

5 September 2024

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

**Re: UNIVERSITIES ACCORD (STUDENT SUPPORT AND OTHER MEASURES) BILL 2024  
[PROVISIONS]**

The Australian Youth Affairs Coalition (AYAC) is the national voice and advocate for young people. We represent more than 4.5 million young people across the country. We are the national peak body, and our members include young people, youth-led organisations, and youth sector organisations that support and work with young people.

We welcome the opportunity to provide feedback on the *Universities Accord (Student Support and Other Measures) Bill 2024 [Provisions]* (hereafter referred to as The Bill) to the Senate Education and Employment Committees Inquiry.

AYAC appreciates that the The Bill responds to key recommendations made in the Universities Accord and aims to fulfill Budget commitments made by the Australian Government. We encourage support of The Bill by members of the Parliament of Australia. However, we wish to recommend some amendments, and address our feedback below to the parts of The Bill dealing with Commonwealth Prac Payments and HELP indexation.

**Commonwealth Prac Payments**

AYAC notes that the intention is to benchmark the Commonwealth Prac Payment to the single Austudy rate; for the payment to be available to teaching, midwifery, and social work students on mandatory placements; and for the payment to be made at \$319.50 per week from 1 July 2025.

AYAC, along with state and territory youth peak bodies across Australia, has previously called on the Australian Government to [raise the rate of income support payments](#) for young people. These payments are woefully inadequate, forcing tens of thousands of young people into living conditions that are well below the poverty line. Benchmarking Commonwealth Prac Payments to income support payments that are demonstrably insufficient, particularly in the current cost-of-living crisis, is ill-advised. AYAC notes that student groups have described the proposed level of payment as a [‘slap in the face’](#), as it equates to being paid only \$8 per hour while on full-time placement. [AYAC reiterates its call to the Australian Government to increase the Commonwealth Prac Payment to at least the minimum wage](#). **AYAC also urges the Australian Government to bring forward the date of implementation for this measure, to provide immediate financial relief to students who are impacted by the cost-of-living crisis.**

While AYAC appreciates that the Australian Government has prioritised courses that train people to provide essential social services to the Australian public, and which are highly feminised sectors, **we recommend that students in any course requiring practical placements should be eligible to receive the Commonwealth Prac Payment.**

**However, as a matter of urgency, we implore the Australian Government to include youth work on the list of courses eligible for Commonwealth Prac Payments.** Youth workers embody a unique approach to working with young people, and utilise this approach to support young people dealing with complex social issues such as homelessness, poverty, and mental ill-health; and to foster environments in which all young people can [thrive, and feel confident, connected, and safe](#). Youth work courses require, on average, 400 hours of unpaid placements (see for example, [Victoria University](#), [Edith Cowan University](#)). Youth work is also a [highly feminised sector](#). Given the essential services that youth workers provide, particularly in the context of the ongoing cost-of-living and youth mental health crises, it would be prudent for youth work courses to be included on the list of those immediately eligible for Commonwealth Prac Payments.

#### **HELP indexation**

AYAC notes that the intention is for HELP indexation to be set as the lower of the CPI or the WPI. However, analysts have pointed out that the [WPI has only been lower than the CPI in four of the last 24 years](#), and have suggested that a fixed maximum indexation rate (e.g. the lower of CPI or 4%) would do a better job of preventing debt blowout. **AYAC therefore urges the Australian Government to re-think its approach to HELP indexation.**

While The Bill introduces some welcome changes that will improve the situation of young people in higher education, AYAC believes it does not go far enough. As outlined above, and elsewhere, there are additional measures that could be introduced to better support those young people who are already undertaking studies at the tertiary level, and to address the significant equity issues that still remain. Ultimately, AYAC supports such measures that support young people's right to education, and that ensure quality education is available to all.

AYAC would be pleased to provide further input to the Inquiry or respond to queries relating to the issues discussed in this submission, should this be required.

#### **Contact**

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