



ASU Submission

Senate Standing Committee on Education and Employment

Higher Education Support Amendment (Job-ready Graduates and
Supporting Regional and Remote Students) Bill 2020

Submitter: Linda White, Assistant National Secretary

Organisation: Australian Services Union

Address: 116 Queensberry Street
Carlton South, Victoria, 3053

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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.

2. Our submission

The ASU provides this submission to the Senate Education and Employment Legislation Committee on the Higher Education Support Amendment (Job-ready Graduates and Supporting Regional and Remote Students) Bill 2020.

At the outset we wish to note that we support the broader concerns raised by the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) in relation to the entire package: we do not support any increase in university fees, or any reduction in higher education funding.

However we make this submission in our role as the union for community services workers – so this submission is focussed on our particular concerns about the development of a Social Work Professional Pathway, and how that should be designed if the package is to proceed.

3. Professional Pathway Social Work

We note the Government's decision to introduce the discipline of Professional Pathway Social Work, which means that courses in that pathway will not be subject to the proposed humanities fee increases. As the union representing social work and community service workers, we are of course concerned to ensure that all relevant courses are captured under the Professional Pathway.

There are several related community services degrees that must be treated in the same way as the Bachelor of Social Work and the Bachelor of Psychology. A recent survey of workers in community services showed that approximately 75% of the workforce have a degree other than the Bachelor of Social Work.

The relevant degrees (in addition to Bachelor of Social Work and Bachelor of Psychology) include:

- Bachelor of Community Services
- Bachelor of Community Welfare
- Bachelor of Social Welfare
- Bachelor of Human Services

- Bachelor of Child and Family Studies
- Bachelor of Social Science
- Bachelor of Youth Work
- Bachelor of Counselling
- Bachelor of Community Development
- Bachelor of Disability

4. Community services degrees

These community services degrees underpin the broader Health and Social Assistance industry that the Department's own discussion paper says is the fastest growing jobs market (see page 23 of the discussion paper).

In addition, 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 etc. 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 stimulus.

5. The impact of the Government's proposed reforms on community services

If the related community services degrees highlighted earlier in our submission are not included in the Professional Pathway Social Work we are concerned about the impact these reforms would have in a number of ways.

5.1 *Impact on course viability*

Community services degrees are offered at many universities across Australia. We are concerned that the proposed reforms will threaten the very viability of the community services degrees being offered at these institutions (and other institutions across Australia).

5.2 *Impact on services available to communities*

The proposed fee increases in community services degrees will further exacerbate the workforce shortages – in both recruitment and retention – that exist in this critical sector at the frontline of supporting our community.

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 the current recession deepens, and without an end in sight to the current pandemic, more people will depend up on what are often life-saving supports provided by community services workers.

We are very concerned that there will not be an adequate pipeline of qualified workers to provide the social support and mental health services that we know are currently needed and will be needed as we begin the recovery from the current pandemic and continue to recover from ongoing natural disasters over the past twelve months.

5.3 *Impacts on local jobs*

The community services sector is one of the fastest growing sectors in our economy. It will provide an important opportunity for people to seek employment and careers as we recover from the COVID-19 economic crisis and natural disasters of the past twelve months. 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.

Should the relevant degrees highlighted earlier in our submission not be included in the Professional Pathway Social Work the increase to the costs of these degrees will drive students to other courses.

Finally, there is a potential long term economic impact on communities, as the proposed fees are also grossly disproportionate to the potential earning capacity of a community services degree graduate. A new graduate can expect to earn from around \$60,000 - \$64,000p.a. under the relevant Awards¹.

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 will reduce the capacity of local workers to spend money to stimulate the local economy. This is a particular problem for rural, regional and remote economies, many of which are still dealing with the economic devastation of the ongoing drought, last bushfire season and in some cases destructive floods.

6. Other concerns

The Australian Services Union surveyed over 700 community services workers across the country about the proposed fee increases in August 2020. A snapshot summary of the results from that survey is as follows:

- 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.

A fee increase for these degrees would also overlook recent State and Federal Government initiatives and commissioned inquiries that have set or recommended minimum degree standards for employment in the social assistance sector. For example:

- a) In Victoria, the Royal Commission into Family Violence recommended (recommendation 208) that all family violence workers have a community services degree qualification.
- b) 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.
- c) 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.
- d) The Federal department of Social Services requires a minimum community services degree to work as a counsellor in its 1800RESPECT hotline

7. Recommendation

The ASU recommends the Commonwealth Government include the following relevant degrees in the Professional Pathway Social Work stream:

¹ <https://au.indeed.com/New-Graduate-Social-Worker-jobs>

- Bachelor of Community Services
- Bachelor of Community Welfare
- Bachelor of Social Welfare
- Bachelor of Human Services
- Bachelor of Child and Family Studies
- Bachelor of Social Science
- Bachelor of Youth Work
- Bachelor of Counselling
- Bachelor of Community Development
- Bachelor of Disability