



Speech by

## RACHEL NOLAN

MEMBER FOR IPSWICH

---

Hansard 6 August 2002

### UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND

**Ms NOLAN** (Ipswich—ALP) (6.58 p.m.): Next Monday night the governing body of this state's best university, the University of Queensland, will consider the introduction of full fee paying undergraduate students. This is a big step. Since the reforms of the Whitlam government, access to university has been determined purely by merit, not by wealth. The principle is that you can do a university course if you are smart enough, not if you are rich enough.

The concept of merit based access to higher education has led to enormous changes in Australian society. A generation of decent working class kids were educated because of it. People such as Peter Beattie and my parents became the first in their families to go to university because, for the first time, people from working class backgrounds could.

Since it was elected in 1996, the Howard government has consistently sought to undermine that system. It has taken \$3 billion out of higher education and has legislated so that universities can take up to a quarter of their Australian undergraduate students on a full fee paying basis. John Howard's always shallow claim to represent the battlers is belied by the system his government has established whereby smart battling young people cannot access university, while people whose results are not as good but whose parents can afford to pay, can access university.

The proposal for UQ to admit full fee paying Australian undergraduate students will seriously undermine both the claims to excellence and the equity of higher education at UQ. It will allow students who have not reached the cut-off point for HECS places to enter courses through the backdoor. While the university claims there will be no demarcation between HECS and fee-paying students once they are in courses, academics will know where the money is coming from and they will be under pressure to keep them in courses. UQ prides itself on excellence. The admission of a second tier of less qualified students is not conducive to the absolute pursuit of excellence. Full fee paying undergraduate students fundamentally offend the concept of equity. In universities, as in life, we should progress because of how good we are, not how rich we are. Even if, as the university promises, entry cut-offs are relaxed only slightly to allow for full-fee paying students, rich people will have access over smarter people. In dentistry, for instance, which currently has an OP cut-off of one, this will play itself out with students with an OP of two who cannot afford to pay being kept out while those on a three with cash are welcomed. The financial case put forward by the university is weak. Of the three schools that want fee paying undergraduates—vet, dentistry and law—none has presented a particularly convincing argument on how many fee paying students they expect to attract and, importantly, how much money they think they will make. For the UQ senate to jeopardise the future of excellence and a foundation of equity for the sake of a financial case riddled with holes would be a travesty. The senate—

**Mr Terry Sullivan:** It'll be the second best degree money can buy.

**Ms NOLAN:** That's right. The senate of UQ must stick to its principles.