

**A Submission to the Australian Universities Accord
April 2023**

**Response to the Australian Universities Accord
Discussion Paper: February 2023**

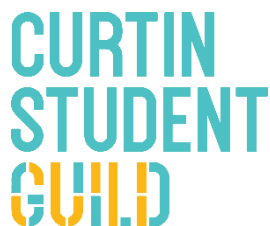
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Introduction

The Curtin Student Guild was established in 1969 to provide essential services, represent the interests, and advocate on behalf of students at Curtin University. We believe that students are the key and most important stakeholders in tertiary education and that reform to Universities is of urgent need. The Guild welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Australian Universities Accord and has responded to the questions outlined in the attached summary table.

Acknowledgement

The Curtin Student Guild pays respects to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members of our communities. It acknowledges the Wadjuck people of the Noongar Nation and Wongutha people of the North Eastern Goldfields who are the first peoples of the land in which the Student Guild operates. This is stolen land that was never ceded.

Alternative Formats

This submission can be made available in alternative accessible formats upon request to **hello@guild.curtin.edu.au**.

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The role of higher education in Australia's future

Q1 How should an Accord be structured and focused to meet the challenges facing Australia's higher education system? What is needed to overcome limitations in the current approach to Australian higher education?

Higher Education in Australia is limited by inadequate funding and flawed Government policy. It is weighed down by onerous administration, and it fails to support its most vulnerable students.

The Accord should focus on how to create an equitable system that encourages and supports participation and funds education as a long-term economic and social investment.

Universities are more expensive than ever before as students are poorer than they have been for generations. The Accord must consider how students today are working more than they have before and are therefore less capable of contributing hours toward their education and fundamental extracurricular activity.

We invite the Chair of the Accord panel to directly engage with the student unions who have made submissions to the Accord's consultation process, to ensure that the student voice is central to the structure of Australian higher education.

Challenges and opportunities for Australia

Q5 How do the current structures of institutions, regulation and funding in higher education help or hinder Australia's ability to meet these challenges? What needs to change?

Universities face structural challenges as they are hampered by declining Government funding in real terms, rigid funding policies and increasing administrative burden.

Further, inadequate funding of student unions, which often provide valuable services to students, has adversely impacted the student experience in terms of retention and well-being. Student unions are the most appropriate providers of services and amenities that support student engagement, well-being and quality of education.

The higher education sector is also hindered by the lack of fairness, transparency, and regulation of Vice Chancellor (VC) and senior executive remuneration. VCs should not be remunerated ten times more (per recent estimates)¹ than the average lecturer, especially in the light of significant staff reduction and workforce casualisation within Universities across Australia. Public Australian universities are primarily taxpayer-funded, and the exorbitant salaries of the VCs across Australia hinder the quality of education as a public good. The education sector would benefit from mandatory disclosure of VC and Senior Staff remuneration and such remuneration set by the Salaries and Allowances Tribunal in their respective states just like any other senior public officer. If a move to federally legislate University enabling legislation is made, then these salaries should be set by the Commonwealth Remuneration Tribunal.

The Curtin Student Guild recommends:

- Capping Vice Chancellor and Senior Executive Salaries and enforcing greater transparency by having them set by the Salaries and Allowances Tribunal

¹ Guthrie, James (2022) Accounting for Vice Chancellors' Salaries: Greater Transparency and Accountability are Necessary. Campus Morning Mail. <https://campusmorningmail.com.au/news/accounting-for-vice-chancellors-salaries/>

Challenges and opportunities for the higher education system

Q9 How should Australia ensure enough students are studying courses that align with the changing needs of the economy and society?

Q48 What principles should underpin the setting of student contributions and Higher Education Loan Program arrangements?

The National Skills Commission concluded that meeting Australia's future needs will require a skilled workforce and a university degree will be requisite for more than half of the jobs created in the next five years. The 2022 Skills Priority List identified healthcare, IT, and teaching as critical areas of demand.²

Financial hardship while studying and ballooning student loan obligations are barriers to student participation in the areas of economic and social need. Student debt is increasing, and the repayment burden is compromising graduate living standards. The private benefits of higher education rationale³ are not providing graduates with a significant lift in earnings and as noted in Curtin Student Guild's initial submission to the Accord, wider trends in the job market, including workforce insecurity and lower real salaries, impact young people's financial outcomes.

The Jobs Ready package as a price signalling mechanism has failed to manipulate student course selection, yet it has led to increased contribution payments for many students, increased administration requirements and reduced Government funding which according to the NTEU has resulted in a 15% cut in real public funding per student. It has also led to disproportionately causing equity groups to lose their commonwealth-supported places from the 'low completion rate' conditions imposed on students.

The Governments of Australia have improved access to jobs and skills training through the various 'fee-free TAFE' initiatives. Similarly, steps to fully fund free education will create a productivity dividend in the workforce.

The Australia Institute calculates that providing free undergraduate education to all Australian citizens and permanent residents would amount to a yearly cost of \$3.1 billion.⁴ Investing in higher education is vital, as it has the potential to significantly boost productivity and result in substantial economic returns.

Currently, more than 2.9 million people are burdened with student debt, with an average balance of \$23,685.⁵ This represents a notable increase from the 2012 average of \$15,191 and is expected to rise even more under the JRG initiative. On average, it takes individuals nearly a decade to pay off this debt, negatively affecting their financial prospects during their early years in the workforce.

