

Purpose of this submission

The Pharmaceutical Society of Australia (PSA) welcomes the opportunity to comment on the *Universities Accord (Student Support and Other Measures) Bill 2024*. PSA's comments relate to Commonwealth Prac Payments which are outlined in Schedule 4 of the Bill.

About PSA

PSA is the peak national professional pharmacy organisation representing all of Australia's 39,000 pharmacists working in all sectors and across all locations.

PSA is committed to supporting pharmacists in helping Australians to access quality, safe, equitable, efficient and effective health care. PSA believes the expertise of pharmacists can be better utilised to address the healthcare needs of all Australians.

PSA works to identify, unlock and advance opportunities for pharmacists to realise their full potential, to be appropriately recognised and fairly remunerated.

PSA has a strong and engaged membership base that provides high-quality health care and are the custodians for safe and effective medicine use for the Australian community.

PSA leads and supports innovative and evidence-based healthcare service delivery by pharmacists. PSA provides high-quality practitioner development and practice support to pharmacists and is the custodian of the professional practice standards and guidelines to ensure quality and integrity in the practice of pharmacy.

Comments relating to Commonwealth Prac Payments

PSA understands that Schedule 4 of the Bill will amend the *Higher Education Support Act 2003* (HESA) to enable grants to be paid to higher education providers for them to make payments to students undertaking mandatory practicums as part of their courses of study. The amendment through the insertion of a new item in the table in subsection 41-10(1) of the HESA will specify a new purpose for which grants under Part 2-3 of HESA can be paid. Eligible higher education providers will be specified in the Other Grants Guidelines for the purposes of the grant.

PSA welcomed the Australian Government's announcement in May 2024 to introduce a new Commonwealth Prac Payment in recognition of the need to take action to relieve cost of living pressures for students undertaking mandatory placements as part of their studies. However, PSA is deeply concerned that students studying pharmacy are among thousands excluded from eligibility for the Government's support arrangements despite Australian Universities Accord recommending that there should be financial support for work placements. This may negatively impact on the ability of some pharmacy students to complete their studies in a timely and affordable manner.

Clinical training through practical placements is a fundamental component of health workforce education. Higher education providers and the Pharmacy Board of Australia, through the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency, work in partnership to ensure pharmacy students undertaking clinical placements practise safely and fulfil relevant standards and responsibilities.

The 2022–23 Annual Wage Review undertaken by the Fair Work Commission identified work value issues that may have implications for the minimum wage rates of modern award-reliant females on higher award classifications, particularly those which apply to persons holding undergraduate degrees. This has led to the recent commencement of a gender undervaluation review with five awards identified as a priority, one of which is the *Pharmacy Industry Award 2020*.

This demonstrates the broader concern we have that pharmacists are already facing work value and wage payment challenges on entry to the profession. Pharmacy qualifications also comprise a high proportion of females, which is a consideration given to the current fields or disciplines that the Commonwealth Prac Payments are proposed to cover. These situations must not be exacerbated by a lack of equitable support for pharmacy students who are investing in their career choice and required to undertake placements as part of their course of study.

PSA works closely with the National Australian Pharmacy Students' Association (NAPSA), the peak representative body for pharmacy students in Australia, to ensure all pharmacy students are supported by the broader profession as current members of our profession and future leaders. PSA is aware that NAPSA members felt let down that the Government's announcement of the new payment arrangement did not include pharmacy students as the deep impact of placement poverty on students is felt equally by the pharmacy student cohort. Many pharmacists have seen first-hand the pressure unpaid placements put on pharmacy students – some forced to give up paid work, struggling to make ends meet, and worryingly, dropping out of their degrees. It is critical that these students are not adversely and unfairly impacted at a time when they need more support and Government investment to build a stronger and more diverse healthcare workforce for Australia.

Summary

With the Government announcing that Commonwealth Prac Payments will be means-tested and available from 1 July 2025, PSA suggests this Bill presents a critical opportunity to extend the arrangement to provide equitable support for pharmacy students who are undertaking their mandatory placements as part of their studies. No student should be disadvantaged by their choice of professional study.

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