

TRANSCRIPT

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Minister for Education Dan Tehan interview with Rafael Epstein, ABC Radio Melbourne Drive

SUBJECTS: Job-ready Graduates package draft legislation and HELP debts, Universities and COVID-19, COVID-19 and Victoria

Rafael Epstein: That's the proposal. If you fail at half of your subjects should you be fortunate enough to go to university, you could then lose access to that low interest loan from the Federal Government, that HECS or HELP loan that you pay back once you start earning a salary. If you fail half your subjects in a year, you would only be able to continue if you paid the full cost of your course upfront, before you continue with the rest of your degree. Now, of course, there'd be exceptions – significant sickness, a death in the family. These are proposals that have been suggested, along with some other funding changes, by the Federal Education Minister Dan Tehan, who joins us on the line. Thanks for joining us Minister.

Dan Tehan: Pleasure, Raf.

Epstein: Are you using fear to try and make sure students study hard for their exams?

Tehan: No. What we don't want is students taking on a study load that they can't complete, leaving them without a qualification and a large debt. We want to make sure that students understand the importance of them doing well. And, so, when they're not doing well, we want universities and the student to be able to sit down and discuss how the student is performing. And, then, if need be, either provide additional assistance, or maybe steer them to another course which is more suitable for them ...

Epstein: ... I understand the intention ...

Tehan: ... So, this is about helping the students and the university make sure that everyone understands that the last thing any of us need is students repeatedly failing, and just getting a debt and getting no benefit out of it. And, the research ...

Epstein: ... Can I ask this question, Minister?

Tehan: Yes, Raf.

Epstein: Why use that financial stick? I mean, isn't it up to the university, surely the university's best placed to work out if someone's taking on study they shouldn't be taking on? Why use this financial punishment?

Tehan: Well, we just want to make sure that everyone understands how important this is, because the research has shown that nearly six per cent of university students fail every subject in their first year. Now, we want to make sure that that doesn't continue to be the case, because that's not in the student's interests, it's not in the university's interests, and, ultimately, it's not in the taxpayer's interests, as well.

Epstein: Where's the carrot in all of this? The stick's pretty big. Universities are in a world of pain. They're less able to accommodate each student. They're less able to throw educational resources at them. This appears to be all stick, no carrot.

Tehan: No, this is about making sure that our universities are places of excellence, which they are. I think we've got one of the best higher education systems in the world, if not the best higher education system in the world. So, this is about ensuring that we keep that, that level of quality, that we keep that interaction with the students, so we're getting students in the right courses. It means that we're getting resources in the right places, so that we can continue to support our education, our higher education system. \$18 billion of taxpayer money was guaranteed for the sector this year, and, obviously, we're in discussions with the university sector at the moment about what we need to do to help and support, get our research capabilities protected through this pandemic, as well. So, this is about working with them, supporting them, but, also, making sure that that excellence that we want to see from our higher education system continues.

Epstein: I didn't, I don't think I heard an answer to my question about carrot, stick. Maybe if I rephrase it. It is clear that some of the things that stop people succeeding, some of the reasons they fail a subject or two or more, is the quality of the education they receive, and their ability to access other study resources. That's not going to improve. It does appear to be all stick, no carrot.

Tehan: No, that will improve, because it will incentivise universities to ensure that they're offering the necessary support to the ...

Epstein: ... They're losing money hand over fist at the moment. How are they going to do that?

Tehan: Well, they've lost revenue as a result of what's happened with international students. But, in terms of the domestic student load, what we're seeing is growth in that area, and we're going to see continued growth in that area, because ...

Epstein: ... You know how universities, I mean, forgive the interruption, you know how universities work. They cross-subsidise each other. You can't just lop off the international bit and ramp up investment in the domestic students. It just doesn't work that way.

Tehan: No, and that's why, as part of our higher education reforms, we're making sure that they will get indexed growth into the future. It's why we're putting additional places, 18,000 additional places, into our higher education sector next year, and that will grow to an additional 100,000 places. So, that's why we continue to work with the sector on seeing what we need to do to make sure we're protecting their research capabilities through this pandemic. We understand that the international student market has been cut off at the knees. And, we need to be there to support the sector. And, I had a very good, another productive meeting with Vice-Chancellors today, where we were talking about what we need to do on research. And, I'm going to continue to engage with the sector, because they're going to be an important driver in how we recover from this pandemic.

