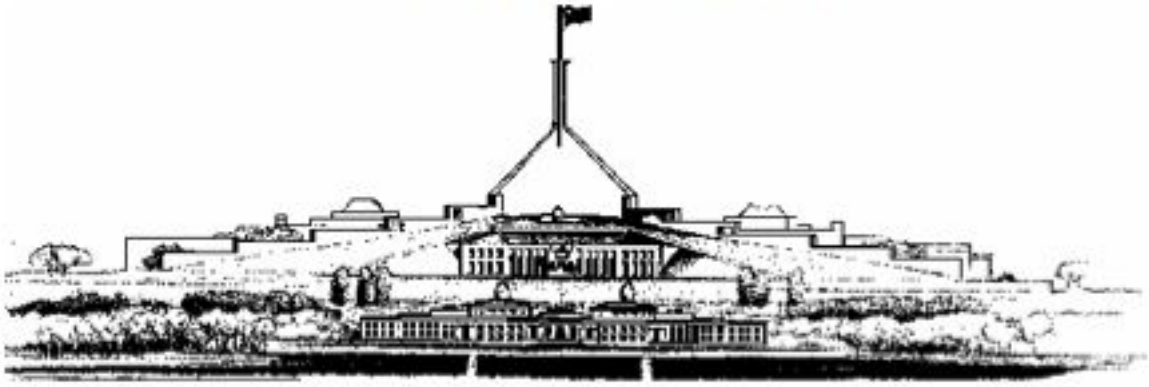
COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



THE SENATE

BILLS

Higher Education Support Amendment (Student Contribution Amounts and Other Measures) Bill 2012

Second Reading

SPEECH

Monday, 20 August 2012

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

SPEECH

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Speaker	Nash, Sen Fiona	**Question No.**	

Senator NASH (New South Wales—Deputy Leader of The Nationals in the Senate) (10:01): I rise to make some comments on the Higher Education Support Amendment (Student Contribution Amounts and Other Measures) Bill 2012. There are two main parts to this bill. Obviously, as many of my colleagues have spoken to already, the first is to reinstate the student contribution amounts for mathematics, statistics and science units of study to their pre-2009 levels for domestic students. It also removes the eligibility for Commonwealth supported places and the Higher Education Loan Program schemes for Australian citizens who commence study after 1 January 2013 but do not intend to live in Australia during their courses of study.

Following the MYEFO in 2011-12 Labor announced a reversal of the then-existing policy, and the reason given was that there had not been a noticeable difference as a result in the number of the country's maths and science graduates. Certainly, from this side of the chamber, there is an acknowledgement that indeed there was not the intended result from the lower contribution that had been required. The contribution will increase from $4,691 to $8,353, but it has to be noted that there seems to be a cost-saving measure attached to this particular piece of legislation that is going to create about $1 billion in savings over four years. That is a significant saving and, given the current nature of the government's fiscal situation, it is not a surprise to see this. The assumption that it is a cost-saving measure has to be taken into account.

There is a need for action in this area—there is no doubt. There is a real lack of science and maths graduates and a dearth of students who are moving to study in that area. There is agreement with the government from this side that we need to address this shortage in maths, science and statistics. On this side we acknowledge that we need to address that. Interestingly, just nine per cent of Australian university students enrol in physics, chemistry and maths compared with an OECD average of 13 per cent and a South-East Asian average of 26 per cent. University maths majors fell by 15 per cent between 2001 and 2008. University enrolments are just one area we need to look at.

To me, it simply does not make sense to try to target students as they are entering university if we want the levels of those students doing maths and science to increase. In my view, it is simply far too late. We need to be encouraging these students way earlier—right back in primary and secondary school—and showing them the great opportunities that are available if they follow a path into maths and science. My good colleague Senator Mason made some excellent comments in his contribution about his thoughts as a young child wanting to be an astronaut. We have moved away as a culture from the aspirational ethos that Senator Mason referred to, after being focused on these types of areas. I noted that Senator Mason spoke almost derogatorily about himself becoming a senator rather than taking on those paths, but I am very glad that he did. He made the very good point that we have changed in our aspirations as young people to where we are headed, and I think it is important that that is addressed.

