



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**PROOF**

**HIGHER EDUCATION SUPPORT  
AMENDMENT (2009 BUDGET  
MEASURES) BILL 2009**

**Second Reading**

**SPEECH**

**Wednesday, 19 August 2009**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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## SPEECH

<p><b>Date</b> Wednesday, 19 August 2009  <b>Page</b> 11  <b>Questioner</b>  <b>Speaker</b> Sidebottom, Sid, MP</p>	<p><b>Source</b> House  <b>Proof</b> Yes  <b>Responder</b>  <b>Question No.</b></p>
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**Mr SIDEBOTTOM** (Braddon) (9.58 am)—I am very pleased to support the Higher Education Support Amendment (2009 Budget Measures) Bill 2009, because it is part and parcel of a systematic commitment by this government to improve the quality of education and training in this country and the quality of teaching and learning in particular. The government's systematic approach to what has been termed an education revolution begins at the earliest stages of learning, with the reforms that we are continuing to introduce in early childhood education. It includes greater funding, improvement and the introduction of programs involved with literacy and numeracy; support and funding for improving the teaching of languages in our schools; and the improvement of facilities in our schools throughout Australia where the teaching and learning will take place. It is very much needed, and I am particularly grateful that so much of the infrastructure resources are to go into primary education.

Further funding and work will go into introducing national curricula—particularly in the areas of mathematics, science, English and history, which are so important—and programs related to training places throughout Australia, including TAFE institutions, VET courses, senior secondary colleges and also now, in this legislation in particular, a commitment to higher education. I congratulate the minister and all those who have assisted her on the excellent work that has been done in this area, and I also congratulate this government for continuing this momentum.

The reform agenda which is inherent in this legislation is based on Labor's intentions, set out in our 2006 white paper when we were in opposition, and the initiatives that we wanted to introduce into higher education. Now that we are in government, these intentions have been underpinned by the review of Australian higher education, chaired by Denise Bradley, who made 46 major recommendations in relation to higher education. The bill before us deals in part with a number of those important recommendations. This legislation is a response to both these processes and follows the minister's substantial response set out in the 2009-10 budget. I would like to reiterate that the budget committed \$5.7 billion to higher education, innovation and research over four years and that less than half of the additional funding of \$2.2 billion will provide additional recurrent funding

for university teaching, learning and, importantly, research.

The guiding principles behind this legislation were set out by the minister in her second reading speech. I would like to briefly reiterate those for the record. The minister said:

... the Government is launching a reform agenda for higher education that will transform the scale, potential and quality of the nation's universities and open the doors of higher education to a new generation of Australians.

It is an integrated policy approach. An approach that provides for structural change and improves the financial sustainability of our universities. An approach that guarantees quality in a system that delivers funding for growth and participation by students from all walks of life and recognises the vital importance of research by our best and brightest.

These are very, very important guiding principles behind much needed reforms in higher education. In short, what the minister outlined in her second reading speech was, firstly, basing access to our institutions of higher education on merit, not on the ability to pay; secondly, broadening access to higher education, especially to groups that are traditionally underrepresented; thirdly, the importance of quality in the university system of education to the community and the individual.

In our tendency towards an adversarial system, in both law and government, we tend to fluctuate between black and white. Most Australians, I think, live in the grey area. In the past I have found, as a former educator, an unfortunate tendency in political speak—and I believe there is some truth to this—to underplay the importance of trade training and vocational education. University tended to be promoted as the be-all and end-all in terms of recognising education. I think that tendency was probably more correct than not. But what we saw in the last 10 to 13 years, I think as a matter of political convenience, was a growing view that because we got rid of our technical schools trades and vocational education were at the bottom of the heap in terms of recognition in education and what we value in our society. We began to rebuild this view of the importance of trades and vocational education, quite correctly. But what we started to do in the political speak—and I used to hear it in this place—was to denigrate higher education again. In

fact, what we should be doing is promoting the full range of education and learning opportunities. That includes vocational education, training and skills and also university, along with the more traditional skills and values related to the university. What we tended to get was a 'them against us' approach, which was highly unfortunate, and it tended to be reflected, I believe, in the underfunding of higher education that has taken place particularly over the last 10 years in the name of an economic and political philosophy that said 'the user should pay.'

These amendments seek to restore the balance. That is what I believe mainstream Australia expects and accepts. The bill technically amends the Higher Education Support Act 2003 to implement the Australian government's reform to the higher education system, as I mentioned and as was announced in the 2009-2010 budget. Two key targets are recommended by the Bradley review, and these are adopted by the government and contained in this legislation, following on the principles of broadening access to higher education, as I mentioned earlier, and practically recognising the importance of quality university education. I do not think anyone or any nation would disagree with the importance of developing a robust, innovative, exploratory university sector, particularly in terms of teaching, learning and research.

