

Week in review

TO FEE OR NOT TO FEE

THE Federal Government's plans to replace voluntary student union fees with a services fee of up to \$250 was hotly debated last week. The Opposition claimed the proposal was a return to "the bad old days of effective compulsory student unionism" and student unions were angered that none of the money would be spent on campus political activities.



Youth Minister Kate Ellis said universities would be able to choose whether they adopted the capped fee on July 1. It would be spent on health and welfare, food and beverage services and sport and recreation.

However, not one cent from the collected fees would be spent supporting political parties on campus and candidates in elections. The Opposition plans to vote against the Government's measure.

Debate on the Bill continues this week, and the Senate Education, Employment and Workplace Relations Committee will report back on it on March 10.

DROP-OUTS

FEDERAL government figures have revealed an average 18 per cent of first-year university students drop out of their courses, and up to 30 per cent at some institutions. The drop-out rate among poorer students was 20.4 per cent.

REVIEWING BRADLEY

UNIVERSITIES have spoken about their fear they will miss out on crucial new funding for teaching and research in the May Budget because the Federal Government now is so heavily in the red.

The Government will release its "in-principle" response to the Bradley Review of Higher Education, which recommended an extra \$6.5 billion in funding over four years - before the Budget. The sector, however, will have to wait until May 12 to see if any new funding is forthcoming.

"We're worried that there won't be attention to the admitted problems," Universities Australia chief executive Glenn Withers said. The review's author, former UniSA vice-chancellor Denise Bradley, said fairer access to higher education was another priority: "We cannot continue to frame education policy and practice around an implicit assumption that all we need to do is pick winners . . . on whom we lavish the benefits of an elite education while we provide basic skills to the rest."



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CLOSED SCHOOLS

IN a state first, 37 schools were closed on Eyre Peninsula on Thursday because of the worst fire conditions since Victoria's Black Saturday.



CAN YOU BELIEVE IT?

WITH JAMES BYRNE, UNIVERSITY OF ADELAIDE

Evolution or design?

CHARLES Darwin published his book *On the Origin of Species* 150 years ago and yet debate still rages between science and church on the issue of how we came to be. Darwin's theory fits neatly into our understanding of the planet and provides the only scientifically acceptable theory for life on Earth. But creationists believe the only explanation for natural wonders such as the eye is an intelligent designer.

Darwinism suggests that over millions of years evolution has driven the development of diversity on Earth.

Genetic evolution results from mutations to DNA. This gentle process slowly and delicately produced all the forms of life on Earth. It also explains why there is such diversity of life, as evolution works by making small groups of individuals better adapted and more able to exploit their environment.

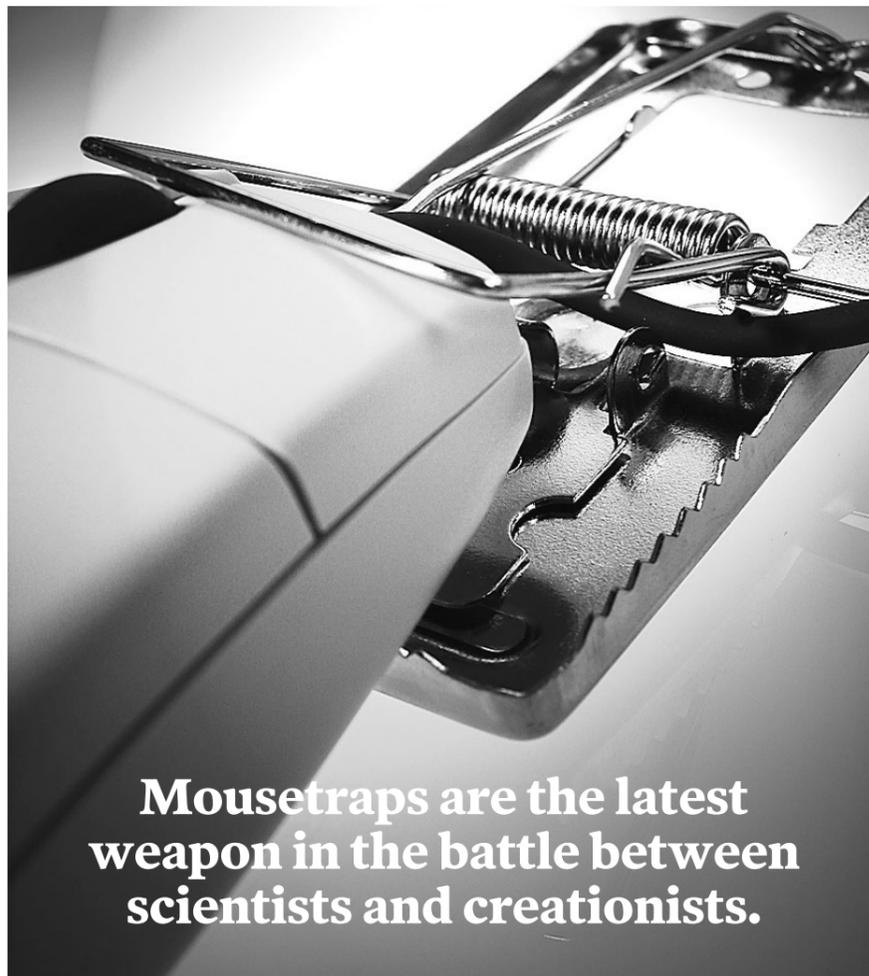
Fish have evolved fins to better exploit the sea while birds did not because their preferred environment is the air and so they evolved alternatively to produce wings.

