Ministers I deal with but he's far from the worst'.) This was not a breach of ABC accuracy standards, but illustrates the need for hosts or interviewers, to take care with quotes which run a risk of being seen as incomplete, non-contextual, or inaccurate. **SATISFACTORY.** 

#### Segment 4.

Co-host Virginia Trioli. Top universities call for another funding review.

- March 31.
- Duration 9.14 minutes.

http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-03-31/top-universities-call-for-another-funding-review/6360958

The introduction of this segment was not available for review on the website link, but co-host Virginia Trioli interviewed the CEO of the Group of Eight Universities, Vicki Thomson, who ostensibly called for a de-politicised process to resolve long-term funding issues for all stakeholders in the university sector.

Ms Thomson, asked about the future of the sector if the (funding and reform ) issues were not resolved, said there would be a 'slow decline', 'slow burn' to 'mediocrity' with diminished quality for

all stakeholders. This underscored the issue raised in Segment 3, ie two key university bodies seemingly making the same or very similar views as those made by the Minister and categorised by the ABC Fact Check Unit as 'far-fetched'.

Either the Fact Unit judgment was valid, and there was cause to challenge the comments of the two peak university organisations, or the judgment was unreasonable, as per the comments in Segment 3. **SATISFACTORY.** 

#### THE INSIDERS

### Segment 1.

Star Wars Fixed, Christopher Pyne fixes the star's problems.

- March 22.
- Duration 1.15 minutes.

www.abc.net.au/insiders/content/2015/s4202398

The introduction of this segment, or any subsequent discussion, was not available for review, but the segment comprised a short mock-film, *Star Wars Fixed*, set somewhere in the galaxy near Canberra. It superimposed the Minister, and a series of his comments, into a discussion among Star Wars characters, accompanied by the film's music.

This was a clever and amusing use of about seven quotes from the Minister (eg 'I'm a fixer', 'I've fixed it', 'I've dealt with it', 'I've taken away that hurdle', 'I've cleared that impediment away') into a Star Wars setting. It concluded with the Minister seen to be laughing at the comment of Darth Vader to another character that 'I find your lack of faith disturbing'.

This segment humorously illustrated the Minister's extensive efforts to 'fix' the higher education reform and funding legislative passage, whatever the obstacles. It could be taken equally as a joke at his expense or an amusing portrayal of his resolve and conviction. One suspects the Minister would have enjoyed it as much as anyone.

There were no impartiality issues, and the segment injected some welcome relief. **SATISFACTORY.** 

#### Segment 2.

Host Barrie Cassidy interviews Education Minister Christopher Pyne.

- March 15.
- Duration 9.22 minutes.

www.abc.net.au/insiders/content/2015/s4198025

Any discussion around this interview was not available for review. The interview began with the Minister initiating a light-hearted exchange about the similarity of his clothing with the host, followed by straightforward questions and answers about the likely Senate voting outcome, and the

Minister's views on university funding, and the consequences -- for the sector, scientific research, politically and economically -- of changes not being approved.

The host missed an opportunity to follow-up what the Minister acknowledged was a good question, ie whether fee deregulation was necessary because successive governments were unwilling, or perhaps unable, to provide adequate funding? The Minister gave a broad answer but the fundamental question of government funding capacity was not addressed, or pursued. **SATISFACTORY.** 

## **NEWS ONLINE (15 segments)**

#### Segment 1.

Government floats compromise plan for universities.

March 4

http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-03-04/government-floats-higher-education-reform-deal-compromise/6278642

This report did not carry any authorship. It stated the Government had floated a compromise plan with Senate crossbenchers to clinch support, and that the Minister's office had confirmed he was discussing the plan suggested by HECS architect Bruce Chapman re a funding-fee increase trade-off. This was followed by quotes from the Prime Minister on AM about the issue and the proposal, and the Shadow Minister Senator Carr describing it as 'a big new secret student tax'.

