

**Senate Standing Committee on Education and Employment
Parliament of Australia**

Submission to the Senate Standing Committee on Education and Employment regarding further actions required to support student participation and completion of health degrees.

The Australian Council of Deans of Health Sciences (ACDHS) is the peak representative organisation for Australian universities engaged in education and research in health sciences. As the educators of allied health professionals, ACDHS sits at the nexus between the health, disability and aged care and education sectors. As a collective we are the largest provider of allied health education in Australia, teaching over 83,000 students at any one time. Allied health professionals comprise almost a third of the country's healthcare workforce and deliver over 200 million health services annually¹. ACDHS members provide qualified allied health workers equipped to work in a range of settings including public and private health, education, disability, and aged care settings. More information about ACDHS is available at <https://acdhs.edu.au/>

ACDHS supports the Accord aim, to increase equity of opportunity, meet future skills needs and deliver high quality research that is useful to communities, industry, and governments. We also support the Accord process aims of rapidly increasing university places. Given the health workforce shortages and projected growth needs there is a critical need to grow the number of university places available in professional entry allied health degrees.

Students enrolled in Allied Health qualifications must complete a substantial amount of practical placements which can be at multiple intervals, multiple locations and for various lengths of time, often located away from the students campus or home residence. ACDHS has submitted to the Accord our recommendation to address "placement poverty" in any effort to grow participation and improve equity and the inclusion of students from First Nations communities and other underrepresented groups.

"Placement poverty"² is a serious issue for many allied health students. When students attend placements for extended periods, typically 5-10 weeks they often need to suspend their part-time work arrangements that usually support their living expenses. If students complete placements away from their home base, then they may also incur travel costs and need to pay double rent. The placements required to complete degrees as per accreditation requirements can place students in a position of financial hardship. If we meet new equity and diversity targets for students in higher education, then we expect that the proportion of students who experience placement poverty will increase. We also respectfully suggest that supporting some types of health students and not others to alleviate placement poverty and support placement costs is another form of inequality.

There are three potential solutions to this issue:

- Make Youth Allowance, Austudy and Abstudy available to students while on placement even if they normally do not meet the standard eligibility requirements.
- Introduce tax incentives for organisations that take final year students on placement and pay them a stipend or wage.
- Enhanced location-based scholarships for rural and remote localities would support place-based study and student placements. In many instances across regional Australia costs are prohibitive for students to relocate for study or for placements in the city.

¹ Allied Health Professions Australia at <https://ahpa.com.au/what-is-allied-health/> Accessed on 3 November 2022

² Christine Morley, Lisa Hodge, Joanne Clarke, Heather McIntyre, Jennifer Mays, Jennie Briese & Tina Kostecki (2023) 'THIS UNPAID PLACEMENT MAKES YOU POOR': Australian social work students' experiences of the financial burden of field education, Social Work Education, DOI: [10.1080/02615479.2022.2161507](https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2022.2161507)

We note the Senate Committee process in relation to amending the Higher Education Support Act 2003 to:

- expand eligibility for places in demand driven higher education courses to First Nations students.

and note the cultural safety considerations of the location, availability, financial and social, emotional wellbeing support for First Nations students on placement which can often require First Nations students to travel away from traditional country and the support of their local community. As with all other students this can most often mean forgoing any local casual employment and this in turn placing additional strain on family they may be supporting or being supported by.

ACDHS are aware of the agreement across Allied Health and higher education broadly that placements are effectively capping growth. We have seen students defer study or withdraw due to the costs to complete a placement.

ACDHS recommend that consideration be given to financial support for all professional entry (pre-registration) health students while on placement. ACDHS further recommend consideration of a placement income support and stipends for students incurring relocation costs for placement completion, which can amount to many months of dislocation and associated costs. Thirdly we recommend that location-based scholarships be offered for placement in rural and remote locations.

ACDHS puts to the Senate Committee and makes the point that successful completion of wider groups of students in health professional education courses that include compulsory placements is only possible if the issue of placement poverty is addressed. To address this issue for only some groups of health professional students introduces a new type of inequality. It is not within the means of universities to be able to fully fund these cost-of-living expenses for students nor for the student to bear. We caution that the workforce issues currently faced in aged care and primary care are projected to worsen substantially over the next decade without an increase in the graduates able to complete mandatory placements.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to the Senate Committee. If you have any questions on the ACDHS response, then please do not hesitate to contact ACDHS at secretariat@acdhs.edu.au.

Prof. Michelle Lincoln
Chair
Australian Council of Deans of Health Sciences

August 25th, 2023.