It is essential for the new government to prioritise eliminating this unnecessary debt, as doing so would help reduce generational inequality. A plan to wipe out all student debt was estimated to cost an estimated \$33 billion over the forward estimates and \$60.7 billion over a ten-year period.⁶ This investment is a fraction of the \$184 billion projected expense of the Stage 3 tax cuts and could yield significant long-term benefits through an educated, skilled, and productive workforce that will contribute to the overall economy.

² National Skills Commission 2022 Priority List
<https://www.nationalskillscommission.gov.au/news/2022-skills-priority-list-released>

³ Norton Andrew. 2022. The public-private balance: A failed rationale for setting student contributions
<https://andrewnorton.net.au/2022/10/06/the-public-private-balance-a-failed-rationale-for-setting-student-contributions/>

⁴ Ai report 52

⁵ https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/FlagPost/2021/November/HELP-2020-21

⁶ Ai report 52

The Curtin Student Guild recommends:

- Waiving HECS repayment if graduates take jobs in areas or locations of identified demand
- Incentivising students with free university courses in areas of identified demand and/ or Government industries similar to the fee-free TAFE model.
- Reducing student contributions to reduce financial burden on young Australians
- The introduction of Federal legislation that guarantees recognised student unions 100% control over the student services and amenities funding to deliver greater student experience and satisfaction.
- Abandoning the Jobs Ready Package which places undue financial burden on students and the university sector
- Abolishing the indexation of HECS debt and raising the minimum repayment threshold and tying it to the median wage.
- Shifting towards a model of fully-funded, free education, similar to models seen in Germany, Denmark, Sweden and Norway.

Q14 How should placement arrangements and work-integrated learning in higher education change in the decades ahead?

Work-integrated learning (WIL) is an invaluable experience that prepares students for their careers. However, placements have also served as a form of severe financial burden and stress for many students. Recent cost of living increases have put pressure on students to increase the amount of paid work on top of their university work. Unpaid practical placements make this situation worse as many students have to reduce or cease their casual employment to accommodate their WIL hours.⁷ For some students, reducing their paid employment is not a severely difficult option and thus students are forced to overload paid work with unpaid WIL, which leads to students dropping out of placements or counter-productive WIL experiences.

All students should be equitably remunerated for the hours they are working in their placement if it is currently unpaid. Forgoing paid employment, unpaid placements and WIL experiences can place financial burdens on students, including costs such as transportation, accommodation, and professional supplies/attire, which may be challenging for some students to afford, particularly those from equity backgrounds. WIL remuneration could be achieved in the form of a universal bursary as a provision of Services Australia.

The development of an interest-free HELP loan for placement and work-integrated learning-related expenses should be created. This would provide students with a means to borrow funds to cover expenses incurred during their placement or WIL program and repay the loan once they have completed their studies and are in a better financial position. We recommend the creation of a WIL-HELP scheme to assist with the increased financial burdens of Work-Integrated Learning in addition to paid mandatory placements.

A system that delivers new knowledge, innovation and capability

Q25 How should Australia leverage its research capacity overall and use it more effectively to develop new capabilities and solve wicked problems?

Q26 How can Australia stimulate greater industry investment in research and more effective collaboration?

⁷ Burmas, Grace. (2022). WA Students Struggle to Pay Bills, Buy Food While Undertaking 1,000 Hours of Mandatory Unpaid Work. ABC NEWS.
<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-10-22/students-doing-unpaid-mandatory-work-receive-little-support/101554620>

Research for discovery or fundamental research as opposed to applied research is crucial to the development of new technologies and capabilities. Research with no practical use in mind has historically led to significant discoveries of many innovations we now take for granted. Discoveries made from fundamental research become the bedrock of future discoveries in applied research.⁸

Increasing the opportunity for researchers to obtain funding for fundamental research may not have immediate effects, however, the discoveries from this research have the potential to position Australia long into the future and give it the capabilities for solving wicked problems. If Australia makes new fundamental discoveries it elevates its standing internationally as a place to both train in, and conduct research.

Better integration of research programs and students with community partners and relevant stakeholders to conduct and disseminate research that can be better applied to complex wicked problems. This could be achieved by better supporting those with a vested interest or those experiencing those problems to encourage them to pursue a career in research. Many wicked problems disproportionately affect equity groups that are under-represented in research fields related to the problems affecting them.

Research into key areas can be encouraged by offering tax breaks to companies that fund university research and government co-contribution in specific research areas where the government wants more investment. Incentives for research investment from industry reduce the funding burden on the government. Collaboration between industry and universities also has the potential to create internship opportunities for PhD candidates and better prepare graduates for industry.

Q27 How can we improve research training in Australia including improving pathways for researchers to gain experience and develop high-impact careers in government and industry?

In 2022 the minimum RTP stipend dropped below the Henderson poverty line for the first time since 2008.⁹ The 2022 rate also falls \$3,298 below the minimum wage (after tax), this is more than 10% below the minimum wage.^{10 11}

Research candidates are vital contributors to the academic community and deserve to be remunerated accordingly. They publish papers, present at conferences, and their findings contribute to the betterment of society and the understanding of their chosen fields. The product of their research often leads to the commercialisation of technologies which in turn strengthens the Australian economy and attracts foreign investment.

