



Comments on the Job-ready Graduates Higher Education Reform Package 2020

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Youth Health Forum

The Youth Health Forum (2020)
*Comments on the Job-Ready Graduates
Package*
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The Youth Health Forum

The Youth Health Forum (YHF) was launched by the Consumers Health Forum of Australia (CHF) in 2018. Fifty young people came to Canberra to discuss the biggest issues affecting youth health and wellbeing, and solutions that they believe will make the system better for young people in the future.

The YHF members are young people aged 18-30 from across Australia with diverse backgrounds, identities, and lived experience. Their collective knowledge spans physical and mental health services, involvement with the NGO and community sector, and engagement with local issues.

In April 2020, UNICEF surveyed¹ over 1,000 young people aged 13 to 17 years across Australia to understand how the pandemic has impacted our youngest generations. Young people reported that they felt their voices have been missing from many of the pandemic and response conversations to date. We hope that this submission will help to bring some of these perspectives into decisions about the final structure of this package. The people who have been most affected by COVID-19 will also be those who will struggle to re-establish their careers and incomes as the economy recovers: people in low-paid and insecure jobs (mostly young people and women).

In our submission, the YHF provide comments about the proposed new Job-ready Graduates Higher Education Reform Package (the Package). While we cannot speak about nuts and bolts of university systems, we do want to share our insights on the complex requirements for someone to be considered 'job-ready', the concerns of restructuring university fees for universities and young people, and additional ways to support people into employment. This submission is based on the opinions and experiences of YHF members.

Most importantly, we want to emphasize the importance of including and prioritising Australia's younger generations in discussions to maximise the positive effect that these changes can have. There is growing concern that we are leaving this generation behind and government needs to take swift and deliberate action to close the generational divide². A person's overall health is largely determined by non-health factors: social, economic, and environmental³ and so we urge those evaluating these legislative changes to look beyond COVID-19 and the current economic situation, and consider the long-term impacts that their decisions will have on the health and wellbeing of future generations of Australians.

¹ UNICEF (2020), "Living in Limbo" How COVID-19 is impacting young people in Australia, available at: <https://www.unicef.org.au/our-work/unicef-in-emergencies/coronavirus-covid-19/young-people-survey-australia>, date accessed: 18/08/2020.

² Grattan Institute (2020), *Generation gap: ensuring a fair go for younger Australian*, available at: <https://grattan.edu.au/report/generation-gap/>, date accessed 17/08/2020.

³ Institute of Health Equity (2020), *Action on the social determinants of health*, available at: <http://www.instituteoftheequity.org/about-our-work/action-on-the-social-determinants-of-health->, date accessed 18/08/2020.

Comments

The concept of 'job-ready'

The Youth Health Forum feels that the concept of 'Job-ready' places much of the onus on young people to possess the qualifications and experience required to secure a job upon graduating, and on universities to facilitate this where possible. While we applaud the requirements for universities to involve industry in creating and delivering course content, we suggest that industries should also have a role in addressing the perceived shortfalls in skills and experience. An incentive for organisations to employ students and graduates would make it easier for young people to break into the job market and gain the necessary work experience of being 'job-ready'.

Career guidance

"I am currently studying both arts and medicine and there's definitely a reason for the discrepancy in fees, hardly any university students would be able to tell you the fee associated with their degree and they often don't care because it's not an immediate concern"

The Youth Health Forum feels that restructuring fees is an ineffective way to guide young people towards certain areas of study. Prospective students are much more likely to consider their interests and abilities, the expected career progression, the lifestyle and employment benefits, and the earning potential. Restructuring fees does not address the following:

- Fees are a delayed debt so the financial incentive may not have the desired effect when someone is thinking about forty or fifty years in a career that they do not think they are suited for;
- Career guidance must begin in the high school when students are choosing their subjects as they may not be qualified to enter degrees in the priority areas;
- A reduction in fees does not guarantee more places in courses known to have limited places or very high entrance requirements;
- The Package should require that degree options offered by universities must align with current registration practices to ensure graduates can enter the workforce*⁴;

*For example, the Psychology Board announced that it is retiring the 4+2 pathway (four year degree and two year internship), in favour of the 5+1 pathway (five year study and one year internship) or masters/PhD level education but in several states (ACT, NT, SA) there are currently no fifth-year programs offered.

