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Thursday 5 September 2024

Committee Secretary
Senate Education and Employment Committees
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Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

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Re: Universities Accord (Student Support and Other Measures) Bill 2024

The Australian Services Union (ASU) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission on the *Universities Accord (Student Support and Other Measures) Bill 2024*.

The ASU is one of Australia's largest unions, representing approximately 135,000 members. ASU members work in a wide variety of industries and occupations in both the private, public and community sectors.

We welcome the Government's objectives through the Bill to make higher education more accessible and affordable for students. We recommend the Bill be passed in full.

We are supportive of legislation that¹:

- Makes the HELP system fairer by improving the way HELP indexation is calculated and provides an indexation credit to students HELP accounts to ensure the new indexation cap has effect from 1 June 2023.
- Provides Commonwealth Prac Payment support to around 68,000 teaching, nursing (including midwifery) and social work students with a \$319.50 per week payment during their clinical and professional placement periods.
- Provides FEE-FREE Uni ready courses, to support greater equity and access to higher education, especially for those from under-represented backgrounds.
- Recognises the value in student-led organisations and requires 40% of the Student Services and Amenities Fees be provided to student-led organisations.

Commonwealth Prac Payments will provide around 68,000 eligible higher education students and over 5,000 VET students each year with \$319.50 per week during their clinical and professional placement

¹ Australian Government, Explanatory Memorandum, Universities Accord (Student Support and Other Measures) Bill 2024 [Online] Accessed at: https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/legislation/ems/r7231_ems_6f290daa-9d12-4604-a99f-50ae24aa5567/upload_pdf/JC013802.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf

periods.² This payment will go some way to assisting students struggling with placement poverty as they work towards completing their qualifications.

However, \$319.50 per week is only 35% of the national minimum Award wage (\$915.90 per week) and does not fully compensate students for the unpaid work they are doing while on placement.

Unpaid placement requirements by degree³

Degree	Hours	Weeks
Nursing	800	20
Teaching	600	16
Social work	1,000	26

We recommend Government pay eligible higher education students at a rate of at least the minimum Award wage (\$24.10) per hour of placement.

In addition, there are many other degrees that can require hundreds of hours of unpaid placement that are not supported by this legislation. Government must urgently broaden the set of courses eligible for Commonwealth Prac Payments to mitigate the financial stress and negative impacts on student wellbeing as they juggle study obligations, unpaid placement, as well as paid work. Commonwealth Prac Payments should be a scheme that helps all students undertaking mandatory practicums as part of their course.

A simpler, fairer test

The Commonwealth Prac Payment will be means-tested (with final details yet to be published), however typical Australian means tests usually consider both personal and family income. We do not support means-testing and instead support a universal payment scheme that does not consider your broader household income.

Government guidelines and eligibility requirements

We understand Government is currently developing the guidelines and eligibility requirements for Commonwealth Prac Payments.

The 2024-25 Budget: New Commonwealth Prac Payment fact sheet states “new payment will be available to eligible students on Australian Government income support and those students who need to work more than 15 hours per week during their normal university studies”.⁴

This means a mature-aged student who is not employed and has full-time caring responsibilities as well as studying full-time would not be eligible for the Commonwealth Prac Payment. This is despite the fact that during practical placement, this student would need to pay for their child/ren to attend child care, as well as pay for travel to and from placement, whilst receiving no income for up to 26 weeks.

² Australian Government, Joint Media Release, Cost-of-living support for teaching, nursing and social work students [Online] Accessed at: <https://ministers.education.gov.au/clare/cost-living-support-teaching-nursing-and-social-work-students>

³ The Conversation, Students on social work, nursing and teaching placements to get weekly \$319.50 means tested Prac Payment from July next year [Online] Accessed at: <https://theconversation.com/students-on-social-work-nursing-and-teaching-placements-to-get-weekly-319-50-means-tested-prac-payment-from-july-next-year-229356>

⁴ Australian Government, Department of Education, Commonwealth Prac Payment [Online] Accessed at: <https://www.education.gov.au/higher-education/commonwealth-prac-payment>

First Nations students and students with disability may also be in a similar predicament and not meet the income support or 15-hour work eligibility requirements, as statistically these minority groups face greater barriers to employment.⁵

A student who provides care to someone with disability or a medical condition, or a frail aged adult and is receiving a Carer Payment would be impacted, as they would exceed the 25 hour per week work rule, and they would have their Carer Payment cancelled.⁶

Seasonal or casual workers may also be impacted as their work rosters vary week to week and they may not work a minimum of 15 hours each week, given their fluctuating rosters.

Commonwealth Prac Payments should be expanded to include these identified equity groups, especially as they experience multiple forms of disadvantage already and exclusion will only exacerbate their financial hardship. Government must consult with key stakeholders, including unions, student groups, higher education providers and peak sectoral bodies to identify and adjust any eligibility issues that would exacerbate or not address current financial pressures being experienced by these students.

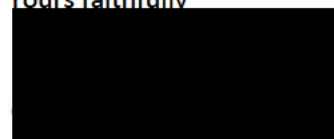
Other enhancements

Furthermore, we believe the Bill could be strengthened by including additional measures that would enhance affordability for Government to support students on placement:

- Government must ensure regulatory bodies adopt evidence-based, flexible, contextually responsive standards that reduce disparities in required placement hours between comparable professions, remove barriers that prevent students participating in and completing university education, and maximise affordability of Commonwealth support for students on placement.
- Government funding should support the creation of employment relationships between organisations and students undertaking work placements to create better pathways, facilitating smoother transitions into the workforce.

By implementing these improvements, the Commonwealth Prac Payment can become even more effective in attracting and retaining students in critical professions, which will ultimately benefit the Australian community.

Yours faithfully



Emeline Gaske
NATIONAL SECRETARY

⁵ Australian Government, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, National Indigenous Australian Agency [Online] Accessed at: <https://www.indigenoushpf.gov.au/measures/2-07-employment#:~:text=Indigenous%20Australians%20face%20greater%20barriers,few%20long%2Dterm%20job%20opportunities> and Australian Government, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, People with disability in Australia [https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/disability/people-with-disability-in-australia/contents/employment/employment-rate-and-type#:~:text=People%20aged%2015%E2%80%9364%20with%20disability%20have%20a%20lower%20employment,863%2C000\)%20\(ABS%202019\)](https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/disability/people-with-disability-in-australia/contents/employment/employment-rate-and-type#:~:text=People%20aged%2015%E2%80%9364%20with%20disability%20have%20a%20lower%20employment,863%2C000)%20(ABS%202019)).

⁶ Australian Government, Services Australia, Carer Payment [Online] Accessed at: <https://www.servicesaustralia.gov.au/time-to-work-study-or-train-if-you-get-carer-payment?context=21816>