

Submission

to

Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education
References Committee

Inquiry into student income support

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AUSTRALIAN PHYSIOTHERAPY ASSOCIATION

SUBMISSION ON STUDENT INCOME SUPPORT

Presented to The Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education
References Committee

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LACK OF SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS ON CLINICAL PLACEMENTS

Many physiotherapy students experience financial hardship when participating in clinical placements away from home. All physiotherapy students are required to complete 1,000 hours of clinical education during their four-year undergraduate degree. For a minimum of four to six weeks students are required to attend locations that are ninety minutes or more from their homes via public transport.

Clinical placements are vital to the development of students' diagnostic, treatment and communication skills. Educationally students need to be highly focused on the placement in order to gain the maximum benefit from it. Distractions created by financial worries or excessive travel detract from students' learning capacity and reduce the value of their experience.

Metropolitan students

For metropolitan students, the majority of their placements away from home are in rural areas. Most schools require that four to six weeks of clinical education be completed in a rural setting.

There are sound reasons for this requirement. Firstly, rural rotations provide students with a breadth of experience that is difficult to obtain elsewhere. One clinical academic says:

In my view the experience students obtain by going on rural placement is invaluable.

Secondly, there is a shortage of clinical placements making rural places crucial. Finally, experience in a rural clinical placement is a significant factor in influencing graduates to practice in rural areas.

The most significant finding was that graduates who had undertaken rural clinical placements as students were more likely to be employed in non-metropolitan locations.

Carroll S, McMeeken JM. Establishing the Value of Rural Clinical Placements During Undergraduate Allied Health Education, University of Melbourne, May 2000. Coordinating unit for rural health education in Victoria.

Universities are doing their best to support the government in attracting more physiotherapy graduates to work in rural and regional Australia by making it mandatory for students to complete non-metropolitan placements. However, there is no recognition of this by government, as evidenced by the absence of

financial support to meet the costs associated with placing students in non-metropolitan locations.

There is no income support provided for physiotherapy students on rural placements¹ while medical students receive assistance in meeting accommodation costs. In most rural settings there is no longer inexpensive accommodation available at hospitals because many former nurses' quarters have been converted into administration and newer facilities do not have nurses' accommodation. This means that there is no inexpensive accommodation available to most physiotherapy students.

Many students reside in rental accommodation in the vicinity of the university they attend. This means that in order to take a rural placement they have to pay double rent for the duration of the rural rotation. The clinical co-ordinator of one school said:

Many of our students face meeting the cost of both their metropolitan accommodation and also their accommodation whilst on placement.

While the program convenor of another school said:

I have seen a number of our students facing financial difficulty as they have to travel for clinical placements and they have to cover the cost of living during their academic studies.

Students also incur additional costs associated with food because the accommodation they secure is frequently without adequate cooking facilities. Other additional expenses include transport and STD telephone calls.

Transport costs can be extremely high for students to attend placements in places such as Tasmania (where there is no physiotherapy school so all students come from interstate), Katherine and the Pilbara. Some students can access travel subsidies but these are not universal and often do not reflect the true cost of transport.

Another difficulty students face is meeting their part-time work commitments in the metropolitan area while completing clinical education away from home. Comment from schools on this matter indicates that it is a significant and increasing problem as a greater financial burden is falling on students for their tertiary education. For example:

¹ Other than in NSW where some students receive assistance under the rural grants scheme (see www.ruralhealth.gov.au) and some hospitals and health services provide discount accommodation on a first-come, first-served basis.

I regularly interview students in crisis because their employer is not tolerant of their need to absent themselves for several weeks at a time.

Whilst on a rural placement students either have to forego their employment or drive long distances back to the city each weekend to continue their part-time employment in order to enable them not to lose their part-time work opportunities.

To illustrate the nature of the problem some physiotherapy students are quoted below.

I have recently returned from a five-week placement in Bundaberg. I was one of two students who was offered accommodation in the nurses' quarters thus had the luxury of not having to find and finance alternate accommodation like the other three students. My expenses for my rural placement included: groceries, transport around Bundaberg and transport between Bundaberg and Brisbane. With the combined loss of income (having to take time off work) this rural experience resulted in the loss of most of my savings. Of course it was quite difficult to save for this placement to begin with due to the limited time available to have a casual job. When I returned to Brisbane a few weeks ago I was informed that my job was no longer available due to the fact they obviously had to employ someone during the time I was away.

We spend all week working at placements and have to go home to study leaving only nights (meaning we're tired for clinic the next morning) or weekends to earn money to support ourselves. Currently I am at clinic from 8am to 4pm weekdays (plus an hours travelling time each way) and work all day Saturday and Sunday at my part-time job to make \$250. I find it very draining to work seven days a week (five of which are quite mentally challenging), only to have to go back on Monday to start all over again. The thought of doing this for a full year is even more daunting.