The government has adopted two key targets recommended by the review, as I mentioned. The first is a national target of at least 40 per cent of 25- to 34-year-olds attaining a qualification at bachelor level or above by 2025. I recognise that the Bradley review recommended that this should happen by 2020. However, this legislation seeks to achieve these important milestones by 2025. The second key target is that, by 2020, 20 per cent of university enrolments at undergraduate level be for people from low-socioeconomic status—what we call SES—backgrounds. How will we go about achieving these targets? The first point is to free up the sector to fund students rather than places and to encourage quality teaching and learning. It is great to hear that speakers on all sides of the House absolutely endorse these very important principles. This will involve increased funding for promoting and sustaining real future growth in student numbers and ensuring improved quality.

This bill also sets out funding and intentions to try to introduce a system to set out the quality standards and performance indicators that will be required and used to measure this quality performance. It will also reform an indexation formula that did little more than effectively cut public investment in this sector over time. I do not think anybody can deny the fact that the

sector has been gradually undercut in terms of funding; indeed, that was part of the philosophical underpinning of the former government's attitude toward higher education, which involved forcing more people to pay and opening up more positions to people who would pay a fee.

Let us look at the funding reforms outlined in these amendments. With the bill, a decade of underfunding will come to an end. The national scandal of declining public investment in higher education as a proportion of gross domestic product will come to an end. It has been available for everyone to see, in terms of underfunding compared to other OECD countries. The era of political interference and micromanagement by ministers and officials will come to an end. A new approach to higher education funding, one that acknowledges the primary importance of students and their learning, is needed. One would hope that is the fundamental principle behind all education, no matter what level or what sector. The bill introduces the first stage of a new, student centred funding system for higher education which will have an estimated cost of \$491 million over four years. For 2010 and 2011—the transitional years—the cap on overenrolment for Commonwealth supported places will be lifted from five per cent to 10 per cent in funding terms. The limit on funding under the Commonwealth Grant Scheme for 2012 will be removed. It will be removed to reflect the fact that there will be no overall limit on the number of students that table A higher education providers will be able to enrol from 2012 onwards. That is a great move and, if successful, it will be a very positive outcome for our nation.

This funding is intended to put the student at the centre. The ambition is that by 2025 40 per cent of all 25- to 34-year-olds will hold a qualification at bachelor level or above. The implications for our nation are enormous and necessary in a highly competitive, globalised world. The second key target recommended by the Bradley review is that by 2020 20 per cent of university enrolments at undergraduate level be for people from low-socioeconomic-status backgrounds. The bill introduces landmark measures to improve the rate of participation in higher education by students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The bill amends the act to provide an increase in funding to address Australia's historically poor record in increasing the participation of low-socioeconomic status students.

The government has announced a commitment to ensure that by 2020 20 per cent of higher education enrolments at the undergraduate level will be people from a low-socioeconomic status background. This goal will be directly supported by the injection of additional funding for universities to support the low-SES participation targets.

The major barriers to increased higher education participation by students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds include previous educational attainment; low awareness of the long-term benefits of higher education, resulting in little aspiration to participate; and the need for financial assistance and academic and personal support once they are enrolled. These are significant barriers that we need to tackle systematically.

International experience shows that interventions or outreach in the early years of secondary schooling are highly effective in increasing the aspirations of students to attend university. The government has therefore allocated \$108 million over four years for a new partnership program to link universities with low-socioeconomic status schools and vocational education and training providers. The intention is to create leading practice and competitive pressures to increase the aspirations of low-SES students to higher education.

The government is putting in place systemic reasons for universities to be engaged with improving the quality of school education—in short, to have programs whereby there is an interconnection between the higher education institutions and those people who are going to make up its population: school students. It makes sense to develop a systematic interrelationship, a communication system, to ensure contact between higher education and students, particularly in secondary schools—and probably even before then, quite frankly. One of the great barriers to retention in years 10, 11 and 12 and then at university is the disconnectedness between the various sectors in education, and probably none more so than between higher education and their potential students in high schools.

Funding will provide schools and vocational education and training providers with links to universities, exposing their students to people, places and opportunities beyond the scope of their own experiences and helping teachers raise the aspirations of their students. I would add that, in trying to do that, you have to help those who have a great influence on children—and apart from teachers and peers, of course, it is parents. Many children aspire because their parents aspire for them. This is a deep-seated trend in our community and will take some time. But this is a very, very important initiative and hopefully it not only gets to students but also gets to their parents. Programs might include scholarships, mentoring of teachers and students, curriculum and teaching support or hands-on activities run by university staff in schools. There is an initiative in my electorate of Braddon which has the very practical component of getting support into schools to teach science and to then have the students

go on to do science at university. I commend the legislation. (*Time expired*)