

CORONAVIRUS

LIVE Live

COVID-19

Common

Life in Isolation

updates

statistics


questions

guide

It's nonsensical to hike fees for social work degrees by 113%

LOU HARMS *and* CATHY HUMPHREYS *and* RALPH HAMPSON

By **LOU HARMS, CATHY HUMPHREYS** and **RALPH HAMPSON**

2 HOURS AGO JULY 3, 2020 •  1 COMMENT

The experience of COVID-19 has been a wake-up call throughout Australia about the importance of something that is too often taken for granted – the health of our society.

Social health is about caring for people in our community. This includes addressing loneliness, being resilient in the face of adversity and supporting people to overcome life's challenges, whether it is social exclusion, health challenges, despair, growing older, living with a disability, alcohol and other drug use, as well as violence or crime.

In the outcry about the federal government's proposed university fee hikes in the humanities and arts, we have heard little about the fate of professional social work that requires a social science or arts degree.

Social workers devote their careers to making a difference in society. The demand for social workers has never been greater. In 2018-19, 95 per cent of all graduates were employed by May of the following year. The Australian government's own workforce projections released in 2019 are compelling – 29 per cent more social workers will be required between 2019 and 2024, on top of the significant growth in the demand for social workers we've seen over the past five years.

A shortage of social workers is also acknowledged by the Department of Home Affairs where the profession of social work is listed in all 10 visa subclasses on the skilled occupation list.

Jobs in the human services industries are paid much less than those in other industries. A weekly wage of around \$1,829 is barely above the average wage in Australia of around \$1,659. Combined with the high level of responsibility that comes with being a social worker, it perhaps helps explain why we are facing a growing shortage. It is a profession requiring more, rather than less, support.

Why then does the Morrison government want to increase fees to students studying a social work degree by 113 per cent to \$14,500 a year? It is simply nonsensical and flies in the face of their own rhetoric that this will be a 'jobs' led recovery'. For most social work students, this involves five years of study – a three-year social science or arts degree followed by a two-year masters degree – for a total cost of \$72,500.

Any fee increase risks deterring students, but an increase of the magnitude proposed will be devastating. Many students are often the first in their family to go to university.

Students who enter social work have a commitment to social justice, human rights and improving the lives of individuals, families and communities. It is a complex and challenging profession and the degrees require students to undertake an intensive academic program alongside over 1000 hours of clinical placements. Like other allied health and clinical courses, it is expensive to provide relative to other social science and humanities courses.

Social work agencies are already finding it difficult to fill positions in the growing fields of aged care, mental health, disability, and domestic and family violence.

To reinforce this point, the Victorian Family Violence Royal Commission was firm in its recommendation that those that worked with the most vulnerable required a social work degree, or a degree of equivalent standing. Similarly, the Carmody Report on Child Protection in Queensland recommended that professionals are employed with qualifications consistent with a social work degree.

The same issues have been raised about the need for specialised qualifications and training by the Royal Commissions into Aged Care, Child Safety, Mental Health and Disability. The demands in these areas will continue to increase as the population ages, the National Disability Insurance Scheme is rolled out across Australia and the demand for mental health and family violence services increases.

In the same week that the government released the recent job-ready graduates higher education reform package, it also released the report from the National Rural Health Commissioner that

repeatedly referenced the essential nature of social workers for regional Australia. It noted that social workers were allied health professionals who “facilitate community access to the services and resources needed at times of hardship”.

Social workers operate on the frontline in these services and are key leaders in the development of these programs, contributing to policy and translating research to ensure that the services we provide are based on evidence, and advocating for social justice and equity.

Social workers will be central to facilitating an ‘employment led’ recovery, assisting individuals, families and communities to recover from the hardships imposed COVID-19. But there appears to be a grave mismatch between the government’s proposed policy and funding changes and its potential impact on the social work profession.

People who use health and human services have a right to be provided with services from workers who are experts in their field, work from an evidence base, have a strong commitment to social justice, and are driven to make a difference.

Social workers are a key profession in our health and human services and an essential part of the future ready Australian workforce.

Professor Lou Harms is head of the Department of Social Work, Professor Cathy Humphreys is professor of social work and Associate Professor Ralph Hampson is in the Department of Social Work at the University of Melbourne.

More stories on this topic

- [Andrews ‘pleased’ at tally of 66 new cases](#)
- [Shock number of Victorians refuse tests](#)
- [Car sales get an EOFY lifeline](#)

Topics

[Coronavirus](#)