



20 February 2015

Ms Julia Agostino
Secretary
Senate Education and Employment References Committee

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

Dear Ms Agostino

Senate Inquiries:

- **Higher Education and Research Reform Bill 2014, and**
- **The principles of the Higher Education and Research Reform Bill 2014**

The Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation (ANMF) welcomes the opportunity to provide advice to the Education and Employment References Committee for the above named Senate Inquiries.

As the largest professional and industrial organisation for nurses, midwives and assistants in nursing in Australia, the ANMF represents a significant cohort of the nursing and midwifery professions. We, therefore, have a keen interest in higher education legislation and resulting policies which will affect existing and future students of higher education nursing and midwifery programs.

With a membership of over 240,000 nurses, midwives and assistants in nursing, our members are employed across all urban, regional, rural and remote locations in both the public and private health and aged care sectors. As the backbone of health and aged care in this country they provide essential care in aged care facilities, tertiary and primary health care settings, schools, the armed forces, statutory authorities, local government, industries, and off-shore territories. The ANMF wants to ensure higher education legislation provides for fair and equitable access to preparatory and post-graduate education opportunities for nurses and midwives.

The ANMF supports a higher education system that is based on the principles of equity, fairness and quality. We do not believe that the Australian Government's proposed cuts to tertiary funding, deregulated course fees and thereby increased student fees and debt, meets these principles. The ANMF strongly objects to the higher education system being based on a market driven ideology.

Australia's tertiary system has, and must continue to, provide a basis for generational growth and social cohesion, both within Australia and the broader global community. The tertiary sector contributes nationally to the growth in employment, workforce skills and living standards. However, this requires the Australian Government to play a central role in providing an

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ANMF Journals

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adequate funding base and a regulatory governance framework to ensure the sector's prosperity. The ANMF argues that the important equity and quality principle of our tertiary sector will be damaged if the Higher Education and Research Reform Amendment Bill 2014 (the Bill) becomes law.

In submissions to the Senate in September 2014 the ANMF repeatedly stated our strong opposition to the Abbott Government's 2014 budget decisions and subsequent higher education reforms, particularly deregulation of university fees. This letter serves to advise the Education and Employment References Committee that the position of the ANMF remains unchanged.

It is true that tertiary qualifications can be a means of people earning high incomes. However, that is not true for the majority of university courses today with a high percentage of graduates being in middle income careers such as nursing, midwifery and teaching.

Nurses and midwives form the largest single component of the health workforce. Australia's health system depends, therefore, on sufficient numbers of people completing nursing and midwifery degrees and entering these professions on graduation. Dramatically increasing the cost of nursing and midwifery courses, as preliminary data suggest will happen under deregulation, could have serious implications for the ongoing sustainability of the nursing and midwifery workforces.

Currently, there are more people wanting to study nursing, and who are eligible to do so, than there are places available. Unregulated fees will result in a level of cost that will deter many from pursuing nursing or midwifery studies which will result in entry to these courses being impossible for students from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

The immediate impact of such radical fee increases on nursing and midwifery should be obvious – diminished nursing and midwifery workforces which result in poorer health outcomes for the Australian community.

An additional sinister element lurking in the detail of the proposed university fee deregulation is the Abbott Government's introduction of American-style privatisation of Australia's universities. This could result in the elimination of distinctions between public, private and overseas institutions and therefore the removal of obligation for universities to focus on contributions to public good for the Australian community.

We foresee this resulting in some universities choosing income over contributions to society and withdrawing entirely from offering nursing or midwifery degrees. Result: diminished nursing and midwifery workforces at a time when projections have forecast dire shortages unless graduate numbers improve or at least maintain current levels.

Deregulation of higher education fees also risks imposing significant costs on older students, many of whom are forced back to education because of structural changes in the economy and the need to enhance existing skills or learn for a new career.

Graduates who take a career break to have a family or care for children will also be hit with higher rates of compounding interest while not earning, which would be a disaster for the thousands of ANMF members who take a year or two away from nursing or midwifery to have children. This is particularly concerning to the ANMF as 90% of the profession is female.

Proposed budget cuts to education will reverse important social and economic achievements, which benefit everyday Australians, while refusing to address important tax revenue opportunities and acknowledge the role of government in maintaining equitable access to, and reasonable cost-structures associated with, a university education.

The core function of Australia's universities and other higher education facilities is to provide the nation with an educated, competent, skilled and sufficient workforce, across a wide range of disciplines. The higher education reforms should be structured to ensure that this outcome is achieved.

It is stated in the *Explanatory Memorandum to the Higher Education and Research Reform Amendment Bill 2014*¹ that the intent of the reforms is to:

...deregulate student contributions to facilitate the development of price competition in the higher education market and ensure the highest quality education in Australia so that Australia is not left behind in an era of increased global competition.

The ANMF contends that deregulation of fees will result in both decreased numbers of courses available for prospective nursing and midwifery students, and, decreased numbers of graduating nurses and midwives. As the key health professionals in this country, and the only health professionals found in every geographical health and aged care setting, should deregulation of higher education fees be enacted, Australia WILL be left behind, on health outcomes for its citizens. What is the point of having a segment of the population who are highly educated and who can compete globally while the health of the general populace lags behind global standards?

Nursing and midwifery are vitally important components of the economy on a number of fronts: workforce, social, economic and international. Education of nurses and midwives is a sound investment for the health of the community. To continue to provide safe, evidence-based, competent and quality care to all people in Australia, higher education courses for entry into the nursing and midwifery professions, and on-going education for those already in the nursing and midwifery workforces, must be accessible and affordable.

For the benefit of the Education and Employment References Committee we enclose a copy of our submission forwarded to the *Higher Education and Research Reform Amendment Bill 2014*, in September 2014. The commentary and costings scenarios outlined in that paper must be considered in the current Inquiry deliberations.

Please do not hesitate to contact Annie Butler, Federal Assistant Secretary, ANMF Federal Office, on 0407299529 or annie@anmf.org.au should you wish to discuss this submission.

Yours sincerely



Lee Thomas
Federal Secretary

Enc. Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation *Submission to Inquiry into the Higher Education and Research Reform Amendment Bill 2014*.

¹ The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, House of Representatives. Higher Education and Research Reform Amendment Bill 2014: Explanatory Memorandum. Available from: http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Bills_LEGislation/Bills_Search_Results/Result?bId=r5325 p.15.