

Australian Catholic University

Submission to the Senate Education and Employment Legislation Committee

Inquiry into the Universities Accord (Student Support and Other Measures) Bill 2024 [Provisions]

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Australian Catholic University (ACU) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Senate Education and Employment Legislation Committee regarding its inquiry into provisions of the Universities Accord (Student Support and Other Measures) Bill 2024 (hereafter “the Bill”).

The Bill proposes to amend the *Higher Education Support Act 2003* (HESA) in response to recommendations made by the Australian Universities Accord Panel. Provisions include to:

- Introduce a Commonwealth Prac Payment for eligible teaching, nursing, midwifery, and social work students.
- Require higher education providers to ensure 40 per cent of their Student Services and Amenities Fees revenue is directed to student led organisations.
- Introduce FEE-FREE Uni Ready courses.
- Reform HELP indexation.

ACU provides the following feedback on these provisions.

Commonwealth Prac Payment

The Bill amends HESA to introduce a new Commonwealth Prac Payment (CPP). Grants would be paid to higher education providers to make payments to eligible domestic students undertaking mandatory practicums as part of their course of study. The CPP would apply to teaching, nursing, midwifery, and social work courses.

As the largest educator of teachers and nurses in Australia, ACU is greatly supportive of this measure, which will help students in these fields of study complete their degrees and reduce the bottleneck in the supply of higher education graduates in these critical fields of workforce shortage. ACU has long advocated for the Commonwealth to support students undertaking mandatory practicum placements. In addition, the university notes that ACU students played a role in negotiating the extension of the CPP to midwifery students.

ACU urges the Senate Committee to further recommend the Federal Government:

- Considers expanding the CPP to other important disciplines, especially in allied health and behavioural health sciences.
- Ensures universities are provided adequate financial assistance to administer the CPP, which will place significant administrative burden on institutions and likely require recruitment of additional staff.

Student Services and Amenities Fees

The Bill proposes amendments to require higher education providers to allocate at least 40 per cent of their Student Services and Amenities Fees (SSAF) revenue to one or more student led organisations that relate to the higher education provider.

ACU is supportive of the Federal Government’s desire to better connect students to services and support, and enhance social inclusion amongst the study body. The Bill also includes provision for transition arrangements, to be agreed by the Secretary of the Department of Education (or their delegate), for up to three years for Table A providers and up to five years for non-Table A providers.

“Student led” organisations

While the proposed new section 19-39(3) of HESA provides some guidance as to the definition of a “student led organisation”, it states that further requirements may be set out in the proposed new Student Services, Amenities, Representation and Advocacy Guidelines (hereafter “Guidelines”), which are not yet available. It is difficult for providers to ascertain the exact requirements for a “student led organisation”, for the proposed 1 January 2025 implementation under the intended legislation, with the Guidelines not yet available.

Transition arrangements

As a national, multi-state university operating seven campuses across three states and one territory, the requirement for ACU to direct a minimum of 40 per cent of 2025 SSAF revenue to student led organisations will pose several challenges in the short to medium-term. Unlike many larger universities, ACU currently has no Student Union arrangement in place. This has led to a staffing model where permanent roles provide the majority of student services and support each year. The process is a transparent one, with regular updates being provided to ACU Student Association members.

There would be considerable cost and time required for ACU to consult with student leaders, to establish the necessary governance structures, and to appropriately equip students with the skills and expertise to be able to successfully deliver services and appropriately acquit funds from 1 January 2025.

The proposed new section 19-40 of HESA states that a higher education provider may apply for an exemption from the requirements of subsection (3) in a form approved by the Secretary, in accordance with the requirements that the Secretary determines in writing, and within a time period as specified in the Guidelines. However, as none of this information is yet available, higher education providers are still in the dark about what form an application for exemption should take, and the timing of the application.

ACU recommends the Senate Committee urge the Federal Government to release information on the details of the Student Services, Amenities, Representation and Advocacy Guidelines, and further:

- Clarify the terminology “student led organisation” to ensure SSAF funding is directed to the intended organisations.
- Ensure sufficient flexibility in the implementation timeline for this reform, and provide scope for longer exemption where full implementation is not feasible for individual providers.

FEE-FREE Uni Ready Courses

The Bill proposes to rename enabling courses as “FEE-FREE Uni Ready” courses and establish a new Commonwealth Grant Scheme funding cluster for these courses, commencing from 1 January 2025.

The proposal to support new FEE-FREE Uni Ready courses in the system is a positive development in affirming the value of these courses, which promote equitable access and opportunity in higher education. As ACU has previously advocated, and as evidence shows, these courses equip educationally disadvantaged and underprepared students with the knowledge, skills and mindset they need to undertake and succeed in higher education.

ACU further emphasises that the new funding regime should ensure there is sufficient access to FEE-FREE Uni Ready courses across the higher education sector, as government funding for enabling courses has previously been limited and confined to a few providers. All institutions should have access to additional funding to deliver these courses and with clear course requirements. This is vital to achieving the Government’s equity agenda and higher education participation targets.

HELP Indexation

The Bill makes provision to revise the HELP debt indexation factor for a financial year, to be the lower of the annualised change in the Consumer Price Index (CPI) or Wage Price Index (WPI), for the four quarters ending on 31 March in that financial year against the four quarters ending on 31 March in the previous year.

ACU supports this measure, which is geared to provide tertiary education that is more affordable and reduce barriers to participation, by reducing the cost of tertiary education. However, ACU notes this measure alone is insufficient to address critical issues in higher education financing for students and to support realisation of the Government’s ambitious higher education participation targets. Critically, it does not address the Australian Universities Accord Panel’s recommendation to replace the Job-ready Graduates Package.