



Speech by

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**MEMBER FOR ALGEESTER**

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**HIGHER EDUCATION [GENERAL PROVISIONS] BILL**

**Ms STRUTHERS** (Algeester—ALP) (5.18 p.m.): In common with previous speakers this afternoon, I acknowledge the fact that we have a world-class higher education system in Queensland and throughout Australia. There is probably no better university than Griffith University and its numerous campuses around south-east Queensland. I am not only a proud member of the Griffith University Council but also a graduate this year in a Masters of Public Sector Management. After many years of hard toil, I finally scraped through this year. Not only is it a good university; it produces very good graduates. I am sure honourable members would agree. Anyway, enough of that shameless self-promotion.

I support this bill as it provides a new framework to ensure that all higher education providers in Queensland, regardless of their status, are subject to uniform national quality assurance procedures and approval or accreditation criteria. It is important that the Queensland government has the power—the teeth—to take action against higher education providers who do not abide by these standards. The growing sector in higher education is international education in terms of both students—and there is a great influx of international students coming into this state—as well as some of the international universities looking to get a share of the market in Queensland. However, they all must abide by these standards. International students are at greater risk of being ripped off within the system because they might be paying full fees and not necessarily getting the sort of support and standards of education that they ought to expect in paying those fees. It is important that we have a quality system that can regulate that well.

I certainly support the minister in the work that she has done in bringing in this new regulatory framework and the education training reforms broadly that are really the centrepiece of Labor policy and Labor programs for the next few years to come. However, today I want to condemn the federal minister, Brendan Nelson, and Prime Minister John Howard for the savage blow that they have dealt to universities and to university students in this country and this state. Each year 20,000 qualified Australians miss out on studying at university and up to 15,000 young Australians miss out on TAFE because there just are not enough places.

What is the response from the Howard government? Students and their families are being forced to make up for the Howard government's \$5 billion worth of cuts from our universities. The Howard government wants to let universities increase HECS fees by up to 30 per cent. That means huge HECS debts of up to \$50,000. Parents now can expect that their sons and daughters are going to have enormous debts when they leave university. Not only will they have a university debt; many of them will not be able to afford housing and, because the way the Howard government is going with Medicare, they will not be able to afford health care. It is a very grim future we are looking at with the Howard government in power federally.

An arts degree, for instance, could cost \$15,000, science \$21,000 and law \$41,000. Who can afford to pay this sort of money? The elite! We are going back to the time when only the elite could make it into university and survive. Under the Howard government's proposed changes, loans for postgraduate students would attract a real rate of interest of six per cent. That means that someone studying a specialist nursing degree, for instance, could have to pay \$4,300 in interest alone. That is the sort of debt that people are going to incur at university into the future. The Howard government's

new fee hikes could see average student contributions increase by more than 100 per cent since 1996. Some courses like law and veterinary science could increase by over 240 per cent.

Do members know what I really like about Griffith University? Griffith University has a world-renowned reputation—

**Mr Reeves:** A great university.

**Ms STRUTHERS:** It is a great university, but it has a great reputation for, as well as the quality of its education, caring about people. It does not care whether they have the capacity to pay. Its philosophy is that all people—regardless of their income, regardless of their means—can have a decent university education. That is what I really like about Griffith University. Under the leadership of Vice-Chancellor Glyn Davis we are seeing further advances in the areas of equity, further support in scholarships for indigenous students, further support for mature-age students, and further support for young people who struggle to make it through the system. That is the sort of philosophy we need. Are we getting that from the Howard government? No! It is just the opposite. We are getting a savage blow to students. The future looks like being one of future debt.

Federal Labor, on the other hand, has a very clear policy. Aiming Higher, the federal Labor policy, certainly makes it clear that we, too, share the view that students should be able to access higher education regardless of their means. Federal Labor will invest \$2.34 billion to rebuild, reform and expand our universities and TAFEs to ensure a better quality education for all Australians. Labor's plans are fully costed and fully funded. Labor will create 20,000 new full- and part-time places in our universities and 20,000 new full- and part-time places at TAFE. It will fully fund approximately 25,000 full-time equivalent student places that the Howard government currently funds on the cheap at a marginal rate.

That is the difference between us and the conservatives in government. That is a very clear difference. People do not have to have the money in their pocket to get on in life. We certainly will make opportunities for all people, and education is the key. Many of us in this House have had the advantage of a great education and have come through from maybe struggling earlier on in life to having the great honour of representing our constituents in this House. That is what Labor is about. That is what Australians generally are about. That is a fair go. In speaking on this bill this afternoon, I certainly commend the minister for the work that she is doing to give primary and secondary students a fair go through that system and the good work that she is doing in the regulatory reform that she is creating through this bill.