

WESTERN SYDNEY UNIVERSITY



Submission: Universities Accord (Student Support and Other Measures) Bill 2024

Western Sydney University welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Universities Accord (Student Support and Other Measures) Bill 2024.

In the main, we support these measures which are in response to the Australian Universities Accord final report (the Accord). However, we urge the federal government to go one step further and immediately address the escalating cost of Arts degrees.

Arts degrees are a critical university entry point for many students, including students from low SES backgrounds, particularly women and Indigenous students. Arts graduates are the critical thinkers we need for future jobs.

Western Sydney University urges the government to urgently act to fix a broken system, which has now pushed the cost of a three-year Arts degree above \$50,000. How does this imbalance, impacting equity groups, serve the Minister's commitment to make the system "fairer"?

The debt incurred for gateway and foundation-style degrees works against the government's stated aim of encouraging more equity and diverse students into university to reach its target of 80 per cent of the working age population with tertiary qualifications by 2050.

Recommendations:

1. Pass the HELP indexation changes but move immediately to address the inflated and unfair cost of Arts degrees.
2. Pass the FEE-FREE Uni Ready courses as an essential fairness and equity measure that open-up pathways to higher education.
3. We strongly endorse the new Commonwealth Prac Payments measures and urge the government to consider extending them to other courses.

1.

Higher Education Loan Program indexation

Recommendation 1

Pass the HELP indexation changes but move immediately to address the inflated and unfair cost of Arts degrees.

Western Sydney University strongly endorses the federal government's decision to improve how HELP indexation is calculated to ensure student debts do not outpace wages growth. We are particularly pleased with the decision to backdate relief for students.

Two-thirds of our students are the first in their family to attend university, we have the highest number and proportion of students from Non-English-Speaking Backgrounds of any Australian university, and the highest number of low SES students.

However, we are deeply concerned about the cost of some degrees. Students who can no longer afford an Arts degree do not undertake alternative degrees. The cost of Arts degrees do not reflect future earning power and ignore the important contribution that these graduates make to our economy and society.

We understand the government is developing a needs-based funding system to be administered through the Australian Tertiary Education Commission. In the interim, we urge the government to act on the escalating and pointedly unfair cost of Arts degrees.

2.

FEE-FREE Uni Ready Courses

Recommendation 2

Pass the FEE-FREE Uni Ready courses as an essential fairness and equity measure that open-up pathways to higher education.

Western Sydney University supports the expansion of fee-free university ready courses. Our mission is to ensure the people of Western Sydney reach their full potential. This includes providing greater pathways to further education for those who, for whatever reason missed out the first time, those seeking career changes, and our refugee and migrant communities. As our economy transforms and demands a higher level of skills, opening up access to pathways will become increasingly important along with lifelong learning.

3.

Commonwealth Prac Payments

Recommendation 3

We strongly endorse the new Commonwealth Prac Payments measures and urge the government to consider extending them to other courses.

The government's focus on cost-of-living relief, particularly through the first ever Commonwealth Practical Payment initiative is welcome. This measure acknowledges the challenging circumstances many of our students face, including experiences contributing to

placement poverty, such as caring responsibilities, disability, cultural barriers, and for many students, being the first in their family to attend university.

For example, the impact of completing 1,000 hours of placement, a compulsory component of social work education, often places considerable financial pressures on our students. This pressure often leads students reconsidering social work as a career. For many, the stress of balancing the demands of unpaid placements with their personal and financial responsibilities, forces them to reassess their ability to complete the program.

This support will better ensure that our future social work workforce reflects the diversity of the communities they will serve. Extending the same support to other courses, including psychology, physiotherapy and podiatry is recommended for the same reasons.

We see this reflected in other disciplines, and it is particularly important in areas such as nursing and midwifery, and teaching. Western Sydney expects to have a shortfall of about 10,000 nurses in the region next year. Programs such as Commonwealth Prac Payments are ensuring more students can graduate in these valued and essential services.

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