



AASW

**Australian Association
of Social Workers**

*Submission to the Senate Education
and Employment Legislation
Committee*

*Re: Higher Education and Research Reform
Amendment Bill 2014*

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Introduction

On behalf of the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW), the Australian Council of Heads of Schools of Social Work (ACHSSW), and the Australian and New Zealand Social Work & Welfare Education & Research (ANZSWWER), please find the following commentary on the proposed changes to Funding Tiers in the Higher Education and Research Reform Amendment Bill 2014 (“the Bill”) and our strong consensus view that social work funding should be included with other Allied Health disciplines in Band 4 as opposed to the proposed allocation of Band 3.

In the Bill’s Regulation Impact Statement {RIS - par 7.1 Government’s Proposed Reforms – preferred options), the rationale for the design of the new funding tiers is set out as follows:

- *The proposed five new funding tiers are designed to incorporate a more rational reflection of factors relevant to the cost of delivery, such as the standard teaching method, the infrastructure required to deliver the course and the potential value to prospective students. (ref. Funding Tiers, p112)*

We will deal with each of these three criteria below.

Cost of delivery

With regard to “the cost of delivery”, we would like to note that Social Work has been heavily subsidised within universities across the country because the high cost of delivering social work education is **not** currently being covered by Band 3 funding. This has become a very urgent issue as we can not hope for this cross-subsidisation to continue.

Infrastructure required to deliver the course

The question of “infrastructure required to deliver the course” has been narrowly defined in the RIS. The criteria for inclusion in the new Tier 4 is for “... laboratory based disciplines with small class sizes and/or high equipment costs”. Allied Health, Nursing, environmental science and clinical psychology are seen as acceptable for inclusion in Tier 4 – but not Social Work.

Social work is one of the fastest growing professions in the country and current workforce labour projections show that need is outstripping demand. A number of government and NGO agencies are not able to recruit sufficient Australian social workers and have been recruiting overseas. The need for social workers is growing at the same time as the universities are being under-funded to produce skilled graduates.

Social workers are required to deal with significant national crises as well as child protection issues and to provide support for those experiencing mental health difficulties, family violence and for groups including older people, those with disabilities and those affected by social fragmentation. Accordingly, qualified, skilled academic input is required at University level.

The meeting of AASW accreditation requirements together with requisite clinical components also necessitate small class sizes and the availability of significant resources (both in terms of social work academic staff and advanced IT and telecommunications technology). The necessity of ensuring small class sizes has been fully recognised internationally [e.g. JUCSWEC and GSCC (UK), the CSWEANZ, (NZ)].

The potential value to prospective students

The third criteria mentioned in the RIS for determining the allocation of disciplines in the new five Tier arrangements is “...the potential value to prospective students.” This is a clear reference to the future earning capacity of graduates from particular courses and probably also an implicit reference to the graduates ability to earn adequately to repay HECs loans after graduation in a lifetime of work.

There are two aspects to consider here.

- Firstly, Social Work has been highly successful at attracting low SES students and will continue to do so. This creates a pathway to higher education for many students. It also means that Social Work programs are exposed to the additional hidden costs associated with maintaining students from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- Secondly, social workers are not amongst the highest earning professions and most will be employed in the public system. Their ability to contribute to and repay the cost of higher education is limited. Graduates Salaries 2011 indicates that social worker average salary to be approximately \$52,000.

The Group of organisations presenting the submission have long been of the view that Social Work rightly belonged in the existing Tier 5 along with the closely associated Allied Health category. The new arrangements put forward for the Higher Education sector in the new Bill offer an opportunity for the government to correct this anomalous exclusion of Social Work from the Allied Health category and we invite this Committee to endorse that view in its Report.

Summary

To assist Senators in understanding and evaluating the arguments in support of our Submission, we have set out below a fuller range of reasons why Social Work courses should be reallocated to Tier 4 in the new Funding Cluster arrangements.

1. Social Work courses are increasingly delivered within Schools of Allied Health in Universities and in many cases also share a common first year with other Allied Health courses. Consequently teaching staff along with other resources are shared across disciplines.
2. Social Work is considered an Allied Health profession as evidenced by inclusion in the recently announced Code of Conduct which the Commonwealth government is intending to cover all health professionals. While in existence, Health Workforce Australia undertook planning for social work again in recognition that we are an Allied Health profession.
3. Social Work is on the Commonwealth government list of skilled shortages and there is a growing demand for qualified and skilled social workers.
4. 29 universities across Australia deliver Social Work courses to approx 10,000 students. The options for studies are a 4 year Bachelor of Social Work or a graduate 2 year Masters (Qualifying) subject to successful satisfaction of pre requisites. All courses satisfy at least AQF 7 and most at AQF 8 or 9 level.
5. Social Work is a profession that reaches out to students in lower socio economic circumstances to facilitate their access to education and therefore enhanced life opportunities. There is evidence that social work attracts a larger cohort of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds than other allied health professions (Healy and Lonne, 2010).

6. Social Work students are required to complete a minimum of 20 days face to face teaching during the course; most programs offer more than this. This is to prepare them for interactions with the public on field placements and satisfy the University staff as far as possible, that the students are suited to this type of professional work. This is a cost impost on social work courses, as their ability to raise funds from students is limited. It is however absolutely necessary to ensure the safety of the public with whom the students will be interacting while on placement.
7. The range of entry pathways into social work degree programs, means that a significant proportion arrive at tertiary study with less academic preparation than other Allied Health programs, and, consequently, staff resources particularly in the earlier years of the program often involve attention to developing professional writing and study skills.
8. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are represented in social work and human services programs at a higher percentage than other Allied Health disciplines. They constitute around 6% of the social and community services professional workforce which is a much higher proportion than other Allied Health disciplines. As many of these entrants come from disadvantaged backgrounds, university social work programs are obliged to provide additional study supports.
9. Social Work field placements require supportive contact from the Universities by at least 3 visits by staff to ensure the placement is meeting the student learning requirements, and the student has opportunity to develop necessary social work skills and knowledge. Preparation and a contribution is also required by the supervisor in the placement through attendance at workshop to prepare the placement for the student.
10. Recently universities in Melbourne were required to introduce a payment of \$35 per day to field supervisors to access placements for students. This is because social work field placements do not attract any clinical subsidy as do other Allied Health professions.
11. Social Work field requirements are comparable to other Allied Health disciplines i.e. 1000 hours of placement. Comparable professions – nursing, clinical psychology, dietetics and occupational therapy are also in the range of 800 – 1000 hours per student.

I am happy to provide further information or clarification and I would welcome an invitation to appear before the Committee and speak to this submission and respond to questions from the Committee members.

Submitted for and on behalf of the Australian Association of Social workers Ltd

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