

Australian Universities Accord Interim Report Concerns for Muslim Students

In response to the 'Australian Universities Accord' interim report I am writing on behalf of Canberra Islamic Centre (CIC) to address a matter of concern to the Muslim community.

CIC commends the Labor Government's initiative to undertake a comprehensive review of the education system which marks an important step in evaluating and enhancing Australia's education system, particularly focusing on the tertiary education sector, to ensure equitable access to higher education for all.

CIC would like to draw your attention to a serious issue raised by the Muslim community in relation to the HELP loan arrangement, which is of great significance and impacts the educational aspirations of Muslim students.

The core concern revolves around the annual increase in the total HELP loan amount in line with inflation. This raises ethical and religious concerns for Muslim students wishing to pursue higher education while adhering to their religious principles as it aligns with the concept of ribā (usury), which is considered ḥarām (forbidden) in Islamic finance and ethics.

The Australian Universities Accord report (AUA) highlights the importance of access to higher education for all Australians, regardless of their background or circumstances. The report also acknowledges several barriers to higher education, including financial barriers.

The AUA report states access to higher education is essential for economic and social participation to gain the skills and knowledge to succeed in the workforce and contribute to the Australian economy.

While designed to facilitate access to education, the current structure of the HELP loan inadvertently creates a barrier for Muslim students who seek to abide by their religious convictions. This issue is not merely theoretical; it has practical implications that discourage, prevent, and disadvantage Muslim students from attending university. As a result, they face the unfair choice of compromising their religious beliefs or foregoing higher education opportunities.

In light of these concerns, CIC proposes the following for consideration to ensure Muslim students will not be compromising their faith to access higher education:

1. Engage with Islamic scholars to better understand the religious perspectives and concerns related to financial arrangements and seek their input in crafting a solution that respects Islamic principles and allows Muslim students to pursue higher education without violating their religious beliefs.
2. Revise the annual loan indexation mechanism by exploring alternative indexing methods.
3. Enhance the transparency of information related to the HELP loan program, particularly with regards to the inflation-based increases, to ensure students are well-informed about the financial implications of their choices.
4. Provide training to loan officers to ensure they are aware of the religious concerns faced by Muslim students and can provide appropriate guidance and support.

The concerns raised by the Muslim community regarding the HELP loan program are deeply rooted in religious convictions and by addressing these concerns, the Labor Government can reaffirm its commitment to providing equitable access to education for all, regardless of their religious background.

Thank you for the opportunity to voice our concern in this matter. We look forward to the response and action on this important issue that will impact the educational aspirations of Muslim students across the country.

Should you require any clarifications please contact the [REDACTED]