

30 September 2024

INQUIRY INTO THE UNIVERSITIES ACCORD (STUDENT SUPPORT AND OTHER MEASURES) BILL 2024 [PROVISIONS]

AYAC's responses to questions on notice

“The new Commonwealth prac payment proposed through this legislation will be established through a grant round and paid to the student via the provider that they study with. Quite a number of the submissions have raised concerns with the timing of the payment and the ready availability of this when students are undertaking their placements. Do you think that this is the best way to administer payments to students?”

During the session on 24 September 2024, AYAC noted some concerns about administering prac payments through Centrelink. To illustrate these concerns, we share below some feedback we received from respondents as part of a recent survey we conducted with young people.

- “The entire process [of dealing with Centrelink] is a challenge.”
- “[Receiving a payment through Centrelink] was legitimately one of the most stressful/anxiety-inducing experiences I've had with the welfare system.”
- “Not only was the process [of applying for a payment through Centrelink] unreasonably rigid, it was quite demoralising/emotionally draining.”

Respondents noted concerns about having received inconsistent responses from different Centrelink phone operators that impacted their payments, as well as concerns about long wait times, limited opening hours, and limited methods of communication. They described the Centrelink user-interface and call system as being “tedious, confusing, and messy”. Several respondents told us about unsatisfactory interactions with Centrelink staff who were “rude and uncooperative” and said that they had experienced certain Centrelink communications as “psychologically distressing”.

While some survey respondents shared positive experiences of dealing with certain Centrelink staff members, it is notable that several respondents explicitly stated that they had had *no* positive experiences with Centrelink whatsoever.

AYAC therefore has significant concerns about prac payments being administered through Centrelink, unless there are considerable changes made to both the system and the culture of Centrelink.

Furthermore, noting that many students are unable to undertake paid employment during their placements, as well as the [woefully inadequate rate of Youth Allowance](#) that does not cover the cost of basic necessities, it is also AYAC's position that prac payments should be made available to students at the time of their placements, if not before.

"...do you think if, as recommended by the uni accord, there is an urgent need to get rid of Job-ready Graduates, is that something that should be done immediately and that would make an impact on students?"

The Job-ready Graduate Scheme has been criticised as not only [failing to achieve its stated intention of influencing students' course preferences](#), but also of [imposing unfair HELP debts](#) on some students, and potentially [decreasing diversity of students in certain degrees](#).

AYAC therefore supports the proposal to scrap the scheme, and to do so immediately.

One exception to this is that students who enrolled in courses that were cheaper under Job-ready Graduates should not be penalised for the consequences of previous government's poor policy decision, and should continue to have the cheaper fees under which they enrolled applied for the duration of their course.

AYAC would also suggest that if the government wishes to influence students' course preferences for the purpose of addressing skill shortages (without current comment on whether or not AYAC believes this is appropriate), they should look at other incentives and deterrents that may have more influence on this choice than do course fees. In particular, we would encourage the government to consider additional measures to address gendered and other cultural issues in some courses and professions that discourage young people – particularly those from certain groups – from applying to these courses. Gender bias, gender stereotyping, lack of role models, and unsatisfactory working conditions have been identified as key issues that [deter young women from taking up positions in traditionally 'male' courses/industries](#) (such as STEM fields), and that [deter young men from taking up positions in traditionally 'female' courses/industries](#) (such as teaching, nursing, and youth work). Regardless of whether or not it is taken up as a policy lever to address skill shortages in certain fields, we would like to see this issue addressed so that all young people, regardless of their gender, have the full range of tertiary courses available to them – in reality, and not just in theory.

AYAC thanks the Committee once again for the opportunity to contribute to this discussion, and for their consideration of the needs of young people in education policy.