

**Response to the Australian Universities Accord Interim
Report**

**Western Sydney University
Student Representative**

Introduction

As members of Western Sydney University Student Representative Council (Western SRC) we are proud to align our priorities with those of the National Union of Students, advocating for outcomes that prioritise accountability and amplify the student voice within the higher education sector. We are glad to see the considerations outlined in the interim report and urge the government to commit to and implement these proposals.

About WesternSRC

Elected yearly by WSU Students, representatives of the Western SRC are here to be the student voice on campus. Together the Student Representative Council (SRC) and the Student Collectives campaign on significant issues impacting students at Western Sydney University, engage with student groups and provide events for all of us.

Ensuring Student Control of Student Matters – Empowering Student Voices

In a robust higher education sector, student voices are integral to accountability and effectiveness. As the primary stakeholders in higher education, students possess unique insights into campus dynamics, identifying what works and what requires improvement. Currently, students often feel unheard, while universities can seem like distant entities, unaccountable to those they serve.

Student unions, run by students for students, are uniquely positioned to represent student interests, provide vital on-campus support services, and hold universities accountable, particularly in addressing issues like sexual assault.

Western Sydney University students face similar challenges in terms of SSAF allocation. With just under 7% of the SSAF allocated to student representation, WesternSRC is financially dependent on the university for access to funding, subject to complex negotiations. In comparison to other student unions, the University of Sydney, for instance, allocates 62% of its SSAF to student run services. Western Australia's State Government mandates that 50% of the SSAF goes to student unions, allowing them to offer more services and support, such as low-cost food, migration information sessions, autonomous clubs, and well-funded collectives, including those for LGBTQIA+ individuals.

Students at Western Sydney Deserve the same opportunities for representation as those at the University of Sydney and other Go8 campuses.

Western Sydney University is also one of the few universities without a fully independent student organisation, with the SRC being limited to a university controlled board. This lack of financial autonomy hampers our ability to respond to the needs of our student body and for active student representation on campus to hold the university accountable.

Currently, power has shifted away from students at Western Sydney University, concentrating decision-making authority in the hands of unaccountable university management. This renders the WesternSRC a relatively powerless advocacy body compared to student unions with the resources and funding necessary to effect substantial

change in students' lives. Enacting federal legislation mandating a 50% SSAF allocation to student unions would ensure that SSAF remains under student control and is utilised exclusively for the benefit of students.

Recommendations:

- 1) Implement Federal Legislation mandating a 50% SSAF allocation for Student Unions at Australian Universities.

“Providing a greater percentage of the Student Services and Amenities Fee to student unions to ensure the support and representation of students. (Page 129, e)”

- 2) Ensure all campuses have independent democratically elected Student Unions

“Creating new structures and empower existing ones for students to advocate for their interests in institutional and national-level decision making (page 129, b)”

Duty of Care

The National Student Safety Survey (NSSS) at Western Sydney University has revealed alarming rates of Sexual Assault and Sexual Harassment (SASH) incidents. These incidents have severe and lasting consequences for victims, demanding accountability and remedial action from the university. There is an urgent need for stronger government intervention.

Over the past five years, universities have demonstrated a lack of meaningful action, often limited to public relations efforts. The federal regulator, TEQSA, has been ineffective in holding universities accountable, offering little beyond confidential letters outlining issues. We require a federal regulator with the authority to compel universities to take action and impose consequences when they fail to do so. This includes the capacity to address individual student complaints, enforce financial penalties, and issue improvement notices.

The federal government should collaborate with students to establish a national student charter that sets forth standards for universities, which an empowered federal regulator can use as a benchmark for accountability.

Recommendations:

- 1) Create a Federal Government taskforce to establish a Duty of Care code to be imposed on Universities.

“Developing a national student charter, in collaboration with domestic and international students, ensuring a national commitment and consistent approach to the welfare, safety and wellbeing of all students (page 129, a)”

- 2) Empower a national regulator to issue penalties for Universities that fail to investigate or provide support following Sexual Assault and Harassment incidents.

“Reviewing the TEQSA Act to ensure the agency is fit for purpose in light of other changes in this Review (page 120, a)”

Ending Unpaid Placements

The Minister for Employment, Tony Burke, has emphasised the importance of not working for free, yet many tertiary students continue to engage in routine unpaid placements. The ongoing cost of living crisis disproportionately affects students and young people, and the current system forces students into lengthy unpaid placements. During these placements, students are unable to earn an income, or they work outside of placement hours, leaving little time for study or rest. Students are expected to sustain themselves during these periods, often spanning 2-3 months, primarily relying on their savings. This expectation has become increasingly untenable in the face of soaring living costs and the nationwide surge in rent prices. It is crucial that the government acts to support students, ensuring they can maintain a livelihood during mandatory placements.

The Federal Government must collaborate with state governments and employers to expand the availability of paid placements is imperative. Additionally, in cases where paid placements are unfeasible, the federal government should consider establishing a stipend program outside the existing welfare framework to provide essential support to these students.

Recommendation:

- 1) Immediately introduce wages for students undertaking mandatory tertiary placements.

“Providing appropriate financial support to students on compulsory placements, particularly to address urgent skills shortages (page 63 b)”

International Student Levy

We condemn the idea of imposing a levy on international student fees. It is essential to recognize that international students are an integral part of our academic community, and their contributions should be valued and supported rather than further burdened. These students already pay 3-4 times the rate annually for domestic students and we oppose any increase to International Student fees that do not go directly towards supporting their education or welfare

Yours Sincerely,

Laine Fox
Western SRC Parramatta City Representative

Bowen Fucile
Western SRC General Secretary