It is impossible to be conclusive, but there appears, prima facie, to be some reason to question whether the language in this report was fully accurate, and perhaps overstated the situation. Based on other ABC content it would appear the Minister was aware of the Chapman suggestion, it having been part of a 2014 report by an advisory panel of which Professor Chapman was a member, and would consider it if the backbenchers gave some indication that they would support the legislative package if such a measure was included. He may have floated the notion such a notion and his office may have said, somewhat obliquely, he was discussing the 'suggestion'. But there did not appear to be any supporting evidence that the Minister was actively discussing the specific plan with crossbenchers.

It is not within the remit of this audit to ascertain the veracity of the report, and in any event there were no issues around fairness or impartiality etc. But it may be a possible illustration of the ease with which the truth of language can become a casualty of war reporting. There are distinctions between floating a notion and potential consideration Vs a specific proposition and active discussion/consideration of a specific plan. It is possibly a small but cautionary example of the care needing to be taken to ensure that in the heat of a fast-moving Canberra story, and the competitive environment of digital news sites, that the integrity of language is not lost, Chinese-whisper style. (see additional comments Segment 2) . **SATISFACTORY.** 

#### Segment 2.

Reporter Louise Yaxley. Government discusses new proposal with crossbenchers.

March 4.

http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-03-04/higher-education-new-university-fee-deregulation-proposal-offered/6280124

This report by political reporter Louise Yaxley was an update on an earlier report (Segment 1) and restated that the Government was discussing the Chapman proposal with crossbenchers but was unlikely to secure Senate approval given the view of the Palmer United Party, Labor and the Greens. It stated that Chapman had made a Senate submission, and that 'his plan is that universities...etc'. It also quoted the Prime Minister, in general comments on efforts to secure support for higher education changes, telling AM he hoped the Senate would support 'the proposals'. This report would give the ordinary consumer the impression of a fresh plan having been put to the Government and now to the Senate, that it was now being actively canvassed by the Government with crossbenchers, and the PM was talking about his hope of Senate support for the specific Chapman plan. In fact the Chapman submission had been made to a Senate committee on February 20 and followed an advisory report in 2014. As per the comments in Segment 1, there was some opaqueness about just what specific discussions the Government was having with crossbenchers, ie whether it was about a notion of prospective support, or about a specific plan. There was no corroborating evidence from crossbenchers that the submission detail was being actively discussed, or that the PM was hoping for Senate agreement out of such specific discussions.

The report ended with the Shadow Minister Senator Carr describing the proposal as a new student tax, and that 'the British Government' had considered such a scheme but considered it would increase fees. The report did not clarify which British Government was involved, or verify whether Senator Carr's version was an accurate summation. The report did not contain any response from the Minister.

As with the review comments in Segment 1, this report again shows the risk, or potential risk, with language when attempting to simultaneously break 'news' and reveal 'developments', succinct issues and interpret consequences, and incorporate or associate a general comment here to a specific issue there, suggesting or inferring a direct correlation which may not or does not exist.

This has always been an historic challenge for print journalism with the written word historically having more primacy and longevity of record than one-time only broadcasting. But the technological revolution now means all content, ie every word, is in 'digital ink' with a longevity and accessibility well beyond its original broadcast. It follows that for journalists whose careers and training have been more audio/visual now, their words and work are now just as much 'print' The digital explosion gives the 'broad' in 'broadcaster' a new meaning, and the reality that all words are now more important than before, in terms of reach and longevity, language and contextual integrity, and fairness and balance.

As more content is digitised, aggregated and repurposed, so the risk is greater that any weakness in language integrity or accuracy will be progressively elevated or aggravated. Or that an unintended, imbalanced or unfair narrative can quickly spread, perhaps virally. If more ABC resources and

content is to be re-used or re-purposed across a many platforms/many audiences approach, then the risk is greater again, especially if there is not a commensurate investment in the editing/reviewing aspects. This is discussed further in Segment 9.

While this segment did not contain any specific issues of impartiality, it raised some areas for reflection, such as the adequacy of training, written as well as broadcast skills and experience, editing/review resources, and re-use processes. **SATISFACTORY/REVIEW.** 

#### Segment 3.

Political reporter Andrew Greene and environment/science reporter Jake Sturmer. Business Council slams Government for jeopardising research jobs.

