



ASU Supplementary Submission

COVID-19

Select Committee on COVID-19

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1. The ASU

The Australian Services Union (ASU) is one of Australia's largest unions, representing approximately 135,000 members.

The ASU was created in 1993. It brought together three large unions – the Federated Clerks Union, the Municipal Officers Association and the Municipal Employees Union, as well as a number of smaller organisations representing social welfare workers, information technology workers and transport employees.

Currently ASU members work in a wide variety of industries and occupations because the Union's rules traditionally and primarily cover workers in the following industries and occupations:

- Disability support
- Social and community services
- Local government
- State government
- Transport, including passenger air and rail transport, road, rail and air freight transport
- Clerical and administrative employees in commerce and industry generally
- Call centres
- Electricity generation, transmission and distribution
- Water industry
- Higher education (Queensland and South Australia)
- Australian Taxation Office

The ASU has members in every State and Territory of Australia, as well as in most regional centres. Around 50% of ASU members are women, the exact percentage varies between industries, e.g. in social and community services around 70% of our members are women.

2. Our submission

The Australian Services Union has previously made a submission to this inquiry on 4 June 2020 (Submission 144) and we are pleased to provide a supplementary submission regarding the impact of the Government's proposed Higher Education reforms on the community services essential to supporting people throughout COVID19.

3. The community services workforce and COVID19

The social and community services sector includes disability services, child protection, youth and family services, domestic violence and sexual assault support services, specialist women's, CALD, Aboriginal and migrant services, counselling services (financial, sexual assault, domestic violence, trauma), housing and homelessness services.

Community services workers are essential workers who have been supporting some of the most vulnerable and marginalised in our community during the COVID19 pandemic. As we enter a recession more people could become reliant on the supports provided by community services workers.

Community services workers are predominantly female (approximately 80%) and low-paid relative to other sectors. There is also a prevalence of insecure work in the sector – casual, low hours part-time, and fixed-term contract arrangements.

The community services sector is one of the fastest growing sectors in our economy. It therefore could provide an important opportunity for people to find work who have been impacted by COVID19. This growing workforce needs to be properly supported with access to training and qualifications that promote quality service provision and the retention of a skilled workforce.

4. The Government's proposed Higher Education reforms of community services degrees

The Commonwealth Government's proposed university fee increases will see the fees for community services degrees (e.g. Social Work, Human Services, Social Sciences, Youth Work, Community Welfare, Social Welfare, Counselling) increase by 113%. These degrees currently cost less than \$30,000 and will increase to \$58,000 (for four years)¹.

The Commonwealth Government's rationale for the new fee structure is that it will lower student contributions in study areas where there is a strong demand for jobs and qualified graduates and increase them in areas with less demand.

However, community services degrees form part of the broader Health and Social Assistance industry that the Commonwealth Government's own discussion paper says is the fastest growing jobs market (see page 23 of the discussion paper). The Commonwealth Government appears to have ignored the "Social Assistance" aspect of this industry and only focused on lowering the fees of some Health-related courses in its plan for university fees.

The Commonwealth Government's own Job Outlook website lists Social Work as an area of strong future growth. The number of people working as social workers has grown very strongly over the past 5 years and is expected to grow to 35,500 by 2023. The ABS and other sources list Health and Social Assistance as the fastest growing employment sector in the economy. This includes social workers, youth and family workers, psychologists, nurses, physio therapists etc². This is particularly the case in regional Australia, where traditional sources of employment are changing, and the health and social assistance sector is now providing the major source of jobs growth and economic stimulus³.

In addition to increasing the fees by 113% for Social Work and related degrees, the Commonwealth Government is proposing to decrease the Government contribution for these courses meaning that students will pay more and universities will receive overall less funding for these "Social Assistance" degrees. This could threaten the viability of Social Work schools and degree programs at institutions across Australia.

The fee increases are also grossly disproportionate to the potential earning capacity of a social work graduate. A new graduate can expect to earn from around \$60,000 - \$64,000 p.a. under the relevant Awards⁴. Repaying a student loan or HECS debt for the increased cost of the degree on a salary at this level is not only an unreasonable burden on the student, but contradicts the Federal Government's economic policy, which is aimed at increasing spending to stimulate the economy.

5. The potential impact of the Government's proposed reforms on community services and their essential work in COVID19 pandemic and recovery

The Commonwealth Government's proposed fee increases in Social Work and related fields will further exacerbate the workforce shortages – in both recruitment and retention – that exist in this critical sector at the frontline of supporting our community during COVID19. It will disproportionately impact women who work in this sector, creating barriers for both entry and career advancement.

