

SUBMISSION RE: HIGHER EDUCATION SUPPORT AMENDMENT (JOB-READY GRADUATES AND SUPPORTING REGIONAL AND REMOTE STUDENTS) BILL 2020.

INTRODUCTION

My name is Trudi Cooper. I am a university teacher and researcher with over 30 years' experience in higher education in Australia and the UK. I am an Australian Learning and Teaching Fellow, an Australian Awards for University Teaching Citation recipient (2006) and have been an AAUT award team leader. As an Associate Professor at Edith Cowan University, I co-ordinate the Youth Work degree program. My research expertise is in youth work and in higher education teaching quality.

I thank you for your consideration of this submission. Submitted 6th September 2020.

SYNOPSIS

I am writing to express my support for some of the proposals and to raise my concerns about other aspects of the proposed legislation. Please refer to the **NOTES** for further details on each point.

Positive features of the proposed legislation include:

- 1) Additional support for rural and remote students
- 2) Additional Commonwealth supported university places

My concerns about the proposed legislation include:

- 1) **Graduate employment data:** The graduate employment data do not support the premise that Humanities graduates are less employable than Science graduates. If employability and skill shortage are the rationale for differential student fees, there is no valid reason for punitive fee differentiation for Humanities, Arts, and Human Welfare students.
- 2) **Recommendation:** This problem is resolved if the fee-contribution is set according to the median graduate salary (as at present) or if a uniform fee-contribution is introduced.
- 3) **Graduates benefit if students study Science and Arts.** This proposed legislation penalises science students financially if they choose to complement their studies with business, commerce, law, accounting, economics, social science or humanities (other than English and foreign languages).
Recommendation: Uniform student fee contributions would remove this distortion.
- 4) **Risks of Course underfunding:** The proposed changes further reduce *per capita* funding to universities for most courses. Many previous reports have warned that underfunding undermines quality, risks non-availability of specialist courses for which there is employer demand, and represents a global reputational risk for Australian universities.
Recommendation: This can be mitigated by reversing *per capita* funding cuts for university places. This will require greater overall expenditure on higher education.
- 5) **Human Welfare Studies and Services courses:** The proposed legislation has assigned all university courses in **Human Welfare Studies and Services** to Cluster 1, except social work. Social work was moved from Cluster 1 to Cluster 2 after recent successful lobbying. All Human Welfare Studies and Services courses prepare students for work in social assistance. Social assistance is identified as an area of future jobs growth. Courses in this field include university courses in Children's Services, Youth Work, Care for the Aged, Care for the Disabled, Residential Client Care, Counselling, Welfare Studies, and Human Welfare Services, not elsewhere classified (which includes drug addiction services, and community and parent support services).
Recommendation: For consistency, all courses in **Human Welfare Studies and Services** should be moved to Cluster 2 with social work and education.
- 6) **Funding of supervised practicum:** Previous government reports have acknowledged that courses with a supervised professional practice component are more expensive to deliver than courses without supervised professional practice. Most courses with an integral

practicum have been placed in Clusters 2, 3, or 4. However, the proposed legislation has placed most Human Welfare Studies and Services courses in Cluster 1, alongside courses without a practicum.

Recommendation: All courses with a supervised professional placement should receive higher base funding than those without. At minimum, they should be allocated to Cluster 2.

- 7) **Exclusion of students from Commonwealth support:** The change to legislation to exclude students who fail more than 50% of units from Commonwealth support is overly harsh, and will disproportionately affect students who are already disadvantaged and under-represented, especially those facing life-crises, who may not feel comfortable to share details of their personal experiences. Many such students can be supported to succeed and should not be penalised for events beyond their control.

Recommendation: This aspect of the legislation should be removed, or amended to broaden exemptions for students facing prior or current adverse circumstances or who have made a wrong course choice.

- 8) **Youth unemployment:** Higher unemployment means higher demand for university places. If there are insufficient places, students will be forced into courses they have not chosen, or may be unable to gain a place at university. If this occurs, there will be adverse personal, social, health and well-being consequences for young people, their families and for Australian society.

Recommendation: These problems can be mitigated by expanding university places to meet demand, and by removing or reducing the differential in student fee contributions. This will require additional funding.

- 9) **Risk of indirect gender discrimination:** There is a risk of indirect gender bias in the way the student fee-contributions have been re-assigned under the proposed legislation. The courses with the highest student fee increases are disproportionately courses taken by female students. This particularly affects Arts, Humanities, and Human Welfare Studies and Services students who are facing a fee rise of 113% under proposed legislation. This proposed arrangement will have long-term social consequences for gendered poverty as well as for child-bearing decisions and fertility rates of female graduates.

Recommendation: Continue to tie student fee contributions to median field graduate salaries.

