



australian  
nursing federation

Submission to consultation by the Department  
of Education, Employment and Workplace  
Relations on the discussion papers:  
An Indicator Framework for Higher Education  
Performance Funding; and  
Measuring the Socio-economic Status of Higher  
Education Students

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## 1. Introduction

The Australian Nursing Federation (ANF) was established in 1924. The ANF is the largest professional and industrial organisation in Australia for nurses and midwives, with Branches in each State and Territory of Australia.

The core business for the ANF is the professional and industrial representation of our members and the professions of nursing and midwifery.

With a membership of over 175,000 nurses and midwives, members are employed in a wide range of enterprises in urban, rural and remote locations in both the public and private health and aged care sectors.

The ANF participates in the development of policy relating to: nursing and midwifery practice, professionalism, regulation, education, training, workforce, socio-economic welfare, health and aged care, community services, veterans' affairs, occupational health and safety, industrial relations, social justice, human rights, immigration, foreign affairs and law reform.

The ANF is pleased to provide comment to the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) on the two discussion papers: An Indicator Framework for Higher Education Performance Funding; and Measuring the Socio-economic Status of Higher Education Students.

## 2. Education of the nursing and midwifery professions

Nurses and midwives form the largest health profession in Australia,<sup>1,2</sup> providing health care to people throughout their lifespan, and across all geographical areas of Australia. They practice in: homes, schools, communities, general practice, local councils, industry, offshore territories, aged care, retrieval services, rural and remote communities, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health services, hospitals, the armed forces, universities, mental health facilities, statutory authorities, general businesses, and professional organisations.

There are two levels of nurse in Australia: registered nurses and enrolled nurses. The education of registered nurses and midwives occurs in the higher education sector. The minimum level of qualification for entry to practice for registered nurses and midwives is a university-based bachelor degree program, with a minimum length equivalent to six full-time semesters.<sup>3</sup> There are a plethora of post graduate programs available to, and taken up by, registered nurses and midwives, from graduate certificate through to post doctoral studies.

There are approximately 40 schools of nursing and midwifery within the Australian university sector providing education to around 23,000 students across three year levels each year. Approximately 7,000 undergraduate nursing and midwifery students graduate each year.<sup>4</sup> The quality of Australian nursing and midwifery education is recognised with an excellent international reputation producing nursing and midwifery graduates to work in every sector of the health care industry. That reputation however, and the ability of nursing and midwifery education providers to deliver quality education to a sufficient number of nursing and midwifery students to meet workforce demand, is under threat as the shortfall in funding to schools of nursing and midwifery is forcing some universities to abandon nursing and midwifery courses in favour of more lucrative or better income producing disciplines.

### 3. An Indicator Framework for Higher Education Performance Funding

The ANF notes the following elements of the Australian Government's agenda for higher education and is supportive of these proposed measures to form an indicator framework for higher education performance:

- To increase the number of Australians with bachelor-level qualifications
- To increase the higher education participation of people from underrepresented groups
- To enhance engagement and thus improve student outcomes, and
- To improve the quality of learning and teaching.

The submission to follow will highlight aspects of the Government's agenda which have particular relevance to nursing and midwifery education in the higher education sector.

#### 3.1 Increase the number of students who graduate with a bachelor degree, particularly low SES students

The ANF supports the Government's agenda to increase the numbers of students who graduate with a bachelor degree, particularly those students who have a low socio-economic status (SES). This is unlikely to happen for nursing/midwifery however, given the following commentary.

The ANF has lobbied consistently over a number of years for an increase in the number of places for undergraduate nursing/midwifery students in Australian universities. While there have been increased allocations over recent years the numbers are still not sufficient to meet demand in the health and aged care systems in some States and Territories.

A report produced by Universities Australia<sup>5</sup> showed that 2,833 eligible applicants for the undergraduate nursing degree were not offered a place in 2008. This equates to almost 20% of nursing course applicants missing out despite nursing being recognised, at that time, as an area of national workforce shortage. The nursing shortage Australia has experienced over the past decade has been exacerbated by insufficient funding. Universities have either had capped student places or have been unable to fill additional allocated places due to insufficient funding of the clinical component of the nursing course.