⁴ Psychology Board (2019), *Retirement of the 4+2 internship program*, accessed at: <https://www.psychologyboard.gov.au/Registration/Provisional/Retirement-of-4-2-internship.aspx>, date accessed 17/8/2020.

- The Package does not account for the occupation's expected salary and means that those in the lower priority areas will have higher fees and the burden of debt for longer; and
- University fees do not address the underlying reasons why some professions are a less popular choice e.g. the work conditions, salary or career prospects.

While some industries have an obvious roadmap showing the stages of training, qualification and remuneration, this is not always the case and can make it difficult for young people to make informed decisions about where their degrees will take them. Clear information about career and salary prospects, and real case studies from a range of industries may be more effective in guiding people towards those jobs that suit them well.

Impacts on universities

"One of the issues that I feel hasn't been mentioned in the media and public discourse about the fee changes is what will the reality of university courses look like?"

The Youth Health Forum is pleased to see that Allied Health, Psychology and other health are listed as priority areas, it is important to make these professions accessible to encourage diversity and choice in the health workforce. However, we are concerned about how changes to fee structures might translate into cost cutting measures and for practical based courses this will often mean less hands on classes, bigger class sizes, reduced one on one teaching from educators, hence risking further casualisation of the workforce. The concept that students paying higher fees might be offsetting costs for students in more heavily discounted degrees seems very unfair, particularly when those in professions like medicine and engineering have a higher earning potential than many social science students. We urge the government to consider their responsibility to provide high quality, accessible tertiary education for all while balancing how the burden of debt may be managed by individuals.

Support for students

"People are paying back uni fees earlier, earning extremely low wages with little growth in this area, paying high cost of living, and young workers have been hit hardest by COVID-19... It's a disaster waiting to happen"

Rural and Remote Areas

The Youth Health Forum is pleased to see a focus on students from Indigenous, and rural and remote backgrounds. Almost a third of Australians live outside the major cities and regional universities contribute a huge amount to local economies⁵ so we welcome the emphasis on growing this industry and encouraging students from these areas in the Package. We would like to note that students already need to be receiving Youth Allowance to be eligible for some

⁵ Regional Universities Network (2020), The numbers tell the story – Regional Australia matters, available at: http://www.run.edu.au/cb_pages/news/RUN_conference_promo.php/, date accessed: 18/08/2020/

of the support payments so this Package will not offer support to additional young people who are not eligible for Youth Allowance.

Support during difficult times

"My sister has a learning disorder and failed several subjects in her engineering degree because she wasn't given support from the uni. It was already so disheartening every time. Why add this punishment?"

"People in my graduate course who have kids have gone from working full time and studying part time to also full time home schooling as their schools have shut down and having massive income stress as many workplaces have shut their doors. Their circumstances have totally changed just in a few months and the burden of paying for any failed subjects is already significant."

University students who fail more than half their subjects face losing government financial support under the new Package. People who fail subjects already face a steep financial penalty when they repeat them and we feel that this measure further disadvantages students with learning disabilities, health issues or facing challenging personal circumstances. In addition, this penalty may discourage people from undertaking a degree at all. As we have seen with the government's Income Compliance Program (Robodebt)⁶, financial stress can lead to increased mental ill health and even suicide. For students in more demanding courses, this will add pressure where mental ill health is already an issue e.g. medicine. The Youth Health Forum would like to again emphasise the government's role in providing high quality and accessible tertiary education for Australians.

The Package does not address the more holistic barriers that can prevent people from studying such as high cost of living, low wages and insecure employment conditions. Youth Allowance does assist some but there are many young people who cannot access this support as they are still classed as dependents. The need to work while studying also poses a challenge when unpaid placements and internships are required in courses such as nursing or teaching.

Support for people with a disability or from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse backgrounds

We would like to highlight that support for these groups has not been addressed in the Package.

⁶Australian Government (2020), *Information about refunds for the income compliance program*, available at: <https://www.servicesaustralia.gov.au/individuals/subjects/information-about-refunds-income-compliance-program>, date accessed: 18/05/2020.