By investing in Higher Degree by Research (HDR) students by giving them a living wage students' dependence on outside work commitments can be reduced, giving them more time to focus on their research and reducing the already high levels of stress that accompanies undertaking a Higher Degree by Research.

Many students have the option to earn three to five times the stipend rate in industry as a graduate and paying them less than the lowest-paid workers holds no incentive for the type of high-quality mind suited for research to pursue a research degree. An increase in the stipend rate may contribute to

⁸ Ceejay Lee, & Rebecca Clements. (2019, January 28). Not So Basic Research: The unrecognized importance of fundamental scientific discoveries. *Science in the News*. <https://sitn.hms.harvard.edu/flash/2019/not-so-basic-research-the-unrecognized-importance-of-fundamental-scientific-discoveries/>

⁹ Garland, Nathan & Breward, Shaun. (2022). How are PhD students meant to survive on two-thirds of the minimum wage? The Conversation. <https://theconversation.com/how-are-phd-students-meant-to-survive-on-two-thirds-of-the-minimum-wage-185138>

¹⁰ Australian Government: Fair Work Ombudsman. (2022). Minimum Wages - What is the current national minimum wage? <https://www.fairwork.gov.au/tools-and-resources/fact-sheets/minimum-workplace-entitlements/minimum-wages>

¹¹ Australian Government: Department of Education. (2022). Research training program. Research Training Program stipend rates. <https://www.education.gov.au/research-block-grants/research-training-program>

higher-quality research candidates and research outputs at Australian Universities.

Many Australian universities have already taken steps to address the underpayment of HDR students. In 2022, only eight of Australia's universities had base stipend rates above the minimum rate. Compare this with twenty-three Universities in 2023 offering base stipends above the minimum RTP rate. Universities have already recognised and taken the first step in improving remuneration for HDR students, it is time for the Federal Government to follow their lead and increase the minimum rate and associated funding to an appropriate level, equal to or above the minimum wage.

The scheme tying PhD internship completion to funding is a good initiative, however, some of the program details have the potential to create inequity. Opportunities for internships exist within some, but not all, areas of research. This inequity in opportunity can lead to some candidates missing out on vital research support funds.

If the government were to offer more research funding for HDR candidates in the form of grants specifically for candidates or attach requirements for a minimum number of PhDs to be supported from grants for certain projects then further targeted investment in research training can be achieved.

Shifting the culture within institutions, and attitudes towards HDR candidates from them being students to them being candidates and junior academics, apprenticing with an advisor, to become a fully-fledged researcher is key to increasing the number of people choosing to enter research and decreasing the number of people who do not complete their research degree. Too often people leave academia because of its toxic culture. Treating HDRs with greater respect and providing them with better financial security completions will increase morale and productivity of candidates. HDR candidates conduct research, publish, and represent their institutions and this country the same as more senior academics and they should be treated with the respect this should afford them.¹²

Of great concern to potential HDR candidates is the student debt already incurred and undergraduates, whilst many research degree course fees are covered by government, industry, and institution support it is important to note that when a person is undertaking their research degree their debt is growing from annual indexation. There is little opportunity to make HECS repayments whilst undertaking a higher degree by research. The living stipend that is already inadequate to cover basic living expenses is nowhere near enough to start making repayments on existing student debt and whilst everyone else is earning 3-5 times as much as you, paying off or at least keeping their debt from growing, the debt of research candidates simply grows for however many years it takes to complete your research program. The government should consider further incentivising research degrees by eliminating previously incurred debt under HELP loan programs for those who choose to undertake research degrees.

Creating opportunity for all Australians

Q28 What is needed to increase the number of people from under-represented groups applying to and prepared for higher education, both from school and from other pathways?

The Curtin Student Guild recommends the continued provision of alternative pathways to higher education for under-represented groups. This could include programs such as bridging courses, foundation programs, or vocational education and training (VET) pathways that provide opportunities for students who may not have followed the traditional academic route to enter higher education. These alternative pathways can help students develop the necessary skills, knowledge, and confidence to succeed in higher education, particularly if they may not have had access to the same educational opportunities or resources as others.

¹² Justin Zobel. (2021). *HDR Candidates: Students or Researchers?* ACGR. <https://www.acgr.edu.au/impact-blog/hdr-candidates-students-or-researchers/>

An emphasis on creating a supportive and inclusive learning environment that accommodates the diverse needs of under-represented groups is important for attracting and, more importantly, retaining such students. This includes providing appropriate academic and non-academic support services, such as tutoring, mentoring, counselling, and disability services, to ensure that students from under-represented groups feel welcomed, supported, and empowered to succeed in their higher education journey. It also involves promoting diversity and inclusion in campus culture, curriculum, and policies, and addressing any barriers or biases that may hinder access and participation for under-represented groups. In order for these types of initiatives to be implemented successfully, research indicates that there needs to be commitment broadly from student-facing teaching staff to support students utilising non-academic support services.¹³ With this in mind, staff welfare and workloads need to be considered, planned and monitored to accommodate the additional support and considerations teaching staff would be undertaking in this initiative.

The Curtin Student Guild firmly believes that lowering the age of independence to 18 years will open up a much-needed avenue of financial assistance for many, boosting participation from under-represented groups and helping alleviate the cost of participation. As noted in the ECU report on retaining under-represented students; for low SES students, balancing study commitments along with work commitments to stay afloat financially is a significant barrier to entry and a major contributor to university withdrawals.¹⁴ Investment in government allowances for young people who wish to study higher education is crucial for attraction and retention. The age of independence is a hindrance to many elements of the higher education sector and is thus further explored in response to Q31.

