

Education and Employment Legislation Committee
ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON NOTICE
Higher Education and Research Reform Amendment Bill 2014
Public Hearing
10 October 2014

DATE ASKED: **10 October 2014**

Question

SENATOR BRIDGET MACKENZIE asked students on the panel on 10 October 2014:

So you are all attending incredibly successful Go8 universities. You are in a very privileged position to be at those institutions and you are all arguing on behalf of low-socioeconomic status students. I would like to hear from each of you why you did not go to your local university and yet expect— [...] When we argue on behalf of regional students, we need to ensure that regional kids get to go wherever their brains can take them and that we have a system that supports that. I want to go to the NUS submission. The vice-chancellor of CQU, the university that has the highest proportion of low-SES students, is also the most positive advocate. We had him before the committee yesterday. I am interested in that nexus. We are out of time so I would ask each of you to take that question on notice and provide an answer in writing.

Answer

MR FOSTER – Has provided the following response to the Honourable Senator's question:

I take the Question on Notice as two questions, and will answer them in turn.

- 1) I come from a regional background, from Latrobe in the Division of Braddon, which currently suffers among the worst of youth and adult unemployment; health, literacy, educational attainment, and household income in the country. Likewise, a background where people with disabilities, who are female, indigenous, queer-identifying (LGBTIQ) or ethnically and culturally diverse face still greater hardship than in achieving their aspirations. Whilst it is a very great privilege to be a university student in Australia, at any institution, there is very little in the lived experience of either myself, or the majority of students whom I represent that can reasonably be called privileged.

In saying that, I do not want to see regional students and their universities fenced off from issues affecting students at Australian universities generally. The negative characterisation of any group of young Australians who have successfully sought greater educational or economic attainment has directly correlated, in my organisation's experience, with a regular dismissing of very real social and economic hardship. We refer the Committee again to Universities Australia's 2013 report, *University Student Finances in 2012*, which we cite in our submission. To assume that prospective students or their families will conclude that the ends will inevitably justify the means in terms of career outcomes,

simply does not align with the real behavior of students as consumers in our nation's Higher Education sector. We see evidence of that behaviour even under our current circumstances; the University of Tasmania's significant growth in enrollments in recent years simply would not have occurred without the additional millions of dollars in funding that it turned into full fee waivers and scholarships.

The University of Tasmania (which, to clarify, is not a member of the Group of Eight) has a nationally recognised track record of research and teaching excellence. It has achieved this reputation whilst also supporting the fourth-largest proportion of low-SES students of any university in Australia. It is for this reason in particular that we are so gratified to have been invited to appear before the Committee. We believe our context is indicative of the nexus to which Senator Mackenzie refers, not an exception, whose particular challenges can be resolved through solutions such as the proposed regional adjustment package. That such a position has been suggested only reinforces the view that the deregulated model falls over at the starting post in its assumption that public institutions can simply transfer to a free market environment without many institutions like ours left at risk. Everything we know about the aversion to debt and lack of regional mobility of Australian students relative to international sectors speaks to the risk that regional and mature aged student enrolments will not recover from sector-wide losses, just as they have not in the UK in the aftermath of the Browne Review.

- 2) Whilst I am not in a position to speak to the view of the Vice-Chancellor of CQU, Prof. Bowman, I note the statements made by several Vice-Chancellors from universities in the sector who, like the University of Tasmania, support disproportionately large numbers of students from regional and low-income backgrounds. Both Prof. Battersby (VC, Federation University) and Prof. Barber (VC, Flinders University) stressed before the Committee that they were opposed to the cut in public spending represented through the reduction in CSG. They also cited the public comments made by The Hon. Mr. Pyne that the Government intends to cut funding through other means should the Bill not be passed.

It is difficult to imagine what else a university Vice-Chancellor might be prompted to say under such circumstances. Whilst we disagree with the recommendations of Universities Australia before the Committee, we believe Ms. Robinson reflected the concerns of many Vice-Chancellors when she stated that continuing to argue for increased investment in universities has become like, 'flogging a dead horse.' It might better be asked, how else could university Senior Executives be expected to respond given their fiduciary and social responsibilities to their universities, staff, and students? The fact that universities have so little agency over the present state of funding in the sector means that they cannot help but respond predictably to the financial pressures that they are subjected to by the Government. This was the primary reason for the choice of evidence cited in our submission, in particular the emphasis on best practice in sectors comparable to our own in economic circumstances, and the emphasis on comparison to sectors where decreased public investment and increased student fees have already played out, with negative consequences.

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