



Submission for the Inquiry into the Higher Education  
Support Amendment (Job-Ready Graduates and  
Supporting Regional and Remote Students) Bill 2020

September 2020

To: Members of the Senate Education and Employment Legislation Committee  
(The Committee)  
From: University of Melbourne Student Union

The University of Melbourne Student Union Inc. (UMSU) welcomes the opportunity to provide comments on the exposure draft of the Higher Education Support Amendment (Job-Ready Graduates and Supporting Regional and Remote Students) Bill 2020.

UMSU is an incorporated association and is recognised by the University of Melbourne as the representative body for all students. UMSU is governed by an elected Students' Council and twelve committees elected by and from students. UMSU is responsible for a broad range of student representative, student engagement and student support activities.

UMSU operates under the principles of Student Unionism which are broadly defined as student control of student affairs.

The UMSU Constitution establishes that UMSU will:

- advance the welfare and interests of students;
- represent students of the University within the University and to the community;
- provide amenities and services, principally for students and other members of the University community, and incidentally to the public.
- provide an independent framework for student social and political activity;
- develop, maintain and support student clubs, societies and associational life generally;
- promote and defend the rights of students to education on the basis of equality, without regard to race, colour, sex, sexuality, gender identity, age, physical disability, mental illness, economic circumstances, political religious or ideological conviction, or national or social origin;
- oppose violence and/or hatred through militarism, nationalism, or discrimination on the basis of race, colour, sex, sexuality, gender identity, age, physical disability, mental illness, economic circumstances, religion, or national or social origin;
- provide a democratic and transparent forum in which students' affairs and interests can be governed in an effective and accountable manner; and
- promote free and accessible government-funded education.

## Executive Summary

UMSU supports measures that ensure students' HECS-HELP debts can be forgiven where their progress has been impacted by special circumstances, however there are a number of areas of concern to Umsu in the proposed Bill. The areas of concern are broadly categorised as follows:

- The impact on students of the proposed course fee changes.
- The decrease on overall funding to universities.
- The changes to students' access to HECS-HELP on the basis of study load and prescribed progress rates.

## Summary of Recommendations

UMSU recommends that:

- the Senate rejects the Higher Education Support Amendment (Job-Ready Graduates and Supporting Regional and Remote Students) Bill 2020;
- the Committee investigates linking university funding to student assessment their experience of institutional measures designed to eliminate, and respond to, sexual violence and harassment; and
- the Committee reviews the causes of poor course progression, including the adequacy of current support services that Universities offer.

## Course Fee Increases

### Debt Sentence

The table below shows the proposed changes to student contributions. UMSU is particularly concerned about the significant price increases of 113 percent to humanities and communications degrees and 28 percent for law and commerce degrees. These changes will result in thousands of university students entering the higher education system already facing more debt than any other student in Australian history. We also note recent modelling from the Parliamentary Library that show students will take nearly 20 years to pay off their HECS debts under this new model – doubling the current time frame.<sup>1</sup>

Field	Current contribution \$			New contribution \$			New Student Contribution	New total funding
	Gov	Student	Overall	Gov	Student	Overall		
Mgmt, Commerce, Law, Econ	2,237	11,355	<b>13,592</b>	1,100	14,500	<b>15,600</b>	^ 27.7%	^ 14.8%
Humanities	6,226	6,804	<b>13,030</b>	1,100	14,500	<b>15,600</b>	^ 113.1%	^ 19.7%
Architecture, IT, Other Health	11,015	9,698	<b>20,713</b>	13,500	7,700	<b>21,200</b>	v 20.6%	^ 2.4%
Mathematics	11,015	9,698	<b>20,713</b>	13,500	3,700	<b>17,200</b>	v 61.8%	v 17%
Education	11,462	6,804	<b>18,266</b>	13,500	3,700	<b>17,200</b>	v 45.6%	v 5.8%
Clinical psych	13,547	6,804	<b>20,351</b>	13,500	3,700	<b>17,200</b>	v 45.6%	v 15.5%
Communications	13,547	6,804	<b>20,351</b>	1,100	14,500	<b>15,600</b>	^ 113.1%	v 23.3%
Creative arts	13,547	6,804	<b>20,351</b>	13,500	7,700	<b>21,200</b>	^ 13.2%	^ 4.2%
Languages	13,547	6,804	<b>20,351</b>	16,500	3,700	<b>20,200</b>	v 45.6%	v 0.7%
Nursing	15,125	6,804	<b>21,929</b>	16,500	3,700	<b>20,200</b>	v 45.6%	v 7.9%
Engineering, Science	19,260	9,698	<b>28,958</b>	16,500	7,700	<b>24,200</b>	v 20.6%	v 16.4%
Agriculture	24,446	9,698	<b>34,144</b>	27,000	3,700	<b>30,700</b>	v 61.8%	v 10.1%
Medicine, Vet Science, Dental	24,446	11,355	<b>35,801</b>	27,000	11,300	<b>38,300</b>	v 0.5%	^ 7%
Enviro studies	24,446	9,698	<b>34,144</b>	16,500	7,700	<b>24,200</b>	v 20.6%	v 29.1%