Epstein: And, I understand that you can't make universities whole, as they were, with the international student input. But, is there any possibility that people who aren't getting JobKeeper right now, working for a university, might get JobKeeper in the future?

Tehan: Well, that will depend whether any university qualifies for JobKeeper. So ...

Epstein: ... But, you set those rules for whether or not they qualify. So, you can change those rules.

Tehan: We can. But, we've set those rules, and they're similar to the rules that we've set for business. They take into account the special circumstances under which the Commonwealth provides \$18 billion of funding to the university sector a year. But, if any university qualifies, then they will receive JobKeeper.

Epstein: I'll come to your texts: 'Back in the '70s, we could fail to our heart's content.' Somebody else texting: 'Yeah, finally, someone speaking sense.' This is the Education Minister Dan Tehan we're speaking to. The text continues: 'Not all students should go to uni. There are wonderful other pathways to consider, other than racking up HECS fees.' And, someone else: 'The outstanding HECS debt should be recovered from deceased estates as well, instead of being written off as currently happens.' That's from Alex in Docklands. Dan Tehan, you are a significant and senior member of Scott Morrison's Cabinet. I know you don't know what your colleagues do, but, are they briefing against Dan Andrews' State Labor Government on hotel quarantine and other issues? Do you think?

Tehan: Oh, Raf, I can tell you, all our, all my colleagues are absolutely 100 per cent focused and committed to doing their jobs. We, as a Federal Government, have a huge role to play in working with the states and territories, but, also, on our own, making sure that we carry this nation through this pandemic.

Epstein: You can do both, can't you? You can be a significant part of the effort, and, also, criticise it. It appears the criticism's been ramped up.

Tehan: Well, Raf, from my point of view, what I've been focused on is my portfolio, in helping and supporting the Victorian State Government with their child care sector. In a matter of days, when they went to Stage 4 lockdowns, we had a response to help and support the child care sector in Melbourne and in broader Victoria. And, so, I think, what you'll see from us, and I think the Prime Minister has been outstanding in his leadership in this regard, is help and support for Victoria as we go through these, these Stage 4 restrictions in this Victorian wave of the pandemic ...

Epstein: ... Have you briefed against the Andrews' Government? I know it's hard to ask people about private conversations. But, have you privately cursed their efforts?

Tehan: Raf, I've been completely 100 per cent focused on my job and what I'm doing. And, what I've actually been doing in the last two weeks is helping and supporting the Victorian State Government. They had to make changes to their child care sector. They had to limit the numbers of children who could actually attend. And, so, we stepped in and supported them in that effort. This is a time when we need to be all working together. Sure, we need to be held accountable for our actions. And, that's why I'm up here in isolation at the moment, awaiting the next session of the Federal Parliament. We all need to be held accountable for our actions. But, also, at this time, we've just got to get on with the job, and help and support all Victorians who need our help at the moment.

Epstein: I do want to get onto some of the people who are calling about the university changes, but you're the Member for Wannon. I think most of you, all of you, are under Stage 3. How's that going, and would any, is there any prospect, do you reckon, of your electorate going into Stage 4?

Tehan: Well, at the moment, all of the electorate is in Stage 3. We had a significant outbreak in Colac, but the numbers there are starting to decline, which is very positive. My view on these matters all along is we need to absolutely take the advice of the medical experts. And, if the medical experts say that extra steps need to be taken, then that's what we should do. If they think that the restrictions are working at the moment, then the restrictions, obviously, should be left in place at the levels they are. But, I'm sure that there is assessments going on at the moment. We're seeing all the medical experts working very well together. Obviously, the Commonwealth is providing additional assistance in this regard to the Victorian scientists and other medical professionals, so I will leave it to their judgement as to what needs to be done. But, it's a very tailored approach at the moment, and I think that's the right approach.

Epstein: Thanks for your time. Good luck.

Tehan: Thanks. Thanks, Raf.

Epstein: Dan Tehan, the Minister for Education in Scott Morrison's Federal Government and the Member for the seat of Wannon here in Victoria.