Some students are must travel long distances home in order to meet work commitments.

Currently, I am on placement in Brisbane meeting 38hrs of placement per week. Living on the Gold Coast, it costs me approximately \$60 per week in petrol expenses to attend a full time "job" for which I am not paid. I then travel directly back to the Gold Coast to my casual employment each night and work often until 1.30am before having to rise at 5.30am again to be back in Brisbane on time at 8am each morning. For the past 3 weeks I have attended between 35 and 40 hours of casual employment on top of

clinical placement so as to save some money for my upcoming placement in Sydney. This leaves little time as you can imagine for extra study or research into my preferred profession and my ongoing education. Last week I accumulated 83hours of work not including traveling time, for only 40hrs of pay, leaving a very tired and worn out student who still has a few months of this lifestyle without sleep ahead.

This is exhausting for students and constitutes a considerable health and safety risk. A number of course coordinators commented on the dangers associated with students driving long hours, usually at night, to return home in time for work.

The lack of income support for physiotherapy students on rural clinical placements causes financial hardship to these students. In some cases students are forced to compromise their safety just to make ends meet. The APA contends that in order to prevent this hardship the federal government must provide income support to physiotherapy students on clinical placements long distances from home.

Rural students

The clinical placement places significant financial demands on students. The majority of students perceive that...financial pressure incurred by clinical placement contributes considerably to their stress levels during clinical placement"

Ideally, students should have time to reflect on their learning whilst on clinical placement. Personal and environmental factors external to the clinical learning environment...may have a negative influence on students' stress levels and therefore learning potential.

Murdoch JM, Smith MCL, McAllister L Lifestyle change and financial demands as contributing factors to stress for rural allied health students during clinical placement. (2003) Unpublished dissertation Bachelor of Physiotherapy (Hons).

Students enrolled at rural universities are required to complete placements in capital cities and often in regional centres distant from their homes. These students spend more time away from home than their metropolitan counterparts. For example, students of Charles Sturt University will spend more than 24 weeks away from home on compulsory clinical placements during the course of their degrees.

The majority of graduates of rural physiotherapy schools choose to practise in rural areas, bearing testimony to the premise that students trained in rural areas will end up practising in rural areas. The clinical placements undertaken by

students are a balance of metropolitan and rural placements. This balance gives students the experience necessary to enable practice in either setting. Importantly the metropolitan placements provide students with experiences that they bring back to their rural communities, thus contributing to improving the overall quality of rural healthcare. While the costs associated with accommodation in rural settings represent a burden the comparative cost of short-term accommodation in metropolitan centres is much higher.

Rural students complete clinical placements away from home more often than metropolitan students and generally incur greater costs. Charles Sturt University has collected data on the costs of clinical placements to students since the inception of the physiotherapy program. Their data shows that students will experience:

- Additional accommodation costs of up to \$150 per week;
- Additional transportation costs of \$250 (including public transport from the accommodation to the placement, parking, tolls etc);
- Up to \$200 per week in loss of earnings.

It would not be unusual for a student to incur costs of up to \$1,600 over a four-week placement.

Students are advised of the costs associated with clinical placements when they commence study but this does not relieve the financial burden or stress associated with meeting the costs. Schools are doing all they can to make it easier for students to concentrate on learning but without financial support from government there is only so much they can achieve.

RESPONSE TO THE TERMS OF REFERENCE

(b) (ii) students being forced to work longer hours to support themselves

University program coordinators report that students frequently make requests for timetable changes etc to allow them to attend to employment commitments. One member commented

The prevailing attitude is one of fitting university around work, not fitting work around university.

The APA is deeply concerned by this development and submits that it is educationally inappropriate for students to work long hours rather than being primarily attentive to their studies. Comments from students include:

With contact hours exceeding 30 and a minimum of four texts a year (often per semester) at no less than one hundred dollars each, part-time work becomes increasingly difficult and yet increasingly necessary. Further, with such contact hours and the expectations for extracurricular study time there leaves very little time for anything else when students are forced to work.

As with all placements, I will have difficulties with my part time work. I normally work up to 20 hours a week on the weekends and Thursday nights to support myself as I am not eligible for Government assistance. I am not able to do these hours while on placement where I am working full time during the week as well as studying, doing assignments and working on my honours project. I have found employers to not be very supportive of the need to have time off work, as other casual employees, whether they are at school or at university, do not have the same commitments with their studies as me. In addition, I find that when I do get days off work, I do not get my normal hours back straight away. Many students in my course are in this situation as well, where their employers do not fully understand why we require more time off work than other students doing courses with lesser work loads.

