

I would like to make a submission on the proposed Higher Education and Research Reform Amendment Bill 2014. I am an academic at a regional university and can foresee several problems arising from the proposed changes to higher education. Overall, the results would harm University education, and be highly inequitable, especially for regional students and Universities.

Removal of the cap on fees: Universities are, according to earlier inquiries, already underfunded by about 10%. The proposed budget cuts of 20% will increase that to 30%. It is inevitable that Universities will raise fees as high as they think the market will bear, as quickly as possible, in order to compensate for this underfunding. The problem for regional Universities is that their market - their catchment population - is not rich. My university serves a population which has a large disadvantaged sector – a high proportion of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, a large number of low SES families, and a high proportion of rural and remote residents in industries that are far from well-off. That means that my University faces the choice of either raising fees to the point where it can actually provide a decent level of education and service to its students, which will put an education beyond the reach of many of them, or keep the fees low to keep these students and struggle to provide quality education.

I have watched over the 24 years I have taught at this university how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student and staff numbers have gradually increased with the small amounts of assistance provided by government and the University to encourage them. It has been heartening to see, as education is the way out of the poverty trap that so many of our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are caught in. The proposed changes will put this in jeopardy.

Scholarships: making Universities fund scholarships out of raised fees is forcing students to pay for other students' scholarships. This might work in a big metropolitan university. It certainly won't work for a regional university where a larger percentage of the population is poor. The result will be that regional Universities will only be able to offer lower or fewer scholarships, further disadvantaging regional populations.

Funding private providers: this has been shown to be disastrous where tried overseas or in the TAFE sector in Australia. The private providers cherry-pick the cheaper, popular courses and provide sub-standard education and minimal or no student support. The public providers are left with the expensive courses but without the numbers of students to provide economies of scale which helps to cross-subsidise those expensive (but nationally important) courses such as engineering and science. I have heard quite a few TAFE colleges in Victoria are going broke as a result of this policy, and predict that the same would happen to the university sector – with the regional universities hurting the most.

Charging fees for research postgraduates: clearly the architect of this policy does not understand what postgraduate research education means. These people already have their professional qualifications, so doing a research degree does not give them the increased employment prospects of an undergraduate or postgraduate coursework degree. In any

case the cuts to Australia's research establishments such as the universities and CSIRO make the idea of a research career, already bedeviled by short-term contract work, even less likely. So, research postgraduates sacrifice income (or if part-time, leisure time and time with families) in order to enrol in their Masters or PhD. The research they do is of high quality, is usually of considerable benefit to Australia and their local regions, and is essential for the research output (including publications) of Universities. They are an important part of University research teams, for example. Currently domestic research students are normally granted HECS scholarships so at least they do not pay fees, in recognition of the value of their work. The proposed budget changes will allow charges of \$3000 a year in fees which they will have to pay. If you want to cripple University research and chase your best and brightest researchers overseas, this is the way to do it.

Following the American privatization model: anyone paying attention to the state of higher education in the U.S. at the moment will understand it is in crisis. Its graduates are questioning whether the employment benefits they get from their education are worth the huge debts they accumulate. Only the rich escape the penalty of years of repaying debt. Education is the means for social mobility and observers are seeing American society as increasingly static and closed, with lower numbers of people being able to access higher education. History warns us that raising expectations and then disappointing them is a dangerous thing to do. History also shows Australia has a tendency to copy overseas trends just as they are being proved worthless or harmful. I would hope that the Senate understands that copying American privatization of higher education is doing just that, and that it stops us going down a path that will inevitably have to be reversed but at a cost to a generation of students and potential students - with the regions suffering most.

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