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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Federation Chamber

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Higher Education

SPEECH

Monday, 10 October 2016

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Speaker	Littleproud, David, MP	Question No.	

Mr LITTLEPROUD (Maranoa) (18:31): Today, I stand in this chamber as a proud member of a government committed to ensuring that education continues to play a key role in bettering the lives and careers of every Australian. I do not have a degree; I was fortunate to build a career in my electorate of Maranoa by working my way up in the finance sector. But, when I was at school, the line 'fail to prepare; prepare to fail' was repeatedly used. Never has a line had more relevance than today, right here in this particular motion. If any government fails to balance the exponential growth in university loans, the current economic pressures and the need to transition our economy through education, then the system that was designed to universally provide opportunity to students electing to study will surely fail.

It is important in a debate as important as this that the facts are clearly articulated: We know higher education is a fundamental component of the Australian workforce and will play a key role in transitioning our economy by building the next generation's skills sets and intellectual property and diversifying our industries. The funding of university loans to students has grown by 59 per cent, almost twice the rate of the nominal GDP growth rate of 29 per cent over the same period. In 2016, our government will contribute more than \$16 billion to funding student places at record levels. The cost of a degree is not a determinative factor to the decision of students in choosing their field of study or career path, which even the opposition have conceded, with various members acknowledging that lower student contributions have no impact on student demand; rather, that a student's interests, abilities and career preferences brought about demand. If Labor had a mascot in this space, it would be the sidestepping, body-burrowing sand crab. They have a remarkable ability to run a scare campaign, while at the same time failing to accurately cost a policy in higher education—or any other policy, for that matter.

This government cannot be accused of not doing its job when it comes to finding the balance. I commend our government and, in particular, Minister Birmingham for today announcing the expert advisory panel that will work hand in glove with government to holistically tackle the issues facing this sector and ensure that we deliver a world-class, future-proofed, sustainable and progressive system that promotes excellence and innovation for the future generations to come. This diverse and qualified panel will be entrusted to examine the merits of a number of policy options emanating from the various key stakeholders and make recommendations.

I look forward to the outcome of this process, but I also look forward to the outcomes I know this government will attain in bolstering participation by students in regional and remote areas in higher education. In my electorate of Maranoa, in regional Queensland, we typically have lower enrolment rates at universities given the tyranny of distance and the issues associated with children relocating after schooling, in addition to the challenges often posed by studying externally. Our government is aware of those concerns, has heard them clearly and over the next five years will invest more than \$350 million in supporting higher education delivery in regional areas. That is in addition to reforming the requirements around the assets test for youth allowance to make it easier for geographically disadvantaged children to get to university, and reducing the self-supporting criteria for youth allowance from 18 months to 14 months for regional and remote students. This is in addition to the coalition's recent announcement of 1,200 rural and regional scholarships aimed at facilitating access to further education for undergraduate, postgraduate and vocational education students from the country.

Make no mistake, it is this government that knows just how important our kids and their aspirations will be to transitioning our economy now and into future. The government is consulting widely. We care about making sure this important system remains sustainable and affordable for all students—no matter their gender, background or postcode. I implore the opposition and the crossbenchers to come with the government on this journey to ensuring that our future generations can look forward to a world-class, sustainable system that delivers on our new economy.