



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**  
**HIGHER EDUCATION SUPPORT**  
**AMENDMENT (2009 BUDGET**  
**MEASURES) BILL 2009**

**Second Reading**

**SPEECH**

**Thursday, 13 August 2009**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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## SPEECH

**Date** Thursday, 13 August 2009  
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**Questioner**  
**Speaker** Marino, Nola, MP

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**Responder**  
**Question No.**

**Ms MARINO** (Forrest) (12.53 pm)—The Higher Education Support Amendment (2009 Budget Measures) Bill 2009 is the legislative instrument that delivers some of the measures included in the government's response to the Bradley review. The review, as we know, received hundreds of submissions and was released in December 2008. Instead of acting on the recommendations, however, the minister announced a further review into the Bradley review. It is interesting to note that during this period the government also announced its second cash handout—much of the funds that may otherwise have been directed into higher education. There are no funds in this process for improving teachers' facilities or support for teachers and only limited funds for teaching and learning outcomes.

One issue of relevance to my electorate, which I note in schedule 1 of this bill, is the abolishment of Commonwealth scholarships—the very scholarships that have helped thousands of students, many from my electorate, achieve their tertiary goals. Fewer students will now qualify for the government's replacement scholarships—a direct and deliberate attack on regional, rural and remote students and their families. Under the revised rules students will have to qualify for youth allowance payments before they can qualify for other scholarships or assistance. The government is deliberately and knowingly limiting the support criteria for students from regional areas, ignoring their equity of opportunity to access tertiary study and, more seriously, deliberately and knowingly ignoring the fact that, for every student who has to relocate to study, he or she and their families have major additional costs compared to students who can live at home while they study.

The government's own figures show that far fewer students will qualify for assistance, because they will not qualify for youth allowance or Abstudy or be able to meet the 30-hour a week work criteria over 18 months in a two-year period to qualify for the independent rate of youth allowance. As well, the scholarship amount itself will be reduced. So the government is not only excluding regional students; it is also short-changing eligible youth allowance or Abstudy recipients. I understand these new scholarships will be included in a future bill.

I have received countless emails and phone calls from people in my electorate. One of those emails is from Roberta Meiklejohn, who writes:

... Nola—I hope you speak up loud and strongly about this terrible situation and get it out to the public domain via radio and television. The proposed changes to the Youth Allowance and the Commonwealth Scholarships are acts of criminality and discrimination. These changes will reduce rural students to peasant status.

The Commonwealth scholarships are vitally important for rural students having to live away from home. Without this extra money they would not be able to afford the high cost of living.

I have two sons who are now studying at UWA and receive Youth Allowance and the Commonwealth Accommodation Scholarship. We live in the country and are not able to financially support our children away from home.

My sons would not have the opportunity to study Law and Engineering without the financial support from the Government.

The Youth Allowance is not enough to cover the high cost of rent, food, clothing, books, computers, Internet connection fees, electricity, telephone and travel costs.

If they were able to live at home then many of these costs are covered by the family home including not having to purchase computers for the boys to use away.

They have no choice but to move to the city for their study. And we are not financially viable enough to pay for their cost of education and living while away from home.

I am a teacher and my husband works in his own small business. The extra financial support from the CAS is necessary to keep my sons fed and a roof over their heads.

This still means however that each holiday they find whatever jobs they can to supplement their income to help with the cost of books, which for both of them is extremely expensive.

It seems to me that the Rudd Government only wants education for certain populations which does not include rural students.

His education revolution excludes these students because of the high cost of living way from home.

So while I have academically able children they would be forced to live lives unfulfilled because of the cost of study away from home. Rural students will be reduced to peasants.

Is this what the Rudd Government sees in their so-called “education revolution”? If so then the peasants will be forced to bring back the guillotine.

Yes I am very angry about these changes to the Youth Allowance and the Commonwealth Scholarships because I have a daughter in Year 12 who is also hoping to go to UWA.

Under the proposed changes she is beginning to think that this will be impossible for her. Is this fair Mr Rudd??

