

# Charles Darwin University

Submission to Senate Inquiry into the  
Universities Accord (Student Support and  
Other Measures) Bill 2024

September 2024

# Table of Contents

Australia's most connected university	3
Implementing Australia's Universities Accord	3
Schedule 1 - HECS – HELP reforms to make the system fairer	3
Schedule 2 - Student Services Amenities Fees – revenue to student led organisations	4
Schedule 3 - Fee-Free Uni Ready courses	4
Schedule 4 - Commonwealth Paid Prac Placements	5

## **Australia's most connected university**

Charles Darwin University's (CDU) vision is to be Australia's most connected university by being courageous and making a difference in the Northern Territory (NT), Australia and beyond.

Being a dual sector university allows CDU to meet the education needs of Territorians in campuses in Darwin, Alice Springs, Palmerston and Katherine and in study centres in Nhulunbuy and Tennant Creek. CDU has a proud history of delivering on country in some of the NT's most remote locations, bringing training to communities who need it in places such as Galiwinku, Maningrida, Borroloola, Wadeye and Hermannsburg.

At the heart of CDU, is the engagement of First Nations students to support their attainment of vocational and higher education (degree education). The NT spans approximately one sixth of Australia's landmass and yet is home to just one per cent of the population, of whom 30 per cent are First Nations peoples.

CDU embrace the vitality and resilience of the Northern Territory, which is the focus of the nation's most ambitious plans for future development – to unlock the vast potential of Northern Australia and to engage with our neighbours in the Asia Pacific. Due to our location, we are in an enviable position to contribute to the future prosperity of Northern Australia through innovative and impactful training, education and research.

## **Implementing Australia's Universities Accord**

CDU participated extensively in the consultation process to inform the Australian Universities Accord. The University advocated for and strongly supports the renewed focus on authentic engagement with First Nations people and driving greater participation and attainment of tertiary education for equity cohorts.

The 2050 targets set out in the Accord, especially to lift the proportion of university-educated Australians aged 25-34 years old from 45 per cent to 55 per cent will require a substantial uplift in participation from equity cohorts. CDU congratulates the Government for committing to these ambitious targets and notes that it will require significant growth.

Maintaining, let alone growing university populations in Australia is a huge task against both the demographic and economic climate. The school leaver cohort has now reached its peak following the baby boom of the early 2000s and with permanent migration likely to stay level, there is simply a slowing number of young adults to apply for tertiary education. Within the NT, the population is currently only growing from net overseas migration. In addition, skills shortages and low unemployment are driving workforce participation and vocational training rather than degree education.

While CDU supports the provisions of this Bill, CDU notes that Schedule 2, 3 and 4, all require additional resources from the University to implement in an already constrained environment. Funding reforms, also envisaged by the Universities Accord have been given a longer implementation period in the Accord of 2026, though universities are expected to enact student facing supports very quickly ahead of the 2025 calendar year.

## **Schedule 1 - HECS – HELP reforms to make the system fairer**

CDU supports the recommendations of the Universities Accord to modernise the HELP system, making it fairer and more accessible for all students. The proposed changes, which offer immediate relief from the

cost-of-living pressures faced by students, are particularly relevant and of significant interest to the University.

The proposed modernisation is crucial in reducing the financial burden of repayment, particularly for low-income earners, women, and those at the beginning of their careers. For CDU students, many of whom face unique challenges due to their geographical and socio-economic circumstances, these changes represent a significant step toward achieving greater equity in higher education and ensuring that financial barriers do not hinder their academic and professional aspirations.

In 2023, CDU's student population was notably diverse, with 42.7 per cent identifying as female, 16.6 per cent coming from low socio-economic backgrounds, and 42.5 per cent hailing from remote or very remote locations. These figures underscore the importance of the Commonwealth's intent to reform the HELP system.

## **Schedule 2 - Student Services Amenities Fees – revenue to student led organisations**

The University appreciates the Commonwealth's engagement on the proposed changes to the Student Services Amenities Fees (SSAF) and supports the three-year transition to the new model. Given CDU's unique position as a dual-sector regional university, with responsibilities spanning both degree and TAFE education across a vast and diverse area, a phased and adaptable implementation is essential. This approach must consider the specific challenges faced by smaller institutions like ours, ensuring tailored consultation and avoiding a one-size-fits-all model that could disadvantage regional universities.

Unlike larger institutions, CDU does not have an active Student Union or independent body currently capable of managing 40 per cent of SSAF funds. The proposed amendments do not adequately consider the varying maturity levels of student-led organisations across institutions. At CDU, the Student Council lacks the infrastructure to manage such significant funds independently, risking a reduction in the quality and availability of essential services for our geographically dispersed students.

While CDU is committed to student representation in SSAF allocations, our size and the diverse needs of our student body—many of whom are remote or online learners—necessitate that the university continues to provide these services to maintain quality and accessibility.

As a smaller institution, SSAF is crucial for enhancing student engagement and the overall student experience at CDU. With 52 per cent of our students studying online and 45 per cent residing in rural or remote locations, maintaining robust online services funded by SSAF is imperative. Any reduction in these funds would disproportionately affect these students, undermining their ability to participate fully in university life and access necessary support.

