

HIGHER EDUCATION



EDUCATION & TRAINING
HIGHER EDUCATION
AUSTRALIAN DEMOCRATS ISSUE SHEET

Access to publicly funded education is crucial to overcome systemic disadvantage and should be available to all. Education is a life-long process that should foster individual initiative, creativity, flexibility and allow all Australians to maximise their potential and fully participate in their community.



Australia needs a thriving public higher education system to succeed in the knowledge economy and improve our national innovation effort. The development of skilled and qualified graduates and the provision of ongoing professional development for the workforce are vital for a knowledge based economy.

For information about tertiary fees, please see our 'Tertiary Fees Issue Sheet'.

Nelson nobbles higher education

Between 1996 and 2003, the Howard Government has cut university funding by an estimated \$2.46 billion¹. The absence of a commitment to improved indexation of university grants in the Higher Education Support Act 2003, combined with inadequate federal funding, encourages universities to seek an even greater proportion of revenue from students. The Government

estimates students will pay an additional \$1.2 billion in fees over the next 4 years. This will have serious consequences for students, who already graduate with life-defining debts, and flow-on effects to the broader community.

The AVCC estimates unmet demand for university places in 2004 as between 19,200 and 24,300. There has been no definite signal of a reversal of the trend of increasing unmet demand since 1998. Their figures also show that the average student teacher ratio at all universities has increased by one third between 1996 and 2003 under the Howard Government.

The Government has ignored the fundamental issues of student poverty and student income support. The participation rate of students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds has remained at around 15% for the past decade², when research shows adequate student income support is the best way of improving this participation rate³.

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Students paid, on average, \$2,137 more toward the cost of a Government subsidised place in 2003 than they did in 1996, and universities received \$1,740 less per student in 2003 than they did in 1996⁴.

Democrats' promise

Our policy is to:

- significantly increase operating grants of universities;
- move to abolish HECS and full-fee degrees, and immediately increase the HECS repayment threshold to average male earnings;
- provide 5,000 new places each year for the next 4 years to reduce unmet demand;
- wind back the ideological commitment to marketisation of education and restore the ethic that education is an obligation of the government and a right of all Australians;
- peg all forms of student income support including Austudy and Youth Allowance to the age pension with a view to minimising student poverty;
- extend Rent Assistance to Austudy recipients and lower the age of independence for students to 18 years;



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- reverse the decision to increase visa application fees for students by \$95;
- make all Commonwealth education related scholarships tax free;
- exempt all University equity scholarships from the social security income tests; and,
- establish a representative and expert advisory body, the Higher Education Funding Council, to provide advice on sectoral issues.

Protecting university staff

We champion the cause of academic freedom, industrial and institutional democracy. We support the incorporation in University Acts of their role as 'critic and conscience'. We will provide legislative guarantees of academic freedom with an Australia-wide tenure status and ensure institutional reforms or amalgamations only occur after an open inquiry involving the institutions concerned.

The Democrats will abolish links between university funding and industrial relations requirements and governance protocols.

The strongest record on higher education

The Democrats have:

- voted against all attempts to introduce and increase fees and charges for higher education;
- opposed cuts to recurrent funding;
- opposed several attempts to privatise parts of the higher education system;
- initiated a wide-ranging Senate inquiry into the capacity of public universities to meet Australia's Higher Education needs in 2001; and,
- initiated the first ever Senate inquiry to look solely at the issue of student income support measures in March 2004.

Footnotes

¹ NTEU, Students Pay (Even) More. Universities Get (Even) Less. An Analysis of the Funding of Government Subsidised Student Places at Australian Universities 1996 to 2003, July 2004

² James and the Centre for the Study of Higher Education, *Analysis of Equity Groups in Higher Education 1991-2002*, 2003

³ James et al, *Rural and Isolated School Students and their Higher Education Choices*, 1999.

⁴ NTEU, Students Pay (Even) More. Universities Get (Even) Less. An Analysis of the Funding of Government Subsidised Student Places at Australian Universities 1996 to 2003, July 2004

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Other issue sheets are available online or can be requested via e-mail or telephone:

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