CASE STUDY ON YOUTH WORK

- A. **Youth work is a national priority**, with a strong future demand for Youth Work graduates, as evidenced by the Australian Government Department of Education Skills and Employment website. <https://joboutlook.gov.au/Occupation?search=Career&code=411716>
- B. **Youth work graduates receive very limited private benefit compared with some other professions.** According to the Department of Education and Skills and Employment website, salaries in Youth Work are \$1328 per week, which is similar to Early Childhood Educators who earn \$1488, <https://joboutlook.gov.au/Career?keyword=teacher> or physiotherapists who earn \$1444 <https://joboutlook.gov.au/Occupation?search=Career&code=2525>.
- C. **Youth Work degree courses have compulsory supervised professional placements** as an integral part of the course structure. Professional placements make Youth Work and other courses in the Human Welfare Studies and Services unique within the Society and Culture (02) broad field. Supervised professional placement is required for international and state accreditation, see for example, the VU course which has [international accreditation](#), p.8.
- D. **Youth Work degree courses have higher course delivery costs than courses without practicum** because of the additional costs associate with supervised placements. This finding has been supported by several previous government reviews, including the Bradley Report, and the Lomax-Smith Review. From a cost perspective, Youth Work degree courses are akin to professional courses in the Broad Field of Health (06) or Education (07).

- E. The fee structure for Youth Work must have parity with similar courses** to avoid market distortions that will exacerbate shortages of qualified youth workers. If student fees for Youth Work courses are higher than fees for Teaching or Nursing, Allied Health or Social Work, fewer students will enrol and this will exacerbate existing and future workforce shortages in youth work, and may lead to oversupply in other professions.
- F. If Youth Work courses are not adequately funded, universities will not offer sufficient places** or may discontinue offering professional courses altogether, as foreshadowed by the Lomax-Smith Review and supported in my recent Fellowship research, [*Achieving economic sustainability for niche social profession courses in the Australian higher education sector - a nationwide collaborative strategy*](#) . My Fellowship report proposed additional funding for specialist courses in Human Welfare Studies and Services such as Disability, Aging and Youth Work, to support inter-university collaboration on course delivery.
- G. The majority of youth work students and graduates are female**, as are most students in other courses in Human Welfare Studies and Service. There is high demand for these graduates but wages are low because graduates provide public services for low income service users. The proposed student fees for youth work (and children's services, aging, disability and welfare) would result in debt to income ratios that are far higher relative to the median graduate salaries than the debt-income ratios in other social, education or health professions. The contrast is even more stark when compared with male dominated science and technology professions where students receive higher fee subsidy and can expect substantially higher graduate salaries. This last comparison illustrates the indirect gender effect of the proposed legislation on low-salary female dominated social professions.

Recommendation: Move Youth Work (090505) and all Human Welfare Studies and Services (0905) courses to Cluster 2, as has occurred already with social work (090501). The fee for all Human Welfare Studies and Services courses would then align with other professional social, health and education courses that have similar national priority, similar private benefit and similar course delivery costs, (e.g. Nursing (0603) Rehabilitation Therapies (0617) or Teacher Education (0701)).

NOTES ON SYNOPSIS

1) Graduate Employment data

Mistakes in government graduate employment data have been acknowledged by Minister Tehan. The fee-equity issue could be resolved either by assessing the fee-contribution according to the median graduate salary, as is the case at present; or by charging all students the same fee contribution regardless of course of study. Concerns about potential graduate oversupply are sometimes addressed by capping places in courses with high graduate unemployment. This option can be problematic in practice because of long lag times between student recruitment and student graduation, by which time labour market needs will have changed. The best solution is to ensure that university education provides a high quality well-rounded educational experience that will ensure students gain transferable skills.

2) Graduates benefit if students study Science and Arts

[Emeritus Professor Geoff Scott](#) has conducted research into future skills (Scott, 2019) 'Preparing work ready plus graduates for an uncertain future', *Education for Employability. Volume 1, The Employability Agenda*, Brill 9789004400825. He supports curriculum breadth, including encouraging Science students to study Humanities and vice versa. He argues persuasively that future employability will require students who have STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Maths). In 2019, my colleague [Professor Jo Coldwell-Nielson](#) from Deakin University, who is also an Australian Learning and Teaching Fellow, and I, published a discussion about how to incorporate digital literacy into the higher education curriculum to support interdisciplinary requirements of the

future workforce and the public good ([Digital Literacy Meets Industry 4.0](#)). This analysis concurs with Professor Scott's conclusions.

3) Risks of course underfunding

Adverse effects and risks of declining *per capita* funding for teaching have been analysed in previous higher education reviews, e.g. Lomax-Smith (2011) and the Bradley Report (2008). The adverse effects of underfunding on course availability are worrying for specialist human welfare courses (youth work, aging and disability) where availability has declined since 2008 ([Cooper and Brooker, 2018](#)). The proposed legislation will reduce total course funding for Human Welfare courses by \$2219 per annum (12.5%). The Bradley Report warned of the risk to global reputation if the decline in *per capita* funding in Australian universities were not reversed. Since 2008, *per capita* funding has declined further. The risk is now acute, there are no more 'efficiency dividends' to be achieved. According to the latest [OECD](#) data, Australian students contribute on average 62.2% of course costs. Australia ranks 31 out of 37 for the proportion of public contribution to higher education, and is one of only eight OECD countries where average student contributions exceed 50% of the course cost. For Human Welfare, Arts and Humanities courses, the proposed student contribution would be 93%.