### Artificial Supply and Demand

These changes are aimed at funneling more students into so-called ‘job ready’ degrees, with cheaper fees, theoretically expected to encourage students to move away from studying Humanities and Commerce. This meddling in the supply and demand of University degrees is inherently flawed and does not correlate with the behaviour of students when choosing courses to study.

Grattan Institute modelling looking into the cost influence on decision-making shows us that even though students already can save money by choosing certain courses, they do not typically decide on this basis.<sup>2</sup> The entire HECS system is designed to ensure that cost did not impact the choosing of a degree. The lack of upfront payments ensure that students make decisions on interests. While it may bear little influence on one’s decision in choosing a course, it will punish some and continue to place a burden on them for years to come.

<sup>1</sup> Hunter, F (2020). Students face 20 years of debt under university fee changes, modelling finds. URL: <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/students-face-20-years-of-debt-under-university-fee-changes-modelling-finds-20200828-p55q8c.html>

<sup>2</sup> Grattan Institute, 2015. University Fees Report. URL: <https://grattan.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/830-University-Fees.pdf>

## ‘Job Ready Degrees’

The Bill makes untested assertions as to what is considered a ‘job ready degree’. While jokes about basket-weaving Arts degrees are funny at the pub, the idea that humanities and social sciences are less valuable within society is an outdated trope. Although, 60% of Federal Government MPs have studied some kind of social science degree at University.

The skills from an Arts degree are job ready and are needed in the workplace. Critical thinking and analysis, problem solving, creativity and concise communication are all skills that are of value beyond University. Indeed, Chief Executive of the Business Council of Australia, Jennifer Westcott has talked about the need for these skills within the workplace.<sup>3</sup>

Research indicates that students are less likely to respond to short term price signals than factors such as long-term employment prospects and career preference.<sup>4</sup> Given 84% of humanities and social science students find employment immediately after graduation – a rate higher than graduates from science and mathematics, the assumption students will flock to cheaper degrees seems misconceived.<sup>5</sup>

The changes are also predicated on unevidenced assumptions that the economy needs more technically trained employees than other professionals. However, even with growth in demand for technically trained workers, there will remain a significant workforce requiring a range of other “human skills”. The World Economic Forum’s *Future of Jobs report* notes

*proficiency in new technologies is only one part of the 2022 skills equation, however, as ‘human’ skills such as creativity, originality and initiative, critical thinking, persuasion, and negotiation will likewise retain or increase their value, as will attention to detail, resilience, flexibility and complex problem-solving.*<sup>6</sup>

## Job Ready Graduates?

In addition to a funding approach that is not evidence based, the proposed legislation does not address critical issues of student wellbeing and job readiness. UMSU takes a broader view of how a student’s experience of higher education shapes their employment outcomes and how higher education providers influence the future nature of workplaces through students’ lived experience of institutional policies and procedures.

UMSU notes the University of Melbourne’s approach to critical issues of student wellbeing, including its response to the Australian Human Rights’ Commissions 2017 report relating to sexual harassment and sexual violence in Australian universities, is demonstrably inadequate and the proposed Bill does not address these issues.

