

Committee Secretary
Senate Education and Employment Committees
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

9th September 2020

Dear Secretary,

We write on behalf of Palliative Care Social Work Australia [PCSWA] to make a submission to the enquiry into the *Higher Education Support Amendment (Job-Ready Graduates and Supporting Regional and Remote Students) Bill 2020* [Higher Education Support Amendment Bill].

PCSWA represents a national alliance of social workers who provide palliative and end of life care and bereavement support. PCSWA is committed to enhancing the provision of high quality and holistic person centred, family focused and community-oriented care. PCSWA aims to strengthen the voice of social work and to promote excellence in social work practice in the provision of psychological, social, cultural, emotional, spiritual and practical support in palliative and end of life care and bereavement. PCSWA promotes evidence based, high quality social work practice across all settings where palliative, end of life and bereavement care are delivered. Social workers across the health and community care sectors provide palliative and end of life care in a variety of health care settings and programs.

Social workers have expertise in working with structurally vulnerable groups in trauma informed ways. PCSWA request that funding for social work education remain aligned with other allied health professions, thus securing the future of social workers. This will ensure there is a growing workforce to meet the increasing demand of palliative, end of life and bereavement care, particularly for underserved populations.

The social work discipline is a critical profession in the delivery of effective and high-quality palliative, end of life and bereavement care. There are around 100,000 predictable adult deaths each year in Australia, 40,000 of which receive specialist palliative care. There are an estimated 32 children per 10,000 children aged 0-19 years living with a life limiting condition, with one child death for every sixty adult deaths in Australia.¹ A recent report *Investing to save: The economics of increased investment in palliative care in Australia* (KPMG, 2020) highlights that the need for palliative care will grow faster than both the population and total deaths, with total deaths estimated to surge by 135% to 400,000 of which 214,000 will require palliative care services. **The majority of these individuals, their families and extended social networks will receive services from a social worker in the course of their illness and in their bereavement.** Social workers provide holistic psychological, social, cultural, emotional, spiritual and practical support to individuals, their carers and families throughout a persons' illness, at end of life and in

¹ PCSWA. (2020). [Palliative & End of Life Care Social Work Standards](#).

bereavement and aim to improve and optimise quality of life for the person and their significant others.

The knowledge and abilities developed by social workers during their studies including social analysis and critical thinking skills, working with diversity and complexity which aim to optimise individual, family and community strengths, capacity and quality of life, particularly with the most vulnerable in society. Social Work is therefore critical to the future of Australian society and economy and in the provision of palliative, end of life and bereavement care. Social workers maintain a dual focus in both assisting with and improving human wellbeing and identifying and addressing any external issues (known as systemic or structural issues) that may have a negative impact, such as inequality, injustice and discrimination.²⁽²⁾

Social work graduates undertake a minimum four-year Bachelor degree, with a requirement to complete two 500 hour supervised training placements to develop competence which necessitates significant personal and economic costs. Social work students are predominantly female and mature age, suggesting that any proposed increase to student contribution or Higher Education Contribution Schemes fees will have significant impacts on formal and informal care responsibilities, as well as that of their families.³ PCSWA believes that the Higher Education Support Amendment Bill will adversely and excessively impact these students and could deter them from pursuing social work careers. Given that the long term financial, physical and mental health impacts of COVID-19 are still uncertain, it is crucial that social work degrees are affordable and accessible, in order to produce highly skilled and job-ready graduates.

The proposed changes by the government disproportionately impact mature-age students, women, people in minority groups, including those from culturally diverse and Aboriginal backgrounds and people from rural and remote communities. Several accredited social work courses are offered at rural or regional universities, with many graduates going on to secure employment in these locations. 40% of social workers who are members of the Australian Association of Social Workers practice in regional, rural and remote regions.² PCSWA is concerned that the current iteration of the Higher Education Support Amendment Bill removes references to Commonwealth supported regional loading grants, which was a key provision of Commonwealth funding agreements in the *Higher Education Support Act 2003* (paragraph 30-25). Social work is an allied health profession that plays an active role in the delivery of quality palliative, end of life and bereavement care to people living in rural, regional and remote areas.

The growing demand for palliative care dictates a commensurate workforce is able to meet growing demand in Australia. The Australian Governments' recommended changes to university fees will impact the number of students undertaking a social work undergraduate degree. This, in turn, will impact the future workforce capability to meet the demands for highly qualified staff that can meet comprehensive and complex psychosocial needs for those receiving palliative, end of life and bereavement care. Palliative and End of Life Care is a rapidly progressing area with increasing psychosocial and medico-legal complexity. Social work has a fundamental

² AASW (2018). [Submission to Medicare Benefits Schedule Review Re: Mental Health.](#)

³ Australian Council of Heads of Social Work. (2020). [Save Social Work Australia](#)



commitment to social justice and human rights which positions the profession as a leader with expertise in analysing, advocating for and implementing system and policy change around health and social inequities that impact access to, and utilisation of, palliative and end of life care and bereavement services.¹ 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.³ At the individual patient level, social workers assess social determinants of health and target psychosocial interventions to enhance quality of life of individuals and families and address any structural barriers that impact on equitable access to support and care.¹

PCSWA strongly asserts that equitable access to higher education for all people interested in doing social work is essential. Imposing high fees will place a disincentive or greater burden on those aspiring to undertake a social work university degree and who seek a career in palliative care. Social workers are essential in contributing to enhancing the quality of life of those receiving palliative, end of life and bereavement care and contributing to Australia's knowledge and expertise in the psychosocial needs and care at end of life and in bereavement, now and in the future. **There is a rapidly growing workforce required to meet the increasing demand of palliative, end of life and bereavement care. Social work is a critical discipline that will be required to fulfill the Australian Governments aspirations to deliver high quality, comprehensive palliative, end of life and bereavement care now and in the future.**

Yours Sincerely,

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