



Speech by

**GEOFF WILSON**

**MEMBER FOR FERNY GROVE**

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Hansard 11 September 2003

### **HIGHER EDUCATION [GENERAL PROVISIONS] BILL**

**Mr WILSON** (Ferny Grove—ALP) (6.30 p.m.): It is my great pleasure to stand and speak in support of the Higher Education (General Provisions) Bill. It is not possible for me to be in the House today and not pass a few brief comments about this legislation but, more particularly, about the broader issue of higher education.

In common with a number of my colleagues in this House, higher education, particularly university education, is very close to my heart. I was the first member of my family to have the opportunity to attend university and, indeed, it was in the early years of the Whitlam federal government. It is the case that, because of the financial circumstances of my family, without public funding for university places that then applied I would not have had the opportunity to go to university. My father was a plant operator on a rural shire council. Whilst I was the last of four children and their financial commitments for the future were somewhat more certain, nonetheless we would not have otherwise been able to afford for me to go to university. The fact is it changed my life. I spent the best years of my life at the Australian National University over a period of seven years.

It concerns me to see what is happening federally about supporting young people, particularly those from working-class backgrounds, in getting a higher education. Tragically, I believe the Howard government's higher education policy is failing young Queenslanders and it is seriously undermining the Beattie government's highly acclaimed Smart State strategy of building the knowledge economy.

The number of federally funded university places for high school leavers in Queensland fell from 42,689 in the year 2002 to 40,588 in 2003. The number of Queensland high schoolers who qualified for a university place but missed out because there were no vacancies increased from about 5,000 in 2002 to 7,000 in 2003. Projections for 2004 are even worse.

Over the past three years an estimated 25 students from Ferny Grove State High School and Mitchelton State High School—two very good high schools in my electorate—have missed out on a university education because of the lack of university places. On current trends, more year 12 students this year will also miss out on a university education. They will be denied a vital opportunity to secure a better future for themselves and, ultimately, for their families. They will not get a chance to help build the Smart State.

This is a story of lost opportunities for young people throughout Australia—not just Queensland. Between 1995 and 2000 Australia had the second lowest increase in the rate of enrolment in universities in the OECD countries. Only Turkey was worse out of the 25 countries in the OECD. I repeat that in case honourable members did not get the point: only Turkey was worse.

In the first five years of the Howard government, growth in university places had shrunk to just two per cent. This is in dramatic contrast to the period from 1992 to 1996 under the Keating Labor government when the number of additional places for new students grew by about 20 per cent. Since 1996 the Howard government has increased HECS fees by 85 per cent, stripped \$620 million from Queensland universities and provided Queenslanders with 16,000 fewer places than were legislated by the Keating government in 1995.

In 1996 HECS changes by the Howard government reduced demand for higher education amongst school leaver applicants by around 9,000 students per year. The 1996 changes reduced demand for higher education amongst mature-age applicants by about 17,000 per year. Reports confirm that Australian student places at universities grew rapidly under Labor but not under the Howard government, with access to university across the population peaking in 1996. Reductions in the HECS threshold from \$28,000 to \$20,000 in 1996 by the Howard government reduced the disposable income of graduating students within this income range by between \$12 and \$24 a week.

Parents want their children to have a good education and that includes a university education. The parents of today are no different from the parents of my day—my parents and the parents of my mates at school—who wanted the best education they could get for their kids. If that included a university education, then so be it. They wanted higher education to be affordable and accessible, not for the children to depend upon family wealth, power and privilege. In conclusion, there can be no doubt that when it comes to higher education the Howard government is indeed, regrettably, a turkey.