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UOW Submission to the Senate Education and Employment Legislation Committee's Inquiry into the Universities Accord (Student Support and Other Measures) Bill 2024

The University of Wollongong (UOW) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Senate Education and Employment Legislation Committee's inquiry into the provisions of the Universities Accord (Student Support and Other Measures) Bill 2024.

As a leading regional university committed to educational excellence, equity and community engagement, UOW is well-positioned to contribute valuable insights into the proposed amendments.

UOW has nine campuses throughout NSW and four offshore campuses, each tailored to meet the unique needs of our communities. Our NSW campuses span the Illawarra (Wollongong), Shoalhaven (Nowra), South Coast (Bega Valley), Southern Highlands (Moss Vale) and Eurobodalla (Batemans Bay). UOW also has three campuses in Sydney – Sutherland, Liverpool and Sydney CBD. Additionally, UOW College Australia provides pathways to undergraduate degrees through its diploma courses.

Our extensive campus network across NSW serves a diverse student population, including a significant proportion of students from underrepresented groups.

We play a critical role in addressing regional skills shortages and supporting educational pathways for students who may otherwise face barriers to higher education. Over 40% of our students come from backgrounds typically underrepresented in higher education, and more than 40% are the first in their families to attend university.

Our innovative programs, personalised student support and strong industry partnerships drive increased participation and attainment among underrepresented groups and produce career-ready graduates. Through successful tailored support programs and targeted outreach initiatives, UOW ensures that we meet the needs of diverse student populations while driving regional development.

Our commitment to diversity and inclusion is evident in our enrolment rates, which outperform sector averages for regional and remote students, low socioeconomic students and First Nations students.

Given UOW's commitment to fostering inclusive educational opportunities, we support the proposed amendments in The Bill aimed at easing student debt repayment, as it is crucial to ensure that younger generations, as well as those seeking to retrain and upskill, can do so without the burden of excessive debt.

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We present the following feedback in response to three key points of the Bill that most directly impact UOW: Fee-Free Uni Ready Courses, Commonwealth Prac Payments, and the Student Services and Amenities Fee.

Fee-Free Uni Ready Courses

UOW welcomes the introduction of Fee-Free Uni Ready Courses as a positive step toward increasing access to higher education by building academic readiness and self- efficacy.

We hope that in the future access to Fee-Free Uni Ready Courses could become demand-driven so that every person aspiring to a university education could be afforded access through a supportive pathway.

On the proposed bill we offer two recommendations:

1. **Clear allocation methodology**

   To maximise the success under the proposed system, we recommend clear methodology be developed to ensure that places are allocated where they are most needed and most likely to drive increased access. This approach would allow institutions like UOW, which serves a catchment area with a significant proportion of students from underrepresented groups, to effectively address the unique needs of their diverse student cohorts. Access to a university pathway with their local communities is critical to widening participation.

2. **Consistent course requirements**

   We also recommend a review of the purpose, content and assessment requirements that underpin the design of Fee-Free Uni Ready Courses. These requirements should articulate with the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) so that the role of these courses as pathways can be most effective. Clear and consistent requirements will support consistency and quality across the sector, encouraging greater collaboration between universities and ensuring a smoother transition for students into higher education. Consistency will also enable portability across institutions which maximises flexibility and utility for students. By refining these programs, we can enhance their effectiveness in preparing students for university study and ultimately improve educational outcomes.

It is our understanding that the additional funding and places associated with these courses will be available from 2025. To optimise these programs and ensure that students are sufficiently aware of their availability, universities need to receive detail about as soon as possible. Specifically, we would welcome early advice on institutional allocations and how they will be implemented (ie. as a financial or Equivalent Full Time Student Load allocation).

We also suggest the government reconsider the funding allocated per place to maximise the financial incentive for universities to offer Fee-Free Uni Ready Courses in priority areas of workforce shortage, such as nursing.

Commonwealth Prac Payments

While the proposed Commonwealth Prac Payments scheme is a positive step towards supporting students in high-priority areas, a more comprehensive and phased approach, along with centralised administration, would improve its effectiveness and feasibility.

On the proposed bill we offer two recommendations:

1. **Centralised administration**

   UOW is concerned about the administrative challenges associated with universities taking responsibility for implementing the proposed weekly prac payments. The administration of these payments will require substantial additional staffing, systems infrastructure and overhead costs. This concern is compounded by other significant reforms scheduled for 2025, such as the introduction of fee-free places and international student caps. Furthermore, universities currently do not collect financial data from students, raising questions about how means testing will be effectively applied. We recommend that means testing and administration of payments be handled by Commonwealth services such as Centrelink, leveraging existing data-sharing arrangements through the Tertiary Collection of Student Information (TCSI). Universities could provide confirmation of placement days through new data sharing arrangements with the administering agency.

2. **Phased expansion**

   UOW supports calls to expand the scheme to include students in allied health disciplines such as physiotherapy, speech pathology, podiatry, and psychology. Additionally, other fields requiring mandatory prac placements, such as medicine, occupational therapy, dietetics and exercise science, should be considered for inclusion. We advocate for a phased inclusion of these disciplines in future iterations of the scheme, given their essential roles in various professional fields. Priority can be given to both areas of workforce shortage and according to student cohorts who are in most need of additional financial support.

We also suggest that the government consider removing means testing to lower the administrative burden. All unpaid placements place a financial impost on students due to lost earnings.

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Alternatively, consideration could be given to removing the means test for some disciplines where cohorts are known to comprise mostly students from lower income brackets or for full-time students have fewer hours available for paid work alongside study.

Student Services and Amenities Fee

UOW supports student engagement in university decision-making processes. The proposed changes to management of the Student Services and Amenities Fee (SSAF) promised to increase student involvement and representation.

We strongly support the three-year transition period as a critical inclusion in the bill, as it allows universities to adapt to the new requirements in a manageable timeframe. This transition period is crucial for accommodating the complexities involved in overseeing and managing student-led organisations, while also ensuring compliance with a broad range of state and Commonwealth obligations and responsible financial administration. It provides necessary flexibility in governance arrangements and acknowledges the diverse settings across the higher education sector. UOW notes the importance of supporting our student-led organisations develop the skills and knowledge needed to discharge their responsibilities.

UOW recommends detailed guidelines and further direction on the submission and approval of transition plans be released as soon as possible. Specific advice is needed about the responsibilities for student-led organisations in decision-making, administration of funds and provision of services, and the expectations of universities to exercise due diligence in funding allocation and assurance of financial management. Clear and comprehensive guidance will be essential to ensuring that the implementation of these changes is smooth and beneficial for both students and institutions.

We would welcome the opportunity for further discussion and engagement. If you require any further information, please contact UOW Director, Government and Community Relations Canio Fierravanti – caniof@uow.edu.au or 0411 244 491