



# SAVE SOCIAL WORK AUSTRALIA

Submission on behalf of the Save Social Work Australia Campaign and supporters to the Australian Government Department of Education, Skills and Employment regarding the exposure draft of the Higher Education Support Amendment (Job-Ready Graduates and Supporting-Regional and Remote Students) Bill 2020.

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## SUMMARY

This submission is made on behalf of Save Social Work Australia to express the concerns of the campaign and our followers regarding the proposed tertiary funding amendments that will see social work degree Equivalent Full-Time Student Loads (EFTSL) reduced and Student Contribution Amounts (SCA) increased. Our submission provides background information and evidence to demonstrate the importance and job-ready nature of social workers in Australia and urges the Australian Government to reclassify social work as an allied health profession and appropriately fund social work degrees as part of its funding reform.

## ABOUT SAVE SOCIAL WORK AUSTRALIA

The Save Social Work Australia Campaign was formed in response to the Higher Education Reform Package and is seeking public support to save the future of social workers in Australia. We have a petition to Education Minister Dan Tehan with over 4,800 signatures that is growing daily (see [attached](#)) and a strong online presence on Facebook and Twitter.

We are calling on the Australian Government to recognise social workers throughout Australia by funding and classifying social work degrees appropriately to reflect the important role they play in our society and their unique course requirements involving intensive training placements.

## ABOUT SOCIAL WORKERS

Social workers are Australia's safety net. They help connect vulnerable people in our community to resources for health, welfare, recreation, housing, employment and other vital services. They also provide critical crisis support for victims of domestic and family violence, and recently those effected by the Black Summer bushfires and the COVID-19 pandemic.

86% of social work students are female with an average age of 29.3 years.<sup>1</sup> It is well established that women graduates earn less across their life-time due to informal care responsibilities and career breaks. In addition, mature age students are often highly price sensitive when it comes to choosing a degree as they often have families to support and other responsibilities, such as buying a home. The job-ready package will negatively and disproportionately impact these women and act as a disincentive to pursue a career in social work.

Social workers are highly trained professionals, requiring completion of an accredited four-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. This study includes a minimum requirement to complete 1000 hours of supervised training placements.<sup>2</sup> These requirements allow little to no breadth subject flexibility for social work students but ensure that Australia has access to well-equipped and job-ready social work graduates that can provide the vital and growing need for support services for the most vulnerable members of our communities.

The Australian Government has deemed social workers as a "very highly skilled" occupation with "very strong" future growth rate of 29% over the next 5 years.<sup>3</sup> Social workers are already struggling to meet the demand for their services with three in five community sector workers (60 per cent) reporting an increase in the numbers of clients their service was unable to support during 2019.<sup>4</sup> If young Australian's are deterred from studying social work due to excessive fees this will only worsen.

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<sup>1</sup> Healy, K., & Lonne, B. (2010). The social work & human services workforce: Report from a national study of education, training and workforce needs. Australian Learning and Teaching Council.

<sup>2</sup> Australian Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards (ASWEAS) March 2020  
(<https://www.aasw.asn.au/document/item/6073>)

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Demand\\_snapshot\\_2019.pdf](https://www.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Demand_snapshot_2019.pdf)

## ABOUT THE HIGHER EDUCATION REFORM PACKAGE

The higher education reform package states it will “focus on delivering more graduates in areas of industry and community priority... to ensure graduates have the job ready skills and experience they will need in a challenging labour market.”<sup>5</sup> However, the Australian Government’s proposal to defund social work degrees appears to be in direct contradiction to this goal.

In 2019, social work degree graduates had a 95.3% labour force participation rate.<sup>6</sup> It is clear that social workers are job-ready graduates and the Australian Government should be encouraging young Australians to study social work not increase their fees.

We believe this contradiction stems from a misclassification of social work degrees and it can be rectified by reclassifying social workers as allied health professionals and reflecting their tertiary funding as such.

According to a recent National Rural Health report, social work is listed as an allied health profession that plays an active role in improving the health and wellbeing outcomes for people living in regional areas.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, the Australian Allied Health Leadership Forum’s (AAHLF) definition of ‘allied health’ is a hand-in-glove description of what social workers do every day.

*“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.*

*An allied health profession is one which has:*

- *a direct patient care role and may have application to broader public health outcomes*
- *a national professional organisation with a code of ethics/conduct and clearly defined membership requirements*
- *university health sciences courses (not medical, dental or nursing) at AFQ Level 7 or higher, accredited by their relevant national accreditation body*
- *clearly articulated national entry level competency standards and assessment procedures*
- *a defined core scope of practice robust and enforceable regulatory mechanisms.*

*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.”<sup>8</sup>*

## CONCLUSION

There is a critical shortage of social workers in Australia and strong job prospects for newly graduated students.

Social work students require extensive academic and practical training to become qualified special workers and there is little or no opportunity to reduce the cost of their degree by taking electives that require a lower student contribution.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.dese.gov.au/document/job-ready-graduates-discussion-paper>

<sup>6</sup> 2019 Graduate Outcomes Survey, p.7 (<https://www.qilt.edu.au/docs/default-source/gos-reports/2019-gos/2019-gos-national-report.pdf>)

<sup>7</sup> Report for the Minister for Regional Health, June 2020 (page 1) ([https://www1.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/815AFEED0337CF95CA2581D30076D095/\\$File/National%20Rural%20Health%20Commissioner's%20Allied%20Health%20Report%20to%20the%20Minister%20June%202020.pdf](https://www1.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/815AFEED0337CF95CA2581D30076D095/$File/National%20Rural%20Health%20Commissioner's%20Allied%20Health%20Report%20to%20the%20Minister%20June%202020.pdf))

<sup>8</sup> <https://aahlf.com/what-is-allied-health/>

Social workers are a vital part of our healthcare system and, in practice, work as allied health professionals to improve health and wellbeing outcomes for vulnerable members of our communities.

The proposed funding changes will adversely and disproportionately impact female and mature-aged students and act as a disincentive for future students to choose social work as a career path.

That's why the Save Social Work Australia campaign is urging the Australian Government to reclassify social workers as allied health professionals and appropriately fund social work degrees.

Please see [attached](#) our petition to Education Minister Dan Tehan MP with over 4,800 signatures.

To: The Hon. Dan Tehan, MP  
Minister for Education  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Minister,

**RE: PETITION TO PROTECT TERTIARY FUNDING FOR SOCIAL WORK IN AUSTRALIA**

We write to you to urge the Australian Government to recognise the important role that social workers play in our society and protect the necessary tertiary funding to train job-ready professionals.

Every day, social workers help Australians in crisis navigate the most difficult times in their lives. Social workers provide critical support for victims of family violence, the homeless and recently helped those affected by the Black Summer bushfires and residents of the towers locked down due to COVID-19.

Social workers are Australia's safety net.

Under the Government's proposed changes as outlined in the job-ready graduates discussion paper, social work courses will see student contributions double to \$14,500 per year while Commonwealth contribution will be slashed by 91% to just \$1,100 per year. This represents a serious threat to social work in Australia and it must be redressed.

Social work degrees are unique and are misclassified in the current and proposed funding bands. Social workers require 1000 hours of training placement to become qualified.

We the undersigned, urge the Australian Government to classify and fund social work to accurately reflect the important role social workers play in our society and the unique course requirements involving intensive training placements.

Yours faithfully,

Save Social Work Australia