



AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL OF
HEADS OF SCHOOLS OF
SOCIAL WORK

Submission to the Australian Government Department of Education,
Skills and Employment concerning the Higher Education Support
Amendment (Job-Ready Graduates and Supporting-Regional and
Remote Students) Bill 2020.

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Summary

This submission from the Australian Council of Heads of Schools of Social Work focuses on our shared concern about the proposed funding of Social Work as part of the Social Studies, Political Science and Behavioural Science cluster and our reasons why we believe Social Work should be classified as part of Allied Health. We provide evidence from Australian Government sources which supports our proposal that the Job-Ready Graduates Higher Education Reform Package 2020 has incorrectly classified Social Work and how this is inconsistent with both the aims of the proposed legislation to encourage studies in priority areas including Health and Social Care, and how the Australian Government regards Social Work as an integral part of the Allied Health workforce.

Introduction

The [Australian Council of Heads of Schools of Social Work](#) (ACHSSW) is the national organisation of higher education institutions (HEIs) teaching accredited Social Work programs in Australia. All 30 HEIs currently teaching Social Work are members of the Council. Our objectives are:

- The furtherance of Social Work education and research in Australia;
- The promotion of active cooperation of the institutions represented on the Council with one another, and with universities and other higher education institutions, professional and other learned bodies in Australia and elsewhere;
- Consultation on matters of mutual concern to members of the institutions which they represent and, where appropriate, the adoption of common policies; and
- Representation of schools of Social Work and their needs to Federal and State governments, higher education bodies, the Social Work profession and the wider community.

In particular, this submission focuses on our shared concern about the proposed funding of Social Work as part of the Social Studies, Political Science & Behavioural Science cluster and our reasons why we believe Social Work should be classified as part of Allied Health.

Social Work Education in Australia

Social Work education commenced in Australia in 1929, as training for almoners, now known as hospital Social Workers. Social Workers continue to be integral to Australian health and welfare service provision.

There are [30 higher education providers](#) who offer programs which are accredited by the Australian Association of Social Workers, into which approximately 14,000 students are enrolled at any one time.

To qualify as a Social Worker requires completion of an accredited 4-year Bachelor of Social Work degree or a two-year Master of Social Work degree in addition to an undergraduate degree which includes studies in the social and behavioural sciences. The requirements for qualifying as a Social Worker are detailed in [Australian Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards \(ASWEAS\) March 2020](#). In order to ensure graduates meet all the learning outcomes specified in the ASWEAS, there is little or no opportunity for students to reduce the cost of their degree by taking electives from units which require a lower student contribution.

A key component of the ASWEAS is a requirement that students complete 1000 hours of supervised practice placements. Students must complete at least two placements in different fields of practice. In particular the ASWEAS notes:

Field education is a distinctive pedagogy for Social Work education. It enables students to integrate classroom learning with professional practice so

that students notice and refine their ways of thinking, doing and being. Field education socialises students into the profession through immersion in real practice contexts, while allowing a constructive and reciprocal learning space to develop. Students make sense of what it means to be a Social Worker by developing their professional identity, integrity and practice frameworks.

Supported by field education partners in practice settings, students achieve deep learning through experimentation, reflection, feedback and critique of practice experiences. Through this process of engagement and refinement of their understanding of their role, and of themselves as professionals, they understand the complex, changing and ambiguous nature of practice. (p. 29)

One of the distinctive features of a Social Work degree is that graduates are considered fully qualified practitioners, with no requirement for additional experience or training to gain professional recognition.

Job Ready Graduates

The Australian Government Department of Education, Skills and Employment's discussion paper [Job-Ready Graduates Higher Education Reform Package 2020](#) proposes a radical alteration of the funding model for fields of study. This new model is premised on a broader assessment of public benefits, including:

- employment participation – we need to encourage study in fields with higher employment outcomes
- proportion of graduates employed as managers and professionals – an investment in professional qualifications leads to professional employment
- completion rates – higher completion rates represent better value. (p.19)

Fields of study which meet these criteria are having student contributions substantially reduced and the Commonwealth contribution increased. However, despite clearly meeting at least the above criteria, it is proposed that the Student Contribution for new Social Work students increase from rise from \$6684 to \$14,500 per year. At the same time, the Commonwealth subsidy for Social Work will drop from \$10,821 to \$1,100.