Curtin Student Guild recommends:

- The continued provision of alternative pathways to under-represented groups.
- Providing support within an enabling learning environment.¹⁵
- Lowering the age of independence to 18 years

Q31 How can the costs of participation, including living expenses, be most effectively alleviated?

As noted in its earlier submission to the Accord, the Curtin Student Guild supports the National Union of Students (NUS) recommendation (2022-2023 Pre-Budget Submissions) to lower the age of independence from 22 years old to 18 years old by 2025.

This will boost participation from under-represented groups and help alleviate the cost of participation.

The majority of students who commence tertiary studies are under the age of 22 and they do not qualify for any Government support for all or the majority of an undergraduate degree.

According to the NUS, 450,000 Australian students cannot access Youth Allowance payments because they are under the age of independence of 22 years old.

At the same time, the NUS has noted that for all 173,945 students on Youth Allowance payments, the rate of Government financial support they are receiving is below the poverty line. The current maximum daily rate of Youth Allowance if you're declared independent and are single with no children is \$13,790 per annum, with an additional rate of \$3,790.80 per annum for rent assistance if you're eligible, totalling \$17,580.80 per annum income. The official Henderson poverty line amount for a single person with housing costs is \$31,786.04 per year, meaning that even at the independent rate of payment with rent assistance students receive income less than 60% of the poverty line.

Students must have financial stability to be able to complete a higher education degree.

¹³ Lane, J. M., & Sharp, S. (2014). Pathways to success: Evaluating the use of "enabling pedagogies" in a university transition course. *GSTF Journal on Education*, 2(1), 72.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 67.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 66-73

Government policy should be tailored to help students reduce working hours so they can focus more on their studies. Students who are studying and working face rising cost of living challenges forcing many to work long hours to afford rent, food, and other expenses. As noted by the NUS, students who work more than 20 hours per week are at risk of lower grades and higher drop-out rates.

Unpaid placements add additional financial stress to students who either wind back or stop their casual employment.¹⁶ This is an issue affecting both domestic and international students. Many students are forced to work seven days across their placements, with paid work on weekends necessary to make ends meet.

The Curtin Student Guild endorses the NUS recommendations to address the challenge of participation:

1. Increase parental means threshold and include more generous allowances for those who live out of home: To ensure that students from low-income families are not excluded from education. This would allow more students to access Centrelink support and reduce the need for them to work long hours.
2. Reduce Centrelink deductions and increase the rate of Youth Allowance to above the poverty line.
3. Increase rental assistance in line with average market rates: The current rental assistance rates for students are not keeping up with the market rates for rent. This is especially needed for regional students and those who need to live away from home.
4. Tailor Government policy to reduce the need for increased working hours: Students who work more than 20 hours per week are at risk of lower grades and higher drop-out rates.
5. Ensure placements/ internships are paid either by the employer or a new government welfare program. This is so that students who have to give up work to undertake these programs for their course can still afford to live.

Quality and sustainability

**Q39 What reforms are needed to ensure that all students have a quality student experience?
Q40 What changes are needed to ensure all students are physically and culturally safe while studying?**

Improving Student Experience and the Underfunded Student Guild

The Student Guilds in Western Australia are almost entirely funded by the Student Services and Amenities Fee (SSAF). Uniquely in WA, 50% is guaranteed by legislation rather than an ongoing year-by-year negotiation.¹⁷ While this is positive and enables our Guild to not deal with a conflict of interest when representing enrolled students, the minimum SSAF collection is not legislated. This means that even though our organisations provide high-level quality student experience to part-time, online, offshore and international students. Universities can unilaterally decide to not levy a fee against these individuals. Further, Student Unions more effectively expend student money, tailoring programs and student experience initiatives to the needs of our students.

Figures retrieved from SSAF reporting highlight like-for-like comparisons between the two organisations.¹⁸ While the University had a much greater attendance of staff and non-student visitors

¹⁶ Burmas, Grace. (2022). WA Students Struggle to Pay Bills, Buy Food While Undertaking 1,000 Hours of Mandatory Unpaid Work. ABC NEWS.

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-10-22/students-doing-unpaid-mandatory-work-receive-littlesupport/101554620>

¹⁷ WALW - Curtin University Act 1966—Home Page. Retrieved 11 April 2023, from

https://www.legislation.wa.gov.au/legislation/statutes.nsf/main_mrtitle_235_homepage.html

¹⁸ Student Guild Internal Report / SSAF Expenditure Report (2022)

to their events and involvement in their few clubs, the Guild's clubs and events are solely focused on enhancing the student experience:

2022 Figures	University (Area: 4 x Events / Activations + Clubs under University)	Student Guild (Area: 30+ x Events / Activations + Clubs under Guild)
Total SSAF Expenditure (including staffing & overhead)	\$419 244	\$1 134 046
Total Student Attendees (non-unique)	754	56 175
Cost per Student Attendee	\$556	\$20

The government should entrust student unions to receive 100% of the Student Services and Amenities Fee (SSAF) and mandate that it be fully levied against all students because student unions are better positioned to address the unique needs and concerns of their members, as opposed to the inefficient university sector. Student unions maintain a direct connection with the student body and prioritise their well-being, while universities, on the other hand, may have conflicting interests, such as financial pressures or reputation management, that could undermine student-focused initiatives. By entrusting the entire SSAF to student unions, funds can be more effectively allocated to specialised services, such as academic advocacy and support for clubs and societies, ensuring a tailored response to student requirements. The democratic, grassroots decision-making structure of student unions guarantees greater accountability, transparency, and student participation in the allocation of SSAF funds, leading to more efficient and targeted spending that benefits the entire student community, in contrast to the university sector, which may not always prioritise student interests in the same manner.

