

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

September 2020

Submission:

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The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare (the Centre) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission on the *Higher Education Support Amendment (Job-Ready Graduates and Supporting Regional and Remote Students) Bill 2020* for consideration by the Senate Education and Employment Legislation Committee.

The Centre is the peak body for child and family services in Victoria. For over 100 years we have advocated for the rights of children and young people to be heard, to be safe, to access education and to remain connected to family, community and culture. We represent over 150 community service organisations, students and individuals throughout Victoria working across the continuum of child and family services, from prevention and early intervention to the provision of out-of-home care. We believe in equity of access to education, including higher education, and recognise the life changing benefits that such education can bring.

We hold the following concerns regarding this Bill:

- The proposed fee increases are likely to reduce the pool of future workers available for the community services workforce
- The fee increases are likely to undermine equity of access to higher education
- Students who are struggling may lose their Commonwealth Supported Place.

Furthermore, we are concerned by the lack of time available for stakeholders to fully consider the implications of this Bill.

The Centre does not support the Bill.

Funding changes put the community services workforce at risk

The child and family services sector, as part of the broader community services industry, relies on a highly educated workforce to deliver quality services to children and families experiencing hardship and disadvantage.

Our workforce consists of professionals from a diverse range of academic backgrounds. A 2017 survey of the Victorian family services workforce found that the majority of our university educated professionals hold social work qualifications.¹ We therefore welcomed the change to the draft Bill which moved social work to Funding Cluster 2, however note that a yearly student fee increase of

¹ Department of Health and Human Services 2017, [Family services workforce survey report](#), Victorian Government, Melbourne.

\$1146 will apply. The Centre remains deeply concerned that degrees in the field of Society and Culture will see a \$7,696 increase in student fees per year if this Bill is passed.

The proposed funding changes will drastically increase the cost to students of a range of community services degrees, with significant implications for the future community services workforce and for Australians relying on this workforce to get through periods of hardship and vulnerability. Some of these degrees include:

- Human Services
- Youth Work
- Sociology
- Child and Family Studies
- Behavioural Science
- Counselling
- Social and Community Welfare
- Community Development.

Data from the 2017 Victorian family services workforce survey shows that many of these courses supply professionals for the child and family services workforce. Any barrier to the pipeline of qualified graduates coming into this workforce is likely to have dire consequences for the children, young people and families who rely on professional support during hard times.

The child and family services sector in Victoria was already experiencing escalating demand prior to the current global pandemic, a trend also seen at the national level. In 2018-19, more than 12,000 children spent time in care in Victoria.² Recent modelling has predicted that the significant pressures on families arising from the pandemic could see this number rise to more than 27,000 by 2026.³ More professionals are needed to address demand and to deal with the longer-term impacts of COVID-19 on the community. This Bill risks deterring students through significant fee increases, thereby jeopardising the future of the community services workforce.

Implications of fee increases for students

The impact of COVID-19 on the employment prospects of young people in particular has been stark. Prior to the pandemic, young people aged 15-24 years were already facing a challenging job market and high unemployment. In December 2019, the Australian youth unemployment rate was 11.5 per cent, more than double the general population.⁴ Recent figures show young people are disproportionately affected by the current crisis, representing 35 per cent of Australians who lost work in April.⁵

² Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) 2020, *Data tables: Child protection Australia 2018–19*, Child Welfare series no. 72, Cat no. CWS 74, AIHW, Canberra.

³ Social Ventures Australia 2020, [Keeping families together through COVID-19: the strengthened case for early intervention in Victoria's child protection and out-of-home care system](#), Social Ventures Australia, Melbourne.

⁴ Atkins, M, Callis, Z, Flatau, P & Kaleveld, L 2020, [COVID-19 and youth unemployment](#), Centre for Social Impact, Sydney.

⁵ Ibid.

The last time Australia faced this level of economic uncertainty was in the 1990-91 recession. The unemployment rate rose to almost 11 per cent in 1992, and to 17 per cent among young people aged 18 to 24.⁶ It took years for the employment rates to recover and for incomes to reach pre-recession levels, with long-term consequences for young people's outcomes. It is not consistent with economic recovery to maintain the current level of government spending and impose greater costs on students, the majority of whom are young people.

The Centre is deeply concerned that increased fees will disproportionately affect students experiencing disadvantage and act as a deterrent to university. While we understand that students will not be required to start paying off their debt until they reach an income threshold, the larger HECS debt burden will mean that students will be paying off more debt for longer, with potential long-term implications for their financial security. For many socio-economically disadvantaged students, this prospect is likely to put higher education permanently out of their reach. We recommend that government pursue other options for increasing the number of Commonwealth Supported Places and incentivising students to study in areas of future workforce demand.

Furthermore, while we welcome the government's intent to create incentives for universities to work closely with industry to produce job-ready graduates, there is currently insufficient support for students to engage in these opportunities. Courses of study leading to work in the 'caring and helping' professions such as social work, youth work and community welfare already include clinical or work placement that produce job-ready graduates. Such placements can be financially challenging as most are unpaid and the number of hours required limits the ability of students to take on or continue paid work for that period. Many care leaver students who pursue study and careers in these professions face additional challenges such as a lack of family support and the requirement to 'transition to independence' on or before their eighteenth birthday. The Bill proposes to increase course fees for students without providing any additional support to enable completion of placement requirements.