March 12.

http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-03-12/business-council-slams-government-for-jeopardising-research-jobs/6307916

This report was by Andrew Greene and Jake Sturmer. The latter is identified on the web site as the ABC's national environment and science reporter but it is not clear if this is for the whole ABC or merely on line. Similarly the OnLine bylines of political reporter/correspondent etc lack some clarity, and some staff, eg Louise Yaxley of ABC Radio Current Affairs, appear to have a dual role, and is cited OnLine as political reporter, but on the ABC website as a RCA political correspondent. Greater clarity and consistency would be useful.

The segment reported comments by Business Council of Australia president Catherine Livingstone that it was 'shameful' that business and research sectors had allowed a situation where research jobs could be held hostage in a political process, suggesting a failure of advocacy. Australia's Chief Scientist Professor Ian Chubb was also quoted from an earlier AM interview by Michael Brissenden, foreshadowing a speech to university heads about a prospective talent drain, and the lack of national prioritisation of key research areas, competitive loss etc.

The report quoted Education Minister Christopher Pyne from PM on the status of Senate discussions.

The overall report was straightforward, but a rare example (among the items cited for review) of addressing some important issues, eg the balance between basic and applied research; the lack of national consensus (government, business and industry, university research) on areas worthy of prioritisation (eg food, cyber-security, population health, advanced manufacturing, energy, resources). The politics of the research funding, and possible consequences of any defunding, was extensively covered on many ABC programs, but the public's knowledge of national interest benefits and potential in key research areas was not enhanced, nor was there much clarity around the strategy-investment-return record of Labor and Coalition Governments. **SATISFACTORY.** 

#### Segment 4.

Political reporter Jane Norman. Minister vows to redouble efforts to win Senator Lazarus.

March 13.

http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-03-13/pyne-vows-to-redouble-efforts-to-win-lazurus-support/5314796

This report focused on Education Minister Christopher Pyne stating he would 'redouble' his efforts to win the support of newly independent Senator Glenn Lazarus, who until that day had been a member of Palmer United Party and its Senate leader. The Minister was accused of 'harassment' by Senator Lazarus in December, but now the Minister was saying he had been surprised not to have had talks with the PUP Senate leader, but 'that's up to him'. There was no indication that attempts had been made to ascertain Senator Lazarus' position as an independent, and the reporter did not press the Minister on why, given his efforts to secure crossbencher support, he had not contacted the Senator since December, but there were no issues of impartiality etc. **SATISFACTORY.** 

#### Segment 5.

Political reporter Anna Henderson. Minister accused of 'blackmail'.

March 16.

http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-03-15/pyne-accused-of-blackmail-to-secure-support-university-bill/6320478

This report began with the Education Minister Christopher Pyne's warning on *Insiders* of consequences if the legislation was not passed, ie 'potentially 1700 researchers will lose their jobs', and how this had angered crossbench Senators Lazarus, Lambie and Xenophon, who were duly quoted, along with Chief Scientist Professor Ian Chubb. While the Minister was being accused of blackmail, unethical behaviour and irresponsibility, there was no direct response from him, or any indication he had been offered an opportunity to respond. As this report was last updated at 12.32am on 16 March, it would appear there had been sufficient opportunity to do so. Even if News Online has a strong reliance on utilising and repackaging other ABC material, its individual reports have to be judged on their merits. The segment per se was satisfactory, but the adequacy of sufficient right-of-reply merits reflection. **SATISFACTORY/REVIEW.** 

#### Segment 6.

Political reporter Louise Yaxley. Crossbench senators look set to reject legislation a second time.

March 16

http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-03-16/governments-bid-to-deregulate-universities-looks-set-to-fail/6321384

This report by Louise Yaxley stated the Government had failed to win the support of six of the eight Senate crossbenchers, amply evidenced by quotes from various senators. This was balanced by the support of one crossbencher, Senator Bob Day of the Family First Party, and the view of one national

MP, Andrew Broad, that scientific research jobs ought to be preserved by finding savings elsewhere. **SATISFACTORY.** 

#### Segment 7.

Political Correspondent Emma Griffiths. Summary of higher education legislative package.