The Curtin Student Guild in summary affirms that the Guild, if in receipt of control of the expenditure of student fees, could deliver the following positive outcomes:

- Focus on student needs: Student unions, by their nature, are created to represent and advocate for the needs and interests of students. This direct connection to the student body means that they have a better understanding of the issues and priorities that students face, and can allocate SSAF funds more effectively to address those needs.
- Grassroots decision-making: Student unions tend to have more decentralised and democratic decision-making structures, where students have a say in how funds are allocated. This leads to a more transparent and participatory process, which can help ensure that funds are used more effectively and efficiently to address student concerns.
- Specialised services: Student unions, including the Curtin Student Guild, often provide a range of services specifically tailored to the needs of students, such as academic advocacy, legal advice, and support for clubs and societies. These specialised services can help ensure that SSAF funds are used to directly benefit students in ways that universities may not be able to provide on their own.
- Greater accountability: Student unions are typically accountable to their members, which means that they must be transparent in their financial management and decision-making. This can help ensure that SSAF funds are allocated and spent more efficiently, and can also help to minimise waste and mismanagement.

The Curtin Student Guild recommends:

- Amendment of the *Higher Education Support Act 2003* to:
 - ensure that student services and amenities fee is levied in full to all students unless reduced (either in whole or for specific populations) by unanimous consent of the Student Unions and organisations in receipt of the Student Services and Amenities Fee.
 - guarantee that 100% of the receipt of student services and amenities fee be provided without University level restriction to the relevant student organisation(s).
 - not allow providers to impose undue restriction on the expenditure and operations of the student organisations including preventing the levy of commercial leases, collection fees, venue booking fees or other restrictions on the capacity of the student union to perform its duties.
- Fully funding universal student unionism will deliver greater student experience and satisfaction.

Duty of Care

Curtin Student Guild has recommended the introduction of a Duty of Care similar to the New Zealand model to be codesigned and overseen by student unions which incorporates:¹⁹

- Physical and mental health awareness and support.
- Proactive monitoring and responsive well-being and safety practices.
- Additional well-being and safety practices in tertiary student accommodation.
- Accommodation staff requirements.
- Accommodation administrative practices and contracts.
- Student accommodation facilities and services.
- Additional well-being and safety practices for international students.
- Reporting and publishing obligations.
- Reporting breaches of the code.
- Responding to complaints.

Implementing a Duty of Care practice will have a significant benefit in improving the safety of students in Australia. Firstly, mental health services will be prioritised, providing essential assistance to those in need. International students will receive greater support across a range of areas, recognising the unique challenges they face. There will be greater transparency and accountability when it comes to accommodation providers, ensuring students have access to safe and suitable living conditions. Lastly, standard protocols for complaints and resolution will be established, providing a clear and fair process for addressing any issues that may arise. Overall, students deserve to feel safe and establishing a Duty of Care Code of Practice will help to create a more supportive and secure environment for students.

A Duty of Care provision for universities supports the recommendations of the Productivity Commission's 2020 Mental Health Inquiry²⁰ which called for better mental health support for tertiary students specifically:

- Expanding online mental health support and collecting de-identified data to inform service improvement.

¹⁹ New Zealand Government: Ministry of Education. (2021). Education (Pastoral Care of Tertiary and International Learners) Code of Practice 2021. Ministry of Education. <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/everyone-assumes-universities-have-a-duty-of-care-towards-students-our-campaign-would-establish-one/>

²⁰ Australian Government: Productivity Commission. (2020). Productivity Commission: Inquiry Report: Mental Health 1(1). Mental Health. <https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/mental-health/report/mental-health-volume1.pdf>

- Ensuring international students are adequately covered for mental health treatment and counselling services meet language and cultural diversity needs.
- Requiring all tertiary providers to have a mental health and well-being strategy as part of registration.
- Monitoring and disseminating information on best practice interventions by Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) and Australian Skills Quality Authority (ASQA).

National Student Safety Survey

The findings of the National Student Safety Survey report 2021 show that sexual assault and sexual harassment is endemic in universities throughout Australia. 1 in 6 students have experienced some form of sexual violence since commencing university and only 1 in 30 students report any incident.²¹

Curtin Student Guild endorses the key avenues of action recommended in the National Student Safety Survey report 2021:²²

- Acknowledging the role of gender as well as intersecting discrimination and marginalisation in driving sexual harassment and sexual assault.
- Taking proactive measures to improve inclusivity and safe learning environments for gender and sexuality-diverse students and those with a disability.
- Promoting safety and respect within residential student accommodation settings.
- Preventing sexual harassment and sexual assault from university staff including in the context of postgraduate supervision.
- Raising awareness among students and staff of the reporting processes within the university and the avenues of support available.
- Improving reporting and support pathways for students who have both university context and other experiences of sexual harassment and/or sexual assault.
- Addressing attitudes that minimise, excuse, or blame the victim/survivors of sexual harassment and sexual assault, particularly in higher-risk settings.
- Adequately resourcing sexual harassment and sexual assault response and prevention strategies.

