

To the Community Affairs Legislation Committee,

I wish to request the review of a potential additional amendment to the current Paid Parental Leave scheme to sit alongside the current proposed amendments in the Paid Parental Leave Amendment (Improvements for Families and Gender Equality) Bill 2022.

As a pregnant PhD student, I would ask the committee to consider recommending the removal of 'study through a scholarship or other award of financial aid' from activities that don't count as work for the work test. Or for the inclusion of any mechanism that would create eligibility for PhD students on scholarship to the Paid Parental Leave scheme. My reasons and further explanation are outlined below.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Madison

To the Community Affairs Legislation Committee,

I wish to put forward a submission for consideration in the report of the Paid Parental Leave Amendment (Improvements for Families and Gender Equality) Bill 2022. I thank the committee in advance for their time in reading and considering my submission.

I am a PhD student at an Australian university. I truly love my research and have pride knowing it actively contributes to the development of new knowledge in my field. As I work in the area of environmental radioactivity and assessment of nuclear legacy sites, I also am proud of the future impact my work will have as Australia and the world continue to use and invest in nuclear technologies. My research is vital and is the only project of its kind in Australia currently. I have moved my partner across this large country so I can continue this work at the best possible facilities. This meant uprooting our personal lives and moving us thousands of kilometres away from our families and friends to pursue this work. I, and my partner, accept this as a reality of being in research and academia and so we take the negatives with the positives. I am happy with this sacrifice with the knowledge my research work will help many people, in Australia and globally.

In November of 2022 my partner and I were delighted to learn that I was pregnant with our first child. On the date of this submission, I will be 23 weeks and 4 days pregnant, and everything is going well. Our families are beyond excited, this will be the first grandchild for both sets of grandparents and we come from large families. Even though we live a 6-hour plane flight away from them, I know this child will be so loved and thought of every day once she is in the world with us. It is, again, a sacrifice we plan to make so I can continue my research.

Late last year we started looking into what leave and care provisions exist for PhD students. After all, our work underpins a lot of the research conducted in the university realm. We are the future academics that will lead Australian research into the future. To say I was disappointed to learn of the currently available leave and support offered to primary and secondary carers of newborns or adopted children is an understatement. I had been awarded an RTP Scholarship from the Federal Government, provided via my university, to be able to pursue this research and be able to financially support myself. This scholarship is small, and calculates out to roughly \$15/hour, below minimum wage. This is a fact that PhD students have learnt to live with, it is a wage that students willingly have struggled to live on for the 4 or so years they can master their craft. It is a widely accepted truth that no one enters academia or publicly funded research for the money. However, what I had not expected was to discover that a PhD student is not considered eligible for the Paid Parental Leave scheme, the safety net provided by the Commonwealth for working residents and citizens of Australia to make sure everyone who is entitled has the right to spend time with their new children.

Simply put, as PhD students are normally on either an RTP or other scholarship, we fail the work test. Specifically, our activity as 'study through a scholarship or other award of financial aid' is not considered work. This means that we are left with whatever leave provisions are provided by our specific university Scholarship guidelines. At my university, and this is like almost all other universities in Australia, I am entitled to 12 weeks maximum maternity leave. There is no antenatal leave. There is no flexible leave on return to work. And if I do not wish to return immediately after this 12-week period expires, I either have to drop my enrolment to 0% and receive no scholarship or return to work and try and continue my program of study.

If I take the recommended 6 weeks of leave prior to my due date, as is recommended for staff at our institution, this means I would then as a PhD student have a 6-week-old newborn at the time of my return. I am expected to recover from the birth in this period. I am expected to then either find a

childcare centre that will accept a 6-week-old and started paying childcare costs, or I need to stop receiving my PhD income. Like a lot of PhD students who have travelled domestically or internationally to study, we do not have family to rely on in the state to help with childcare.

I commend the current Government's proposed amendments and extensions to the Paid Parental Leave (PPL) scheme due for implementation later this year. My partner and I will not actually qualify for the new leave entitlements as they do not state they will be retroactively applied. This to me appears to be another potential oversight. Our child will be born in May of 2023, and we will miss out on the new scheme by a matter of weeks. Regardless of our personal circumstance, the amendments will create real change for most of Australia's workforce who are currently captured by the work test.

Therefore, what I would ask of the committee and the government would be to consider the removal of the scholarship as an activity that does not count as work. Or application of some other mechanism that would make PhD students eligible for the PPL scheme. By refusing to accept that PhD students on scholarship contribute to Australia's economy and are an asset to our nation we are actively accepting that women pursuing careers in academia are disadvantaged and are looking in the other direction intentionally. I look around at the number of full-time professors in my school and wonder if policies like the PPL that reinforce exclusion of women at early stages of their academic career have contributed to the lack of female representation in our academic leadership.

I acknowledge that this issue does not sit squarely at the feet of the PPL. Other changes are necessary, specifically within the parental leave scholarship conditions that are set out in Commonwealth Scholarship Guidelines 2017. But I believe that changes to the PPL are one necessary step in providing PhD students with the necessary support to both start their careers and families.

This current government has made equitable parental leave a priority. I humbly ask that the committee reflect and ask whether they should also consider inclusion of PhD students on scholarship and other scholarship holders as any other worker in Australia. We are just like any other public servant; our wages are paid for by the Australian people and in return we provided services that push Australia forward.

As the current conditions stand, I am a young woman with great potential at the cusp of my career and starting my young family with my partner. The current exclusion of scholarship from the work test, the effective exclusion of PhD students from accessing appropriate parental leave, means I am having to decide between the two. For me family will always come first, and I am afraid I am being forced into a decision that other primary carers in their PhDs are also silently facing.

I ask for the committee to consider my perspective above and am hopeful that future young academics will have the option to start their families while they also start their careers. I am hopeful that by the time my future daughter is old enough to choose what path she takes as a young woman she won't feel like she ever has to choose between family and her career.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Madison