

Committee Secretary
Senate Education and Employment Committees

By email: eec.sen@aph.gov.au

RE: Universities Accord (Student Support and Other Measures) Bill 2024

Dear Members of the Senate Education and Employment Legislation Committee

The University of Tasmania welcomes the introduction of the Universities Accord (Student Support and Other Measures) Bill 2024.

As the only university based in Tasmania, we educate a diverse cohort of students with varied backgrounds and life circumstances. Our student cohort includes regional and remote students (61%), low SES students (28%), first in family (37%), and adult learners (~70% of our total student cohort, compared to a national average of 50%). These are the types of students who often require additional support to prepare for, access and succeed in study, and who will benefit greatly from improved access to education and educational support services.

We consider this Bill an important step in making university education accessible for more people across Australia, and a milestone in implementing the recommendations within the Universities Accord Report.

The HECS-HELP indexation reforms within the Bill will be significant for many graduates across Australia and we strongly support this initiative to provide debt relief and reduce the financial barriers for those considering future study.

Student Services and Amenities Fees (SSAF) at universities are important funding avenues to enable the delivery of non-academic services for students, and we welcome the level of certainty that the proposed SSAF funding allocation will provide for student-led organisations. In implementing the minimum SSAF allocation requirement, we strongly recommend the transition period is utilised for universities and student led organisations to work together on planning to ensure the appropriate financial and governance functions are established and there is no disruption or loss of services for students because of this change.

Office of the Vice-Chancellor

University of Tasmania
Private Bag 51
Hobart, TAS 7001
Australia

T +61 3 6226 2003
E Vice.Chancellor@utas.edu.au

CRICOS Provider Code 00586B | ARBN 055 647 848 ABN 30 764 374 782

utas.edu.au

The introduction of FEE-FREE Uni Ready courses will be transformative for people in our communities who are not prepared with the skills to succeed at university, and we strongly support the proposed approach to improve access for people who need these courses.

This initiative will be critical in meeting the participation targets of the Accord Report, particularly for places like Tasmania where only 21% of people have a university degree (compared to 26.3% nationally) - and in some regional areas this drops to below 10%.

Increasing post-school educational attainment levels in Tasmania will rely on accessible and well-funded pathways programs, as 15.9% of our population have no formal education post Year 10.

At the University of Tasmania, we offer enabling programs to develop skills, enabling students to undertake further study at university level. We understand how these programs can be life changing for people who did not always consider university education as an option for themselves.

One of the programs we offer is the University Preparation Program (UPP), a free enabling course which provides an alternative pathway into university. Since 2020, this program has supported over 1,300 students to build the knowledge, skills and confidence to study at university. Of these students, 51% are first in family to attend university, 39% are from a low SES background, and 65% are under the age of 24. We welcome the implementation of a consistent and simplified funding system for FEE FREE Uni Ready courses which will reduce the financial barriers and enable more students to access these important preparation courses such as the University Preparation Program.

Noting that the Australian Government has committed to working with universities to improve the portability for students on completion of a FEE FREE Uni Ready Course, we suggest the proposed National Skills Passport would be a suitable platform to achieve this. The National Skills Passport should be configured to record completion of preparation courses in the FEE FREE Uni Ready courses category, with consideration given to how the Australian Skills Classification can be used to underpin the portability of these courses.

It will be important that recognising completion of these courses is student-centric and accessible, legitimises what students have achieved, and does not result in barriers or complicated processes for students to navigate in applying to study a university degree on completion of a Uni Ready Course.

Office of the Vice-Chancellor

While we support the introduction of Commonwealth Prac Payments for students undertaking compulsory placements in priority courses, further detail is needed to determine if this policy will have the intended outcomes and to identify potential negative consequences or sector risks.

The potential issues we consider need to be more clearly defined and understood are related to the student processes and experience, and the calculation and frequency of both university grant and student payments.

Students should be able to self-determine if they are eligible for the Commonwealth Prac Payments before they commence study, as this will be an important factor in the decision-making process for students. Further, if the Prac Payments are intended to be means tested, clarification is required on where the responsibility for reviewing and endorsing means testing sits, noting that universities would not typically have access to student personal information about individual finances, employment status, personal and family circumstances.

Confirmation is also required on whether students would be required to make repayments if a placement is cancelled or rescheduled, including pro-rata repayments, and who would be responsible for identifying and requesting a repayment.

Clarity is needed on whether there is an intended cap on the grant payments to universities, and how the varying number of student enrolments and prac placements across study periods would be determined and approved for the grant payment to be calculated. If there is intended to be an institution level cap, who determines which students are eligible for Commonwealth Prac Payments, and how is this determined. If all eligible students at all universities are unable to access these payments due to a cap on funding levels for institutions, this will result in inequality across the sector and will not achieve the intended policy objective.

Further, the Commonwealth Prac Payment is currently proposed as a weekly payment. We suggest this frequency would introduce a considerable workload for many universities, as across different courses and each year of study, placements occur at varying times and duration. To mitigate against a situation which may result in unnecessary high-volume workloads or potential disruptions or delays for students, we would instead recommend an upfront or lump sum student payment could be made either immediately before placement commences, or at the beginning of the semester that a placement is scheduled.

Office of the Vice-Chancellor

Because higher education providers will be responsible for administering these payments and therefore accountable for the potential risks to student experience and wellbeing, it will be important the processes and guidelines for these payments are further co-designed with the sector. This will provide clarity on the administration of Commonwealth Prac Payments, ensure consistency and equality for students, and will mitigate unintended negative consequences during implementation.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to the Universities Accord (Student Support and Other Measures) Bill 2024.

We would welcome the opportunity to provide the Senate Education and Employment Legislation Committee with further information on our submission.