Social Work students are highly employable and undertake 1000 hours of placement as part of their qualifying degree in Social Work. The [2019 Graduate Outcomes Survey](#) found almost all (95.3 percent) 2018 graduates were involved in the Labour Force in May 2019 with 84.8 percent in employment. Although only 70.2 percent of graduates were employed full-time, this is consistent with patterns of enrolment by students who often have caring responsibilities. Data about Australian Social Work students, provided by the Commonwealth of Australia Department of Education and Training, was that approximately one-quarter of Bachelor of Social Work students in 2015 were aged 25 and over (24 percent) and enrolled part-time in their studies (26 percent). Employment rates for Social Workers also need to take into account that compared students enrolled in Bachelor of Social Work degrees with all undergraduate students in Australian universities in 2015 reveals that Social Work students are more likely to have a disability, which often limits participation in employment.

[Social Work attracts a high proportion of female students](#) with 86 per cent of Social Work students being female and the average age of a Social Work student being 29.3 years. These students will be disproportionately negatively impacted by the Job Ready package. It is well established that women graduates earn less across their life-time due to informal care responsibilities and career breaks. Mature age students also are often highly price sensitive due to the fact that they graduate at point in the life course where they are likely to have family and other responsibilities, such as buying a home. The proposal to double Social Work fees will disproportionately affect Social Work graduates and act as a disincentive for

students to pursue a career in Social Work. This will exacerbate the crisis in graduates for the mental health and community services workforce.

Social Workers remain employable long after graduation. [Australian Jobs 2019](#) published by Australian Government Department of Jobs and Small Business identified Social Work as a profession in which there was a “Below Average” level of unemployment.

Priority area

The proposed funding for Social Work is inconsistent with the stated aim of [Job-Ready Graduates Higher Education Reform Package 2020](#) as encouraging students to undertake studies in priority areas, which would include “Health and social care” (p. 22):

The changing nature of the Australian workforce in coming decades will have direct implications for the skills and education required of workers. The new funding model is therefore informed by national public benefit considerations. ... We must do what we can now to ensure there is a pipeline of skilled workers in these priority fields, working to prevent future skills shortages the impact on the Australian economy. (p.22)

Social Work has been denoted by the Australian Government’s [Job Outlook](#) as a “very highly skilled” occupation. In particular this webpage states that

Social Workers assess the social needs of individuals, families and groups, assist and empower people to develop and use the skills and resources needed to resolve social and other problems, and further human wellbeing and human rights, social justice and social development.

Social Workers are employed by the Commonwealth, State and Local governments as well as health networks, non-government organisations and private businesses. One of the largest employers of Social Workers is the [Commonwealth Department of Human Services](#) whose website informs Australians:

We can help you with:

- short term counselling
- information
- referrals to support services.

You can talk to us about:

- family and domestic violence
- thoughts of suicide or self-harm
- being a young person without support
- a personal or family crisis
- mental health concerns
- a natural disaster and how it’s affected you.

Social Workers are considered to provide essential services within Australia, including in mental health, child protection and family violence. This has been most recently evidenced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Social Workers are frequently deployed to disaster situations including natural disasters such as droughts, floods and bushfires. Australian Social Workers have also been sent overseas to disasters involving substantial numbers of Australians including the Bali bombings in 2002 and the bombings in London in July 2005.

The Australian Government’s [2019 Employment Projections - for the five years to May 2024](#) released on 22 November 2019 show a need for 29.3 percent more Social Workers between 2019 and 2024. This growth comes on top of growth 41.2 percent over the previous five years as reported in [Australian Jobs 2019](#) published by Australian Government Department of Jobs and Small Business. A shortage of Social Workers is also acknowledged by the

Australian Government's Department of Home Affairs listing Social Work in all 10 visa subclasses on the [Skilled Occupation List](#).