4) Human Welfare Studies and Services courses

Human Welfare Studies and Services courses prepare students for work in social assistance. The ministerial briefing predicted that future jobs growth will occur in 'professional, scientific and technical services; health and social assistance; and education and training' (Steggall in Hansard, Tuesday 1st September p.54).

In addition to social work, **Human Welfare Studies and Services** courses include Children's Services, Youth Work, Care for the Aged, Care for the Disabled, Residential Client Care, Counselling and Welfare Service. These courses produce **job-ready graduates** who provide leadership in services that provide **mental health support** to children, young people, families, men, the elderly and people with disabilities, including survivors of sexual and family abuse and people recovering from addictions. Graduates of these courses **support families and children** with relationship counselling, parenting skills, and by ensuring quality in childcare services. Graduates **support young people** to continue in education, find employment, stay out of the justice system, be safely housed, address addiction issues and maintain healthy relationships with peers and parents. Graduates also provide support to **people with disabilities** and **older people** to enable them to access services, to live meaningful lives with independence and dignity, prevent or delay their entry into institutional care, and improve quality of life in residential care, where this is needed or chosen.

Various on-going and recent Royal Commissions relevant to Human Welfare professions have recommended better leadership supported by enhanced professional skills. Moving all **Human Welfare Studies and Services** courses to Cluster 2 (as has occurred with Social work) would address employer graduate demand, workforce shortages and underfunding; and support improved leadership and professional skills in these fields.

5) Funding of supervised practicum

Previous government reports stated that university courses with supervised professional placements are more expensive to deliver (Lomax-Smith Review) and need to be funded at a higher level than courses without practicum. Most similar courses are in Cluster 2. Some courses with practicum are in Cluster 3 (Nursing) or Cluster 4 (Pathology, Agriculture, Medicine etc.).

6) Exclusion of students from Commonwealth support

In my experience, most students who fail multiple units fall into one of four categories. The first group have had insufficient or poor quality careers guidance advice, and have chosen courses that do not match their interests or their skills. Students who are first in family to attend university have access to fewer informal sources of accurate career guidance and are especially reliant on the quality of formal career guidance they receive. When students receive poor advice and make the wrong

choice of course, they are more likely to fail. The second group of students have had gaps in their previous educational preparation. Poor previous education frequently compounds difficulties for those who have faced early life adversity or whose lives have been disrupted as children. Sometimes they are not aware of the gaps and initially they may not be willing to accept help until after they have failed. The third group of students are coping with difficult personal circumstances, including chronic illness or disability, temporary or chronic mental health difficulties, family or domestic violence, poverty, homelessness, or unexpected extra caring and family responsibilities because of illness of dependents, or relationship breakdowns. The effects of life crises are greatest on those who have the most limited support networks, especially State care leavers (who are under-represented in higher education), students whose families have disintegrated, students facing family violence, and students who have moved away from their families to study. The fourth group of students are 'reluctant students' who have been pressured by others (parents or school) to enrol in a university course against their wishes. Many students in each of these categories can be supported to succeed after a rocky start. Even reluctant students can get good outcomes, but may need to change course. In my experience at Edith Cowan University, universities try very hard to provide appropriate academic and personal support, and careers guidance, to help students overcome barriers to success. Sometimes, however, support does not have immediate effects. Students may not ask for help quickly, may not initially accept help, may feel embarrassed to disclose highly personal information, or may take longer to address academic gaps, to get their living arrangements and personal circumstances in order, or to manage chronic conditions.

7) Youth unemployment

High levels of youth unemployment are expected to continue for some time, possibly for several years. It is anticipated this will increase demand for university places. Unemployment has hit young people and people approaching retirement harder than people in their 30s and 40s who are established in the labour market. Students who are forced to study courses that do not interest them are more likely to discontinue. There are wide-ranging negative economic, social and personal outcomes from extended periods of youth unemployment. If young people cannot find work and do not study, they are at higher risk of worse physical health, loss of confidence, poor mental health and suicide. When more jobs become available, they are less likely to gain employment and there is an increased risk of long-term welfare dependency. It is vitally important that sufficient university places are available, and that young people have choices about what they study, so that they are well prepared when the employment prospects improve. This will require additional expenditure now, but will produce long-term social and economic benefit.

8) Risk of indirect gender discrimination

From a gender perspective, the proposed changes to the fee structure are especially problematic. Students enrolled in the disciplines that attract a greater proportion of female students (Humanities, Arts and most Human Welfare Studies and Services courses) will be faced with the largest fee rises (113%). Women (and men) enrolled in female-majority courses will receive less government support, will accrue more debt, will be paid less when they enter the workforce, and will take longer to repay their student loans, than students in male-majority disciplines. This will further entrench female poverty, and gendered economic inequality across the life course including in retirement. The Commonwealth will make significantly higher proportional and actual contributions for male-majority courses. For example, for Engineering courses, the Commonwealth contribution would be \$16,500 per annum (69%), compared with \$1,100 per annum (7%) for a specialist Human Welfare course. Both disciplines are identified as having high future demand, but graduates from specialist Human Welfare courses can expect much lower median graduate salaries.

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Edith Cowan University, 6th September 2020.