Yours sincerely



Professor Rufus Black
Vice-Chancellor

3 September 2024

Committee Secretary
Senate Education and Employment Committees

By email: eec.sen@aph.gov.au

RE: Inquiry into the Universities Accord (Student Support and Other Measures) Bill 2024 – University of Tasmania response to Question on Notice

Dear Members of the Senate Education and Employment Legislation Committee

Thank you for the invitation to appear at the Public Hearing for the Universities Accord Bill 2024 on Tuesday 24 September. The University of Tasmania welcomes the introduction of the Universities Accord Bill and considers this an important step in making university education accessible for more people across Australia.

Please find attached responses to the Questions on Notice asked during the hearing and in written correspondence following our appearance. If you would like further information on the detail within our submission to the Universities Accord Bill, or our responses to these questions, please contact my office via PVC.Student.Equity.Success@utas.edu.au.

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide a response to the Universities Accord (Student Support and Other Measures) Bill 2024.

Yours sincerely



Dr James Brann
Pro Vice-Chancellor (Student Equity and Success)

Academic Division

Inquiry into the Universities Accord (Student Support and Other Measures) Bill 2024
University of Tasmania response to Questions on Notice, October 2024.

Commonwealth Prac Payment

We strongly support the introduction of Commonwealth Prac Payments for students undertaking compulsory placements in priority courses, though careful consideration needs to be given in developing the process for means testing to determine eligibility to mitigate negative impacts on students.

The current proposal requires universities to administer Prac Payments to students, rather than being administered through existing central government agencies such as Services Australia. While many universities, including ours, currently make payments to students including stipends or scholarships, the scale and frequency at which the Prac Payments need to be administered will require additional resourcing across university teams. Importantly, the potential impacts on students who will need to disclose their personal financial and income position to their education provider needs to be considered as this process is designed. This process of continued assessment could be destabilising or a barrier for students who have likely already disclosed this information to government agencies.

A process where the means testing and eligibility confirmation is completed outside of universities by the central government agencies who already collect this data would result in a simplified and improved process for students, removing the additional step of engaging with their university about their financial position. This process would also benefit from the privacy and data management processes already in place in these central agencies.

At the University of Tasmania, we take student privacy and management of personal information seriously, as outlined in our [Data and Information Governance Policy](#). While we have existing information management systems to store student information, this would not typically include the type of information required for means testing purposes. Gathering and storing financial documentation including payslips, full bank statements and Centrelink records is not currently within the usual course of operations for our university at scale, and existing systems would need to be reassessed to determine whether they are appropriate to store this type of documentation. This assessment would be aligned with the [University of Tasmania Data Classification Framework](#).

It is likely that this would require the extension of existing system functionality, or introduction of a new system, to ensure alignment with our Framework and manage the potential data risks with collecting and storing this sensitive information.

Student Services and Amenities Fees (SSAF)

Student Services and Amenities Fees (SSAF) play a pivotal role in the development and support of our students at the University of Tasmania. Through adherence to the legislative guidelines and genuine consultation with our university community, we ensure SSAF is spent on key initiatives such as clubs and societies, student led events and much needed student support avenues.

At the University of Tasmania, the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic) approves all SSAF expenditure after consultation with the wider university. All SSAF recipients are then expected to provide regular reporting and updates regarding how their SSAF allocation has been spent and the resulting impacts to student experience. All SSAF recipients are expected to be efficient with their expenditure and ensure they meet the legislative guidelines.

FEE-FREE Uni-Ready courses

At the University of Tasmania, we offer enabling and pathways programs which develop skills to equip students with the capabilities needed to undertake further university study.

One of these programs is the University Preparation Program (UPP), a free academic skills-based course which provides an alternative pathway into university. The UPP is a general pathway course which develops critical key study and foundational academic skills such as academic writing, referencing, general numeracy and science skills, and an introduction to university learning. Since 2015, this program has supported 3,400 students to build the knowledge, skills and confidence to study at university. Of these students, 52% are first in family to attend university, 38% are from a low SES background, and 65% are under the age of 24.

In addition, we also deliver a Diploma of University Studies (DUS) which provides discipline specific pathways to Nursing, Social Work, Education, Engineering, Psychology, Arts, Business, Science, ICT and Pharmacy Bachelor level courses. The structure of the DUS enables continuation of study into Bachelor level courses, by aligning specialised and tailored content to specific disciplines and providing partial credit into Bachelor courses. Since its introduction in 2018, the DUS programs have supported 3,200 students to begin their university studies – 52% who are first in family to attend university, 34% from a low SES background and 72% under the age of 24.

Students in the UPP or DUS programs do not meet the general university entry requirements for Bachelor level courses, and through these programs have alternative entry pathway and supported capability development to prepare them for university study. Together, these programs prepare and enable students to successfully transition to further study at the University of Tasmania.

Combined, over 47% of participants in these programs have continued to further study at the University of Tasmania (excluding students still currently enrolled in pathways programs in 2024). Most students have continued to Bachelor level courses (79%), while others have enrolled in Diplomas and Undergraduate Certificates. Many of these students are studying professionally aligned bachelor's degrees - including Nursing, Education and Social Work.

An opportunity exists to further develop pathways programs in line with the intent of the Australian Universities Accord and the introduction of FEE FREE Uni Ready places. Building on the success of our programs, creating pathways courses which offer students direct access to further study by allowing provision of some course credit into degree level qualifications is a successful way to encourage continuation from preparation courses to qualifications. Our student progression data shows that where pathways programs can effectively bridge the gap into the first year of university, they serve as a successful model for improving university access and reducing barriers such as time and cost of study for students. We urge for consideration of how the FEE FREE Uni Ready places can provide some credit allowance and facilitate direct or guaranteed entry to full qualifications to support the best outcomes for the students who need these courses the most.