March 31.

http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-03-16/whats-in-the-governments-higher-education-package/6322364

This report set out to summarise the status of 'the main points of the package' following various negotiated 'nip and tuck' changes. On the major issue of fee deregulation, the report said: 'This will allow unis, TAFEs and colleges to charge market-driven rates for courses from January 1, 2016. Last September, the University of Western Australia revealed its course fees would jump 30 per cent, with a full medical degree costing students more than \$100,000. In the budget, this move was made concurrent with a saving of \$1.1 billion over three years from 2015-2016, representing a 20 per cut in Commonwealth funding for course fees'.

This was an overly narrow summary. It utilised a single university's statement about its modelling of fees for one degree -- a fee frequently cited by Labor -- and did not reference the Government stating it would consider a proposal to cap excessive fee increases by universities by reducing government funding if crossbench Senators indicated such a mechanism would result in their support. The report briefly canvassed changes across aspects of student loans and scholarships.

The report would also have been more complete if it also briefly summarised the Government rationale for fee deregulation, and the historic and current views of the Labor and Green parties, and the views of key stakeholders (eg G8 and smaller universities).

The report was not impartial but missed an opportunity to provide a comprehensive but succinct ABC summary of the state of play of higher education. **SATISFACTORY.** 

#### Segment 8.

Political correspondent Emma Griffiths. March 16. Government back-down fails to win over crossbenchers.

March 16.

http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-03-16/pyne-backs-down-on-research-cuts/6322504

This report stated the Government's splitting of fee deregulation and funding, and a back-down on a threat to defund scientific research, had the support of Universities Australia but was still insufficient to win crossbench support. It also referred to 'the ABC has learned' the Government's Research Infrastructure Review Panel making a preliminary call for resolution of the scientific research funding and the breakthrough on that issue. The use of the term 'the ABC' ought not be used to elevate impact, cf 'the ABC's X program/reporter has learned...'., and their ought to be due attribution, in this case Jake Sturmer (see Segment 9).

The report, as with the majority of items in the audit, focussed almost exclusively on the crossbenchers. While key, they remained so because the Labor and Green parties had not shifted their opposition, notwithstanding frequent changes, proposals, back-downs etc.

The Minister, and the crossbenchers, were pressed ad infinitum: what's your view/reaction of this? would this change your position? how do you justify this? what would change your position? what you think of the Minister/crossbenchers? etc. But this was conspicuously absent in dealings with Labor and the Greens. Based on the material cited for the audit, Labor, in particular, was not regularly pressed on its unchanged stance, contradictions between its past record and present statements, or its own 'solution', and the Greens were almost absent.

Labor was afforded ( quite reasonably) opportunities to critique the Minister about the perceived shortcomings of his legislation, approach and tactics, but there was inadequate or no commensurate balance of (a) a comparative critique of Labor's record and policies in Government and (b) contradictions between its former and current positions and (c) its specific or alternative solutions to sustainable affordability and equity issues for universities, students, research, government and industry.

It would be unfair to single out this report per se, but it was illustrative of a broader pattern of overall pre-occupation with the crossbenchers and relations with the Minister. This was perfectly legitimate and reasonable, but it was not accompanied by due or commensurate focus on the majority of senators, ie Labor and Greens. It evidenced an imbalance of attention, which in turn could be seen by some as an over-emphasis on the trials and tribulations of the Government, or its Minister, and an under-emphasis on the past and present contributions of Labor and Greens, ie a perceived political imbalance by the ABC. Even if the 'sins' of coverage were more in unintended omission than deliberate commission, the perception risks are the same. The segment did not evidence a serious breach of impartiality but aspects merit review. **SATISFACTORY/REVIEW.** 

## Segment 9.

Science reporter Jake Sturmer. Federal Government panel calls for NCRIS funding.

• March 16.

http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-03-16/federal-government-review-panel-calls-for-ncris-funding/6323562.