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<sup>3</sup> Business Council of Australia, 2016 <https://www.bca.com.au/the-true-value-of-humanities>.

<sup>4</sup> Chapman, B., & Ryan, C. (2005). The access implications of income-contingent charges for higher education: Lessons from Australia. *Economics of Education Review*, 24(5), 491–512.

<sup>5</sup> QILT, 2019.

<sup>6</sup> World Economic Forum, *Future of Jobs report* (2018), p. ix.  
[http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_Future\\_of\\_Jobs\\_2018.pdf](http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_Future_of_Jobs_2018.pdf).

UMSU has made recent submissions, in 2019<sup>7</sup> and 2020<sup>8</sup>, to the University of Melbourne that detail improvements that could be made its processes designed to provide support to students experiencing the impacts of circumstances outside of their control, including the effects of mental illness. Umsu notes that the Bill proposes (see further comment below) changes to academic progress rules that will exacerbate the impact of the University's failure to ensure students with mental health concerns are treated with empathy and compassion.

It is well documented that students who survive sexual harassment and sexual assault are likely to experience significant impacts on their mental health. The Bill would place these students at a heightened risk where they sit between the operation of rules relating to the limitation on Commonwealth Supported Places (CSP) and inadequate institutional wellbeing support. The impact of this is likely to create circumstances where:

- Victims of sexual violence and harassment are less likely to complete higher education in a CSP;
- Lower the rate of workforce participation of survivors of sexual violence and harassment

Students who have experienced sexual violence and harassment routinely report to Umsu their concerns about the inadequacy of the University of Melbourne's policy and procedures to address these matters. Students simply do not trust the University. To build and support organisational cultures that do not foster or tolerate sexual violence and sexual harassment universities have a critical role to play – both in supporting students, and modelling behaviours that support appropriate responses to instances of sexual violence and harassment so that these can flow into employment practices.

The Committee should consider recommending tying a component of Higher Education funding to student assessment their experience of institutional measures designed to eliminate, and respond to, sexual violence and harassment.

## Funding to Higher Education

UMSU supports any measures to lower course fees and make university more accessible to students. Hence, while we welcome the changes to course fees in science, engineering, nursing and teaching we fail to understand why these 'priority' courses will lose funding in these proposed new changes.

Any drop in course funding has a significant impact on the quality of teaching and learning. COVID-19 has left our universities vulnerable – the University of Melbourne alone is expected to lose around \$1 Billion over the next three years<sup>9</sup>. University of Melbourne students are deeply

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<sup>7</sup> *THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE UGLY* Umsu submission on Consultation on Proposed amendments to the Special Consideration provisions in the Assessment and Results Policy, <https://umsu.unimelb.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/UMSU-Special-Consideration-Consultation-2019-.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Umsu submission on Consultation on Proposed amendments to the special consideration provisions in the Assessment and Results Policy, <https://umsu.unimelb.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/UMSU-Submission-SCPpolicyChangesAug2020.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> Duffy, C <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-08-05/university-of-melbourne-announces-450-job->

concerned with job cuts at the University, where we will see 450 staff let go just this year, with a high likelihood of more to come. UMSU has received feedback from hundreds of students, who through larger class sizes, less subject offerings and poorer administration support know they will feel the direct impacts of further cuts to higher education.

Of all years, 2020 is not the year to be taking further funding away from higher education institutions. Indeed, we would question why any legislation for tertiary education would not aim to improve overall funding - Australian Government funding is already below OECD standards<sup>10</sup>.

## Changes to Access of HECS/HELP Scheme

UMSU is concerned about removing access to HECS-HELP or FEE-HELP for students who fail more than 50% of classes after taking 8 units. These proposed changes misunderstand student experience on campus, while making an attempt to incentivise success through fear of punishment.

We believe the onus is on Universities to support students throughout their degrees – a system that takes into account the situations that impact student success at University is one where students will succeed.

