

A Fair Australia
Resolution on Higher Education and the
'Backing Australia's Future' Initiative

ACTU CONGRESS 2003

1. ACTU declares its support for a public and national system of universities primarily funded and regulated by the Commonwealth Government. Congress recognises that a vibrant and expanding university sector is central to Australia's economic, social and cultural development. Access to university education should be as wide as possible and should not be restricted on the basis of economic or social status.
2. Congress notes that key elements of the Howard Government's recently released *Backing Australia's Future* higher education package (the Nelson package) threaten to undermine the quality and accessibility of Australia's universities. Large rises in student fees and a continuing decline in Government spending will have negative consequences for the majority of universities and the communities they serve, and will place a university education beyond the reach of many Australian families. Increased debt will be a minimum requirement for a new university place.
3. Congress declares its opposition to the following specific Nelson package proposals:
 - (a) Allowing universities to impose new HECS fees, noting that fees are likely to rise by at least 30%.
 - (b) Replacing the current Block Operating Grants system with the Commonwealth Grants Scheme, noting that many universities will receive less base funding.
 - (c) Increasing full fee paying places from 25% to 50% of student load and the introduction of a full fee paying loan scheme.
 - (d) The introduction of a Learning Entitlement to restrict the Government's funding commitment to students to five years of equivalent full time study. This move, in conjunction with the increase in Government subsidised loan places to private higher education institutions, represents a definite step towards a voucher model for higher education.

- (e) The need for universities to comply with the Federal Government's workplace relations policies, including the introduction of AWA's, to be eligible for increases in Government funding.
 - (f) A 'Workplace Productivity Programme' that would link individual pay to performance evaluations and the encouragement of individualised employment arrangements.
 - (g) The plan to prohibit universal student union membership.
 - (h) Increased Government interference in universities, including the need for institutions to enter into a Funding Agreements with the Commonwealth, and the introduction of the Higher Education Information Management System.
 - (i) Reductions in staff and student representation on university governing bodies.
4. Congress also notes that proposed changes to the *Workplace Relations Act 1996* to limit protected industrial action by university staff will have broader implications for the trade union movement as a whole, notably for workers in community, health and education services.
5. Congress endorses an ongoing campaign by the ACTU Officers against the Nelson package noting that such a campaign will be linked to broader community campaigning around health, education and family policy.