This report stated 'the ABC has learned...' the Government's own Research Infrastructure Review Panel had, in advance of its report being finalised in May 2015, submitted to the Government that funding for scientific research had to continue beyond its June deadline. As commented in Segment 8, the generic use of 'the ABC' ought to be avoided.

The report said the Review Panel's submission had been accepted. Although the Minister's backdown was not commented on by members of the Panel, including Chief Scientist Professor Ian Chubb, who had previously appeared on several ABC programs expressing dismay with the prospective defunding, it quoted several leading scientists expressing relief.

Given the previous strong emphasis on criticism of the Minister's 'threat' of 1700 researchers potentially losing their jobs in nationally important research if the whole education package was not

passed, this report might equally have led off with the positive of the Minister agreeing to changes which would see the funding for nationally 'vital' research and international competitiveness being retained, at least for the time being, and that this came about as a result of a submission by the Government's own science panel. It would be understandable that a science reporter would focus on the input of a science panel, but equally understandable that an individual reporter would be less concerned with how an individual report sat in the context of overall NewsOnLine coverage of the issue. And also understandable that NewsOnLine editorial management is primarily focused on its own individual unit output in the competitive digital space, not on how well its output sits in the context of total ABC output.

The broad challenge is multi-dimensional: to ensure that not only are individual reports, programs and formats (radio, tv, online) as fair and balanced as possible, but that the whole aggregation of content is as fair and balanced as possible, given that many consumers are fluid in their access to multiple ABC programs and formats.

Assuming the ABC continues to shift from one program/one format/one time mode to more multiple aggregation/curation/dissemination/24x7 mode, so any element, be it one of excellence or shortcoming, can take on its own life and momentum, perpetuating a new 'truth' or 'conventional wisdom', so often more in the convention than the wisdom.

Any shortcoming in original material (eg accuracy, context, relevance, impartiality, fairness, diversity, open-mindedness, bias) can become bigger or elevated shortcomings, while any strengths and value can become weakened or warped as it passes through more hands, each pursuing its own program positioning, values, agenda etc. Disaster reconstructions often highlight how a small fault, seemingly inconsequential in isolation, can lead in a chain of events to an explosion of normal tolerances, as with NASA's famous o-ring disaster. Avoiding this in communications requires well-articulated, monitored and reviewed standards and policies. This is occurring with the ABC's efforts on standards, policies and guidance notes, and also stand-back independent objectivity, eg the Board's retrospective Editorial Audits. But the bigger challenge is real-time 24x7 monitoring and reviewing, so that any areas of inaccuracy, impartiality, imbalance etc are readily addressed and/or redressed while a news event is 'alive', not after it has passed.

Presumably everyone from the Board to individual staffers is seeking to be in lock-step in pursuit of the charter, standards of excellence and identifying and addressing any shortcomings, individual or systemic, real or perceived, as expeditiously as possible. The cross-check question is whether the focus and resources, be they top-down, bottom-up, or horizontal, are optimally and consistently achieving those objectives. **SATISFACTORY/REVIEW.** 

#### Segment 10.

Political reporter Anna Henderson. Senator Muir opposes Bill to deregulate fees.

March 17.

http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-03-17/ricky-muir-oppose-government-bill-to-deregulate-university-fees/6324110

This report was of a statement by Motoring Enthusiast Party Senator Ricky Muir that he would still oppose fee deregulation, and commenting that both major political parties had contributed to the

university sector issues, and called for Labor to outline its policies so they could be tested against the Government. **SATISFACTORY.** 

#### Segment 11.

Political reporter Andrew Greene. Minister vows to never give up.

March 17.

http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-03-17/christopher-pyne-higher-education-reforms-vow-never-give-up/6324262

This was a straightforward wrap-up on the eve of the Senate vote, the Minister commenting to Channel 9 that he would 'never give up' despite the pending defeat, and would be having his first meeting with Senator Lazarus that same day. **SATISFACTORY.** 

#### Segment 12.

Political reporter James Bennett. Universities call for fresh funding debate. March 18.

http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-03-18/universities-call-fresh-funding-debate-deregulation-defeat/6327648

This report was of Universities Australia CEO Belinda Robinson calling for redress of the 'historic underfunding' of the nation's 41 universities, a recapping of the Senate vote. The Labor Shadow Minister called for Mr Pyne's resignation or sacking, stating that universities had misjudged the mood of the people, and Labor would put forward an alternative funding model 'ahead of the next election'.

