



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**PROOF**

**SPEECH**

**Thursday, 23 June 2011**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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## SPEECH

**Date** Thursday, 23 June 2011  
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**Questioner**  
**Speaker** Ms RISHWORTH

**Source** House  
**Proof** Yes  
**Responder**  
**Question No.**

(Kingston) (NaN.NaN pm)

Ms RISHWORTH (Kingston) (12:03): I am very pleased to rise to speak in support of this legislation, the Higher Education Support Amendment (Demand Driven Funding System and Other Measures) Bill 2011. I am very pleased because one of the reasons I decided to join the Labor Party, apart from the Liberal Party's stance on industrial relations, was the way they approached access to higher education. I was at university when the Howard government brought in the fee-paying places so that those who could afford to go to university could go and those who could not afford it did not have access to higher education. It was this education for the wealthy but not for everyone that drove me to join the Labor Party and to decide that I wanted to stand up and ensure that everyone got the opportunity to get a good education. That is why I am very pleased to speak in support of this legislation.

According to the Chair of Universities Australia, Professor Glyn Davis, this new legislation will directly transform the accessibility of higher education in Australia. A study by the Department of Education, Science and Training revealed that, while social stratification directly influenced the relevance and attainability of higher education among young Australians, the overall attitudes of young Australians towards higher education are similar regardless of their socioeconomic circumstances.

Specifically, the study stated that 90 per cent of the sample reported that, all things being equal and imagining no constraints, they would prefer to undertake tertiary education of some kind after school. However, when asked whether they believed this preference for higher education would eventuate, the proportion agreeing with this fell away significantly and students from medium- and low- socioeconomic backgrounds reported that, while they hoped to go on to higher education, they believed that they would not be able to do so.

This demonstrates the clear willingness of young Australians to acquire a higher education. This government has recognised and responded to this through the introduction of this amendment as well as a number of other initiatives. This bill will significantly improve the possibility for all young Australians, regardless of socioeconomic background, to receive

and benefit from a university qualification. The government has also set ambitious targets to emphasise its commitment to higher educational opportunities. It is seeking to increase the proportion of 25- to 34-year-old Australians with a qualification at bachelor level or above to 40 per cent by 2025.

This bill considerably enhances the opportunities presented to young Australians and will have numerous positive effects on communities across Australia. It encourages young Australians to equip themselves with the qualifications and skills they need to secure their futures. I have often said at many functions, whether they be for a TAFE certificate, a bachelors degree or further training, that training and education is a passport to a young person's future. This bill goes significantly towards enabling students to get this passport.

Also included in the bill is the removal of the student learning entitlement, the SLE, from 2012. The SLE currently offers the equivalent of seven years full-time access to a Commonwealth supported position at an Australian university. The bill before the House will remove the SLE as an eligibility requirement for a Commonwealth supported place, such that the seven-year limit will no longer apply. The bill has been well received by Australian universities, who fully support its greater flexibility and increased responsiveness to the needs of students. The Australian Technology Network of Universities supports this measure and believes that it would significantly reduce red tape within the sector and as such ensure that resources are better directed towards teaching and learning. The Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations confirms that only 0.2 per cent of students currently undertaking higher education are at risk of exceeding their entitlement, yet the bureaucracy required to administer this system is immense. The bill before the House abandons this limit, making it easier and simpler for all Australians to access higher education, including those who wish to return to study later in life to learn new skills.

In addition to improving the educational opportunities of young Australians, this bill will also stimulate growth in the higher education sector. If Australia is to remain globally economically competitive it must promote a highly educated workforce. As Australia grows, the need for university educated workers also

grows. For this reason, this bill removes the current cap on funding for undergraduate Commonwealth supported positions. Economically, this will prevent distortion of the higher education market by ensuring that student and market demands govern the number of Commonwealth supported positions offered by Australian universities; there will not just be an arbitrary figure decided by government. Australia's economy and higher education sector will greatly benefit from this demand driven system.

The bill before the House is finally moving Australia away from an outdated system of higher education funding. The old capped system was stifling the growth of Australian universities and preventing many Australians from experiencing the benefits of higher education. Australians will no longer have to compete for unnecessarily limited spaces that have been dictated by university negotiations with the government. It is estimated that in 2012 there will be over 500,000 undergraduate student positions, which equates to a 20 percent increase in the number of positions between 2008 and 2012. We are really providing much more opportunity for people to study at university, to choose what they would like to study and to ensure they get opportunities for the future. Australian universities will be able to grow, diversify and innovate in response to student needs, which will greatly enhance Australia's higher education sector.

For students commencing studies in 2012 and beyond, the system will be far more efficient as Australian universities will receive funding for however many places they offer within each discipline. This process has commenced, with transitional arrangements currently underway. During the transitional period in 2010-11, the cap on funding for overenrolments has lifted from five per cent to 10 per cent, allowing universities to overenrol by 10 per cent in funding terms above their funding agreement targets. This is enabling universities to prepare and get ready for the demand driven system. This will be very important so that they can prepare for the future.

The amended legislation will significantly improve higher education as well as the lives of many people across Australia. The higher education community is looking for bipartisanship on this issue, yet those opposite still insist on rejecting not only this legislation and the concerns of the higher education sector but also the future of young Australians who are seeking to improve themselves and gain a passport for the future.

I strongly concur with the sentiments of the National Tertiary Education Union, who express concern over the coalition's response to this bill, stating that it appears to be crude opposition for opposition's sake itself. That is not surprising considering the

performance that we have seen from this coalition, who seem to oppose everything put to this House. I call on the opposition to support this bill. It will significantly enhance and increase the opportunities for young Australians. It will ensure that we have a vibrant, innovative system. I ask the opposition to stop thinking about the past, to stop harking back to the Howard era, where only wealthy children could attend university. There was no encouragement for people. There was no strategy in place for young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds to attend university. If the opposition suggest that the Howard government had a strategy, then maybe they should produce it, because there was certainly no strategy that I could see to ensure that every young Australian got that opportunity; in fact, it was quite the opposite. This is sensible amending legislation that is supported by the tertiary education sector and by families who want to give their children the best opportunity. I would strongly encourage the opposition to support it. I commend the amendment bill to the House.