



# Participation aims also require school reforms

**Jill Rowbotham**

FEDERAL government plans to lift participation of disadvantaged students in higher education to 20 per cent of the population by 2020 are aspirational, according to the University of Sydney's vice-chancellor Michael Spence, who nonetheless welcomes the initiative.

Dr Spence, for whom "elite but not elitist" has become something of a mantra since he assumed the top post at Sydney seven months ago, made the comments after Education Minister Julia Gillard announced the Government was prepared to adopt the equity targets from its Bradley review of the sector.

"I think the target is great, [but] I think it's aspirational and it will not be possible, as the Government realises, to achieve it without also addressing educational disadvantage at primary and secondary school levels," he said. "We have a clear ambition for the University of Sydney to

train Australia's brightest regardless of their social background.

"It's clear to me there are real obstacles to higher education for working Australian families and that's something our university is committed to overcoming.

"One challenge is to think about the way, at admissions, we assess not just [students'] attainment but potential.

"The current admission system of Australian universities is better at assessing the former than the latter. That's not something you can change overnight.

"It raises enormous equity issues of all sorts, it's something about which we need to think."

But the immediate need was to maintain pressure on the Government to accept the recommendations of Bradley and the Cutler review of innovation for a big cash injection to the system.

This is why he was surprised by the tone of some commentary in the sector regarding the Bradley report. One notable attack came from Group of Eight executive

director Michael Gallagher and was published in the *HES*.

"I think the Government's feet need to be kept firmly to the fire of the [Bradley review's] recommendations and I'm concerned that an excess of attention to matters of detail in the report may let the Government off the hook," Dr Spence said.

"It needs to follow through in the detail of its relationship with individual universities and it needs to put cash on the table. Does the Government believe in the education revolution enough to spend in that kind of way?"

He said it had already done so in the area of infrastructure, which had been very welcome.

"The Bradley and Cutler challenge is to follow through in the areas of teaching and learning.

"This is the biggest single investment the Government ought to be making in how we will live after the market bounces back. If we find ourselves not having the number of qualified Australians we need to take

advantage of that recovery we will really be in trouble."

Dr Spence said he had been disappointed there had been no deep discussion of the role of fees in making educational reform during the Bradley process.

"It's a pity the Australian debate around these issues has not managed to move on in the last 20 years, but it hasn't. It's possible to do fees in a way that's socially equitable. It's not immediately obvious that people on a modest income should pay taxes for the children of the wealthy to go to university."

He hoped the Government would also adopt the Bradley recommendation that it match any philanthropic funding universities managed to attract.

The 19th-century model of philanthropy was no longer appropriate and was being replaced by a venture-capital model in which investment could be targeted at projects that interested the donor, he said.



**Elite but not elitist:** University of Sydney vice-chancellor Michael Spence says his university is committed to removing obstacles to working families