It is not going to be fixed, and the government tends to put forward simplistic responses. Again, with the lowering of the HECS fee, we have a simplistic response from government: 'We'll lower the costs so therefore we'll get more students.' In fact, there was a good deal of commentary at the time warning that the HECS discount policy would not actually work. Professor Bruce Chapman, from the ANU, said:

I would expect these changes in prices to have very little effect on enrolment behaviour … People don't respond much to changes in HECS prices.

In 2007 Vice-Chancellor Steven Schwartz from Macquarie University predicted a HECS discount 'would have little effect because it was seen as too far away in the future and abstract'.

Indeed, most of these students make their decision on the course rather than a cost reduction. I would say it was a very simplistic response from the government that is not taking into account the bigger picture that Senator Mason talked so eloquently about in his contribution last week on this piece of legislation.

It is also very interesting to note that this is a combination. It is not just about the students that we need to encourage—and we do need to encourage them from a very early age. It is also the difficulty in attracting and retaining maths and science teachers. In 2006, quite some time ago, a survey was done that pointed out quite alarmingly that 75 per cent of schools were finding it difficult to recruit qualified maths teachers. Things have not really improved since then. We need to focus on this area—there are no two ways about that. The government have approached this far too simplistically. They are not thinking of the bigger picture. They are not thinking holistically about how to attract these young people and provide some incentives for them. We need to look at how to open these students' eyes to the great future in maths and science, because the current figures show that the policies in place at the moment simply are not working.

This is another example of the government's inability to properly formulate and implement policy. The Prime Minister likes to pride herself on being the 'education prime minister'. Indeed, for some time she has been talking about the education revolution:

We've started the journey for the Education Revolution. We need to complete that journey for every child, in every school.

That is what the Prime Minister said at the ALP campaign launch way back in August 2010. What we are seeing again from this government, as we have seen so often, is words and not actions that actually back up those words. They throw out all the words, throw out all the trite sayings about having an education revolution and yet we look at a policy misdirection, at best, with something like this HECS reduction to try and encourage these students into maths and science. But this policy simply did not work. When we look at the inability of this government to properly formulate and deliver policy, the list is endless.

What is astonishing is that the government was trying to encourage more students to do maths and science yet, at the same time, the government cut the funding for PrimaryConnections. This is extraordinary because on the one hand the government is saying, 'We're trying to encourage students to do maths and science,' and on the other hand the government is cutting funding to one of the very programs that are instilling and inspiring a love of maths and science in young students. That is simply stupid, yet another stupid piece of policy from this Labor government. The PrimaryConnections program was initiated by the Australian Academy of Science. It established a professional learning program supported by a very strong curriculum to improve the quality and quantity of primary science teaching. In the middle of 2011, the Gillard government moved to cut funding to the program. At that time, 55 per cent of all Australian primary schools had adopted at least one of the PrimaryConnections teaching modules in their teaching programs. At the time the Australian Academy of Science said:

At a time when Australian students' interest in science is declining and achievement standards are slipping, it makes no sense for the Government to cut funding for primary and high school science education programs that are proven to improve teacher quality and increase students' science knowledge and skills.

How stupid was that? Here is a government with a perfectly good program currently in place, that is shown to work and is supported across the sector, and yet the government cuts funding to it. People quite rightly get extremely frustrated and annoyed when they look at the waste and mismanagement in so many areas by this government. Yet the government cuts funding to a program for young students that was shown to work and that was trying to deliver exactly what the government was trying to do by reducing HECS debt: instilling students' interest in and aspiration to move towards maths and science. It is breathtakingly stupid! We know that Professor Brian Schmidt, from the Australian Academy of Science and the 2011 Nobel laureate in physics, saw that the worth of the program was so great that he donated $100,000 from his Nobel prize to the program. And yet we have the Labor government under the so-called 'education prime minister' with the 'education revolution' cutting funding to the program. It simply does not make sense and reflects the inability of the Labor government to properly think things through and properly come up with a process and a policy that is going to work, can be implemented and is going to be substantive. There was also a lot of concern at the time about the initial lack of commitment by the government to fund the maths and science Olympiads. Finally, thankfully, after all this period of confusion and extreme concern across the sector the government reinstated the program. All of that confusion and uncertainty was completely avoidable and completely unnecessary. The government simply made a very bad decision in moving to cut that funding when it did not have to. It was a piece of ill-thought-through policy from this Labor government.