Intelligent design is based around the belief that "certain features of the universe and of living things are best explained by an intelligent cause, not an undirected process such as natural selection." Intelligent design suggests that because mutations occur at random locations and have random effects, the chance that they would produce supremely complex organisms is too small to be considered an option.

Evolution cannot "plan" or "direct" the construction of an eye; an eye is simply built by random mutation. The suggestion is that because it is so complex, it could not possibly have evolved, mutation by mutation; it must instead have been designed to appear and function the way it does by a creator of some kind.

One of the central points of intelligent design is the concept of "irreducible complexity". Irreducible complexity means that certain structures cannot be made simpler and still retain their function.

Intelligent design supporters claim this as proof of an intelligent creator. After all, if something could not be made simpler then it must have been put together as a whole and not piece by piece by sequential mutations. The common example of irreducible complexity is the mousetrap. A common mousetrap is made up of five parts, the wooden board, the cheese holder (or bait), the spring, the bar and the latch that holds the bar back and the spring tight. If any of these components are taken away, the remaining parts no longer function as



Mousetraps are the latest weapon in the battle between scientists and creationists.

a mousetrap and therefore the mechanism is irreducibly complex.

However, the concept of irreducible complexity can be accounted for by Darwinism. There is increasing evidence that systems that are thought of as irreducibly complex are actually made up of components that have alternative functions not related to that system.

It's like having a number of jigsaw puzzles. Each puzzle makes its own picture but large sections of different puzzles can be combined in different ways to make new pictures that are completely different from the two original completed jigsaw puzzles. Biologically, this is how many protein complexes work. Protein complexes are made up of many interacting proteins but each of those proteins may also be involved

in building other protein complexes. The result of this is that you do not need to evolve a whole complex system at the same time. Multiple systems can all "donate" components to create new complexes capable of performing a new or better role.

Darwinists have stolen the idea of the mousetrap to make their point. Sure a mousetrap is irreducibly complex, as a mousetrap. However (and you can try this at home), if you remove the bait and the latch, leaving only the spring, board and bar, you have an awful mousetrap but a perfectly functioning tie clip.

James Byrne is a PhD student of microbiology at the University of Adelaide.

Universities on edge as money crisis bites

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The university is cutting back on costs and discretionary spending - such as spending on books, journals and equipment. However, all prizes and scholarships are still being funded. Mr Duldig said the biggest concern was whether international student numbers would hold up, with the majority coming from China, Malaysia, Singapore and Hong Kong.

A spokesman from Flinders University said the devaluation of the Australian dollar relative to the U.S. dollar was expected to add 25 to 30 per cent to the costs of U.S. dollar purchases in 2009 - with software and library supplies most affected.

However, he said, "the devaluation should make Australia a more attractive place to study for international students, subject to the influence of the global financial crisis on study intentions". UniSA vice-chancellor Peter Hoj said he was

"really tested as a leader" when he had to formulate the budget for 2009.

"Investment returns have dropped quite significantly," he said. "Collectively, we have almost 10,000 full-time employees. I mean, we are big employers."

"So if you happened to have cash reserves say of \$100 million, you suddenly have to find another \$3 million, so it is difficult."

Professor Hoj said the university might be forced to freeze staffing levels, though there were no plans to sack staff.

"When you have 10,000 employees, people do leave," he said.

"Can we actually afford to re-employ them, or refill those positions?"

Flinders University's Professor Michael Barber said universities in Australia had built "one of the most dramatic export service industries ever seen".

"No other nation anywhere else in the OECD has the level of international education that we have. Many Australian

universities have more international students on board than many U.S. ones," he said. "That's kept us afloat."

Professor Barber said export earnings from the higher-education sector had gone up in the past 12 months, while earnings from the nation's top two exports - coal and iron ore - had come down.

But the rate of growth was not sustainable without further investment to maintain - and improve - teaching standards and facilities, Professor McWha said.

International students injected \$741 million into the state economy in the 2007-08 financial year.

Enrolments by international students in Australian institutions increased by a record 20.7 per cent to 543,898 in 2008 - the largest increase since 2002. This is the first time international enrolments have exceeded 500,000 in a calendar year.

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