



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

Senate Standing Committee on Education and Employment

Submission of the
Australian Veterinary Association Ltd

September 2024



The Australian Veterinary Association (AVA)

The Australian Veterinary Association (AVA) is the national organisation representing veterinarians in Australia. The AVA consists of over 7500 members who come from all fields within the veterinary profession. Clinical practitioners work with companion animals, horses, farm animals, such as cattle and sheep, and wildlife. Government veterinarians work with our animal health, public health and quarantine systems while other members work in industry for pharmaceutical and other commercial enterprises. We have members who work in research and teaching in a range of scientific disciplines. Veterinary students are also members of the Association.

Summary

The AVA welcomes the opportunity to provide comment on the *Universities Accord (Student Support and Other Measures) Bill 2024*. The comments in this submission are limited to the Commonwealth Prac Payments scheme.

At the time the scheme was announced by the Government, the AVA raised the need for extending the scheme to veterinary students with the Minister's office and in the media¹.

Veterinarians provide an essential service to Australian communities. Veterinarians are integral to maintaining animal health and welfare, public health, food safety, biosecurity, emergency response and the economic stability of the agricultural sector, making them essential health workers in Australia.

As an essential service that struggles with significant workforce shortages, the AVA is calling on the Government to include veterinary students in the Commonwealth Prac Placements scheme.

Recommendation

That the Committee encourage the Government to include veterinary students in Commonwealth Prac Placement scheme, at a cost of \$9.5 million per annum²

Key reasons

1. Veterinarians provide an essential health service to Australian communities, similar to doctors and dentists.
2. Veterinarians are integral to maintaining animal health and welfare, public health, food safety, biosecurity, emergency response and the economic stability of the agricultural sector, making them essential health workers in Australia.
3. There is no public support funding for the training of veterinarians, as there is for other medical professionals e.g. doctors and dentists
4. If veterinarians experience positive rural and regional placements, they are more likely to remain in the regions, helping solve the workforce shortage crisis affecting the profession.

¹ <https://www.ava.com.au/media-centre/media-releases/essential-nature-of-veterinarians-work-ignored-by-federal-government/>

² Approx. 3,500 veterinary students in Australia, required to each undertake 52 weeks of placements over their 5-6 years degree, equates to \$9.5m approx. p.a.



Discussion

In Australia there are 15,000 registered veterinarians to look after 30.4 million pets, this does not include livestock or wildlife. To provide a comparison there are about 130,000 doctors to look after 26.5 million people.

Veterinarians are essential health workers, and there is currently a critical long-term shortage of veterinarians – now in its eightieth year. The shortage is more acute in regional areas, with 43% of veterinarian job vacancies remaining open for 12 months or longer.

We know that if students undertake placement in rural areas, they are more likely to work there upon graduation. Veterinary students have some of the highest mandatory practical placement requirements of any degree. Additionally, they are generally required to find and organise their own placements, pay for travel and accommodation, with many placements occurring far from a student's university base given the nature of the placements (e.g. farms, equine hospitals etc).

One key way of helping veterinary students consider future practice in regional areas is to give them positive experiences of regional life when they undertake practice placements during their studies. However, there are significant financial barriers to doing so, with the student or practice having to cover the associated costs. Practice placement support that allows veterinary students to engage in regional practice in a meaningful way is important.

In the 2024 budget, it was announced that students studying teaching, nursing, midwifery, and social work will receive a newly introduced Commonwealth Prac Payment of \$319.50 per week for the duration of their mandatory job placement. The reasoning was that it would allow students to avoid what has been termed 'placement poverty' while they complete compulsory practical placement.

These payments are welcome, however it's unclear why other professions providing essential services to the community have missed out.

The AVA is calling on the Government to extend the Commonwealth Prac Payment to Veterinary students. Veterinary students are required to complete approximately 52 weeks of clinical placement during their study, often in rural and regional areas to access livestock or mixed practice. Veterinary students bear the burden of the cost of travel, accommodation, food as well as forgoing regular part-time work. Veterinarians are just as vital for communities to function as other professionals. Additionally, veterinarians provide essential services to monitor Australia's livestock for biosecurity breaches.

With approximately 3,500 veterinary students in Australia, each of whom are required to undertake 52 weeks of placements over their 5-6 years study, this equates to approximately \$9.5m per annum.

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