She cannot work 18 months for 30 hours each and every week to qualify for Youth Allowance because there are not the jobs for all these students in the country. She cannot take two years off from her studies because she will lose her position at the university.

The education revolution should be changed so that when every rural student chooses to go on with further education then they immediately qualify for Youth Allowance and the Commonwealth Scholarships.

Rural students should have the same opportunities as students who live in the cities.

Students who live in the city and are at home do not have to take time off from their studies.

My son who is studying engineering found it extremely difficult to recommence higher maths and science studies after a 12 month break.

The students who he was studying with who had not taken the gap year did not find the same difficulties as the Year 12 course was still fresh in their minds.

Changes should happen for the better Mr Rudd. Not to make things even more difficult or in this case impossible. For God’s sake, someone please make the Government see some sense.

That is why I am speaking on these issues. These are Roberta’s own words—and she is not a lone voice in regional Australia. All members representing regional areas have been receiving these same emails, but it is only coalition members who are speaking up on behalf of these students and families. There is absolutely no doubt the proposed changes will directly and negatively affect the higher education opportunities of students from my electorate of Forrest, which is a rural and regional area of Western Australia.

In some instances, these changes will actually deny students their university and career opportunities. Where is the detailed analysis on the number of current gap year students in my electorate who will be disadvantaged because of the proposed changes? I have not seen it. How many students in my electorate who would have previously qualified for youth allowance will now not meet the eligibility criteria? Where is the analysis on where and how many jobs will be available to students who will need to work for 30 hours a week for 18 months in small regional towns

and rural communities—of course, assuming they can get the transport to find the jobs? Where is the acknowledgement of the students’ needs to travel to find such work if it is available? There is no equity of opportunity to higher education for regional students in the proposed changes, or the acknowledgement that every student from my electorate who has to relocate to study faces substantially higher costs to access their education than a student who lives at home and does not have to travel.

Students from my electorate live at least two to four hours drive from metropolitan universities and have no choice but to relocate to Perth. There are a multitude of additional costs, as you heard from Roberta’s statement, associated with relocation—transport, food and communication with home, and they are just a few. Students in the south-west of Western Australia are unable to study their chosen or required courses. To be able to afford to attend university at all, many students need to be able to meet the independence criteria. That is how it is. This is frequently the only way a regional student can access university study. Statistics show that a disproportionate number of regional students defer compared to metropolitan students. The Victorian government’s Education and Training Committee recently inquired into geographical differences in the rate in which Victorian students participate in higher education. The executive summary noted:

From 2010 only those young people who have worked for a minimum of 30 hours per week for 18 months will be eligible for Youth Allowance under the criteria for independence. The Committee firmly believes that this change will have a disastrous effect on young people in rural and regional areas.

This is the Victorian government report—a Labor Victorian government. It further noted:

The Committee was concerned to find that many young Victorians who wished to commence a university course defer their studies for financial reasons. There was widespread concern that a significant proportion of students who defer do not subsequently return to study.

I have no doubt that these findings would be replicated in my regional and rural electorate, and around Australia. The current workforce participation criteria allows regional students to take one year off study—the gap year—to allow them to earn the designated amount needed to qualify for youth allowance the following year. There are three main issues that will arise from the tightening of the independent criteria. The current 2009 gap year students who began working at the conclusion of year 12 under the current youth allowance criteria will not qualify for youth allowance in 2010. To change the criteria part way through their qualifying period seriously and unfairly disadvantages students who were unable to plan for these changes. How many current gap year students will be affected

and how many in my electorate? How many will now not be able to attend university at all because of the changes?

At any time, it is very difficult for students to find work in regional towns and small communities, and my electorate has 12 towns or localities with fewer than 1,000 residents. Where in these communities will young people find 30 hours of employment for 18 months of a two-year period, particularly those with no skills and immediately out of high school? Agriculture and tourism are major industries in the south-west that provide employment in seasonal or peak periods, but certainly not 30 hours of work a week consistently for 18 months.