In 2018, the [NSW Health Social Work Workforce: Horizon Scanning and Scenario Generation Final Report](#) identified several key factors as contributing to this increasing demand for Social Workers. These included:

- Increasingly complex health and social needs of the population, as well as an increase in social isolation in Australian society.
- A reported lack of services and supports outside the health system can also lead to a bottleneck of people at discharge, requiring Social Workers to spend considerable time ensuring that people are able to access essential services.
- The role of Social Workers becoming more complex due to: an increase in demand for support with medico-legal matters; an increasing need to deliver culturally appropriate services; an increasing need to deliver trauma informed services; and an increasing need to utilise technology in the delivery of Social Work.
- The Social Work role also changed due to changes in service provision due to recent govt reforms (NDIS, MyAgedCare portal, NSW govt Domestic and Family Violence reforms – IT Stops Here).

It is not just in the future when more Social Workers will be required. The 2019 [ACOSS Demand for Community Services Snapshot](#) found the following:

- There is significant unmet demand for community services in Australia
- Demand for services is increasing.
- Unmet demand is impacting people accessing services, their families and their communities.
- The vast majority of community sector workers (82 per cent in total) reported that in the last year, levels of demand in the community either 'increased' (50 per cent) or 'increased significantly' (a further 32 per cent).
- Three in five community sector workers (60 per cent) reported an increase in the numbers of clients their service was unable to support during 2019.
- Around a quarter of respondents (24 per cent) described their main service as 'rarely' or 'never' able to meet demand, and only five per cent said their service was 'completely' able to meet demand.
- Staff involved in housing and homelessness, financial counselling, and legal services were most likely to report demand pressures. In addition, high levels of unmet need were observed in regional and rural areas.
- Community sector staff described how unmet demand for services was generating stress, undermining wellbeing, and contributing to cascading crises relating to housing, poverty, debt, violence, physical and mental health, and the law. Unmet need also impacts workers, impeding their capacity to work effectively with people with the most complex needs, and to undertake advocacy work. (p.5)

The 2018 [Victorian Allied Health Workforce Research Program Social Work Workforce Report](#) also described both current and future demands across the sector:

According to the workforce survey and qualitative research findings, Social Work services are currently under pressure in the public system in Victoria with Social Workers citing long waiting lists, large workloads and limited capacity. Demand is predicted to continue to rise with the ageing population, and increasing policy focus on family violence, disability and mental health support. Future areas of high demand include family violence, aged care, disability, mental health, child protection, and Indigenous mental health. There are existing service gaps in these areas and also in rural areas. There

is also an important and growing role for Social Workers in emergency departments. (p.8)

At a time when there are already insufficient Social Workers, the Victorian [Royal Commission into Family Violence](#) has called for introduction of mandatory qualifications for specialist family violence practitioners (Recommendation 209). This recommendation states that family violence practitioners be required to hold a Social Work or equivalent degree no later than 31st December 2020.

Another field of practice in which a lack of Social Workers has been identified is child protection. The [Victorian Allied Health Workforce Research Program Social Work Workforce Report](#) cites an earlier 2015 report from the Victorian Department of Health and Human Services in which it was noted that an inability to recruit sufficient numbers of Social Workers is resulting in graduates with less suitable qualifications being recruited into child protection roles:

Department of Health and Human Services has to recruit annually at least 175 new child protection practitioners a year just to keep pace. If all these individuals were Social Workers, Department of Health and Human Services child protection would therefore account for about 35% of new graduates each year, making it a major player in Social Worker employment. Despite efforts to increase the proportion of Social Workers in the long term it is likely this will become difficult to sustain, as demand for Social Workers is likely to exceed supply by the mid-2020s. Thus, psychologists and others with similar degrees, and the VET diploma holders, are likely to gradually increase their penetration of the child protection workforce.