Of itself the report had no issues, but it underscored the point, made elsewhere, that whatever anyone's view of the Government/Minister's performance, legislation, tactics and advocacy -- and there was no shortage of reported opinion -- the same scrutiny was not apparent on Labor and the Greens, especially if one took at face value the peak university body's view of historic 'underfunding' which encompassed previous governments, including Labor-Green periods.

One might have expected Labor to have been pressed much harder to move beyond the politics of demonising the Minister and the dire consequences of fee deregulation, student 'taxes' and debts, funding cuts etc to outline its solutions to university funding, student equity, competitive teaching and research excellence, industry innovation etc. Over the month of material cited for audit, there was not one identifiable segment where Labor's position was seriously critiqued in any major or detailed way, not on its education/research record in government, not on its current policies and proposed solutions, not on the adequacy of putting forward an alternative funding model 'ahead of the next election'.

While the Minister repeatedly stated that the votes of crossbenchers had become pivotal only because of continued opposition by Labor and the Greens, and some of the crossbenchers lacked experience and/or expertise in economic, science and education matters, and lacked the resources of an Opposition party, there was scant evidence that Labor, and the Greens, were as scrutinised as much as the Minister and the crossbenchers. This segment per se was satisfactory but evidenced elements previously referred to, and discussed further in Part 2, which merit reflection. **SATISFACTORY/REVIEW.** 

#### Segment 13.

Political correspondent Emma Griffiths. Top tier universities call for de-politicised debate.

March 31.

http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-03-31/universities-call-to-reset-higher-education-reform-debate/6360734

This report focussed on the Group of Eight universities call for a de-politicised process 'to avoid the political animosity and polarisation which have characterised recent debate', and for any future review of the sector to involve business groups and a focus on research funding. The report did not address any differences between the Group of Eight and Australia's 33 other universities. **SATISFACTORY.** 

#### PART 2

Some comments on individual segments in Part 1 contained broader areas recommended for reflection or review, and referenced further comment in this Part 2. This section of the audit goes to more general discussion on those matters.

The ABC's stated objective is 'to be Australia's most trusted source', and the public investment in its journalistic resources and reach imposes a unique responsibility to demonstrably garner that trust, 'curate' it and create a virtuous cycle of trust, leadership and national benefit.

For the ABC to be broadly regarded as 'Australia's most trusted source' requires sustained bipartisan acknowledgment that, as per the Charter, it makes a unique and leading contribution to national identity by 'informing' Australians, and as per the Editorial Policies and Principles, does so with consistent accuracy, timeliness, fairness, balance, impartiality, open-mindedness, political neutrality and objectivity.

The desired net outcome, and key objective, would presumably be one where it is recognised the nation is demonstrably more 'informed' and with a greater sense of shared 'national identity', which goes to common values and priorities, than would have been possible without the ABC's contribution.

In areas of national importance, such as higher education, there is a need, and challenge for the ABC: to 'inform' (ie impart knowledge of a fact or circumstance) so more people are 'informed' (ie knowledgeable, learned). Especially in the contemporary political and media environment where 24x7 immediacy and competitiveness often creates a surplus of heat and noise, and a deficit of light and understanding.

Individual programs and segments may strive to be 100pc 'impartial' but even if achieved that of itself does not guarantee the community overall is better or optimally informed on a particular issue, the alternatives, risk-benefits and consequences.

Notwithstanding the performance levels of impartiality etc within individual segments canvassed in Part 1, the more challenging question is whether, after a month of intense journalistic endeavour on a single issue across multiple platforms, the ABC's resources and endeavours clearly led to the community being better informed, ie truly more knowledgeable.