The Australian Services Union has surveyed over 700 community services workers across the country about the proposed fee increases in the last fortnight. A snapshot summary of the preliminary results from that survey (which is still in the field) is as follows:

¹ Commonwealth Government's proposal is outlined in their discussion paper:

https://www.dese.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/job_ready_graduates_discussion_paper_0.pdf

² <https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/lookup/6150.0.55.003Media%20Release1September%202019> and <https://joboutlook.gov.au/IndustrySpecific?search=Industry&Industry=Q>

³ http://www.regionalaustralia.org.au/home/wpcontent/uploads/2019/03/2019_RAI_HealthyCheckUp_Final2.pdf

⁴ <https://au.indeed.com/New-Graduate-Social-Worker-jobs>

- a) 43% of workers have completed a community services degree relevant to their work, 9% are currently enrolled in a community services degree, and 26% were planning to enrol in a community services degree to advance their career or specialisation in the sector.
- b) 42% of workers surveyed said that their funding body or regulator require them to have a degree, and almost 60% said that their employer considers it desirable to have a university degree.
- c) Of those who have a degree already in community services fields, 80% say they would have been less likely to pursue that degree if the fees had been more expensive.
- d) Of those who were planning on enrolling in a community services degree in the future, 97% said they would be less likely to do that should the fees increase as proposed by the Government
- e) Alarmingly more than half of the workers planning on enrolling in a community services degree said they would now consider moving industries to nursing or teaching where the degree costs will be substantially lower.

The Commonwealth Government's proposed fee increases for these degrees also overlooks recent State and Federal Government initiatives or commissioned inquiries that have set or recommended minimum degree standards for employment in the social assistance sector. For example:

- a) In NSW Child Protection system, there are minimum degree requirements. It is now a requirement that to be a Manager of an Intensive Therapeutic Care home you must have a Bachelor of Social Work or related human services degree. It is also a requirement to be a Case Manager in the Permanency Support Program (Foster Care). Indeed, the NSW Children's Guardian has written to the ASU outlining her concern that the proposed fee increases will impact quality Out of Home Care services in her state, especially for Aboriginal children (see Attachment to this submission).
- b) In Victoria, the Royal Commission into Family Violence recommended (recommendation 208) that all family violence workers have a community services degree qualification.
- c) In Queensland it was a recommendation of the Carmody QC Report into Child Protection that Child Safety Officers and Team Leaders in child protection services have minimum tertiary qualification in community services.
- d) Health and Social Services departments across every State and Territory Government directly employ their own social workers or case managers. These State Government departments frequently require minimum entry of a Bachelor of Social Work or related human services degree for these workers, particularly in Child Protection roles.
- e) The Federal department of Social Services requires a minimum community services degree to work as a counsellor in its 1800RESPECT hotline.

These trends for minimum degree qualifications are happening across the community services sector and across jurisdictions.

6. Recommendation

The ASU recommends that the Commonwealth Government's proposed Higher Education reforms do not proceed because they will have an adverse impact on the community sector which is at the frontline of supporting vulnerable people in the COVID19 pandemic. They will also disproportionately impact women in lower paid, less secure jobs. These jobs are jobs of the future which will continue to be essential into the COVID recovery phase and as we enter a recession. They should be supported more, not less.

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Dear Ms Lang

Thank you for your letter dated 10 July 2020 regarding the impact of proposals to increase university fees in relation to “social assistance” degrees.

A professional workforce is critical to the quality of services provided to children and young people in the child protection and out-of-home care (OOHC) systems. While accreditation requirements for statutory OOHC providers do not require specific tertiary qualifications, there is an expectation in the NSW Child Safe Standards for Permanent Care that people working with children and young people are highly skilled and committed to continuous personal and professional development.

There are a number of important reforms underway within the statutory OOHC sector that require growth in the workforce. The Intensive Therapeutic Care (ITC) program requires staff working with children and young people to hold, or be working towards, relevant tertiary “social assistance” qualifications. Children and young people within the ITC program are highly vulnerable with complex needs and a skilled workforce with access to contemporary research and practice theories is vital to the success of the program.

The recent independent review into Aboriginal OOHC in NSW, chaired by Professor Megan Davis, found that Aboriginal children and young people continue to be the single largest cohort of children and young people in OOHC. There is a need to expand the Aboriginal child protection workforce in NSW, both in frontline and senior leadership roles. Strategies to intervene early with at-risk families in order to divert them from the child protection system also requires access to skilled professionals in the broader social service system, particularly domestic and family violence, mental health and drug and alcohol services.

People who work in child protection and OOHC undertake challenging and confronting work. Children and young people in OOHC require the support of thoughtful, competent and resilient workers. Access to affordable higher education and training is critical to providing a diverse and skilled workforce.

Thank you again for your letter and your interest in the implications of these proposals for vulnerable children and young people.

Yours sincerely

Janet Schorer PSM
Children’s Guardian

21 July 2020



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Children’s Guardian**

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