



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

BILLS

**Higher Education and Research
Reform Amendment Bill 2014**

Second Reading

SPEECH

Tuesday, 2 September 2014

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Questioner
Speaker Snowdon, Warren, MP

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Mr SNOWDON (Lingiari) (16:53): I am so disappointed that that earlier contribution was cut so short!

When I was so rudely interrupted by an event earlier today, I was talking about regional universities and the impact of the Higher Education and Research Reform Amendment Bill 2014, particularly about regional universities, students, their families and communities in the Northern Territory.

We do know that universities which will be most disadvantaged by these cuts are those most reliant on public funding—the smaller regional universities in particular.

Minister Pyne says :

Regional students and their communities will be among the big winners from the Abbott Government's higher education reforms ...

Well, blah, blah, blah—we all know that is wrong. Let me just give the contrary view, as expressed by the former vice-chancellor of Melbourne University, Prof Kwong Lee Dow, who said:

Whatever finally emerges from the political machinations with the Senate, students will be paying significantly more, and rural and regional students will be disproportionately affected.

Which is precisely what I have been saying.

The minister argues that regional universities will benefit in attracting students by keeping fees low. He has the Bunnings model of higher education for regional students, based on keeping costs and prices low and keeping volume of throughput high. I have news for him: this is based on what I think is a very poor and mistaken assumption that regional universities will be in a position to reduce their fees and absorb the funding cuts. Regional students and universities will be reduced in this process—the process being imposed upon them by this government—to second-rate institutions!

Regional universities enrol well above the sector average when it comes to the proportion of domestic students who are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, who come from low-SES backgrounds and who are from regional and rural areas. For example, Charles Darwin University has the highest Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander enrolment in the country at 7.3 per cent. Monash University has 0.4 per cent. Charles Darwin University has a low-SES student cohort of 19.6 per cent. The University of Sydney—that great sandstone university which really wants these processes—has only 7.8 per cent. And Charles Darwin University has students from a regional and remote background at 63 per cent and Macquarie University has 5.9 per cent. Those are just three examples of the way in which Charles Darwin University, in this case, is looking after the interests of those people who we want to target to make sure they get a better educational outcome.

The minister says that new scholarships will produce record levels of scholarships for disadvantaged students and will be of particular benefit to regional students and regional universities. However, as we know, this scheme is basically funded by an internal 20 per cent tax on increased course fees. An increase in fees for any university where more than 20 per cent of its student cohort comes from a disadvantaged low-SES background will be more than the average value of the Commonwealth scholarship. Therefore, if the university wanted to award every low-SES student a scholarship this would be less than the increase in fees used to fund them and the university would be losing.

By contrast, universities with the lowest levels of disadvantaged student enrolments will be in position to offer more generous scholarships—that is, Sydney, Melbourne and the like—and to attract the best students from the bush. I know this to be the case: this is what regional universities fear. That is, regional unis might be unable to compete to keep the best students from their own communities. This poses a significant threat to viability and

long-term educational opportunities for those communities, and particularly puts the social and economic health of regional communities at risk.

Professor Andrew Van, the vice-chancellor of Charles Sturt University said:

The second concern I have is with the impacts on workforce supply. In the existing system we have been able to boost the supply of skilled professionals in regional areas. I worry that this may be undermined by these changes as regional students are put off studying.

Universities like CDU are a key social, cultural and economic part of their local and regional communities. Considerable public investment has been put into establishing these universities where people live and work in regional Australia. It would be highly regressive to the prosperity of our nation—and it is clear that this will be the case—if our regional universities are closed down or reduced to cut-price, or find that they cannot offer the breadth of courses that they currently offer to compete with other universities—the sandstone universities and private companies—which have no long-term investment in the community.

A 20 per cent cut to Commonwealth grants funding—as I said earlier today, in CDU's case—will mean a cut of \$50.4 million over the four-year period 2016-2019. Immediately, for a regional university like Charles Darwin there are some programs they would not be able to fund and courses that they would not be able to provide.

We know what the government is on about here. What they are doing is unfair, unreasonable and unwanted. They need to go back to the drawing board and do something which is reasonable, fair and wanted by the Australian community, and not discriminate against those people who aspire to have further education.