



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**PROOF**

**BILLS**

**Higher Education Support Amendment  
(Response to the Australian Universities  
Accord Interim Report) Bill 2023**

**Second Reading**

**SPEECH**

**Monday, 4 September 2023**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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## SPEECH

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<b>Questioner</b>	<b>Responder</b>
<b>Speaker</b> Khalil, Peter MP	<b>Question No.</b>

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**Mr KHALIL** (Wills) (18:39): My electorate of Wills, which is in the inner-northern suburbs of Melbourne, is home to a large number of students and staff that study and work in the university sector. I speak to many of them regularly, as you would, and the issues they identify are pretty clear cut. They talk about access. They talk about quality. They talk about affordability of higher education. We know and we've heard in this debate that higher education is becoming more expensive whilst quality is declining. Class sizes are ballooning. Staff face impossible workloads, limiting access to feedback, and navigating university bureaucracy is often a nightmare.

These are significant issues that are all too common for students and university staff across this country. They are symptomatic of a higher education sector looking more like a corporation than an institution that should be dedicated to delivering quality education and quality working conditions. The model that we see now is simply not sustainable. The issues facing the sector are not sustainable. Our higher education system must be both equitable and high quality in order to best serve our country's interests. When higher education is systematically discouraged, it leads to lower skilled workers, a less competitive labour market, lower productivity and overall less innovation in the Australian economy.

This is the key issue that this Labor government, the Albanese Labor government, is tackling. Of course, it is one of the great Labor traditions to work on policies to ensure that university education never remains out of reach for any Australian wanting to obtain one. That is why the Minister for Education is leading the Australian Universities Accord. I know that he is deeply committed to reforming Australia's higher education sector for the better.

He knows the power of education to change lives for the better. I think we all share an understanding that education is the key that literally opens the door to opportunity. Whatever your socioeconomic background, whatever your diverse background, whatever your identity and wherever you've come from, getting access to a quality education opens up so many doors to opportunity to allow an individual to make a contribution to their community and to their society, a significant contribution that also fulfils their potential as a person. The minister knows, as this government knows, that education is of critical, fundamental importance to so many people in our community.

In November last year, Minister Jason Clare appointed a panel to conduct a thorough review to reform Australia's higher education system and ensure that it meets the current and future needs of the nation. In its interim report, the panel calls for five modest but sensible priority actions to be considered immediately. The panel's recommendations were made by a bipartisan group of Australians with unparalleled experience in higher education, business and public policy. The Albanese government has accepted all five of these recommendations.

Two of these recommendations require legislative amendment to the Higher Education Support Act, the HESA. The first is to extend the current demand driven funding for regional and remote First Nations students to all First Nations Australian undergraduate students, regardless of where they reside. Thirty-eight per cent of Indigenous Australians live in major cities. Most young Indigenous people live in non-remote areas of Australia. The system that we have now leaves a large portion of that population ineligible for funding.

Indigenous students who come from regional and remote areas to metropolitan areas, which is common in my electorate, are already faced with housing and relocation costs. These students must also deal with the challenges of isolation and being away from their families, their communities, their culture, their homes. Without the same Commonwealth support that we provide to rural and regional Indigenous students, metropolitan Indigenous students are placed at a significantly disadvantaged starting point compared to their non-Indigenous peers. Expanding eligibility provides immediate material support in ways that matter the most. Indigenous students make up only 1.8 per cent of the higher education student population. One of the top reasons for Indigenous students not studying for another educational qualification in the last 12 months was that it was too expensive, basically. Other barriers include not feeling like they belonged, moving away from family, and internet access.

There's a lot of work to be done, but this bill addresses the biggest barriers to accessing higher education. Evidence has shown that providing access to support in the form of a Commonwealth supported place and a HELP loan has led to increased access to university for underrepresented groups. They help break down barriers to higher education for those that need it most. We know that higher education is linked to better quality of life, higher lifetime earnings, and increased contributions to the overall Australian economy. If we are to meet the goals of the Closing the Gap initiative, we must expand funding to all Indigenous students.

Secondly, we must remove the 50 per cent pass rule that punishes and abandons struggling Australians. This rule targets HECS recipients only. It does not dissuade all students; rather it discriminates based on socioeconomic status. It privileges those that are able to afford to fail while financially straining those that cannot. Since its implementation, more than 13,000 students at 27 universities have been hit by the rule. Within a span of less than two years, it has wiped out an entire university's worth of students. The scale of the harm caused by the 50 per cent pass rule is unfathomable. Universities Australia said that this rule was unnecessarily harsh. It has disproportionately targeted underrepresented students, including Indigenous Australians. Innovative Research Universities called it punitive. If we continue to enforce the 50 per cent rule, we would be ignoring the voices of our future skilled workers. We've already lost so many high-skilled workers. We must prevent further harm on the Australian economy by abolishing the rule.

The Albanese government is committed to opening the door of opportunity for more Australians to go to university. We are working with the state and territory governments to improve university governance. This requires that university governing bodies include more people with expertise in the operation of universities and a focus on student and staff safety to ensure universities are good educators and good employers. We are extending the Higher Education Continuity Guarantee for a further two years to provide funding certainty to universities as the accord process rolls out. As part of this, universities will be required to invest remaining funds from their yearly grant on additional academic and learning support for students from poorer backgrounds, regions and other underrepresented groups. The panel is also assessing the current HECS repayment scheme, including indexation arrangements, to ensure that it is fair and efficient and does not unduly burden those who made the wise decision to pursue higher education.

I enthusiastically await the final report of the Universities Accord panel. But I think it is true to say that we are not wasting time as a government. We're not wasting a moment. With this amendment today, we are acting on the recommendations that have already been made. The Albanese government is committed to removing barriers and supporting more people to access higher education, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds, First Nations Australians and those based in the regions. Our future as a diverse and modern society depends on students from all walks of life being afforded the opportunity of a higher education if they choose so. Not everyone will go to university, but everyone should have the choice. That is what equality of opportunity is about. Every person should have that same opportunity, regardless of whether they live in my electorate—in Fawkner, Glenroy, Coburg or Brunswick—or in remote or regional parts of Australia. The great thing about this country is that everyone should get—at least, we should aspire to everyone getting—the same access to a quality education. As I said earlier, that access to a quality education gives so many of us the opportunities to fulfil our potential and make a meaningful contribution to our community and to the society that we live in. It is about fairness, and it is about equality of opportunity, because education is such a fundamental part of our lives in making the contribution that we seek to make. That's why the Albanese Labor government is so committed to these reforms.

Before I finish, I want to take the opportunity to recognise the staff, the students and the NTEU members at the University of Melbourne, many of whom live in my electorate, who went on a week-long strike last week. The staff and students from the Faculty of Arts, Melbourne Law School, the VCA school of art, student services and the library joined together to call for fair pay, more secure work, manageable workloads, better access to parental and carers leave, greater flexibility in work arrangements and restricting rolling restructures which cause instability. I stand in solidarity with you in your efforts because I know that staff working conditions are student learning conditions. They are key to delivering a quality higher education sector in this country and ensuring equality of access for Australians, no matter their background, where they come from or who they are.