Q43 How should the current recovery in international education be managed to increase the resilience and sustainability of Australia's higher education system, including through diversification of student enrolments from source countries?

Increasing the number of international and local students studying together is part of the solution identified by the Australian Strategy for International Education. Fostering more connections between international and domestic students will establish more people-to-people links within the region, mitigate social isolation and discrimination against international students, and improve social cohesion.²³

While student visa requirements have been recently relaxed, there is no automatic pathway from a student visa to a permanent residency visa in Australia. However, demand is strong with 63,000 Temporary Graduate visas granted in 2020.²⁴

²¹ Heywood, W., Myers, P., Powell, A., Meikle, G., & Nguyen, D. (2022). National Student Safety Survey: Report on the prevalence of sexual harassment and sexual assault among university students in 2021. Melbourne: The Social Research Centre.

²² Ibid.

²³ Australian Government: Department of Education. (2021). Australian Strategy for International Education 2021-2030. <https://www.education.gov.au/australian-strategy-international-education-2021-2030>

²⁴ Australian Government: Department of Home Affairs. (2020) Student Visa and Temporary Graduate Visa Program Report. <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/research-and-stats/files/student-temporary-grad-program-report-june-2020.pdf>

Offering a proportion of Commonwealth Supported Places to international students who are enrolled in courses where there is a long-term skills need and who commit to staying in Australia for a specified period and/or permanently will assist in meeting the demand for skilled workers. International student graduates are ideally placed as they have been educated in Australia, have undertaken local placements, have local work experience and are invested in the community.

At the same time, the university sector and governments must provide adequate support to international students who face many challenges including isolation, financial hardship, wage exploitation, visa restrictions and discrimination.

Australia is a highly respected place to undertake a higher degree by research and international students make up 33% of the research student population.²⁵ Their contributions to Australian research are invaluable and yet only 10% of Research Training Program (RTP) funding is allowed to be allocated by universities to international students. This limit should be removed and Universities should be allowed to allocate RTP places to the best students rather than preferentially offering scholarships to domestic students who are less suitable to undertake a research degree.

The Guild is aware Permanent Residents and others who receive Commonwealth Supported Places but restricted from accessing student loans can lose access to education when in financial crisis and unable to fund the significant upfront costs.

We also recommend the Accord consider the issues of global campuses of Australian Universities. These campuses often have an increased risk of poorer quality learning and teaching, academic integrity issues,²⁶ English language difficulty and fewer student extracurricular experiences and often lack student representation/advocacy.²⁷

An Accord process focused on these global campuses should be within the lens of equitable access to educational resources, support services, and opportunities for meaningful engagement across all campuses. The review should ensure that these global campuses adhere to consistent standards of quality and inclusivity, while encouraging a diverse, culturally-rich learning environment that fosters seamless student exchange and collaboration, thus strengthening both the international reputation and reach of Australian higher education.

Investment and affordability

Q49 Which aspects of the JRG package should be altered, and which should be retained?

The Jobs Ready Graduate package and the low completion rate requirements should be abolished. Higher education funding models need to be overhauled with a fairer and more equitable basis for course fees and funding.

The Productivity Commission's 5-year Productivity Inquiry: From Learning to Growth²⁸ noted that using differential subsidies to encourage students toward courses in which there was a perceived economic or social need was flawed and methods for comparing the relative benefits of various courses in order to decide the level of funding support are not reliable or, at a conceptual level, even valid.

The outcomes have been:

²⁵International Students in Australia Statistics (2023)

<https://www.studying-in-australia.org/international-students-in-australia-statistics/>

²⁶ Curtin University TEQSA Internal Report. (2022).

²⁷ Curtin Singapore Student Committee Interviews. (2023).

²⁸ Australian Government: Productivity Commission. (2022). 5-year Productivity Inquiry: From learning to growth. Australian Government Productivity Commission Interim report 5(1)

<https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/current/productivity/interim5-learning/productivity-interim5-learning.pdf>

- Inequity for students
- An administration burden to universities
- Universities are receiving less funding per student to teach courses according to the NTEU
- The changes deliver a 15% cut in real public funding per student and a 7% increase in average student contributions.
- The policy effectively reduces the overall government contribution to degrees from 58% to 52%, with student contributions lifting from 42% to 48% to pay for more places without extra government funding and a 6% decline in overall student-related income per Equivalent Full-Time Student Load (EFTSL).
- The gap between the cheapest and most expensive course has more than doubled to \$10,550 a year.²⁹
- Failure of the assumption that price signalling could manipulate student course selection, which was one of the major aims of the legislation.
- Inflation has been exacerbated, and in some cities, the increased price of education has been the main driver for increased inflation.³⁰

The completion rate requirement is flawed because:

- Equity groups will likely be most adversely impacted.
- It encourages students to swap courses to stay enrolled or move to part-time studies.
- It could lead to higher failure rates as part-time students are more likely to fail or leave university than their full-time counterparts.³¹
- The problem of non-participating enrolments can in part be attributed to concurrent enrolments at multiple universities which can be identified with improved government data sharing and the Universal Student Identifier (USI).
- There are different degrees, and reasons why students fail and universities should have the discretion to look at individual circumstances instead of being forced to adopt a one size fits all approach.
- Increased administration on behalf of universities to identify and report on students who do not meet the 50% threshold.
- Need for increased support, but without increased funding, to assist students who are at risk or meet the criteria for low completion.
- It is expensive and resource-heavy to ensure that university policy complies with the new legislation and universities may have modified processes around unsatisfactory academic progress and special consideration.³²
- Disengaged students are not protected from incurring debt.

