

Our Ref: G-04-104

28 May 2009

Senator Claire Moore
Chair
Senate Community Affairs Legislation Committee
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

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Dear Senator Moore

Inquiry into the Health Workforce Australia Bill 2009

Universities Australia is the peak national organisation representing Australian universities in the public interest. Australia's 39 universities are the primary educators of health professionals, and approximately 120,000 health students are currently enrolled across a range of disciplines. Effective clinical education placements are a vital component of the education of these students, and consequently Universities Australia is keenly interested in the Health Workforce Australia (HWA) Bill.

Universities Australia wrote to the Minister for Health and Aging, The Hon. Nicola Roxon MP, on 19 March 2009, stating that

"A correctly established and adequately funded Agency will alleviate many of the issues and concerns currently experienced by those involved in clinical education."

This remains the case.

The \$1.6 billion that the proposed HWA would administer could substantially improve the availability and effectiveness of clinical education placements. Universities Australia is, however, concerned that the Bill as written does not provide any substantive detail on the powers and responsibilities of HWA. Until such time as these details are made available, Universities Australia cannot provide more than in-principle support for the Agency, and for the Bill that will establish it.

In the correspondence to Minister Roxon, Universities Australia outlined what it considers to be the key features required in HWA, including its role, governance and powers. This letter is attached for the Committee's information.

In summary, universities and their partner health care providers have collaborated very effectively to-date in providing clinical education for health students. The two parties have broad experience and knowledge and in many places hard-won goodwill and support. What they do not have is adequate logistic and financial

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support, which has led to some universities struggling to source enough quality clinical education opportunities for their students from cash-strapped health care providers.

If the HWA acts as a facilitator to provide funding, administrative and higher-end strategic planning support for universities and health care providers, it will assist in solving these problems now and prevent them becoming exacerbated over coming years as increasing numbers of health students enter the system.

If, on the other hand, the HWA is established to be directly involved in operational aspects of clinical education, with direct involvement in the negotiation for and provision of clinical education places between universities and health care providers, Universities Australia believes that it will not substantially assist in alleviating current problems and, indeed, may add to them through imposing a new level of bureaucracy that is not responsive to local needs, or to changes in curricula and practice, and which may erode the good relations that have built up between individual universities and health care providers over decades.

The Health Workforce Australia Bill does not indicate which of these two possible directions is intended for HWA.

Universities Australia wishes to comment on one specific matter relating to the Bill, which is the proposed composition of the HWA Board. The Bill envisages a 13-member Board which is heavily weighted (9-4) towards Government. Universities Australia does not consider that such a composition will adequately reflect the relative importance of all stakeholder groupings, being Government, Education providers and Health providers. Only three Board places (four including the Chair) will be expected to accommodate education providers (universities, VET and private education), private and not-for-profit health care providers and discipline-specific groups, including registration and accreditation bodies.

Universities Australia proposes that a more equitable balance of Board membership would be for an independent Chair, three Commonwealth representatives, three State and Territory representatives, and three each from education providers and health care providers.

Universities Australia considers that HWA has great potential to benefit clinical education, if it is established in an appropriate manner. We seek the opportunity to expand on these matters further in a suitable public hearing of your Committee.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'N. Saunders', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Professor Nicholas Saunders
Chair
Universities Australia Clinical Placements Advisory Group

Attachment A: Universities Australia to Nicola Roxon MP, 19 March 2009