



Charles Sturt
University

Universities Accord (Student Support and Other Measures) Bill 2024

5 September 2024

Office of the Vice-Chancellor
Charles Sturt University



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Senator Tony Sheldon
Chair
Senate Standing Committee on Education and Employment
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

By email: eec.sen@aph.gov.au

Dear Senator Sheldon

Charles Sturt University welcomes this opportunity to comment on the *Universities Accord (Student Support and Other Measures) Bill 2024*, representing as it does the Government's first legislative response to the array of recommendations arising from the 18-month Accord process.

The University has been fully engaged with the Accord since it was launched in mid-2022. In our submissions to the Accord we made various suggestions on how to improve the sustainability of higher education in regional areas and so ensure the best possible opportunities for regional students, communities and businesses. We were pleased to see the University's submissions cited repeatedly in the Accord's interim and final reports, and many of our proposals reflected in the Accord's recommendations.

In those submissions we highlighted the impact of the high financial barriers faced by regional students: not just the cost of their degrees but the cost of getting to, staying at and succeeding at university, and especially the cost of extended compulsory placements for students in teaching, social work, health, allied health, and medicine courses. It is pleasing to see that the *Universities Accord (Student Support and Other Measures) Bill 2024* addresses these issues by changing the indexation arrangements for HELP debts and empowering the Minister to make grants to universities to provide financial support for students who need to undertake compulsory practicum placements to complete their studies and begin their careers.

We support both measures, though we note that the changes to indexation of HELP debts do not deal with the underlying problem of the high debts resulting from the Job-ready Graduates package, and that much of the detail around the Commonwealth Prac Payments (CPP) has yet to be worked out. If the CPP is to serve its intended purpose effectively the Department of Education will need to undertake genuine and inclusive consultation with higher education stakeholders. This must include consideration of the higher travel and accommodation costs borne by regional students, whose compulsory placements are often some distance from home.

We support without caveat the creation of Fee-Free Uni Ready courses. Preparatory programs have proven to be an effective way of boosting higher education access and attainment for students from disadvantaged, First Nations and regional backgrounds. Charles Sturt University has a proven track record in providing such programs: both the Access Charles Sturt Entry course and the Undergraduate Certificate in University Preparation, for example, give prospective students the skills and confidence they need to succeed at university, with the latter providing subject credits toward a degree in some



Charles Sturt
University

cases. For many students, though, the cost of these programs is a deterrent, so the creation of more fee-free places is a welcome step.

Charles Sturt University cannot support the measures relating to use of the Student Services and Amenities Fees (SSAF) without significant amendments. The intent of the Schedule 2 of the bill seems to be to impose a single model for SSAF across all universities regardless of their differing characters and demographics. The model may be well suited to universities with a single major campus and a large on-site daily student presence but may not be workable for regional and/or multi-campus institutions, or those with a high proportion of part-time or online students.

Geography and our student demographics make it difficult for Charles Sturt University to foster the kind of on-campus student life envisaged by the Government's goals for SSAF, however desirable it may be. Two-thirds of our 35,000 full-time equivalent students are online. More than half are part-time and therefore pay a proportionally smaller SSAF. Those studying on campus are spread across six main campuses in regional NSW, in numbers varying from less than 70 in Dubbo to more than 2,000 in Wagga Wagga. Two of our campuses, Albury and Port Macquarie, are almost 1,000 kilometres apart. The University's campuses are nonetheless host to around 60 sporting, cultural, recreational and discipline-focused clubs similar to those at other universities, though with much smaller memberships than is the case at metropolitan universities. The activities of these clubs are in part support by SSAF.

As a geographically dispersed University, educating and supporting diverse students from right across Australia, Charles Sturt University has developed an effective co-design model for allocating SSAF funds to services and initiatives, one that meets the *Higher Education Support (Student Services, Amenities, Representation and Advocacy) Guidelines 2022*. This model is supported by decision-making from our eight democratically elected student-led organisations. Currently these organisations are the main decision-makers for approximately 30 per cent of SSAF funding, allocated annually, through a proposal process, to initiatives and services that meet the Guidelines. The process and implementation of the selected initiatives and services is administered by the University. Revenue from SSAF also funds the kind of activities described in the Guidelines. Examples of the services supported by SSAF at Charles Sturt include health and wellbeing services, student advocacy and leadership, some IT services for students, food and beverage outlets on campus (including for intensive schools), orientation activities, careers advice and programs, and financial support for students in need. Most of these services and amenities are available to all students, full-time, part-time, on campus or online.

It is important that the Committee understands these services and amenities are run not by student organisations but by the University, as is the case at several other regional and smaller universities. Our student associations do not have the capacity or capability to manage the staff and other resources required to provide the kind of services and amenities listed in the Guidelines and would be unlikely to do so even if they were given direct control over a portion of the SSAF collected by the University. Were 40 per cent of SSAF funds directly allocated to student-led organisations across the University campuses and online – a process that would several years and divert funding from the services and amenities we already provide – it would mean a significant tranche of SSAF being disbursed to benefit relatively few students, rather than the majority of the student population as is now the case.

Charles Sturt University recommends that the bill should be amended to focus on the involvement of student-led organisations in decision-making regarding SSAF expenditure and allocation, rather than specifying a high percentage allocated to student-led organisations which, in the case of regional universities, would not be able to discharge the administrative burden.



**Charles Sturt
University**

We have consulted with student SSAF representatives on this submission, and they support both the University's current approach to distribution of SSAF and the position set out in this submission.

We are also concerned that the bill requires universities that do not conform to the proposed model for SSAF to ask the Secretary of the Department of Education to approve, annually, a transition plan – a responsibility we assume would eventually transfer to the CEO or Chief Commissioner of the proposed Australian Tertiary Education Commission (ATEC). It is far from certain, though, that the Department has or that ATEC will have the capacity, knowledge or experience to carry out a meaningful assessment of SSAF transition plans. It would be more appropriate for discussions around the use of SSAF to be included in existing reporting and accountability arrangements such as mission-based compacts.

Charles Sturt University suggests that the shortcomings in the bill could be addressed by amendments to:

- (1) set the threshold for allocation of SSAF to student organisations at 30 per cent, increasing to 40 per cent over time, in recognition of the different circumstances of different universities,
- (2) allow for other ways of achieving the target, for example by making a student-led organisation the final approver for use of a portion of the SSAF,
- (3) introduce more flexible definitions under 19-39 (3) to include other models, such as having student-led organisations involved in decisions about how SSAF is used, and
- (4) remove the requirement for approval of transition plans in favour of including discussions about the use of SSAF in mission-based compacts.

We believe such amendments would be in keeping with the spirit of the Accord and Government's proposals for SSAF. They would provide regional universities and student organisations with certainty about the future funding arrangements for essential services and amenities, and, by encouraging greater student self-determination in decisions around how SSAF is used, foster a more student-centred culture and ensure that the majority of students have access to the services and amenities they want.

Charles Sturt University would be happy to provide the Committee with more information on any of the issues raised in this submission, either in evidence at a hearing or in response to written questions from Committee members.

Yours sincerely

**Professor Renée Leon PSM
Vice-Chancellor and President**