Bishop to continue reform agenda

LAWYER and West Australian MP Julie Bishop will step into the Education, Science and Training portfolio after a cabinet reshuffle yesterday elevated Brendan Nelson to the senior role of Defence Minister.

After four years of higher education reform, Dr Nelson will hand the baton to Ms Bishop, formerly aged care minister. She said she was thrilled to take charge of education, which had long been a passion of hers. "I believe education is a life-long process: it starts with our children at an early age and it ought be a life-long commitment," she said.

Ms Bishop will have carriage of a radical range of reforms introduced by Dr Nelson, some of which are yet to be implemented. She paid tribute to his "reformist zeal".

"I hope to continue some of the initiatives and policies he has put in place," she said.

"A number of them do need bedding down and that will be a challenge, but I'm certainly relishing the prospect of being in that role."

Vice-chancellors have supported Dr Nelson’s attempts to free up the fee market but have railed against an increase in bureaucratic intervention in their day-to-day affairs. This will be one of Ms Bishop's biggest challenges: to realign the Government’s market principles with its demands for accountability.

Greg Craven, director of the John Curtin Institute of Public Policy, hailed Ms Bishop's elevation as "an outstanding appointment". "She is highly intelligent, very focused and an excellent listener, and I expect she would be a very effective minister," Professor Craven said. "One challenge she might have in higher education is stabilising the pace of reform. There have been some very good reform ideas but there are an awful lot of them, and there might be some need for ordering and prioritisation."

"I think she would be a selective reformer. I think she would carefully pick her targets for maximum strategic effect and then do them."

Dr Nelson’s departure has received a mixed response. National Tertiary Education Union president Carolyn Allport said he had overseen substantial rises in tuition fees, a deterioration in infrastructure and resources, and unprecedented interference in the day-to-day operations of universities. But Dr Allport said he had made an effort to consult widely and seemed genuinely concerned with issues of quality and advancing educational opportunities.

The National Union of Students president Rose Jackson said: "To Nelson, we say good riddance to bad rubbish ... what we will remember from his era is rising cost and decreasing access."

Higher education policy specialist Simon Marginson of Monash University said Dr Nelson's legacy was "half finished, but considerable". "He’s remade the sector. He’s been the most important minister since [Labor's John] Dawkins, but more than the Dawkins settlement, his is an unfinished settlement," Professor Marginson said. He said Ms Bishop and the Government were confronted by a stark choice: allow the universities real flexibility to pursue full-fee paying students or go back to the days when universities depended on the commonwealth for a high level of funding.

The Australian Vice-Chancellors Committee did not return calls from the HES yesterday. Several vice-chancellors saw less government regulation as a priority for the new minister. "The regulation is overbearing at the moment," said Ian Goulter, vice-chancellor of Charles Sturt University.

The University of Queensland’s acting vice-chancellor Paul Greenfield, said the Nelson reforms, in theory, gave universities more freedom but this was countered by the commonwealth's micromanagement. Monash vice-chancellor Richard Larkins said Dr Nelson had been a committed advocate for quality but he pointed to the minister’s failure to secure proper indexation of university grants as a significant issue.

In her 1998 maiden speech to parliament, Ms Bishop had talked about the importance of the information economy and the role of the education sector. "We need a national skills base as a critical component of a national comparative advantage," she said at the time. "We need to equip our people with an enhanced knowledge base through education, as intellectual capital will be the key to prosperity and stability."

A University of Adelaide law graduate, she moved to Perth, where she became a managing partner with Clayton Utz and at one stage sat on the Murdoch University senate. Touted as a rising star and close political ally of Treasurer Peter Costello, she became aged care minister in 2003.

In a ringing endorsement of Bishop at the opening of her Perth electorate office in 2000, Mr Costello said: "This is a Bishop [who] will go all the way to the Vatican."