Dylan Botica

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Mitch Craig

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²⁹ The Conversation. (2022). The inequity of Job-ready Graduates for students must be brought to a quick end. Here's how. <https://theconversation.com/the-inequity-of-job-ready-graduates-for-students-must-be-brought-to-a-quick-end-heres-how-183808>

³⁰ DASSH. (2022). DASSH calls for fee shake up in light of new CPI figures. <https://dassh.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/DASSH-statement-March-CPI-education-figures.pdf>

³¹ Grattan Institute. (2018). Dropping Out the Benefits and Costs of University. Report No. 2018-07. <https://grattan.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/904-dropping-out-the-benefits-and-costs-of-trying-university.pdf>

³² Student Progression: Are you ready for 2022 changes? Ian Thompson 06/08/2021. DVE Solutions <https://www.dvesolutions.com.au/2021/08/06/student-progression-are-you-ready-for-2022-changes/>

Overview

<p>Q1 How should an Accord be structured and focused to meet the challenges facing Australia's higher education system?</p>	<p>The Accord should focus on how to create an equitable system that encourages and supports participation and funds education as a long-term economic and social investment.</p>
<p>Q1 What is needed to overcome limitations in the current approach to Australian higher education?</p>	<p>The Accord must consider how students today are working more than they have before and are therefore less capable of contributing hours toward their education and fundamental extracurricular activity.</p>
<p>Q5 How do the current structures of institutions, regulation and funding in higher education help or hinder Australia's ability to meet these challenges? What needs to change?</p>	<p>The Curtin Student Guild recommends:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Capping Vice Chancellor and Senior Executive Salaries and enforcing greater transparency by having them set by the Salaries and Allowances Tribunal.
<p>Q9 How should Australia ensure enough students are studying courses that align with the changing needs of the economy and society?</p>	<p>The Curtin Student Guild recommends:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Waiving HECS repayment if graduates take jobs in areas or locations of identified demand ● Incentivising students with free university courses in areas of identified demand and/ or Government industries similar to the fee-free TAFE model. ● Reducing student contributions to reduce financial burden on young Australians ● The introduction of Federal legislation that guarantees recognised student unions 100% control over the student services and amenities funding to deliver greater student experience and satisfaction. ● Abandoning the Jobs Ready Package which places undue financial burden on students and the university sector ● Abolishing the indexation of HECS debt and raising the minimum repayment threshold and tying it to the median wage. ● Shifting towards a model of fully-funded, free education, similar to models seen in Germany, Denmark, Sweden and Norway. ● Capping Vice Chancellor and Senior Staff Salaries and enforcing greater transparency by having them set by the Salaries and Allowances Tribunal.

<p>Q14 How should placement arrangements and work-integrated learning in higher education change in the decades ahead?</p>	<p>Work-integrated learning remuneration can be achieved in the form of a university bursary as a provision of Services Australia. All students should be equitably remunerated for the hours they are working in their placement if it is currently unpaid. Including forgoing paid employment, unpaid placements and WIL experiences can place financial burdens on students, including costs such as transportation, accommodation, and professional supplies/attire</p>
<p>Q25 How should Australia leverage its research capacity overall and use it more effectively to develop new capabilities and solve wicked problems?</p>	<p>The Curtin Student Guild recommends:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Increasing the opportunity for researchers to obtain funding for fundamental research. ● Better integration of research programs and students with community partners and relevant stakeholders to conduct and disseminate research that can be better applied to complex wicked problems.
<p>Q26 How can Australia stimulate greater industry investment in research and more effective collaboration?</p>	<p>The Curtin Student Guild recommends offering tax breaks to companies that fund university research and government co-contribution in specific research areas where the government wants more investment. Incentives for research investment from industry reduce the funding burden on the government. Collaboration between industry and universities also has the potential to create internship opportunities for PhD candidates and better prepare graduates for industry.</p>
<p>Q27 How can we improve research training in Australia including improving pathways for researchers to gain experience and develop high-impact careers in government and industry?</p>	<p>Investing in Higher Degree by Research (HDR) students by giving them a living wage will reduce students' dependence on outside work commitments, giving them more time to focus on their research and reducing the already high levels of stress that accompanies undertaking a Higher Degree by Research.</p>
<p>Q28 What is needed to increase the number of people from under-represented groups applying to and prepared for higher education, both from school and from other pathways?</p>	<p>The Curtin Student Guild recommends:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The continued provision of alternative pathways to under-represented groups. ● Providing support with an enabling learning environment. ● Lowering the age of independence to 18 years.

