

Australian reform will see universities put squeeze on students

Sydney The Australian government has unveiled a blueprint for higher-education reform that will allow universities to ratchet up student fees and clamp down on industrial action.

The A\$1.5-billion (US\$1-billion) package, announced in the federal budget on 12 May, will increase higher-education funding as long as universities comply with a raft of reforms, such as the abolition of compulsory student unions. These measures, together with increased student fees and restrictions on industrial action, make it likely that the reform package will face a rough ride in the Senate, in which the ruling Liberal Party lacks a controlling majority.

The plan has generated mixed reactions among university staff. Funding for student courses is “disappointingly modest”, says Paul Greenfield, deputy vice-chancellor of the University of Queensland in Brisbane. However, university chiefs have welcomed the partial deregulation of student fees, given the limited public funds available.

University research will not be affected by the reform, as this will be addressed later in the year when the government completes its audit of the nation’s scientific activities.

Museums face prospect of giving up human remains

London Thousands of prehistoric human bones and skulls, brought to Britain during the nineteenth century, may be set to return home. A report commissioned by the British government, which will be released in the summer, will propose legal changes that would allow indigenous people to claim items from British museums and galleries.

But anthropologists last week warned that handing over the remains would be a blow to evolutionary science, particularly if they were reburied or damaged. The collections are important for understanding human evolution and migration, they say.

“Human specimens help us to understand



Bone of contention: Britain’s museums may have to return human artefacts to their places of origin.

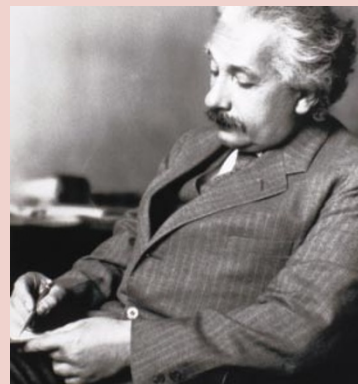
Einstein enthusiasts gain net benefit

Pasadena Albert Einstein’s musings on science, politics and travel are to be made available to the public on the Internet.

More than 230 scientific manuscripts, 740 non-scientific essays and 5 travel diaries — many previously unseen by the public — have been compiled in a free, searchable database.

The project coincides with a symposium on papers by Einstein (pictured), hosted by the American Museum of Natural History in New York. “Einstein interests a broad intellectual community and he is a public figure for science,” says science historian Jürgen Renn of the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science in Berlin, who proposed the project more than a decade ago.

► www.alberteinstein.info



patterns of health and disease in earlier populations,” says Louise Humphrey, an anthropologist at the Natural History Museum in London. The museum houses a collection of around 20,000 items, many representing indigenous people from Australia and North America.

In the United States, anthropologists have been at loggerheads with native tribes since the enactment of 1990 Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act.

Approval for stem cells pre-empts parliament

Ottawa The Canadian Institutes of Health Research are to bypass a legislative hold-up that is stalling plans to use human embryonic stem cells for research, the institutes’ president Alan Bernstein has announced.

The Canadian parliament is considering a bill that will allow researchers to work on stem cells taken from unused embryos at fertility clinics, but would outlaw cloning to produce such cells. The legislation was expected to be approved earlier this year, but its passage has been delayed by controversy over stem-cell research. The bill is still expected to become law later this year, but Bernstein says that he will begin to implement the guidelines before then, by assembling an ethical-oversight committee for the work.

Opponents of stem-cell research have accused Bernstein of circumventing the legislative process. But research-advocacy groups have welcomed the move, arguing that the parliament’s indecision has held up Canada’s contribution to stem-cell science.

Italian research chief jumps ship as reorganization looms

Rome Lucio Bianco last week resigned as president of Italy’s main basic-research organization, the CNR. The announcement came one day before the Italian government issued a decree that places the CNR, as well as the National Institute of Astrophysics (INAF)

and the Italian Space Agency, in the hands of commissioners for reorganization.

The decree was drawn up last autumn by research minister Letizia Moratti in a bid to make research more productive. But the research community viewed it as an attempt by the government to gain political control over basic research (see *Nature* 421, 465; 2003).

The decree’s exact contents are not yet known, but the National Institute for the Physics of Matter is likely to be brought into the CNR, and astronomy institutes are likely to be transferred from the CNR to the INAF. Researchers say they will consider a protest if they are not consulted over the reorganization.

A career in sport? I’d rather be on the bench

Tokyo More Japanese schoolboys want to be academics when they grow up than anything else, says a survey released this month. The survey, which asked 991 children of up to primary-school age what they wanted to be, found that an academic career was the choice for 9.6% of boys — more than wanted to play professional soccer (9.1%) or baseball (8.5%).

It is the first time that academia has taken the top spot since the Dai-ichi Mutual Life Insurance Company launched the annual survey in 1989. The company attributes the jump to the fact that Nobel Prizes went to Japanese scientists in 2000 and 2001.

Hopes for a better gender balance in future research are likely to be dashed, however. Girls in the survey were more interested in catering and nursing, with an academic career not making it into the top ten.

Correction

In the news feature “The tiny toolkit” (*Nature* 423, 10–12; 2003), an image of a cantilever on page 11 was incorrectly credited to the California Institute of Technology. It was actually developed by teams at IBM Zurich Research Laboratory and the University of Basel. On page 12, the diagram labels have been mixed up — the left-hand protein should be marked ‘field off’ and the right-hand protein ‘field on’.