Shortages of Social Workers in child protection have also been reported in Queensland as part of the 2013 [Queensland Child Protection Commission of Inquiry](#), known as the Carmody Inquiry. Although not specifically identifying Social Work, identified the need for all child protection workers to have qualifications as below which are consistent with those of a Social Work graduate. Recommendation 10.1 was:

That the Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services require Child Safety officers and team leaders to have tertiary qualifications demonstrating the core competencies required for the work — with a preference for a practical component of working with children and families, demonstrating a capacity to exercise professional judgement in complex environments. (p. 322)

Social Work and Allied Health

In the same week that the [Job-Ready Graduates Higher Education Reform Package 2020](#) was released, the Federal Government released a report from the National Rural Health Commissioner with the title [Report for the Minister for Regional Health, Regional Communications and Local Government on the Improvement of Access, Quality and Distribution of Allied Health Services in Regional, Rural and Remote Australia](#). There are 17 references to Social Work in this report, including the identification of Social Workers in the Introduction as allied health professionals who “facilitate community access to the services and resources needed at times of hardship” (p.1). It notes, among other things, the recognition of Social Work by Allied Health Professions Australia and role Social Work plays in improving health and wellbeing outcomes for people living in regionally areas. Social Work also fits comfortably within the definition of ‘allied health’ employed in the document which is that used by the Australian Allied Health Leadership Forum (AAHLF):

Allied Health Professionals are qualified to apply their skills to retain, restore or gain optimal physical, sensory, psychological, cognitive, social and cultural function of clients, groups and populations.

Allied Health Professionals hold nationally accredited tertiary qualifications (of at least Australian Qualifications Framework Level 7 or equivalent), enabling eligibility for membership of their national self-regulating professional association or registration with their national board.

The identity of allied health has emerged from these allied health professions' client focused, inter-professional and collaborative approach that aligns them to their clients, the community, each other and their health professional colleagues (p. 2).

Social Work, as a nationally accredited profession committed to social justice, human rights and the achievement of wellbeing for individuals, families, groups and communities, meets this definition in every aspect.

Elsewhere in this report it is noted that

- Social Work is one of nine professions included in the Allied Health Rural Generalist Program, which is an education program established by Queensland Health (p. 18).
- In a section defining the scope of the report, Social Work is identified under the sub-heading 'Defining allied health' as a self-regulating allied health profession (pp. 44-45)
- Social Work is identified as one of the professions included under the umbrella organisation, Services for Rural and Remote Allied Health (SARRAH), which was established in 1995
- The report refers to a range of initiatives and research activities relating to training and retention of allied health workers. These include initiatives undertaken in NSW, Victoria, Queensland and Western Australia where Social Work was included (pp. 56-62).

However, despite being recognised as an integral part of Australia's Allied Health workforce, the [Job-Ready Graduates Higher Education Reform Package 2020](#) proposes funding Social Work as part of the Social Studies, Political Science & Behavioural Science cluster alongside non-professional disciplines such as Political Science, Sociology and Anthropology which do not have the significant professional placement education requirements expected of Social Work. The Australian Council of Heads of Schools of Social Work believes this is a timely opportunity to redress the current funding model which does not reflect the real costs of training for the profession - including 1000 hours of supervised field education placements. Continuation of this inequitable funding compared with other allied health professions is a risk to the future of professional education standards and capacity. Furthermore, the [Job-Ready Graduates Higher Education Reform Package 2020](#) reflects an observation in the 2018 [Victorian Allied Health Workforce Research Program Social Work Workforce Report](#) which noted a need for "improving professional understanding and definition of the Social Worker role" (p.8) as integral to Allied health provision in this country.

Conclusion

That [Job-Ready Graduates Higher Education Reform Package 2020](#) does not classify Social Work as Allied Health is inconsistent with both the aims of the proposed legislation and how the Australian Government regards Social Work as an integral part of the Allied Health workforce. Furthermore, [Job-Ready Graduates Higher Education Reform Package 2020](#) fails to recognise the contradiction of identifying Health and Social Care (of which Social Work is a key field of study) as a priority area and then classifying Social Work alongside non-professional disciplines such as political science, anthropology and sociology. If the proposed changes became law, this would exacerbate already critical shortages of qualified Social Workers.