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*With the diagnosis of terminal illness in my nuclear family I have been appalled at the accessibility of special consideration and have ultimately given up on the process due to the lack of clear instructions, assistance when trying to gain clarity and overall no concern for individual circumstances.*

*(UMSU Special consideration survey September 2019)*

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## Penalising students with mental health issues

In the middle of 2014, the UMSU Advocacy Service began highlighting the over representation of students suffering mental health problems in academic progress processes, noting that a large number of university students fall into in the age group featuring the highest proportion of those who suffer mental illness.<sup>11</sup> The Advocacy Service noted that it frequently sees students who have been struggling to keep up with their studies due to problems with their mental health and those students can be particularly vulnerable to the gap between the special consideration process and those mechanisms to support students with chronic disabilities or ongoing health problems. This is due to both the episodic nature of acute illness as well as this effect such illnesses can have on the organisation and motivation required to negotiate the current special consideration regime. In 2019, the Service continues to see the same or greater volume of these mental health related issues as it had five years previously.

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[losses/12527576](#).

<sup>10</sup> OECD, 2018, Public spending on education.

<sup>11</sup> Student between 16 and 25 years old. The Mentally Ill Students' Guide for Academics <https://www.unimelb.edu.au/accessibility/guides/mental-illness>.



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*I have had significant mental health challenges throughout my university experience. I have struggled with anxiety on and off, and was hospitalised for trying to commit suicide at the age of 18. Coming to unimelb at 19 I still had to deal with all the trauma that came with what I experienced at 18. 1/4 people will have mental health issues, students who live out of home and are in financial hardship feel these effects more than any others. Changing these rules will do nothing to help University retention rates or student welfare. They serve to punish students experiencing difficulties rather than support them. (UMSU Special consideration survey September 2019)*

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### Impact on Disadvantaged Students from Equity Groups

The proposed changes in Schedule 4 will penalise students who fail in their first year of study, notwithstanding well understood issues related to transition to tertiary study which make subject failure far more likely in the first year of study.<sup>12</sup> This is also a grave concern in the context of the current and continuing impacts of COVID-19.

The national academic success rate is 84 per cent. However, the majority of students from equity groups experience considerably lower success rates, with remote (79.2 per cent) and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (70.4 per cent) having markedly lower rates.<sup>13</sup>

Students should also have some agency in determining their capacity to complete studies, given existing university processes to select students on academic merit, and providing there are adequate internal university supports. There is also a lack of clarity on what future study prospects, if any, there will be for students excluded from accessing CSPs and/or Commonwealth assistance.

Instead of the proposed changes, which are not evidence based, and implement a punitive rather than supportive approach to students, the Committee should conduct a thorough review of the research on the underlying causes of poor progression and completion rates, including the adequacy of current supports for students within universities.

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<sup>12</sup> See e.g. A.R.J. Briggs, J. Clark & I. Hall 'Building bridges: understanding student transition to university' (2012) *Quality in Higher Education*, 18:1, 3-21, and Urquhart, B. A., & Pooley, J. 'The Transition Experience of Australian Students to University: The Importance of Social Support' (2007) *The Australian Community Psychologist*, 19(2), 78-91.

<sup>13</sup> National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (2020). National Data. NCSEHE Equity Data Website. <https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/national-data/>

## Conclusion

This submission reflects the position of UMSU and the University of Melbourne student body with regard to the Higher Education Support Amendment (Job-Ready Graduates and Supporting Regional and Remote Students) Bill 2020.

The measures in the Bill will have a catastrophic effect for students. Moreover, the higher education reforms will do nothing to improve the quality of tertiary education in Australia. University of Melbourne students are overwhelmingly against these changes. The changes the Bill entails place the burden on students, disproportionately affecting young people. Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are further disadvantaged by the Bill.

UMSU appeals to the Senate to block the Higher Education Support Amendment (Job-Ready Graduates and Supporting Regional and Remote Students) Bill 2020.

UMSU further recommends:

- the Committee investigates linking university funding to student assessment their experience of institutional measures designed to eliminate, and respond to, sexual violence and harassment;
- the Committee review the causes of poor course progression, including the adequacy of current support services that Universities offer.