For example, did all the endeavours and content truly deliver a deeper knowledge and understanding of:

- the economics of tertiary education(eg teaching, research, taxpayer, student, government)?
- the cost-benefits of free, subsidised or free-market approaches to tertiary education?
- whether Australia can afford a demand-driven system at globally competitive standards?
- funding models and outcomes, in Asia, Europe and North America?
- how Australian taxpayer contributions to higher education compare internationally?
- the extent to which the debate was about ideology, politics, economics or education?
- the competitiveness of Australian universities and the importance of foreign students?
- the economic contribution of education to the economy?
- the transparency around university revenues and teaching/research outcomes?
- whether universities were evidencing self-interest or public interest?
- Labor's education and research outcomes in government and clarity of current policies?
- whether Labor's '\$100,000 fees' campaign, or the Minister's predictions of university 'mediocrity', were well-based?
- any national prioritisation in scientific research investment, and the past or potential benefits?
- why Australia has not achieved bipartisanship on major education objectives, as it has with defence, security, banking, corporate regulation, consumer protection, etc?

If the coverage did not meaningfully address some or many of these areas, then some base questions might reasonably be asked: if the coverage did not deliver a more informed/understanding community on the higher education issue, was this due to an absence of objective or priority? organisational structure and operations negating the optimally harnessing of total resources and reach? issues of priorities, resources, authority, culture or accountability?

And if the ABC does not demonstrably deliver a more informed/understanding community on a major issue, and thus contribute meaningfully to national identity (which comes from broadly shared values and priorities), then what is its real and unique value?

The remit and resourcing of individual programs, with respective teams operating with full autonomy, provides due editorial 'independence', competitiveness and uniqueness of approach/audience, with all the positives that engenders. But as strength and weakness are often two sides of the same coin, the flip-side may be a structure of autonomous units which mitigates against harnessing, integrating and co-ordinating the totality of resources to deliver an enhanced outcome, ie where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Or mitigates against timely delivery of overall balance, fairness and due right of reply.

Many individual ABC programs cite high-quality analysis in their mission (\*see attachment 1), along with agenda-setting, leadership, intelligent engagement and knowledge etc. Analysis is the process of breaking a complex issue or subject into smaller parts so as to produce better 'understanding'

and a 'finding' from that process. On the basis of program segments submitted for audit, it is not clear how much focus is put on breaking down complexity into understanding and finding, and how much real 'analysis' takes place.

(A related area worthy of reflection is whether the audience/s sufficiently understand the 'mission' and ethos of individual ABC programs? Whatever the appropriateness or merits of each 'mission', they ought to be more readily transparent. This could provide greater context for an audience and overcome any audience confusion, and possibly mitigate against those with a negative view of 'the ABC' based purely on their perception of a certain segment/program without fully understanding the program's 'mission' within the broader ABC framework.)

Against these missions, and beyond editorial principles of 'impartiality' and 'fairness' etc, how effectively did a month of intense higher education coverage truly deliver on 'informing', 'analysis', 'knowledge' and 'national identity'?

While the ABC has many excellent presenters and journalists, there was no evidence of qualified and experienced in-house expertise on matters of higher education, economics or research and innovation. Much of the 'analysis' in programs was often the opinion or observation of external stakeholders.

Program staff and audiences would have benefitted from having access to a resource with experience and expertise in the area. In the past the ABC has had, to varying degrees, staff with a strong and recognised knowledge of areas such as science, business, religion and sport. A hint of the potential value is evident through ABC business with Alan Kohler, and BBC foreign affairs and economics with John Simpson and Robert Peston.

In addition to the apparent absence of specialist in-house expertise to better guide and inform staff and audiences, there was also no evidence the ABC utilised any external bodies. The Grattan Institute, Centre for the Study of Higher Education, L.H.Martin Institute, Eidos Institute, Australia Institute all have some higher education expertise and resources, yet were seemingly not utilised or meaningfully engaged.

There was no evidence of the ABC having an 'intelligence unit' approach to major socio-economic issues such as higher education, whereby it can, selectively, harness its strongest in-house resources, and occasionally in alignment with suitable third-parties.

