

Submission to the Education and Employment Legislation Committee

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To: Committee Secretary
Senate Education and Employment Committees
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Regarding:

The Higher Education Support Amendment (Job-Ready Graduates and Supporting Regional and Remote Students) Bill 2020

From:

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Summary:

I am writing in relation to express concerns about the proposed tertiary funding amendments that will see the cost of social work degrees increase, and possibly provide a disincentive for students from lower SES backgrounds engaging in this field of practice. I am concerned that social work is not correctly classified as allied health, and this is to the detriment of the profession. I want to illustrate with my own personal experience the work I have done over the past 30 years as a social worker, in the hope that this will support the argument for reconsideration by the Education Minister Mr Dan Tehan.

What Social Workers do:

Social workers are engaged in a wide range of activities, from direct service work with clients, to policy development, research and program evaluation, community development, and management in health and community services across a wide range of sectors including social welfare, housing, employment and other vital services. They also provide critical crisis support for victims of domestic and family violence, child protection, advocacy for older people, and people with disabilities among others.

Social workers are highly trained professionals, requiring completion of an accredited four-year Bachelor of Social Work degree or a two-year Master of Social Work degree in addition to an undergraduate degree which includes studies in the social and behavioural sciences. A core component of a social work degree includes a minimum requirement to complete 1000 hours of supervised training placements (Australian Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards (ASWEAS) March 2020). These requirements ensure that Australia has access to well-equipped and job-ready social work graduates who can provide the vital and growing need for support services for the most vulnerable members of our communities. We have seen evidence of this need in the wide range of Royal Commissions and National Inquiries in Australia in recent decades, and the urgent need for change to improve outcomes for these service users.

My background:

My professional life has been in the independent and public sector in Australia where I have worked as a social worker in a variety of social work settings including drug and alcohol services, local government, a major public women's hospital, community health and a centre for the care of refugee torture and trauma survivors. I worked in East Timor in 1999, first with the United Nations and then with a Non Government Organisation. I have worked in the United Kingdom with a County Asylum Seekers and Refugee Services Unit. This diverse social work background and my professional skills reflect my interest and commitment to work in the provision of services to disadvantaged communities. I am currently working with the Social Work team based in Geelong, at Deakin University, teaching students and engaging in research. I have worked as a Course Director for the Masters in Social Work for four years, and know first hand the contribution of students to the sector.

Social work in Allied Health

I would urge the Government to reconsider the banding of Social Work, and to align it with the current definition of what consists of allied health. The Australian Allied Health Leadership Forum's (AAHLF) definition of 'allied health' is a description of what social workers do every day.

"Allied Health Professionals are qualified to apply their skills to retain, restore or gain optimal physical, sensory, psychological, cognitive, social and cultural function of clients, groups and populations. The identity of allied health has emerged from these allied health professions' client focused, inter-professional and collaborative approach that aligns them to their clients, the community, each other and their health professional colleagues.
(<https://aahlf.com/what-is-allied-health/>)

Social workers are a critical part of our healthcare system and in many areas of practice work as allied health professionals to improve health and wellbeing outcomes for vulnerable members of our communities.

In 2019, social work degree graduates had a 95.3% labour force participation rate as stated in the National Graduate Outcomes Survey (2019 Graduate Outcomes Survey, p.7.

<https://www.qilt.edu.au/docs/default-source/gos-reports/2019-gos/2019-gos-national-report.pdf>)

Social workers are job-ready graduates and we need the Australian Government to be encouraging young Australians to study social work not increase their fees. The demand for social work services will only be increasing in response to climate change, the pandemic, and other challenging social and health issues facing all our community.

As stated by the Save Social Work Australia campaign (www.savesocialwork.org), the proposed funding changes will adversely and disproportionately impact female and mature-aged students and act as a disincentive for future students to choose social work as a career path. I support this evidence and urge the Australian Government to reclassify social workers as allied health professionals and appropriately fund social work degrees.