According to the ABS Labour Force Survey data, teenage full-time unemployment has risen from 7.5 per cent in November 2007 to 10.6 per cent in June this year. With rising unemployment, it is just unreasonable to expect and assume that all young people will be able to find virtually full-time employment, especially in small towns and communities in the south-west. It just displays a lack of understanding by this government of what goes on in regional communities across Australia. Even in normal circumstances, finding 30 hours work every week for 18 months will prove to be a major barrier for regional students. Also, there are many employers who are unwilling to provide a job for an employee they know will only be there for 18 months. How many students will lose their motivation to study at university or TAFE following a two-year gap?

Students who wish to complete a Bachelor of Medicine at the University of Western Australia are already faced with a six-year degree. To be forced to take an additional two years away from study to satisfy the proposed criteria would push back completion of the degree to at least 25 years of age. We know that in my electorate we currently have a shortage of GPs, and this will not help that. The changes certainly will not encourage young people to pursue this course of study or facilitate a potential return to the region to take care of that GP shortage.

Commonwealth scholarships were available to all students and were granted to the most disadvantaged students. Under the proposed criteria, the Commonwealth scholarships have been axed and the relocation and start-up scholarships introduced. However, both scholarships are only available to youth allowance recipients. If a student does not qualify for youth allowance, they are not eligible for the relocation and start-up scholarships. Therefore, there is no other form of financial assistance available to regional students except for competitive university scholarships. The relocation scholarships are valued at \$10,000 less over the period than the previous Commonwealth accommodation scholarship. A Perth

based university—and I will not quote its name—states that it has noted the proposed change in the youth allowance and the way that it will force students who are constrained financially to undertake a greater time period earning prior to entering the tertiary system. As such they expressed concerns over the new requirements. In their experience, a significant number of students who defer for a year do not take up their place in the following year.

This is particularly the case for students who undertake an 'informal' rather than a 'formal' year off. 'Formal' gap year students tend to undertake specific activities, including community aid type projects, where they know the placement is only temporary and they tend to still see themselves as university students. In contrast, 'informal' gap students tend to engage in casual work. They often become accustomed to the luxury of money and new possessions and have greater difficulty in relinquishing these, describing themselves as being part of the workforce. Both sets of students, of course, get out of the practice and habits of study, which is also detrimental to their return but is part of life. The changes foreshadowed will in effect force those in financial need to work both more intensively and for a longer period, and this is only going to exacerbate trends in deferment, to the detriment of participation in tertiary education.

'Regional and remote students', said the university, 'who are usually faced with the additional financial burden of living away from home with all of the additional expenses this requires, are particularly vulnerable in this regard'. What a great word for rural and regional students, I would add: vulnerable. The university went on to say that these students could thus be considered to be the most at risk. The university is particularly vulnerable in this regard and thus could be considered to be the most at risk. This university is particularly proud of the number of low SES students that it is currently catering for and would note that a large number are from regional and remote communities. As such, it is particularly concerned about any change that has the potential to reduce participation from these cohorts, particularly in light of the federal initiatives aimed in the opposite direction.

Information provided to me indicates that it costs from \$15,000 to \$20,000, and even more in certain circumstances, for a student to relocate and study at university in Perth. Families who have more than one child attending university have even higher costs, which are not taken into account in the proposed changes to youth allowance. One of the most distressing comments that I have received in this process comes from parents who are now saying to me that as a result of these changes they will be forced to choose which one of their children will

be able to attend university. Every student should have equity of opportunity to gain a higher education. The proposed changes create an additional barrier for regional students, their parents and some of their siblings, who are already working several jobs and going without in other areas of their lives to support the children's education. The changes to youth allowance are a disincentive for families thinking of moving to my south-west electorate and an incentive for families to move from regional areas to the city to support their children's educational opportunities. Unfortunately for regional and rural Australians, the Rudd government's education revolution is typical of their continuous Shane Warne style of delivery—nothing but spin.