There would seem to be opportunity, and need, for the ABC to develop stronger expertise and profile in areas of major national/international importance, such as economics, higher education, defence and foreign affairs, health and wealth. Beyond program enhancement and internal knowledge building, there is scope for the production of special broadcast and on-line reports on major topics, providing the community with an enhanced go-to source for independent, quality knowledge and understanding on that topic. One indicative example is special reports and surveys produced by The Economist.

An 'intelligence unit' approach ought also to include a more productive use of the ABC Fact Check resources to verify or challenge various statements made by key stakeholders, so as to better inform staff and/or audiences. Despite the plethora of conflicting statements and assertions in the higher education coverage, there was no reference in any program to any material produced by Fact Check.

Beyond ABC optimising internal and external resources, it is also submitted the pursuit of 'informing' for national benefit could have been enhanced by some collaborative or simulcast programming with SBS, with the potential for greater efficiency, impact, innovation, reach and diversity on the topic of education without impinging on the charters or independence of either the ABC or SBS.

There was also little evidence of the ABC actively seeking to draw audience attention to other relevant ABC content. Beyond some links off online reports, there were conspicuously few references within any segment to any other segment, or program to program, or foreshadowing of relevant upcoming content.

To further assist its audience/s, the ABC ought to investigate the potential for aggregating and centralising all content on a specific issue into a one-stop digital shop, whereby anyone interested in higher education or scientific research, for example, can readily locate and access all the available ABC content across television, radio, on line and Fact Check etc. This could also have a collateral benefit of demonstrating the breadth of ABC coverage on a specific issue, and perhaps mitigate against perceptions of impartiality and imbalance being formed on the basis of a single segment or program.

There did not appear to be an integrated or consistent approach to fully engaging and utilising the ABC's own audience/s. Some programs like The Drum and QandA utilised online and social media, but generally this was a 'come on down' invite, meaning it often delivered unstructured, unfocused and possibly un-moderated anonymous 'venting', and the majority of programs did not appear to have any facility for two-way engagement.

In pursuing more engagement, care needs to be exercised to ensure the extension of digital 'tentacles' through more individualistic or autonomous programming, be it under the charter's duality of 'informing' and 'entertaining', is not at the expense of those core responsibilities and standards which are the primary drivers of 'trust'.

#### **Conclusion**

Against the ABC charter, Editorial Policies and Principles, the 54 segments offered for audit broadly did a satisfactory job of keeping audiences up to date with the political machinations and positioning of various stakeholders, ie the 'heat'. There was, with some notable exceptions, less focus and thus less success in gathering and delivering elevated knowledge and understanding of sustainable economic and education outcomes for the nation, ie the 'light'.

Clearly the ABC quest for bipartisan recognition for being 'impartial' is a challenge in itself. The bigger challenge is to achieve the same recognition for being 'partial' to national conversations which deliver a better informed nation with enhanced prospects of national identity, direction or well-being.

Just as elite sporting leaders often focus more on addressing a top athlete or team's weaknesses rather than strengths, it is submitted the ABC could enhance its performance and reputation for trust, knowledge leadership and national benefit by understanding and addressing any weaknesses or missed opportunities without losing any of its many existing strengths.

## **Attachment 1: ABC Program missions:**

AM: "Australia's most informative among current affairs programs...sets the agenda".

**PM:** "covers a broad spectrum of issues relevant to all sections of Australia's geographically and culturally diverse community".

**The World Today:** "a comprehensive current affairs program which backgrounds, analyses, interprets and encourages debate on events and issues of importance to all Australians".

**Radio National:** "the most comprehensive coverage and analysis of national and international events".

**7.30:** "the best analysis of events".

**QandA:** "punters, pollies and pundits together to thrash out the hot issues of the week...democracy in action".

Drum: "the loudest noise".

**News Breakfast:** "latest news, incisive analysis and intelligent debate'.

Insiders: "fast-moving treatment of national affairs that invites discussion and analysis".

News Online: not identifiable.