

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

I make this submission on behalf of the Children in Care Collective which was formed in 2016 by a group of out-of-home care service providers and leading experts in working with children with complex needs.

The aim of the Collective is to share experience, discuss best practice informed by research, provide advocacy and learn from policy and practitioner experts in out-of-home care. The Collective seeks to address solutions to difficult systemic practice issues faced by the sector and to improve outcomes for children and young people with complex needs living in out-of-home care. The Collective's website is at <http://childrenincarecollective.com.au/>

As such, we bring to your attention our deep concern about the proposed changes to student contributions to the cost of social work degrees.

On 22 June, a spokesperson for the Minister for Education confirmed that new students studying social work would pay \$14,500 a year, a 113 per cent increase in fees for their degree. This increase is at the top fee level in the university funding plan, alongside business, law and economics as well as humanities courses.

The Minister has said that the government wants to 'incentivise students to make more job-relevant choices that lead to more job-ready graduates by reducing the student contribution in areas of expected employment growth and demand'. Social work courses are highly vocationally oriented with structured work experience ensuring that graduates are immediately ready for work.

As you would be aware there is an increasing need for qualified social workers in many areas, including aged care, disability services, mental health and family violence services, and child protection. There is a strong demand for graduates and especially for graduates outside of the major cities. We note that it is a profession included in the government's skilled migration programme.

The proposed increased annual tuition fee for a social work degree bears no relationship to future earnings for social workers and is likely to turn people away from this critical profession, which is not well paid but demand for quality workers is increasing. This will significantly impair the capacity of the non-government sector to support the most vulnerable in our community, particularly in non-metropolitan areas.

It is our contention that any changes to the cost of social work degrees should result in a reduction of the student contribution to studying for a profession which is without question in high demand. Social work degrees should be aligned with allied health studies with reference to fee structures.

Roderick Best
Special Counsel
Life Without Barriers
10 September 2020

Co-Chair
Children in Care Collective

On behalf of the Children in Care Collective: Allambi Care, Anglicare NSW South, NSW West and ACT, Anglicare Sydney, CareSouth, Key Assets, Life Without Barriers, Mackillop Family Services, Settlement Services International, Stretch-a-Family and Australian Catholic University - Institute of Child Protection Studies