

Submission to the Australian Universities Accord in Response to the Interim Report

The Griffith University Student Representative Council (SRC) and Postgraduate Students Association (GUPSA) are independent associations proudly representing students at Griffith University's Nathan, Mt Gravatt, Logan, South Bank and Digital campuses. We aim to enhance the student experience through the provision of a range of events and services as well as advocating for the interests of our undergraduate, postgraduate coursework, and HDR students.

We appreciate this opportunity to respond to the Universities Accord Interim Report. **We urge the Accord Panel to prioritise reforms to unpaid placement requirements, and to include social work students (along with nursing and education students) as being in urgent need of Government financial support.**

Significant numbers of undergraduate and postgraduate coursework students are experiencing increasing levels of poverty as a direct result of participating in study-related placements. We are currently undertaking a project to more comprehensively investigate the extent and impact of the financial burdens of placements, with a report to be delivered later this year.

Many students in allied health and education fields are required to complete extensive and/or frequent unpaid field or clinical placements. Whilst education students need to complete at least 80 days of professional experience, nursing students must complete 800 hours of clinical placement, and social work students must complete 1000 hours (approx. 130 days) of field placement. Significant numbers of students in fields such as these are mature-aged and have additional responsibilities and expenses, including caregiving, and this places them at even greater risk of poverty.

Unpaid placements are often a double-edged sword. Students must confront increased expenses (such as uniform and travel costs, after-school or childcare fees, and even double rent due to needing to relocate) along with partial or complete loss of employment income. A 2022 survey commissioned by

the Australian Council of Heads of Social Work Education commissioned found over 41% of social work students experiencing financial hardship had had to forego or significantly reduce paid employment to undertake placement¹. Similar experiences have also been reported by students in other fields^{2,3}.

The financial pressure on students has now reached breaking point due to the cost-of-living crisis coupled with the inadequacy of Government student payments such Youth Allowance, Austudy and ABSTUDY. Current data from ACOSS/UNSW Poverty and Inequality studies reveals that poverty is deepest in households where the main income-earner receives Youth Allowance, with significant poverty gaps also experienced in Parenting Payment and Carer Payment households⁴.

We have heard countless stories from our students about the financial ramifications of unpaid placement requirements, with many students being forced to forego basic needs. Many Griffith University students experience placement poverty, and as a result they:

- skip meals and/or are survive on cheaper, less nutritious food;
- need to defer home loan repayments or seek cheaper rental accommodation, often further from campus;
- have difficulty paying bills and increasingly rely on credit and loans;
- work in paid employment at nights and weekends in order to meet living costs; and
- suffer high levels of stress, exhaustion, and mental ill-health.

¹ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02615479.2022.2161507>

² <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-05-24/health-students-completing-unpaid-placements-inflation-struggle/102373242>

³ <https://www.news.com.au/finance/work/at-work/social-work-and-teaching-students-left-21000-worse-off-due-to-university-placement-requirements/news-story/5c75df4860e95fd6c8a9454460591f90>

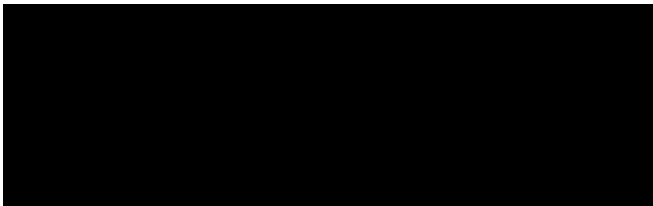
⁴ <https://povertyandinequality.acoss.org.au/poverty/average-poverty-gap-for-income-support-households-by-payment-type-pw/>

We therefore support the following recommendations:

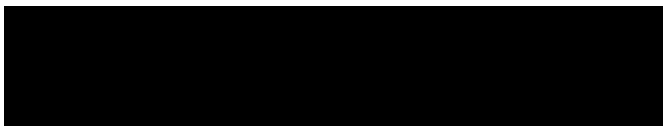
- Reconceptualisation of field and clinical placement requirements, including greater flexibility in terms of structure and recognition of prior learning
- Outcomes-based placements, with a reduced reliance on meeting set numbers of hours
- Increased payments rates for all Australian Government student payments, at least in parity with Jobseeker rates
- Introduction of Government-funded financial assistance for students completing compulsory unpaid placements
- The inclusion of social work students (along with education and nursing students) as being in urgent need of financial support

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Endorsed by the Boards of the Griffith University Student Representative Council and Griffith University Postgraduate Students Association



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