

## **SOCIAL WORK POLICY & ADVOCACY ACTION GROUP**

### **At RMIT UNIVERSITY**

The Social Work Policy and Advocacy Action Group at RMIT University is made up of social work students and academics with a shared commitment to human rights, social and environmental justice. The group brings together researchers, practitioners and people with lived experience. In line with our professional code of ethics, we advocate on key social issues with a particular focus on marginalized and disenfranchised communities.

**This submission represents the views of the authors and not RMIT University.**

**Date:** September 2025

## **SUBMISSION TO Education and Employment Legislation Committee: Quality of governance at Australian higher education providers**

**TOR - the impact of providers' employment practices, executive remuneration, and the use of external consultants, on staff, students and the quality of higher education offered; and**

### **Response**

The tertiary education sector is made up of deeply committed and passionate academics who go above and beyond for students. This commitment is often met with precarity, overwork and in some cases wage theft. Neoliberal management has reshaped the sector into what Graeme Turner (2025) refers to as a “corporate university.” The vocationalisation and marketisation of higher education has placed significant strain on both staff and students. Universities being in a state of perpetual reform and maximising of profit has diminished student experience, but also to a drastic “brain drain” as some of our most exceptional academics leave the sector or move to institutions overseas. These cuts occurred alongside rising class sizes and steadily increasing student fees. The pressures of reduced funding, market competition, and corporate rationalisation transforms the education experience from one of growth, development, and critical inquiry into a commercial transaction.

There is a pressing need to stem the ability of executives to make excessive amounts, as the focus on financial prudence distracts from the quality of education. Governing bodies should be informed by expertise and passion for higher education, balanced with financial expertise, so that education remains central. Similarly, while reporting may be technically above board, it can still be

systematically unfair and draw attention away from learning outcomes. This creates a veneer of accountability that masks the deeper issues students and staff face.

The current crises can be directly linked to the ideological and economic push to run universities as businesses rather than as institutions of public good. Universities should not be managed like private corporations. They require sustained investment, infrastructure, and long-term commitment to knowledge creation, needs that are fundamentally incompatible with short-term, profit-driven orthodoxies. Students are not consumers, and academic staff are not producers. The growing influence of consultants does not strengthen our institutions, it erodes them. Their focus remains short-term profit, achieved through cutting staff and raising costs under the guise of “efficiency.”

As Hannah Forsyth (2014) has argued, university planning has effectively become economic policy, positioning higher education as an industry seeking financial reward. We must recommit to treating universities as a public good in the national interest, alongside public healthcare and schools. Running them as commercial enterprises places profit ahead of innovation, education, and knowledge creation. There are also issues of fairness when high executive salaries are juxtaposed with excessive HECS debts, placement poverty, and students bearing costs for mandatory checks such as police and Working with Children Checks. This is particularly amplified for international students. At the same time, staff are overworked, with many on insecure casual contracts that create stress and instability. These conditions directly affect teaching quality and therefore student learning outcomes. Anecdotally, many students increasingly view higher education not as a place of learning, but as a commodity they are forced to purchase.

If universities continue to operate within short-term, profit-oriented models, we will continue to lose talent, both in academic staff and graduates to overseas institutions. At a time when economic, social, and technological challenges are greater than ever, we need institutions that prioritise the development of critical thinking, competency, and reasoning. As things stand, we risk undermining the very foundations of higher education through the false promise that commercialisation is possible or beneficial. Education is the foundation of the nation. As Coldrake and Stedman (2013) argue, “the fate of our universities is the fate of our society.” As such we implore the committee to consider what Graeme Turner (2025) asks of you: “[that] our policy makers must be brave enough to argue that education is unequivocally and intrinsically a public good, vital to the interest of the nation, and therefore worth funding properly.”

The issues are widespread and we draw attention to the NTEU Victorian Division's evidence on the disparity between Vice-Chancellors' income and that of academics and staff. With VC incomes exceeding \$1 million, which in Victoria is more than the Premier (\$406,483) earns, and over six times the pay of Level E professors (and up to twenty times that of HEW 1 professional staff), the imbalance is stark. From a social work standpoint, such discrepancies are deeply troubling. Core values of social work (social justice, equity, dignity, and empowerment) are compromised when public institutions reward top executives disproportionately, especially amid staff underpayment, wage theft, casualisation, insecure work, and financial strain on students and professional staff.

Universities, as publicly funded institutions, should exemplify ethical leadership and fairness. Yet, excessive executive salaries starkly conflict with social expectations of equity and responsible stewardship of taxpayer dollars. NTEU rightly highlights that paying Vice-Chancellors vastly more than core academic and professional staff signals an erosion of trust and institutional integrity. Universities' prioritisation of excessive executive pay while staff face insecure contracts, underpayment, and redundancies jeopardises the well-being of workers and therefore students. This unjust dynamic undermines educators' ability to support students and damages institutional culture. Setting a formal limit on executive pay relative to the Premier's salary, aligning with democratic fairness principles. This restores trust and aligns public spending with community expectations. Mandate independent oversight of remuneration decisions, with participation from staff and students. Institute compulsory reinvestment of savings from executive remuneration into fair wages, job security, professional development, and mental health supports.

There are also the larger issues of Job-ready Graduate Package reforms. The Job-ready reforms were introduced under the previous government with the aim of steering students into fields deemed to have strong labour market demand by lowering fees in areas like STEM and increasing them in disciplines such as humanities. However, evidence shows the policy has not achieved its intended outcomes. Student enrolment patterns have remained relatively consistent, with many continuing to choose fields of genuine interest rather than being swayed by cost. This reflects the reality that career pathways are influenced by passion, aptitude, and long-term goals more than fee structures. At the same time, the policy exacerbated inequities. Students in humanities and social sciences, fields crucial for critical thinking, social services, and civic life, were disproportionately burdened with higher debts. This penalised students who choose careers that are vital to the community but not necessarily high-paying, such as social work, education, and the arts.

Moreover, the package failed to address the core challenges facing the sector: chronic underfunding, staff casualisation, and inadequate student support. By framing education primarily in terms of “job-readiness,” the policy narrowed the purpose of higher education to labour market supply, ignoring its broader role in fostering knowledge, citizenship, and innovation. Ultimately, the package has deepened financial strain without delivering better outcomes and despite Labor’s opposition at the time, the program continues to be rolled out.

Social work’s focus on systemic inequality and worker advocacy brings a necessary ethical lens to governance reform. Balancing executive remuneration with the needs of the broader university community is integral to restoring institutional cohesion, ensuring safe and fair workplaces, and advancing social justice.

#### **References:**

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