

Make Education work as a Public Good

Education is a basic right, and Australia has obligations under International human rights agreements and its own laws, to provide free education for all people, focusing on equity of access and opportunity. To include everyone in the enjoyment of their fundamental right to education we have to remove all barriers which exclude and marginalise people.

The neoliberal approach that students should pay for the benefit they receive from education denies the broad national benefit of an educated and skilled population. Nor is the payment of fees being turned into national benefit, rather education has become an investment area of global corporations and their goals often drive the research focus of universities.

Many Scandinavian countries, and Germany, do not charge tuition fees, yet still provide a high standard of living. Not only is it not necessary to make money from education, it is counterproductive to turn away the students who will provide the skilled workers, and to exploit the overseas students who will be our ambassadors in their home country.

Good quality education should enable all people, no matter with what background or ability, to maximise their potential and take on the jobs, create the culture and enjoy the environment that forms Australia. Most importantly, education enables people to think about how Australia can develop for the betterment of all.

How can we pay for Education as a Public Good?

Our national education system require a predictable and sustainable funding model that gives both government and all levels from pre-school to universities some certainty in planning, and that takes into account student, community, professional and industry demands and needs.

This would put Australia on an even footing with other industrialised countries and assist in generating a more secure and sustainable economic future, as well as ensuring the access of disabled and disadvantaged students on an equal footing. We need:

1. to expand child-care access and early childhood education associated with child-care (approx. \$1.5 billion per year) with a supply model based on the care needs of an area and which set conditions for services to that area;



2. to increase funding to public schools as outlined in the Gonski review which recommended an increase of less than 0.5 per cent of the Gross Domestic Product of Australia (approx. \$8 billion per year);
3. to guarantee funding of public sector vocational education at TAFE / VET, and an end to the funding cuts, phoney competitive tendering, selling of capital assets, and resulting shrinking of the sector;
4. to abolish all tertiary education fees (approx. \$16.6 billion per year);
5. to increase and expand tertiary student income support;
6. to increase the base funding of Australia's public universities by at least 10 per cent per student (as recommended by the 2007 Bradley Review of Higher Education);
7. to increase public investment in universities to the equivalent of at least 1 per cent of GDP from the present approx. 0.5 per cent (approx. \$8 billion more per year);
8. to eliminate public funding to private and for-profit operators in the vocational sector. The market model does not provide a way to guarantee the quality of educational outcomes.
9. all institutions with government subsidies for teaching and learning to improve the participation rates of students with disabilities, from disadvantaged backgrounds, and specifically increase participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders;

10. tertiary institutions levying the Student Services Amenities Fee (SSAF) to ensure there is independent and democratic student representation and adequate funding to support student welfare and advocacy services.

This expanded vision for Australian education as a public good would cost about \$34.6 billion more per year, or about 2 per cent more of GDP.

Secure jobs for University staff

Universities now run as a business rather than a public good. They have been cutting their wage bill and employees' rights by using a more flexible, seasonal workforce. Higher education is now the third most highly casualised industry after tourism and retail.

Universities employ more than 160,000 casual and contract staff, and more than half of all teaching is carried out by academics employed by the hour for a few hours a week over a teaching period. Eight out of ten of research-only staff hired in the last 10 years are on fixed term contracts. This is negative for the quality of the educational experience, and research.

There is an increase in online learning and related software production, and this is both an area of growth for Australian export of expertise and computer skills, and also a possible area of exploitation as the process of developing online courses is highly labour intensive and often does not replace the learning done in face-to-face courses.

Education as a resource

Education is Australia's third largest export earner, and universities constitute the largest component of the sector generating about \$17 billion in export income per year. But reliance on international student fees is exploitative, and subject to sudden downturns.

Questions for discussion

1. **What sort of benefits do you think that people get from their study at School, TAFE / VET or University?**
2. **How do these benefits flow on to society? What kind of education system would you like to see Australia have? How much will it cost for all people to have access to these resources relevant to their ability to learn, rather than their ability to pay?**
3. **How can we pay for this? Should overseas students be used to subsidise the core work of university teaching and research, or to promote educational exchange, international capacity building and human rights?**
4. **What can you do to boost early childhood education and the Gonski schools funding?**
5. **How can workers' and students' rights be enhanced in education?**

**Send your group or individual ideas and feedback to
contact@commonaction.org.au**

Common Action network: Aboriginal Rights Coalition, Australian Fair Trade & Investment Network, Australian Manufacturing Workers Union, Community & Public Sector Union - PSU Group, Construction Forestry Mining & Energy Union, Evatt Foundation, Federation of Italian Migrant Workers & Families, f-collective, Greens NSW, Maritime Union of Australia Sydney Branch, Migrante Australia, National Tertiary Education Union, NSW Nurses & Midwives Association, NSW ALP Socialist Left, SEARCH Foundation.
<http://www.commonaction.org.au>. February 2017.