

Bridges to Higher Education

Fairfield High School, 2 August 2012

Professor Peter Shergold

I would like to thank the Minister for Tertiary Education, Skills, Jobs and Workplace Relations, Senator the Hon. Chris Evans, for officially launching Bridges to Higher Education. This is a gold medal for Australia.

I am Peter Shergold, the Chancellor of the University of Western Sydney. On behalf of the five partner universities of Bridges to Higher Education, I want to thank the Commonwealth Government for supporting this initiative and providing us with the resources to enrich the lives of the people of Greater Western Sydney. Minister, I want in particular to express our appreciation of your personal commitment to ensuring that university is a gateway to opportunity for those Australians who face disadvantage and social exclusion. You have been a strong advocate of the view that university should be open to all who have the talent and who, with support, can benefit from higher education.

A couple of week's back I participated in an IQ2 debate at the Adelaide Town Hall. It will shortly be broadcast by the ABC. The topic was that a university degree is highly overrated. Because I am a Chancellor with three university degrees it was thought that it would be far more interesting if I spoke in favour of that proposition. That's tough for someone who had his own life transformed by university.

I argued the case, unsuccessfully I hasten to add, on the basis that in Australia the individual and social benefits of a degree are significantly lessened by the fact that access to a university remains so unevenly distributed: whilst 25% of young Australians are classified as of low socio-economic status only around 15% gain entry to university. It's simply not good enough.

That's why all of us here today – universities, TAFE Colleges, schools and partners – applaud the government for committing:

- to increase the proportion of those who hold a degree in Australia to 40% of 25-34 year olds;
- to ensure that 20% of university students come from low SES communities by 2020; and
- to allocate significant funding to that end through the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) scheme.

The Bridges to Higher Education initiative, which has been enabled by that funding scheme, will help to change lives and communities. It will help enable people with potential to gain entry to university, irrespective of their personal circumstance.

For many students it will be a journey in which they are the first generation in their family to go to university. Their parents (or parent) will probably have low income and, quite likely, have few workplace skills and little education. Many will come from families who speak a language other than English at home. A significant minority will be Indigenous.

Often they will attend schools from which only a small group will go on to university. Others may leave school and come to university only later in life – after learning on the job or, perhaps, taking advantage of the vocational education and training provided by TAFE. Thanks to Bridges they will be able to seize their opportunity and become proud ambassadors for future generations of university students.

Minister, on behalf of all the partner universities, thank you for your belief that together we can change things. We are grateful to the government for the HEPPP scheme and hope that there will be long-term commitment to this scheme from future governments. We have no doubt of the transformative impact the Bridges approach can have on Greater Western Sydney.

The senior representatives of the Bridges Universities here today, congratulate the members of the Bridges to Higher Education Management Committee and their project teams. We express our appreciation, also, to the Partner Advisory Group members. We appreciate their ongoing commitment, hard work and dedication to the program. Thank you, too, to the Principal, teachers and students of Fairfield High for your wonderful hospitality.

Minister, **together** we will make this a success.

We appreciate your support.