## **Schedule 3 - Fee-Free Uni Ready courses**

CDU strongly supports the introduction of Fee-Free Uni Ready Courses in the Act. Preparatory courses, aimed at enhancing access to higher education for students who may not have the traditional academic background or qualifications, align well with CDU's mission to provide inclusive and accessible education to all Territorians, across degree and vocational education. Offering fee-free preparatory courses lowers barriers to entry for students from diverse and disadvantaged backgrounds, including those in remote and regional areas. Furthermore, the success of these courses depends heavily on their design and delivery, which must be tailored to meet the needs of a diverse student population, many of whom may be studying remotely or balancing their studies with work and family commitments.

The Tertiary Enabling Program and Preparatory Studies Program at CDU are unique initiatives designed to support non-traditional and under-represented students by bridging knowledge gaps and enhancing readiness for higher education. Unlike similar programs at other universities, CDU's programs offer flexible, customised pathways with units available in intensive formats and online options, allowing students to address their educational needs at various stages. Since its inception in 2021, the programs have seen substantial growth in enrolments and improved success rates, reflecting high student satisfaction. They align well with the objectives of the Fee-Free Uni Ready Courses, making it an ideal candidate for this funding.

CDU distinguishes its Tertiary Enabling and Preparatory Studies from pre-programs, which are specifically designed for First Nations students. These pathway programs prepare First Nations students for university by offering a variety of options that align with their interests. They provide dedicated support through First Nations mentors, tutors, and other services to ensure student success. Upon completion, students can advance into various CDU courses, obtaining exit qualifications at the Certificate, Diploma, or Degree level. These specialised First Nations Pre-Programs are available in fields such as Introduction to University, Health, Engineering (STEM), Education, Accounting, Business, and Law.

The University seeks assurance that the Fee-Free Uni Ready Courses will cover Preparatory Studies, the Tertiary Enabling Program, and the First Nations Pre-Program courses.

CDU will work on the implementation of Fee-Free Uni Ready Courses to overcome the present challenges that must be carefully managed. For CDU, the increased demand for these courses could strain existing resources, particularly in terms of staffing, facilities, and support services. As a smaller university with limited financial and operational capacity, CDU will look to effectively scale up these programs without compromising the quality of education and student support.

While fee-free preparatory courses may attract a broader range of students to CDU, it is essential that these students are provided with the necessary support to succeed beyond the preparatory phase. This includes academic advising, mentoring, and access to resources that can help bridge the gap between preparatory studies and more advanced academic or vocational coursework. Unfortunately, these necessary supports, expected to be underpinned by needs-based funding, are currently significantly strained. Without adequate support, there is a risk that students may struggle to transition from preparatory courses to their chosen degrees, leading to lower retention and completion rates.

For CDU, ensuring a seamless transition and ongoing support will be critical to maximising the benefits of fee-free preparatory courses.

## **Schedule 4 - Commonwealth Paid Prac Placements**

The University welcomes the introduction of Paid Prac Placements as a timely and practical solution to the current cost of living crisis. This initiative provides essential financial support, enabling Australians to continue their studies and contribute to addressing critical skills shortages in key industries.

However, the proposed changes present several administrative and operational challenges for CDU. Facilitating payments to students for practical placements raises points requiring further consideration, particularly regarding the potential complexities if students do not complete their placements or need to repeat them.

The administrative burden on CDU in managing these practical placement payments is expected to be significant. The university would need to implement new systems and processes to handle the distribution of payments, track student eligibility, and ensure compliance with the relevant guidelines.

This added responsibility could strain existing resources and require considerable investment in administrative support, potentially diverting attention from other critical areas.

Furthermore, there is a need for clarification on whether these practical placement payments will be means-tested and how the University can be expected to validate eligibility. This information is essential for CDU to accurately assess the financial impact on students and to ensure equitable access to the support being offered.

It is crucial to address whether students would be eligible to claim practical placement payments for the same unit more than once, as this could have substantial implications for both the students and the university.

In implementation, CDU is keen to see better clarification on key matters, including:

- **Degree levels eligible for payments:** The university seeks clarity on which degree levels will be eligible for these payments. Initially, there was an indication that payments would only be available for courses with 80 or more days of placement. If this criterion remains unchanged, it will exclude CDU's Master's Teaching courses, which involve 60 days of placement, thereby disadvantaging a significant cohort of students.
- **Timing and calculation of practical placement grant payments:** Clear guidelines need to be established on when these payments will be calculated and disbursed. It is essential to know whether the payments will be processed upon enrolment into placement units, post-census date, or at another stage in the academic cycle. This timing will directly impact the university's financial planning and students' ability to manage their finances during their studies.

From a health perspective, it is strongly recommended that the Commonwealth considers that the proposed practical placement payment scheme be expanded to include other health professions, particularly given the current workforce shortages in these critical areas. For example, occupational therapy students are required to complete 1,000 hours of practical placement, while medical laboratory science students must undertake 560 hours. Similarly, students in physiotherapy and psychology programs also face significant placement requirements.

Given the mandatory nature of these placements and the urgent need for qualified professionals in these fields, it is crucial that these disciplines receive adequate support through the proposed measures. CDU advocates for the inclusion of these health professions in the payment scheme to ensure that students in these vital areas have access to the necessary financial support to complete their training. This recommendation is vital not only for the benefit of the students but also to address the ongoing workforce shortages affecting the healthcare system in the Northern Territory and beyond.