

I have worked in education for over 30 years, primarily in Western and South Western Sydney. I am currently an educational consultant working in private practice. The children and young people who I have worked with have generally come from a significantly disadvantaged background, either homeless, refugee, indigenous etc. Many of these young people present with mental health issues, either expressing them themselves or come from families that have mental health issues. The commonality of many of these children and young people is that for many, financial and social disadvantage leads in most cases to educational disadvantage. Innate intellectual abilities have rarely been a deciding factor in the child or young person achieving their educational goals. In other words, it is usually circumstances outside the control of the young person or child that has limited their educational success.

Educational outcomes (or the lack there of) are not achieved in isolation. Outcomes in other areas including health outcomes, social outcomes, financial outcomes, crime outcomes etc are closely linked to educational success and engagement. Those children who achieve educationally do well almost all other other social and health indicators. This is one of those clear, self evident facts that must be considered when making changes to educational opportunities that are being presented to young people. Significantly, the real cost to governments and the community on a range of domains must include the overall and holistic nature of the benefits of an equitable, accessible, inclusive and supportive education system.

Those children and young people who are engaged and supported in education are the ones who ultimately contribute rather than extract from our community. It is clearly worth the investment, both for their economic and social consequences.

The proposed changes to tertiary education funding significantly changes the manner that young people from the most disadvantaged groups can perceive their ability to access and engage with education at a tertiary level. These young people will not take on a significant future debt at the commencement of their studies, they will not perceive that tertiary education is within their grasp, they will not understand the importance of a tertiary education, nor will they add an additional burden to their highly stressful lives. The proposals will actively discourage many young people who have the ability not to take on tertiary studies. The consequences of this will clearly be a disparity of opportunity and ultimately an entrenchment of the factors that has led to the young person being disadvantaged in the first place. The cycle of poverty and disempowerment can be broken through the young persons participation and success in education.

The government needs to actively pursue mechanisms that include rather than exclude marginalised groups in our community. By bridging the gap we all benefit. The current proposals before parliament does the opposite.

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