

Job Ready Graduates Higher Education Reform Package 2020

Submission by
Association of Children's Welfare Agencies Ltd (ACWA)
Monday 17th August 2020

Introduction to the Association of Children's Welfare Agencies (ACWA)

The Association of Children's Welfare Agencies (ACWA) is the peak body in New South Wales representing the voice, experience and expertise of non-government organisations delivering services to vulnerable children, young people and their families.

ACWA's response to proposed fee increases to community sector degree qualifications.

On behalf of our member agencies, we would like to express our deep concern at the potential impact that the Commonwealth Government's planned university funding reforms will have on the already-struggling community services sector.

The Government's own discussion paper states that:

"The sector has a fundamental role in preparing students for the future workforce and the higher education funding architecture must encourage this goal." It also talks about restructuring the university sector to focus attention on what it calls *"jobs of national importance"*, citing nursing, teaching and STEM-related jobs in this category.

However, despite a graph on page 22 of the discussion paper clearly showing that the largest proportion (28%) of all newly created jobs by 2023 are anticipated to be in Health Care and Social Assistance, degrees in Social Work, Human Services, Youth Work and Social Sciences are planned to see a significant reduction of Commonwealth funding and a huge increase in student contribution costs.

We wish to point out to the Commonwealth Government that there is already a shortage of suitably qualified workers to meet growing demand in the human services sector, and we feel that these reforms will deter students from pursuing degrees in a field of study that will impose on them a large debt at the beginning of their working life.

Critical Issues:

1. The Commonwealth Government's proposed university fee increases will see 'Social Studies, Political Science & Behavioural Science' move from Cluster 3, attracting a Commonwealth funding contribution of \$11,015, to Cluster 1 which brings that contribution down to \$1,100.

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Patron: Her Excellency the Honourable Margaret Beazley AO QC Governor of New South Wales

2. The Commonwealth Government's rationale for the new fee structure is that it will lower student contributions in study areas where there is a strong demand for jobs and increase them in areas with less demand. However, despite the anticipated growth in jobs

in 'Social Assistance', this area of study will move from Band 1, with a student contribution of \$6,804 p.a., to Band 4 (the highest band) with an increased contribution of \$14,500 p.a.

3. The Commonwealth Government's own Job Outlook website lists Social Work as an area of strong future growth. The number of people working as social workers has grown very strongly over the past 5 years and is expected to grow to 35,500 by 2023.

4. The ABS and other sources list Health and Social Assistance as the fastest growing employment sector in the economy. This includes social workers, psychologists, behavioural therapists, counsellors etc.

5. With universities receiving overall less funding for these "Social Assistance" degrees, the viability of Social Work schools and degree programs at institutions across NSW will be put under significant threat.

The importance of Social Work and related degrees for the community services sector in NSW:

1. The social and community services sector includes Aboriginal and migrant services, disability services, child protection, youth and family services, domestic violence and sexual assault support services etc.

2. This sector is growing and will be vital to supporting vulnerable and disadvantaged members of our community in the COVID recovery and as we enter a recession. The sector relies on a pipeline of Social Work and related degree graduates to fill critical roles in its workforce.

3. The Australian College of Community and Disability Practitioners (ACCDP) surveyed the community sector workforce in NSW in 2017 on skills and qualifications. That survey found that across the entire sector, including NDIS, over 35% of workers had a bachelor's degree or higher qualification. ACCDP surveyed over 200 employers in the community sector, and over 70% of employers listed a bachelor's degree as an important qualification in their consideration of suitable candidates for positions.

4. The Commonwealth Government's proposed fee increases in Social Work and related fields will further exacerbate the workforce shortages that exist in this critical sector across Australia. It will disproportionately impact women who work in this sector, creating barriers for both entry and career advancement.

5. The Commonwealth Government's proposed fee increases for these degrees also overlooks recent Government initiatives here in NSW that have set or recommended minimum degree standards for employment in the social assistance sector.

Recommendation:

ACWA recommends that Social Work and all related community service degrees (Social Science, Social Welfare, Youth Work, Psychology etc.) be exempt from any fee increase, and that these degrees should be able to receive the fee reductions that Health and Education degrees are proposed to receive.

Final statement

For the reasons outlined above, ACWA does not support the Commonwealth Government's proposed reforms as set out in the Job Ready Package – Higher Education Reforms 2020 Discussion.

It is our firm belief that there can be no job that is more 'nationally important' than that of looking after the most vulnerable in our society, particularly our children and young people.

We urge the Commonwealth Government to reconsider the way in which community service jobs are classified to ensure that we not only acknowledge their enormous value to society, but encourage young people to take up relevant studies that will lead to a strong, highly qualified workforce in this critical area of social assistance.