

Universities Accord (Student Support and Other Measures) Bill 2024

5 September 2024

Key takeaways:

1. ATN Universities welcomes the Government's swift uptake of some of the Universities Accord's recommendations.
2. The introduction of FEE-Free Uni-Ready courses and provisions to adjust the Higher Education Loan Program debt indexation sends the right signal to future students.
3. The Government should investigate measures to ensure that the Commonwealth Prac Payment can be effectively implemented in the best interests of the students.

The Australian Technology Network of Universities (ATN Universities) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback to the Senate Inquiry on the Universities Accord (Student Support and Other Measures) Bill 2024.

ATN Universities welcomes the Government's swift uptake of some of the Universities Accord's recommendations

The implementation of the Universities Accord has often been described as a generational change in the higher education sector. ATN Universities welcomes the Government's commitment to implementing the Accord and recognises that this Bill forms part of that program of work.

We reiterate our concerns around how the goals of the Accord will be put into practice, especially those requiring more complex policy changes. ATN Universities would welcome discussions on prioritization, to ensure that the most impactful policies are given due consideration. For example, implementing Managed Growth, Needs-Based Funding and a review of funding rates for domestic students will all have larger material impacts on the sector.

The introduction of FEE-Free Uni-Ready courses and provisions to adjust the Higher Education Loan Program debt indexation sends the right signal to future students

ATN Universities has consistently advocated for a sustainable higher education system that remains accessible to all. The proposed legislation goes some way in easing the pressures on university students.

We welcome the proposal to introduce FEE-FREE Uni-Ready courses as a pathway to higher education for students from underrepresented backgrounds. The new fee structure delivered in this Bill will provide a consistent and predictable level of funding. ATN members Curtin University and The University of Newcastle are exemplars in delivering free courses that effectively give students the foundational skills they require to succeed in higher education.

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The University of Newcastle is currently the largest provider of these courses and adheres to the following principles: courses must be free, open access and high quality, and students must be provided with high quality, wraparound support and valued for their unique perspectives, skills and strengths they bring to higher education.

ATN Universities is also supportive of the Bill's provisions to adjust the Higher Education Loan Program (HELP) debt indexation to the lower of the Consumer Price Index (CPI) or Wage Price Index (WPI). This sends positive signals to future students which also reducing the impact on those repaying loans.

ATN Universities has historically supported ensuring that students have a say in the allocation of Student Services and Amenities Fee (SSAF) revenue. ATN's members typically allocate more than 40% of SSAF revenue to their student-led organisations.

The Government should investigate measures to ensure that the Commonwealth Prac Payment can be effectively implemented in the best interests of the students

The Commonwealth Prac Payment (CPP) goes some way to support students in fields such as teaching, nursing, midwifery and social work, particularly in addressing the financial challenges they face during mandatory placements. In 2022, there were over 25,000 domestic students enrolled in nursing and teaching at ATN member universities,¹ a significant proportion of whom will be positively impacted by this provision. ATN Universities is supportive of the CPP, with some caveats.

ATN member universities have expressed concerns around the implementation of the CPP. The main concern relates to the proposal for universities to means-test the payment. If not undertaken consistently across the sector, it could lead to disparity in experience and opportunity, directly impacting students. Further, requesting financial information from students could be intrusive and impact their dignity. Finally, means-testing students is not core business for universities; adds an administrative burden; and may be difficult to verify.

The second concern is around efficiency. Many students will have already demonstrated their financial resources through claims to Services Australia for Youth Allowance. Universities will have to develop the necessary capabilities to administer the payments, and potentially duplicate systems already set up in Services Australia. We propose that pre-existing systems – which are already attuned and suited to means testing – be leveraged to administer these payments. Given that the policy is proposed to take effect in July 2025, we urge the Government to investigate pre-existing systems that can be leveraged and work with the sector to refine the policy's design and implementation.

Overall, ATN Universities welcomes the inclusion of CPP in the Bill but encourages further work to ensure that implementation is equitable, efficient and does not place additional burden on students and universities. We look forward to the expansion of CPP to other fields in the future, in particular fields where completion of

¹ [2022 Section 8 Special courses - Department of Education, Australian Government](#); social work and midwifery enrolments were not captured in this data set.

placements is a requirement of the accreditation authority or is required to practice and is in a field of national priority.

ATN Universities is committed to continued work with Government to implement effectively the vision of the Universities Accord and to co-create workable solutions.

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