<p>Q31 How can the costs of participation, including living expenses, be most effectively alleviated?</p>	<p>The Curtin Student Guild endorses the NUS recommendations to address the challenge of participation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Increase parental means threshold and include more generous allowances for those who live out of home: To ensure that students from low-income families are not excluded from education. This would allow more students to access Centrelink support and reduce the need for them to work long hours. ● Reduce Centrelink deductions and increase the rate of Youth Allowance to above the poverty line. ● Increase rental assistance in line with average market rates: The current rental assistance rates for students are not keeping up with the market rates for rent. This is especially needed for regional students and those who need to live away from home. ● Tailor Government policy to reduce working hours: Students who work more than 20 hours per week are at risk of lower grades and higher drop-out rates. ● Ensure placements/ internships are paid either by the employer or a new government welfare program. This is so that students who have to give up work to undertake these programs for their course can still afford to live.
<p>Q39 What reforms are needed to ensure that all students have a quality student experience?</p>	<p>The Curtin Student Guild in summary affirms that the Guild, if in receipt of control of the expenditure of student fees, could deliver the following positive outcomes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Focus on student needs: Student unions, by their nature, are created to represent and advocate for the needs and interests of students. This direct connection to the student body means that they have a better understanding of the issues and priorities that students face, and can allocate SSAF funds more effectively to address those needs. ● Grassroots decision-making: Student unions tend to have more decentralised and democratic decision-making structures, where students have a say in how funds are allocated. This leads to a more transparent and participatory process, which can help ensure that funds are used more effectively and efficiently to address student concerns. ● Specialised services: Student unions, including the Curtin Student Guild, often provide a range of services specifically tailored to the needs of students, such as academic advocacy, legal advice, and support for clubs and societies. These specialised services can help ensure that SSAF funds are used to directly benefit students in ways that universities may not be able to provide on their own. ● Greater accountability: Student unions are typically accountable to their members, which means that they must be transparent in their financial management and decision-making. This can help ensure that SSAF funds are allocated and spent more efficiently, and can also help to minimise waste and mismanagement. <p>The Curtin Student Guild recommends:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Amendment of the Higher Education Support Act 2003 to:

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ ensure that the student services and amenities fee is levied in full to all students unless reduced (either in whole or for specific populations) by unanimous consent of the Student Unions and organisations in receipt of student services and amenities fee. ○ guarantee that 100% of the receipt of student services and amenities fee be provided without University level restriction to the relevant student organisation(s). ○ not allow providers to impose undue restriction on the expenditure and operations of the student organisations including preventing the levy of commercial leases, collection fees, venue booking fees or other restrictions on the capacity of the student union to perform its duties.
<p>Q40 What changes are needed to ensure all students are physically and culturally safe while studying?</p>	<p>Curtin Student Guild has recommended the introduction of a Duty of Care similar to the New Zealand model to be codesigned and overseen by student unions which incorporates:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Physical and mental health awareness and support. ● Proactive monitoring and responsive well-being and safety practices. ● Additional well-being and safety practices in tertiary student accommodation. ● Accommodation staff requirements. ● Accommodation administrative practices and contracts. ● Student accommodation facilities and services. ● Additional well-being and safety practices for international students. ● Reporting and publishing obligations. ● Reporting breaches of the code. ● Responding to complaints <p>Curtin Student Guild endorses the key avenues of action recommended in the National Student Safety Survey report 2021:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Acknowledging the role of gender as well as intersecting discrimination and marginalisation in driving sexual harassment and sexual assault. ● Taking proactive measures to improve inclusivity and safe learning environments for gender and sexuality-diverse students and those with a disability. ● Promoting safety and respect within residential student accommodation settings. ● Preventing sexual harassment and sexual assault from university staff including in the context of postgraduate supervision. ● Raising awareness among students and staff of the reporting processes within the university and the avenues of support available. ● Improving reporting and support pathways for students who have both university context and other experiences of sexual harassment and/or sexual assault. ● Addressing attitudes that minimise, excuse, or blame the victim/survivors of sexual harassment and sexual assault, particularly in higher-risk settings.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adequately resourcing sexual harassment and sexual assault response and prevention strategies.
Q43 How should the current recovery in international education be managed to increase the resilience and sustainability of Australia's higher education system, including through diversification of student enrolments from source countries?	Increasing the number of international and local students studying together is part of the solution identified by the Australian Strategy for International Education. Offering a proportion of Commonwealth Supported Places to international students who are enrolled in courses where there is a long-term skills need and who commit to staying in Australia for a specified period and/or permanently will assist in meeting the demand for skilled workers. At the same time, the university sector and governments must provide adequate support to international students who face many challenges including isolation, financial hardship, wage exploitation, visa restrictions and discrimination
Q48 What principles should underpin the setting of student contributions and Higher Education Loan Program arrangements?	<p>The Curtin Student Guild recommends:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accessibility: The system should be designed in a way that ensures all students, regardless of their financial background, have equal access to higher education. • Affordability: The system should be structured to ensure that the cost of higher education is affordable for students, and that they are not burdened with excessive debt that could limit their financial prospects and opportunities • Equity: The system should not disproportionately affect any particular group of students, including those from low socioeconomic backgrounds, Indigenous Australians, and students with disabilities. • Transparency: The system should be transparent in its processes and funding arrangements, and students should have access to clear information about the costs and benefits of different courses.
Q49 Which aspects of the JRG package should be altered, and which should be retained?	The Jobs Ready Graduate package and the low completion rate requirements should be abolished. Higher education funding models need to be overhauled with a fairer and more equitable basis for course fees and funding.

“The great university should find its heroes in the present, its hope in the future, it should look ever forward, for it the past should be but a preparation for the greater days to be”

- Former Prime Minister John Curtin