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09/12/2013

Ms Julia Agostino
Committee Secretary
The Senate Standing Committee on Education and Employment

Submission to the Standing Committee on Education and Employment: Schedule 6 of the Social Services and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2013.

Dear Ms Agostino,

The Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations thanks the Standing Committee on Education and Employment for seeking contribution around the changes to Schedules 6 and 9 of the Social Services and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2013. We welcome the opportunity to provide comment around Schedule 6 of this Amendment Bill as it pertains to the movement from student start-up scholarships to student start-up loans.

The Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations is opposed to start-up scholarships being replaced by start-up loans. We believe that such a move fails to recognise the purpose of the start-up scholarship, which is to allow greater access to University studies for students from diverse backgrounds.

The introduction of the start-up scholarship meant that students were often in a better position to commence university studies by taking away one measure of financial hardship. It has a particular benefit to those students from low-socio economic status or diverse equity backgrounds who may otherwise be unable to afford text books and study materials. Turning the start-up scholarship into a loan means that students who are the recipients of Government assistance – by definition, students who have already been identified as the most in need – will be placed in a position of having to pay back a greater loan than their more well-off counterparts once they reach the payment threshold.

The Student Start-Up Scholarship as it currently exists is imperfect as postgraduates are concerned as it is only available to students receiving ABSTUDY, AUSTUDY or Youth Allowance as a full-time student. Higher Degree by Research students are not eligible for ABSTUDY or AUSTUDY and the majority of postgraduate coursework qualifications do not meet its requirements either. This was due to be addressed by the previous government for postgraduate coursework students, but this was delayed in the 2012 mid-year budget review.

The fact that most postgraduates are ineligible for ABSTUDY and AUSTUDY, and therefore are also ineligible for a start-up scholarship, speaks to the misled perception that postgraduates are somehow more financially prepared or secure than undergraduates. As a postgraduate qualification increasingly becomes a virtually entry-level expectation and more students are going directly from undergraduate to

postgraduate study, this perception should be subject to greater scrutiny. Many postgraduate students are struggling with the burden of dependants (children/elderly parents), living costs, a lack of access to transport concessions in Victoria, and existing HECS/HELP loans. Postgraduates should be eligible to apply for ABSTUDY/AUSTUDY and should also be eligible for start-up scholarships.

In an ideal world, the Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations believes that a start-up scholarship program which is extended to all postgraduate students is the most equitable approach and as such is our preference. However, in recognition of the changing sentiment in this space we concede that a start-up loan is preferable to no start-up program to support the extra cost of study materials, at all. Any approach, whether scholarship or loan, should however be extended to include postgraduates and Higher Degree by Research students.

Finally, we would like to register our disquiet with the timing of this Amendment Bill and the amount of time provided for response. It is not realistic to expect stakeholders to make a substantive contribution to a Bill of this nature within a seventy-two hour timeframe, especially where that timeframe falls over the course of a weekend. It must also be noted that the timing of this consultation period is set within a difficult time of year for various higher education stakeholders, including the National Union of Students, whose annual general meeting commenced over the weekend. It sends a disappointing message and sets a dangerous precedent when so little consideration appears to be given toward consultation around an Amendment Bill of this magnitude.

We look forward to noting the outcome of this Amendment Bill.

Kind Regards,

Meghan B. Hopper

2013-14 President of the Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations