

**Letters, The Age, August 31, 2004**

Bruce Chapman and Andrew Leigh argue (Opinion, 30/8) that our athletic superstars should have to pay back their scholarships - just as successful members of less heroic professions do under HECS. This would be fair, they say, and fund even greater athletic triumphs.

Very droll! But they are running the argument backwards. What we should be doing is treating our doctors, scientists, teachers, musicians, engineers, architects, nurses, writers and artists the same way we treat the athletes. True fairness requires that the person who takes extra years of education to develop a special talent should not be lumbered, on that account, with a massive extra debt. Australia will never become a clever country while it so penalises its clever people.

Our expenditure of public money merely to stand fourth on a medals table reminds one of East Germany. But the money would be well spent if we were to learn from that success the wisdom of sparing no expense to make all our education totally free and first-rate from the bottom to the top.

**Colin Smith, St Kilda**