

Prof. Jacqueline K. Phillips

September 9, 2014

**Higher Education and Research Reform Amendment Bill 2014.
Submission to Senate Committee Inquiry**

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission regarding the Higher Education and Research Reform Amendment Bill. My comments are informed as a university academic, medical science researcher, PhD supervisor, and mother of two teenage children who want to go to University. I am very concerned about the proposed changes and what will be widespread detrimental impacts: My focus is on three specific points:

(1) Increasing the interest rates on student HELP loans to the Government bond rate.

Such an increase in interest rates places a major disadvantage on those students who do lower income courses, such as nursing and teaching. Further, it disadvantages women who typically start on lower salaries, do not have pay equity across multiple professions and take maternity leave. Their debt will be disproportionate to future earning capacity and become a life long burden. This will serve to drive inequality in our employment sector – both gender and socioeconomic based and have significant long-term impact on make up of our professional workforce.

(2) Deregulation of University undergraduate fee structures. Allowing universities to regulate their fee structures means course costs can be brought in line with international fees – this will resulting in a doubling or even tripling of course costs for domestic students, leaving families and individuals with huge debts, trending ever more towards an Americanised high fee graduate education system. The prospects of such a large debt, and the time frame it will take to repay will deter students, particularly those from lower and middle income families. They will simply not be able to go to University and we close that door of opportunity on them forever. I do not believe that the provision of scholarships schemes by the Universities will be in anyway adequate in redressing this issue: there will be too few scholarships with likely very tight means testing and the requirement for high academic achievement levels – average kids from middle income families will simply miss out.

(3) Cuts to the Research Training Scheme. Reducing funding to the Research Training Scheme, which functions now to support our PhD students, would be a tragedy. At the moment we have a system that facilitates the progression of our best and brightest to higher degrees, research and professional training. If funds are cut and universities are allowed to charge doctoral students “ the gap” these talented individuals will go elsewhere. Attracting domestic

postgraduate students to research in the current Australian climate is already difficult and many students make significant sacrifices to gain their higher degrees. The typical PhD student is no longer fresh out of University; they often have families and financial commitments, and sacrifice income to undertake doctoral degrees. The current level of scholarship is only \$25,392 and they are expected to work full-time for the 3 -4 years it takes to do a PhD degree. Contrast this to the level of international student fees of between \$27,000 - \$35,000 per year.

Furthermore, the imposition of an effective cut in funding to the Australian Research through the 3.25 per cent "efficiency dividend" will compound the impact of the proposed changes to Higher Education and Research, by reducing further the opportunities for our graduates to secure a job. Many are already facing the option of two to three year contracts in the research environment that do not offer job and family security, and as a result many take alternative career paths or leave Australia. Our science and humanities research will suffer.

These reforms are not a good deal for students.

I appreciate my comments being taken into consideration and would be happy to provide further information.

Sincerely,

Jacqueline Phillips