I have also found that, despite working the number of hours that I do, I still do not earn enough to be over the threshold to be classed as 'independent' and therefore receive financial support from the government. I do appreciate that this is an issue which probably will not change in the near future, but I think it is important to recognise that it is just about impossible for students in courses with high work loads to work the hours, and therefore earn enough, to receive this assistance, when students in courses with a lower workload are able to work more hours and get the assistance from the government

I have to work two jobs in order to pay for me to study and I live at home, so god help those who also have to pay rent.

I am working two part-time jobs as we have a mortgage to pay which probably earns me \$200 each week if I'm lucky. Then we are told we must do regional placements and that work is not a reasonable excuse. We are all trying to get somewhere in life and when you look at the \$32,000 it is costing us to get this degree, and consider the text books,

parking, uniforms, accommodation and travel costs we endure, any contribution, however small, would help immensely. I would be grateful to become a physiotherapist and not lose all that I have worked hard for in life.

The other side of this problem is the pressure that schools face to offer part-time programs and lectures outside traditional contact hours. Schools would like to be accommodating of students' needs but this is often impossible for budgetary and logistical reasons. This places increased pressure on staff and creates tension between students and program coordinators: a situation that is not healthy for either party.

The APA contends that students are experiencing difficulty managing the extensive hours required for income generation and are in turn pressuring schools to arrange courses around work needs.

(c) the importance of adequate income support measures in achieving equitable access to education

As outlined in its platform, the APA supports equitable access to education. The APA contends that income support for students from disadvantaged backgrounds is a precursor to equality of access to education.

The APA also acknowledges the difficulties some communities, such as Indigenous communities, face in accessing education and support programs targeted to these groups to improve access. Consequently, the APA supports income support programs targeted to communities with special needs.

(d) alternative income support measures

An alternative measure to eliminate the specific problems associated with clinical placements is for the government to provide an allowance/subsidy to all physiotherapy students while on clinical placements away from home. Such an initiative would be inexpensive as the average student will spend around six weeks away from home the entire four-year course. There are approximately 3,000 undergraduate physiotherapy students at present so a budget of only \$675,000 per year would provide each physiotherapy student with an allowance of \$150 per week for the duration of placements attended away from home.

There are a range of options for administering the proposed allowance, such as students applying to the Department of Education, Science and Training or Centrelink or funding schools to administer the allowance.

The general feeling of students is nicely captured by this statement from one student:

Studying physiotherapy requires passion and dedication. It shouldn't be dampened with worry. We're not less important than medicine students, so I feel a subsidy is only fair.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Students from a range of disciplines are forced to work part-time because they have no other means to support themselves. Part-time work is a particular burden for physiotherapy students because of the number of contact hours required to teach a clinical discipline. Working long hours creates problems for students and in turn causes them to exert pressure on schools to alter their programs to make it easier for students to meet work commitments.

The APA contends that the pressures of part-time work are adversely impacting on students' studies and that measures should be put in place to alleviate the pressure. However, the most urgent need for physiotherapy students is to address the problems associated with clinical placements completed away from home.

Recommendation:

That the government provide an allowance of \$150 per week to physiotherapy students on clinical placement where the clinical placement is to be completed at a location ninety minutes or more by public transport from their residence.

ABOUT THE AUSTRALIAN PHYSIOTHERAPY ASSOCIATION

The Australian Physiotherapy Association (APA) is the voice of the physiotherapy profession in Australia and leads the profession internationally. Physiotherapists must be fully qualified and eligible for registration with the Physiotherapists' Registration Board in their respective State or Territory to be eligible for full APA membership.

Australia has approximately 11,300 registered practising physiotherapists. The APA has more than 10,000 members, and nearly 1,200 of these are students. Its national office is in Melbourne and has branch offices in every State and Territory.

Further information about the APA is available via its interactive website, www.physiotherapy.asn.au or on request from the national office.

PRINCIPLES

The APA has recently adopted a platform which includes a section on education. The principles relating to education guide this submission and are reproduced below:

- The APA supports equitable merit based access to health professional education.
- The APA acknowledges that it is difficult for Australians from some communities to access health professional education courses. The APA supports the role that universities play in offering programs to assist and encourage Indigenous and socioeconomically disadvantaged Australians to complete health professional education courses.
- The APA supports free undergraduate and postgraduate education.
- The APA supports life long learning, particularly for health professionals in the form of continuing professional development.
- The APA contends that the Federal Government should provide financial support for pre-registration clinical education placements for physiotherapy students.
- The APA contends that the standard of undergraduate and postgraduate physiotherapy education is of importance to the profession and the community and that mechanisms to comment on the standards should be available.