When it comes to maths and science, these are particular concerns for me for rural and regional areas. There is no doubt there is a real disparity in the struggle that rural and regional areas, particularly the more remote areas, have to maintain the same education standards as we see in the metropolitan areas. This is particularly so in the science and maths sector. Now we have seen, from the NAPLAN results and answers to some questions on notice that I asked earlier, that regional and remote students are consistently and markedly outperformed by their metropolitan counterparts. We know it is a lot more difficult in the regions to access equity in education across a whole range of areas.

One particular inequity that still exists is for students who are trying to get independent youth allowance. The government have a $150 parental income test cap on that. Again, how stupid is that? These young students have proven themselves independent of their parents, but the government have a parental income test cap in place which precludes those students from even applying for independent youth allowance. This is one of the most stupid, inequitable pieces of policy I have seen in some time. I will continue to raise this issue until the government realise the incredibly bad impact that this is having on so many regional families.

When it comes to science and maths in the regions not only do we have to address this issue of inequity that we see in the results that are coming through; it is particularly difficult to attract and retain teachers in science and maths. In regard to filling vacant teaching positions in secondary science, ICT and maths, studies have found that schools in regional areas find it twice as likely, and remote areas four times as likely, that they will be unable to fill those vacancies compared to schools in metropolitan areas. Often this means in regional areas we are getting teachers—and I am sure they are very capable—who are not necessarily trained in maths and science to deliver those subjects. There is a whole range of areas we need to address when it comes to increasing the number of students going through the maths and science pathway. It is not as simple as just saying, 'We'll reduce the HECS fee.' That has been shown to have not been the appropriate decision to make.

The lack of attention by this government to education and university outcomes across a whole range of areas has become more and more obvious. It is not just maths and science; there is a significant lack of numbers studying agriculture and agribusiness. While the government obviously have a focus in this legislation on maths and science, I ask the government to put a similar amount of effort and focus on agriculture and agribusiness. At the moment, there are around 700 graduates in agriculture and related courses, but there are about 4,000 places in that sector that need to be filled. So the government need to start focusing on this area and making sure that this shortage is addressed. The fact that the government have not had a focus on this area just shows their complete disconnect from regional communities, whether it is what the government are doing when it comes to the Murray-Darling Basin plan or what the government are doing when it comes to the inequity for regional students trying to access university. We have seen a lack of focus from this government when it comes to education in agriculture and in agribusiness and related skills.

The government will argue they have things in place, and I do take the point that Senator Evans has made on occasion that the government have a range of things in place. But it is not good enough. The government need to do more and to recognise it is not just the skill side of things; we need to clearly encourage more students to go to university and do those courses, to take up agriculture and take up agribusiness so that we can ensure the sustainability of the sector into the future and ensure food security into the future. One of the greatest issues for us in the future is going to be the sustainability of rural Australia, the sustainability of agriculture and making sure that we have the future food security that we are going to need. While the government are looking at maths and science, and the need to ensure that young people looking for that pathway through school and university to take on a profession in fields of maths and science, we need to be equally as focused on agriculture, agribusiness and the skills needed for that sector to thrive.

Rural and regional students are already doing it tough. While we do not oppose this legislation, we note that these students currently doing maths and science are going to face an increase from the beginning of 2013. That is particularly difficult for regional students and I make no apologies for being parochial about regional students, regional communities and regional Australia in general. But it is going to make it that bit harder for those students currently doing those courses having to face this increase because they already have to face the huge cost of relocation. It costs around $15,000 to $20,000 a year for regional students to relocate compared to city students, who do not have that financial impost. This is the point I make and have made in the past—probably to the annoyance of some because I do not stop talking about this. Regional students face this inequity because they have the cost of relocation that city students do not have to bear. For some of those students who have struggled to do that who will now face this increase in fees from early next year if they are doing those

courses, we acknowledge that that is going to be difficult for them. That was unforeseen and it is something that they are now going to have to factor in.

Having said that, we do not oppose this legislation, but we do point out the very real difficulty it is going to create for those students who are currently doing those courses. While we agree with the government that more needs to be done in this area, we ask that the Labor government focus more strongly in a broader policy sense rather than just making simplistic policy responses and take into account the very good point Senator Mason made in his speech on Friday: it is about aspiration, it is about the whole picture and changing the mindset of our young people to understand the very real opportunities that are on offer if they take the maths and science pathway.