

## **We should all pay for a good education**

**By Dr Janet McCalman**

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Dr Nelson's inquiry into higher education is under way and we are still all tiptoeing around the reality that dare not speak its name, to wit taxpayers need to pay more for education.

There, I've said it. Why is it such an awful prospect?

Few people in the business would disagree that Australian education in schools and universities could be better than it is. If we compare ourselves with like societies - Canada, the Netherlands - we do not look good. Our children do not learn enough at school and our universities are increasingly dysfunctional. Our national research performance has been deteriorating since the instigation of the Research Quantum and crude performance measuring. We are failing to retrain workers for new technologies. We have many clever individuals, but we are not collectively smart.

This would not matter if we could live forever off the sheep's back and on non-renewable natural resources, but we cannot. If we do not become smarter about our environment and how we make a living, our children will inherit a dying land, inhabited by a poverty-stricken people whose assets have long disappeared into foreign hands. We will be poor and divided and probably rather unpleasant.

Charles Darwin foresaw this when he visited in 1836. After an uncomfortable tramp over the Blue Mountains in a heat wave, he concluded that Australia could never become another America - its soil was too poor, its rains too unpredictable. Instead it must depend on becoming "the centre of commerce for the southern hemisphere and perhaps on her future manufactories".

Life in this difficult place has always depended on brainpower and self-reliance. We have to live within our means, ecologically and economically. We cannot afford duplication and waste. We are too small and too fragile to indulge, for instance, the luxury of endemic inequality.

Most families that can, choose to spend \$60,000 to \$100,000 per child on private school education. In the United States, however, that private investment would be reserved for higher education. In Canada, less might be spent on preparing for international sporting success and more tax-income on quality schools and universities.

To ask Australian university students and their families to pay higher fees or HECS debts is to squeeze a lemon that is already almost exhausted. We deplore the falling marriage rate of the young, yet we seriously consider inflicting even greater debt as they struggle to buy their first homes. It is cheaper per capita to pay more tax.

Asking students to pay their own way is taking from the future in order to evade the responsibilities of the present. If we want Australia not just to prosper, but even simply to survive as a decent place to live, we must sacrifice and work for it now. We must invest in the coming generations.

A society's investment in education must be seen as an investment for everyone. An educated workforce benefits the entire economy. We now know that within 12 months, each dollar that the

government invests in education is returned with profit in taxes paid and economic activity stimulated.

We also know that well-educated societies are more creative and resilient, more equipped to cope with change, more economically productive.

And we know that enriched individuals who have the opportunity to fulfil their potential and realise their talents, are happier and more effective citizens.

There are no quick fixes to the decay of higher education other than more central government funding. There has never been enough wealth in the corporate or philanthropic sectors to make a lasting difference. There are no smart solutions that will suddenly earn universities enough private income to compensate for the decline of core public funding.

There are limits to our capacity to absorb overseas students. Our resources and energies are sapped to exhaustion.

Australians do not pay the world's highest taxes - indeed, we bear the fifth-lowest taxation burden in the OECD. And if we were less addicted to private schools and private health, there would be even more left over for the public good.

But we must face the reality that we cannot have a good society on the cheap. The rest of the world is investing deep in education and research - and we are beginning to look foolish.

Neither side of politics has the courage of its convictions when it comes to education.

And, because Labor is meant to know better, its record is the more shameful. The rhetoric is there, but not the cash.

Band-aids, new loans, higher fees, fiddling with the balance between research and teaching universities will achieve too little. We have to spend big - and that spending has to be in scholarships for students, salaries for more staff, funding for research and equipment and cash for libraries.

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