

Higher Education

AUSTRALIAN DEMOCRATS ACTION PLAN HIGHER EDUCATION EDUCATION

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, and 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.

The Howard Government's ideological assault on the higher education sector has resulted in sky-rocketing fees, a university sector strapped for capital works, and heightened financial stress for students.

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 the first ever Senate inquiry to look solely at the issue of student income support measures, in March 2004.

For information about tertiary fees, please see our 'Tertiary Fees Action Plan'.

Our Action Plan

- Wind back the Government's ideological commitment to de-regulation of higher education and restore the ethic that education is an obligation of the government and a right of all Australians.
- Revise the indexation formula for grants to universities to accurately account for inflation. Provide additional funding of \$1.5 billion over 5 years to redress years of under-funding.
- Abolish full-fee degrees for domestic students and immediately increase the HECS repayment threshold to average male earnings.
- Repeal the Voluntary Student Unionism legislation.

"The Australian Democrats will act to reverse the Howard Government's ideological assault on the university sector"

**Senator
Natasha Stott Despoja
Spokesperson on
Higher Education**



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- Peg student income support measures, including Austudy and Youth Allowance, to the Henderson Poverty Line.
- Lower the age of independence for students to 18 years.
- Make all Commonwealth higher education scholarships tax free and abolish the distinction between Commonwealth Learning Scholarships and university scholarships by establishing a new class of scholarship that is exempt from the social security personal income test.

The Issues

The Howard Government made their intentions towards publicly-funded higher education clear when they first came to power in 1996, cutting the budget for the tertiary sector by over \$1 billion. Spending on higher education declined rapidly as a share of GDP until 2004. While the 2007 Budget went some way towards redressing the financial short-fall, it was nowhere near enough.

There are clear signs that this Government wants to progressively distance the higher education sector from the public purse, which has serious ramifications for the viability of the sector as a whole and for access to higher education by students of all socio-economic backgrounds.

The Howard Government introduced full fees for domestic undergraduates but promised that there would be no \$100 000 degrees. Now, 111 degrees cost more than that and 13 degrees cost more than \$150 000. A combined medicine/arts degree at the University of New South Wales will cost a full-fee student \$237 000.

In 2005, the Howard Government introduced Voluntary Student Unionism legislation, which drastically cut the \$160 million that universities used to collect each year for sports and recreation, student welfare and advocacy, and a host of other services. This has diminished the scope of the university experience.

In 2007, the Howard Government, as part of the 2007 Budget package, removed the cap on the proportion of places in a course that can be full-fee places. The Department of Education, Science and Training admitted that this opens the way for full-fee only degrees.

The Australian Democrats champion the cause of academic freedom, industrial and institutional democracy. We are not opposed to increasing diversity and specialisation by Australia's tertiary institutions – in fact, we welcome it. We will, however, ensure that institutional reforms occur in partnership with universities, not via financial blackmail. The Democrats will abolish links between university funding and industrial relations requirements and governance protocols.

Higher education is not a drain on the public purse, it is an investment in the nation's future. Reducing the Government's role as education provider and making university students pay more for less is not in the national interest and the Democrats will act to reverse that trend.



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