

Government Senators Dissenting Report

The Government Senators of the Committee note that the Government is committed to improving the participation of underrepresented groups in education, including rural and regional students.

Government Senators note that the Government has undertaken a wide range of reforms which will begin to address these issues including the reforms adopted as part of COAG to provide support and reform for 1500 low socio-economic status (SES) school communities across the country (\$1.5 billion from the Commonwealth which will be matched by the states), improve the quality of teaching (\$550 million from the Commonwealth), increase school leaving age, improve transparency and renew school infrastructure through the Building the Education Revolution.

The Government has also undertaken major reforms to tertiary education after adopting a range of findings in response to the Bradley Review and allocating an additional \$5.4 billion in the last budget for higher education and research. The Government's comprehensive reform program includes the adoption of demand driven funding, substantial new infrastructure funding, improved indexation of funds, better targeting of student income support to better direct support to those who need it most, a substantial low SES loading, equity partnership programs and performance funding, a new national regulator and the movement towards the full cost of research.

Government Senators note that the Government's reform agenda is about increasing participation and expanding access to tertiary education and improving quality. The range and scope of the Government's reforms has been lauded by educationalists with the response to the Bradley Review heralded as 'visionary' by the Go8 in response to the last budget.

The combined impact of these reforms will be an increase in access to education and quality of education – this will mean better educational outcomes for low SES students and regional students.

In total, this Government has increased education spending by around 50 per cent in real terms over the current five year period compared to the previous one.

The Government is working hard to turn around the shameful legacy of neglect that occurred under the previous Government.

Under the previous Government low SES participation rates in higher education languished at around 15 per cent.

Regional participation rates fell from 18.715 per cent to 18.08 per cent from 2002 – 2007 (25.4 per cent of the population come from regional areas).

Remote participation rates fell from 1.27 per cent to 1.12 per cent over the same period (2.5 per cent of the population come from remote areas).

While Government Senators commend the interest that Opposition Senators now show in education, they believe the majority report does not fully explain the legacy of policy failure of the previous Government and the way that this has curtailed the opportunity for all students. Furthermore Chapter 3 does not present an accurate and fair assessment of the Government's proposed changes to Youth Allowance and the widespread support these reforms have received from universities, students and educationalists.

Government Senators wish to highlight the fact that the Government's broad reform agenda – including the proposed reforms to Youth Allowance – will assist students from low income backgrounds to achieve the educational qualifications they need for sustainable employment. These changes will better support students that need it most, including regional and rural students.

Response to Recommendation 1

Government Senators welcome the intention of Recommendation 1 which is to increase participation in secondary education and ensure all students, regardless of location or background, have opportunities to access education. However, Government Senators note that the Government is already pushing forward with a massive reform agenda through its COAG reform process which will increase high school attainment nationally.

The Government is best placed to determine processes it uses to expand participation in, and quality of, education after the shameful neglect of the previous Government.

Response to Recommendation 2

Government Senators welcome the intention of this recommendation. The Government Senators note that the Government has already announced their National Partnership on Literacy and Numeracy worth \$540 million entitled 'Foundation skills in literacy and numeracy' as part of its broader education strategy in addition to the other measures outlined above.

Details of the Government's reforms in this area can be assessed at the DEEWR website

<http://www.deewr.gov.au/Schooling/Programs/SmarterSchools/Pages/default.aspx>

Response to Recommendation 3

Government Senators note that the Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) scheme supports eligible primary, secondary and tertiary students who are unable to attend an

appropriate government school on a daily basis because of their geographic isolation. The scheme provides financial assistance to families for the costs of boarding and other expenses for their children. In 2008, AIC assisted 11,212 rural and isolated school students at a cost of \$60.7 million.

From 1 January 2008, the AIC scheme was enhanced in the following ways:

- a \$1,000 Distance Education supplement (rising to \$1,045 in 2009) became payable to all recipients of the AIC Distance Education Allowance.
- The AIC Additional Boarding Allowance increased by \$1,000 to \$2,164 in 2008 (rising to \$2,261 in 2009).

The Government will promote its participation agenda through the COAG reform process.

Response to Recommendation 4

Government Senators note that if the Government's student income support legislation had been passed by the Senate all eligible students who need to move from home to study would have received a Relocation Scholarship worth \$4,000 in the first year on top of a Student Start up scholarship for every year they are at university worth \$2,253 (\$1,434 in the transition year of 2010 only).

Opposition Senators can still deliver this support to regional students by passing the Government's legislation when it is debated next year.

Response to Recommendation 5

Government Senators note that almost \$5 billion in capital funding to the tertiary sector has been committed since the Rudd Government took office. The guidelines of the Better Universities Renewal Funding (BURF) and Teaching and Learning Capital Fund (TLC) for Higher Education (HE) funds worth \$1 billion in total were broad enough to allow universities to spend this on student housing.

Response to Recommendation 6

Government Senators note that the Henry Review is currently considering other issues in terms of adequacy and the Government has committed to a review of the new system which will look at issues like this.

Response to Recommendation 7

Government Senators note that the Government will carefully monitor the results of its new system which is aimed at supporting students and ensuring that institutions are more responsive to student needs. A demand driven system and reformed student income support will provide students with more choices as to where to study.

Response to Recommendation 8

Government Senators note that there are already a range of HECS remission policies in place which have already been adopted by this Government to encourage graduates to work in priority fields or areas.

Conclusion

Government Senators agree that increasing access to education should be a top priority of Government. We note that the Rudd Government is marshalling a huge reform program which will make a difference to thousands of students who will be able to access education for the first time and thousands more who will have better school facilities and a higher quality learning experience.

There are a number of recommendations which, while well meaning, duplicate work processes already underway. Unlike the previous one the Rudd Government will not stand idly by and watch participation of under represented groups go backwards.

Government Senators note that to help improve regional access to education Non Government Senators first need to vote to pass the Government's reforms to student income support. We would also encourage Committee members to make a submission to the Government's review of the regional loading.

Senator Glenn Sterle
Deputy Chair

Senator Kerry O'Brien

References

http://www.deewr.gov.au/Ministers/Gillard/Media/Releases/Pages/Article_090512_183017.aspx

<http://www.deewr.gov.au/Schooling/Programs/SmarterSchools/Pages/default.aspx>

http://www.deewr.gov.au/HigherEducation/Documents/PDF/Pages%20from%20A09-303%20Budget%20Fact%20Sheets-1_webaw.pdf

http://www.deewr.gov.au/Schooling/Programs/SmarterSchools/Pages/Lifting_lit_num_outcomes.aspx

http://www.ato.gov.au/budget/2009-10/content/ministerial_statements/rural_and_regional/html/ms_rural_and_regional-08.htm#07_01

