

20 November 2015

Committee Secretary
Senate Education and Employment Committee
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Inquiry into the Higher Education Support Amendment (VET FEE-HELP Reform) Bill 2015.

Thank you for the invitation to provide a submission to the Senate's Education and Employment Standing Committee Inquiry into the Higher Education Support Amendment (VET FEE-HELP Reform) Bill 2015.

Australia has a world-leading education and associated student fee support system. The implementation of the VET FEE-HELP system has been key to increasing the number of Australian students who can now choose to complete higher education qualifications that were previously out of financial reach. The VET FEE-HELP system is integral to ensuring equity and accessibility; especially for low socioeconomic students. It is essential, however, that this investment in Australia's future workforce and leaders is accompanied by an assurance of quality education.

As clearly demonstrated by the outcome of recent investigations into poor quality VET education providers by the Australian Skills and Quality Agency (ASQA), there are real and significant concerns regarding the appropriateness of the current regulatory regime underpinning Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) and VET FEE-HELP.

The recent work by government and associated quality control agencies in relation to improved monitoring of VET education quality and outcomes is to be commended, however, further action is required. The current Inquiry is both timely and vital to the future of Australian education and should be viewed as a core component of the ongoing national discussion on how all aspects of our higher education system can best meet the future needs of all Australians.

Charles Sturt University (CSU), as Australia's largest regional university and the recognised leader in provision of successful transition of VET program graduates to University qualifications, is well placed to comment on the proposed changes. CSU is a multi-campus institution with Australian campuses at Albury-Wodonga, Bathurst, Canberra, Dubbo, Goulburn, Orange, Parramatta, Port Macquarie and Wagga Wagga. CSU has approximately 2,100 staff and more than 35,000 students. Over 50% of CSU students study online or in a blended on-campus/online mode. Education and research are integral to the University's character and mission.

The success of the University is evidenced by its sector leading performance in work-integrated learning, high graduate employment rates and high graduate incomes. Underpinning this success, and clearly demonstrating the University's commitment to the development and sustainability of rural and regional Australia, are the close links that the University has forged with the VET sector, our communities, industry and the professions; locally, regionally and nationally.

CSU strives to ensure that its programs of study are relevant to the needs of our students, the professions, industry, our regions and Australia. Our research is guided by the challenges and opportunities that industry and regions face. This, in turn, ensures that our students receive a practical, relevant and industry-informed education; resulting in the University's high graduate employment rate.

This commitment to our regions, student employability and the needs of industry also underpins our strong history of extending university availability. CSU has been widely recognised as a leading institution in the provision of effective pathway programs for students looking to gain a university degree, while recognising the value of their TAFE qualifications. Such pathways help provide additional modes of entry to university for student groups who historically attend university at rates far below average.

CSU is proud to claim the highest number enrolled indigenous students and the highest number of students successfully transitioning from the VET sector to University in the Australian higher education sector; with a large proportion of its students being first-in-family (FIF) to complete a university qualification and/or from low socioeconomic (LSES) backgrounds. Most recently, the University's work in this space was recognised by a CSU Pathway Program, offered in partnership with our local TAFE institutions, being nominated for an AFR Higher Education Award in the Equity and Opportunity Category.

CSU strongly supports the proposed requirement for VET FEE-HELP approved training providers to develop and apply appropriate student entry requirements. We know, from significant experience, that unrealistic entry requirements only result in setting a student up to fail. This not only leads to the student potentially disengaging long term from further education but greatly affects the future workforce and sustainability of regional Australia.

CSU strongly supports the proposed requirement for students under the age of 18 to seek their parents' approval before requesting a VET FEE-HELP loan. This age group are particularly influenced by both strong marketing strategies and peer pressure. The inclusion of a parental check to ensure that the prospective student fully understands the implications and details of their chosen qualification is a sound and sensible inclusion.

CSU strongly supports the proposed broadening of the circumstances in which a student can seek a re-credit of their VET FEE-HELP loan debt balance and remission of a debt. As an experienced provider of post-secondary qualifications to mature, LSES and FIF students, CSU is well aware of the life circumstances outside of the student's control that can impact on study and employment. Provision of this flexibility will allow individual cases to be judged on merit and need.

CSU strongly supports the proposed increased eligibility requirements for admitting new providers to the VET FEE-HELP loan scheme. CSU also strongly supports the proposed penalties for VET providers who engage in inappropriate behaviour/practice and the proposed extension of the VET Regulator's powers with respect to monitoring and investigation.

Public investment in our education and training system is essential in providing a quality student experience resulting in a highly skilled, future proofed workforce that meets the needs of regional Australia.

In summary, we believe it is vital that strong reforms are put in place to ensure that all Australians have faith and trust in the VET-FEE HELP system.

In light of the above comments and our commitment to providing world-class education for students in regional Australia, CSU strongly supports the proposed reforms contained within this legislation.

We look forward to being kept informed of progress of this important Inquiry.

Yours sincerely

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Vice-Chancellor