Making sure no student is locked out of higher education

Equity for students experiencing disadvantage and hardship

Young people who have spent time in out-of-home care often experience significant disadvantage and barriers to accessing post-secondary education. Studies show that educational aspirations and expectations for young people in care are low, with few going on to university.⁷ One of the Centre's flagship programs, Raising Expectations, is actively working to change this situation,⁸ recognising that accessing postsecondary education and training can transform the life trajectory of young

⁶ Alcorn, G 2019, 'Remembering the recession: "The 1990s experience changed my view of the world"', *The Guardian*, 17 November, <<https://www.theguardian.com/business/2019/nov/17/remembering-the-recession-the-1990s-experience-changed-my-view-of-the-world>>.

⁷ Harvey, A, Campbell, P, Andrewartha, L, Wilson, J, & Goodwin-Burns, P 2017, *Recruiting and supporting care leavers in Australian higher education*, Centre for Higher Education Equity and Diversity Research, La Trobe University, Melbourne; Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee (Vic) 2020, *Inquiry into sustainable employment for disadvantaged jobseekers*, Parliament of Victoria, Melbourne.

⁸ Raising Expectations is designed to increase awareness of care leavers as an equity group and to make sure they are supported to be able to access and complete post-secondary education.

people with a care background and break the cycle of disadvantage, poverty, and homelessness.⁹ However, care leavers are not currently considered an equity group by the Federal Government and the proposed Bill is likely to make access to higher education even more difficult for this cohort.

While we do not support the passage of the Bill in its current form, we do support programs that fund universities to support students experiencing disadvantage, such as the Indigenous, Regional and Low Socio-Economic Status Attainment Fund (IRLSAF) included in the Bill. Government has stated its intent to 'work with the sector to design a more refined model to support equity outcomes'.¹⁰ We urge government to consider the inclusion of care leavers as an equity group to enable access to grants and support programs such as the IRLSAF.

A further concern with this Bill is the measure that would 'require all higher education providers to develop and apply appropriate student admissions procedures that ensure a student is properly assessed as academically suitable for a unit of study before enrolling'.¹¹ While this is important, it is important that this process does not exclude students who could succeed with additional support and that appropriate linkage pathways are offered to these students.

We note the measure that would require higher education providers to provide 'a statement of the provider's strategies for improving equality of opportunity in higher education' but question whether this will be sufficient to support and protect students and extend provider integrity.¹²

The Victorian Legislative Assembly's Economy and Infrastructure Committee recently completed their *Inquiry into sustainable employment for disadvantaged jobseekers*. Their report states that:

Anglicare Victoria mentioned a new policy in Scotland where 18 educational institutions are offering guaranteed entry to an undergraduate course for any person who has been in care regardless of their age and length of time in care. This policy recognises care leavers' barriers to university participation and aims to expand access. Victorian universities could be encouraged to create similar alternative entry pathways for care leavers.¹³

Consistent with the Committee's recommendation, the Centre recommends that the Australian Government work with universities to develop alternative entry pathways into undergraduate study for people who have been in out-of-home care.¹⁴

Students who fail subjects

The Centre is concerned by the measure in this Bill that would result in a student losing their Commonwealth Supported Place if they do not pass at least half the units in their course. While we

⁹ Council to Homeless Persons 2014, Young people leaving care need a safety net, viewed 25 June 2020, <<https://chp.org.au/young-people-leaving-care-need-a-safety-net/>>; Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee (Vic) 2020.

¹⁰ Department of Education, Skills and Employment 2020, 'Access and participation', viewed 9 September 2020, <<https://www.education.gov.au/access-and-participation>>.

¹¹ Explanatory Memorandum, p. 13.

¹² Explanatory Memorandum, p. 43.

¹³ Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee (Vic) 2020, *Inquiry into sustainable employment for disadvantaged jobseekers*, Parliament of Victoria, Melbourne, p. 88.

¹⁴ Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee (Vic) 2020.

accept the need for integrity measures to protect students, the proposed mechanism potentially puts students who are struggling at risk. There are many reasons why a student might not pass a particular unit of study at a specific time in their lives. The Centre is aware of examples of this occurring where circumstances do not qualify as 'special' but have nevertheless affected a student's capacity to study at that time. There needs to be sufficient flexibility for students who might not have passed units of study to continue their course with appropriate support.

Rather than employing a blunt instrument that fails to address barriers to education faced by students, government should fund and require universities to actively offer support to students at the first sign of difficulty. Students at the margins, who already face obstacles accessing university, need to be adequately supported to complete and succeed in higher education.

Conclusion

The Centre does not support the Bill. Our member agencies regularly demonstrate the critically important role community services play in supporting children, young people and families to survive and thrive. This Bill threatens the pipeline of qualified professionals, with likely significant social and economic implications for individuals, communities and government.

For students who already face significant challenges in accessing higher education, this Bill, with its proposed fee increases, adds another challenge and likely deterrent. For students at university who fail to pass more than half their units of study, the Bill provides insufficient protection for students to be able to maintain engagement in higher education.