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## **Minority government could lead to improved outcomes**

- Conor King
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### **THE federal situation should be looked at as a golden opportunity for positive change.**

THE reliance on independent members of parliament and the Australian Greens is generally interpreted as providing a shallow base for good policy during the coming term of government.

Many commentators, including some from the universities, have argued that the government will be tied to unseemly deals targeting the electorates of its four additional supporters, to the neglect, if not detriment, of other regions and nationally valuable initiatives. This is based on a narrow stereotyped reading of how independent MPs operate.

There is reason to argue that the government's minority status can lead to better outcomes for universities and students than a majority government would necessarily provide.

The macro policy settings for higher education are well set, following the Bradley review and the government's almost complete endorsement of its recommendations. A minority government may well have been slower to endorse the proposals when faced with the array of questions from universities and other groups on the Bradley report's release. There were considerable doubts about whether universities would attract substantially more students and how well universities would respond to demand-driven funding.

For a sector keenly awaiting a clear direction, backed by additional investment, a long consideration of the Bradley report would not have been positive.

Effective implementation of Bradley requires a viable quality framework to support a well-constructed funding system delivering the government's promised resources.

These involve myriad micro settings that collectively have to support, not hinder, the macro policy intent. This is the task for the government during the next three years.

The main challenge is the government's (and universities') willingness and capacity to respond imaginatively to the inevitable problems that will emerge in the next three years.

Good implementation is crucial to the success of policy change. The problem universities face is that implementation is less interesting politically than the policy announcement, until faults arise.

We need to ensure implementation gets the attention it needs so we can avoid faults and instead reap the benefits the reforms promise.

The independents provide one means to ensure the government remains focused.

The sector-wide concern about the international student program is a leading example.

The visa changes for international students addressed serious problems in the international student market. The direction is right but the implementation has overreached, deterring legitimate students from enrolling with well-established providers. The government needs to understand the problem is real and work to correct it while holding to the broader intent of tidying up the previous problems.

The operation of the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency is already a concern for universities. So far it has not been developed thoughtfully to balance effective scrutiny of all providers, including the universities, with the robust targeting of areas of greatest risk. Universities are also working with the Australian Learning and Teaching Council on the development of discipline-level standards, while conscious about how such standards could be badly mismanaged in practice.

Demand-driven funding will work well only if the financial incentives support a suitable response from universities.

The government is committed to renewing the funding clusters, a process that needs to produce an effective structure relating the base commonwealth rates for teaching and student contributions to the funds for regional loading, teaching and learning quality, and low socioeconomic status enrolments. The outcomes need to balance the incentives so that universities will respond to the range of potential future students and collectively retain access for all Australians.

A majority government may take the attitude that these are all questions of detail and focus its attention elsewhere, an approach the government took in other areas, to its detriment, in its first term.

Universities should consider the independents as allies in ensuring that all of these areas are developed sensibly, balancing government program needs with workable arrangements for each university. Played well, we can make minority government a boon rather than a negative.

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