

PLENARY – FUNDING AND QUALITY

Speaker 2 – Donald Sword, University of Sydney

Higher Education Support Act and HECS

According to DEST of 63,000 students who started a degree course, 20,000 finished. Many of those who do not finish their course still leave with a HECS debt, whether the withdraw, are excluded, have absent fails or experienced unforeseeable and adverse circumstances which were detrimental to their academic career.

Applying for HECS Debt Remission

Under the Higher Education Funding Act (HEFA), if students wish to apply for remission then they should apply to the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST).

Timeframe

Many applications for a HECS debt remission are rejected, a large number of which are because they are submitted outside of the 12 month allowable timeframe. This timeframe is inappropriate. If a student's studies suffer due to unforeseen circumstances, for example, to the extent that they need to withdraw, it is unreasonable to assume that the student will be able to lodge a remission application at that time.

If an application is rejected, students may appeal to the Administrative Appeals Tribunal.

The Higher Education Support Act

Under new legislation coming in – namely the Higher Education Support Act (HESA) – decisions surrounding the remission of HECS debts are solely up to the higher education institutions. The 12 month period remains a problem and it looks like this will be treated in a similar manner as remission of an upfront payment and so does not look a likely probability.

It is possibility is that because students will be approaching the institutions directly for remission of their HECS debt, institutions may investment more in student learning support services to keep students enrolled.

The Australian Tax Office: New ground?

As a caseworker, I am approaching the Australian Tax Office (ATO) in the hope that this is an alternative avenue through which a HECS debt that is up to 4 or 5 years old may be remitted. The ATO does not place a time limit of remission of debts.