

To:

The Community Affairs Reference Committee inquiry into Commonwealth Funding and Administration of Mental Health Services.

Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs,
PO Box 6100,
Parliament House,
CANBERRA,
ACT 2600

Submission from the Heads Of Departments and Schools of Psychology
Association (HODSPA) of Australian Universities.

This brief submission concerns the terms of reference designated

(e) mental health workforce issues, including:

- (i) the two-tiered Medicare rebate system for psychologists,
- (ii) workforce qualifications and training of psychologists, and
- (iii) workforce shortages;

(e) (ii) & (iii)

Psychology as a subject for University study is required to fulfill two roles – firstly as a discipline for scientific research and academic scholarship, and secondly as a profession with a professional skill base and set of applied competencies. The pattern of training in University degree courses, one that has developed over many years, is for the undergraduate degree to focus on the scientific bases of psychology and for applied skills to be developed in postgraduate courses. This pattern is, to an extent, like the division of medical training into pre-clinical science followed by applied clinical training. It may be thought that this pattern of training is different from most other allied health sciences, where undergraduate courses are designed to train students for particular occupations. However, the current movement of medical and allied health training towards postgraduate courses indicates that the model of undergraduate science followed by postgraduate professional training, is becoming the norm. Psychology can be regarded as an early adopter of this training model. Moreover, this pattern of instruction in applied psychology is cost-effective; is in accord with international benchmarks; and ensures high quality training of postgraduate professionals. As well as being consistent with a scientist-practitioner model appropriate for an evidence-based discipline, the model delivers the high resource-intensive professional training necessary for effective practitioners, to a selected cohort of students who are already trained in the knowledge base and scientific methodology that underpins the evidence-based practice of the profession.

The difficulty that the Schools and Departments of Psychology have in addressing the shortfall of trained psychologists in the Australian health workforce lies in the inadequate funding provided for training. In the overwhelming majority of Schools and Departments of Psychology within Australian Universities the management of resources and budgets demands

cross-subsidies from undergraduate programs to postgraduate professional training. In other words, the postgraduate training of professional psychologists in Australian Universities is undertaken at a cost (sometimes a very significant one) to the Academic Units involved, and hence, Psychology Departments have been reluctant to increase the number of students accepted for postgraduate professional training. Psychology receives substantially less base funding per undergraduate student than other Science disciplines, and this differential is even more significant when compared with professional domains such as medicine and veterinary science. The demands of under-resourced undergraduate programs and the need for cross-subsidies from these to the expensive professional postgraduate training programs is hard to sustain and makes expansion of the postgraduate training courses hard to contemplate.

It is HODSPA's view that the way forward to increasing the number of trained psychologists, and to overcoming the workforce shortage, is to adequately fund Academic Units for their programs. This could be achieved by altering cluster funding for postgraduate units. Whatever the mechanism, a reduction in the need for internal cross-subsidies between degree programs within Academic Units will increase the ability of Schools and Departments of Psychology to increase the through-put of postgraduate trainees.

(e) (i)

The two-tiered Medicare rebate system for psychologists reflects the quality of the two major pathways to Registration. Students with a four-year undergraduate degree are able to register as a professional psychologist with an additional two years of supervised applied work. The Registration Board is trying to tighten the processes and procedures of this pathway, but it remains the case that the two years of postgraduate supervision can vary greatly in quality of supervision and the breadth of experience provided. The second pathway requires a four-year undergraduate degree plus a two-year Masters degree plus a year of practicum experience. The Masters courses comprise advanced academic study, a variety of supervised practicum placements and coursework components designed to develop, improve and monitor applied skills. It is HODSPA's view that the advanced qualifications and the development of applied skills and techniques of the postgraduate qualified psychologist justifies the maintenance of the two-tier system since this system recognises the advanced skills of the Master level graduate.