



“Public education must not be sold off to highest bidder”

UPFRONT FEES NOW PAVE THE ROAD TO DEGREES, SAYS KATE ELLIS

WOULD N'T it be nice to think that any Australian child who works hard, applies themselves to their study and has natural ability can go on to pursue their dreams?

This week we've learnt that if that dream happens to require a university degree then it is being placed further and further outside of the grasp of many.

The recent Federal Budget not only gave a green light for further increases in HECS fees, on top of the 25 per cent increases authorised prior to the last federal election, but it also removed the cap on full fee-paying places for Australian undergraduate students.

What this move does is enable wealthy students who can afford massive upfront fees to access a higher education that may be denied to more worthy students who have worked harder, received better results and are more qualified.

At the University of Adelaide in 2006 a student hoping to secure a HECS place in the Bachelor of Engineering (Aerospace) would have required a mark of 98 to be granted entry. In contrast another student who could afford to pay full fees upfront could be admitted with the far lesser mark of just 80.

Apparently this is the fairness in education offered in John Howard's Australia.

It has now been revealed that for the first time Australian universities are able to offer some undergraduate degrees solely to those who can afford to pay for them upfront. Lucrative courses such as law or dentistry can be organised to actually offer zero Commonwealth supported places but a number of upfront fee-paying spots.

I find it completely abhorrent that this Federal Government has introduced an education system which encourages queue jumping and actually now rewards earnings over learning.

The Federal Minister for Education, Julie Bishop, has the gall to suggest that this is an example of the Government offering the Australian people “choice”. How out of touch is this Government if they cannot see that paying up to \$240,000 for an education is not a “choice” that the vast majority of Australians have open to them? Universities, which have long been completely starved of necessary funding will, of course, jump at this opportunity. They desperately need the money. Foreign and domestic upfront fee-paying students offer much-needed revenue for higher education institutions which have been financially neglected for far too long.

Adelaide University Vice-Chancellor James McWha has already indicated that the university would try to lift domestic fee-paying places, hoping for an increase from 3 to 5 per cent of enrolments.

One Australian university has also now revealed that it receives a massive 45.7 per cent of its total revenue from overseas students' upfront fees. But is this really in our national interest?

We on the Labor side argue that instead, the Commonwealth has a responsibility to adequately fund our universities.

I am unashamedly a believer in the power of education to transform a person's life and offer increased opportunities, experiences and prosperity. But investment in education is not only good social policy, it is in our nation's best long-term economic interests.

As we move forward into the 21st century we surely must recognise

that education is not merely social expenditure and a drain on the economic resources of our nation; it is in fact integral to our economic growth.

We are a nation intent on competing on the international stage as a knowledge-based economy, and investment in education and human capital is surely our best chance to do that. Investing in our best and brightest is the only way to do that.

That is why Kevin Rudd has vowed to phase out these unfair full-fee paying places from 2009. It is why we have such a strong focus on the need for an “Education Revolution” which must incorporate our universities as well as education more broadly – schools, skills and training.

We have already announced our \$111 million policy to halve HECS fees for new maths and science students as well as the \$2.5 billion Trades Training Centres in Schools plan – a ground-breaking initiative to see new trades centres built in Australia's 2650 secondary schools.

Rebuilding our education and training system must be a long-term priority for the Australian Government.

Australia's future prosperity will be built on fostering education, skills and trades among our people, enabling us to compete in a competitive global market – not by pursuing an outdated ideological approach to outsource the cost of our education.

There is no more valuable investment than in our own human capital.

Public education must be publicly funded, not just sold off to the highest bidder.

Kate Ellis (ALP) is the federal MP for the seat of Adelaide