

Submission

Higher Education Support Amendment (Job-Ready Graduates and Supporting Regional and Remote Students) Bill 2020

clarable

For further comment in relation to this submission, please contact:

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Securing Social Work education funding toward future workforce needs

Clarable values the opportunity to provide feedback on behalf of prospective Social Work students, in relation to proposed amendments to higher education funding support. We urge the Government to guarantee that funding for social work education will remain in line with other allied health professions. The therapeutic and practical skills of social workers are both highly valued and in demand, and our profession remains a positive prospect for continued contribution for both young and older workers, and workers from diverse backgrounds and experiences.

Social work is a practical allied health field with application across a range of community sector, health services and independent provider settings. Social workers participate across clinical settings, not for profit settings, mental health and homelessness, community health, carer services, disability service organisations, peak representative bodies, family and children's services organisations, in local government and in educational settings, to name a few. We are a diverse, adaptable and resourceful profession, creatively assisting those we support through approaches sensitive to their experiences and needs.

Social workers also contribute within policy work and reform, as government policy representatives, as educators and trainers, and in management roles across the fields described above. We are academics and contributors in a range of meaningful ways toward increased equity and inclusion of the voices of marginalised groups within public debate, and toward fairer distribution of community resources.

Because of our breadth we can be difficult field to define. The Australian Association of Social Work definition states that:

*'Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing.'*¹

Pathway from lived expertise, to professional contribution and innovation

Many social work entrants return to studies later in life. Proposed funding reforms put at risk a vital pathway from lived expertise of themes of disadvantage, to practical application in support of others through casework and counselling, and group work. Transformation of lived expertise to professional contribution will be under threat if the cost of education is prohibitive. Mature age students are often highly price sensitive when it comes to choosing a degree as they often have families to support and other responsibilities, such as buying a home.

Clarable has been established as a private social work practice, to respond to gaps in services for individuals with significant psychosocial disability and / or co-occurring Autism and intellectual disability or Acquired Brain Injury (dual disability). Our service works in the provision of therapy and consulting services to NDIS participants and families. We also provide counselling and consulting

services to family carers through state and federal funded initiatives. We support relational recovery – the mental health recovery journey of the whole family alongside the person they support. Studies in social work contributed an appreciation of systemic factors in wellbeing, and the social model of disability, to enable this innovation. Current health service provision focusses mainly on the individual with the health or disability need. Social work insights and models, alongside lived experience of disability systems, inform our approach.

Meaningful work across life

Our team includes women who studied as mature entrants, as a second career and after family and carer responsibilities. This is consistent with data suggesting that 86% of social work students are female with an average age of 29.3 years². We know that women graduates earn less across their life-time due to informal care responsibilities and career breaks.

It would have been prohibitive to re-enter education for many social workers in our extended network if the fee structure was markedly different at the time they commenced social work studies. In conversations with welfare workers and other lived-expertise workers in our network, the cost and time required away from caring responsibilities, difficulties managing their own health needs and the stress of further financial obligations make further education prohibitive in spite of their passion for the field.

Those who are attracted to social work at a younger age, have at times indicated they found the work of social workers beneficial in their childhood, through their own challenging circumstances. Social work has the capacity to address and reframe generational disadvantage, creating shared meanings of hope and empathy in the difficulties of life.

In demand: an attractive and highly skilled allied health approach

We urge the government to protect the future of social workers with a commitment to funding for social work degrees commensurate with allied health degree funding and to encourage growth of this much-needed workforce. There is high demand for allied health workers with skills in maintaining relationships and knowledge of community and government systems, to support improved service navigation and improved wellbeing for marginalised and at-risk families and individuals. Unfortunately, with recent devastation to the economy, demand for diverse therapeutic support will only increase. The recent Royal Commission into Mental Health in Victoria, and Disability Royal Commission, have brought into stark focus the challenges of sourcing appropriate and skilled services to meet diverse needs. Social workers have much to contribute to the reform of these, and other areas of practice.

The job-ready package will negatively and disproportionately impact women and act as a disincentive to pursue a career in social work. Social workers are highly trained professionals, requiring completion of an accredited four-year Bachelor of Social Work degree or a two-year Master of Social Work degree in addition to an undergraduate degree which includes studies in the social and behavioural sciences.

This study includes a minimum requirement to complete 1000 hours of supervised training placements³. This is a considerable commitment and sacrifice for individuals juggling the realities of the cost of living in modern Australia. In 2019, social work degree graduates had a 95.3% labour

force participation rate⁴. It is clear that social workers are job-ready graduates. The Australian Government would do well to encourage increased uptake of social work studies by young Australians, rather than increasing fees.

Incentivise Social Work education, to build community wellbeing

The Social Work field would benefit from incentivised fee-structures to increase the attractiveness of our program. Services are stretched with increased demand; three in five community sector workers (60 per cent) reporting an increase in the numbers of clients their service was unable to support during 2019⁵. If young Australian's are deterred from considering social work as a viable option due to excessive fees this will only worsen. Many roles in the community sector are not highly paid, however are highly valuable to our community. An affordable university education minimises barriers to course entry for all interested in social work as a career option.

The Australian Government has deemed social workers a “very highly skilled” occupation with “very strong” future growth rate of 29% over the next 5 years.⁶ A recent National Rural Health report listed social work as an allied health profession that plays an active role with improving health and wellbeing outcomes for people living in regional areas⁷. Government contribution of funds toward education of social workers is a low risk investment for the government, bound to pay dividends in community cohesion and wellbeing for the long term.

¹ <https://www.aasw.asn.au/information-for-the-community/what-is-social-work#:~:text=Social%20work%20is%20a%20practice,are%20central%20to%20social%20work>. Accessed 5/9/2020

² Healy, K., & Lonne, B. (2010). The social work & human services workforce: Report from a national study of education, training and workforce needs. Australian Learning and Teaching Council.

³ Australian Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards (ASWEAS) March 2020
(<https://www.aasw.asn.au/document/item/6073>)

⁴ 2019 Graduate Outcomes Survey, p.7
(<https://www.qilt.edu.au/docs/default-source/gos-reports/2019-gos/2019-gos-national-report.pdf>)

⁵ https://www.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Demand_snapshot_2019.pdf

⁶ Australian Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards (ASWEAS) March 2020
(<https://www.aasw.asn.au/document/item/6073>)

⁷ Report for the Minister for Regional Health, June 2020 (page 1)
([https://www1.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/815AFEED0337CF95CA2581D30076D095/\\$File/National%20Rural%20Health%20Commissioner's%20Allied%20Health%20Report%20to%20the%20Minister%20June%202020.pdf](https://www1.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/815AFEED0337CF95CA2581D30076D095/$File/National%20Rural%20Health%20Commissioner's%20Allied%20Health%20Report%20to%20the%20Minister%20June%202020.pdf))