The nursing profession prides itself on offering career pathways to women who would otherwise not have an opportunity for a rewarding career in the workforce. Facilitating access to this cohort of women would be of great benefit to the community as well as the profession. Adequate public funding for both undergraduate and post graduate education places must be ensured for the profession to compete for workers in a rapidly shrinking pool of potential students.

The available demographics for commencing nursing/midwifery undergraduate students show over half are of mature age (>20 years)<sup>6</sup> and the majority are female. Currently, criteria to establish low SES background relates only to geographic area and postcode of the student's home. Anecdotal evidence shows that many of the female nursing student cohort are single parents/single income earners/supporting dependant families while studying for their nursing/midwifery degree. A further potential cohort for nursing includes Indigenous women and non-English speaking background women from poorer countries, who may or may not be able to get financial support from families for their education due to negative cultural gender bias or low family income. The financial status of all of these women is therefore relatively tenuous during their student years.

While possibly these students may not meet the established criteria for low SES backgrounds, the ANF believes that they should.

**The ANF recommends that:**

**The Government ensures that the criteria developed for low SES background takes full account of those factors that distinguish the mature age entry and disadvantage of many females into the Australian education sector.**

**Individual student funding contribution.**

Until 2010 nursing was identified as a national priority area and so assigned to the lowest band for annual student contribution amounts. However, students commencing in nursing/midwifery undergraduate programs from the start of 2010 can expect to pay around 25% more for their degree than those who started in 2009<sup>7</sup> as nursing/midwifery is no longer to be subsidised as a national priority area.

For the student nurse/midwife this means an increase in up front costs while they are at university, or an increase in the amount of repayment once they are in the workforce. Although there is the promise of reduced debt repayment for newly graduated nurses/midwives, their beginning salaries do not easily accommodate the level of repayment required on debt incurred for their education. This is especially pertinent given the previous commentary regarding those disadvantaged female cohorts.

The Australian Government funds a range of scholarship programs for nurses and midwives to undertake undergraduate education courses. These scholarship programs have provided financial assistance to hundreds of scholars who would otherwise not have been able to enter the fields of nursing or midwifery. However, the scholarship programs have from their inception been heavily oversubscribed, with only the top small percentage of applicants able to access funding. There is a large number of people who are eligible for university education but who can not proceed with studying in nursing/midwifery programs due to lack of personal funds to allow them to do so.

In addition, the current undergraduate scholarships have not increased in value over the past years to allow for increased cost of accommodation and living expenses; nor do they provide funding for potential students who reside in metropolitan areas.

The ANF strongly supports the proposed goal of the Government to develop strategies for increasing the numbers of people from low SES backgrounds to be able to undertake bachelor degree programs. There are people in this financial category from Indigenous and non-English speaking backgrounds who would be invaluable as health professionals because of their intimate understanding of the cultural challenges faced by many people interacting with the health system. They are tending not to access education at this level at present because of a variety of reasons including low family finances precluding them from remaining in secondary school to the level required for a nursing/midwifery degree entry or from supporting them to undertake a degree program. This potential nursing workforce also often requires additional support to assist with overcoming language barriers, which means a greater funding commitment from the Government.

**The ANF recommends that:**

**The Government extend the nursing/midwifery scholarship program (in both the number of scholarships and the amount offered), to enable access to funding support for undergraduate courses, to a greater number of people: from low SES backgrounds; from Indigenous and non-English speaking backgrounds; and from all geographic areas.**

### 3.2 Improve the overall teaching, learning and support provided to students

#### **Funding for Schools of Nursing and Midwifery**

There is a widely held view in the nursing and midwifery professions that the current funding models, and in particular the discipline groupings and relativities within the education funding cluster mechanism for the health professions, are disadvantageous for nursing and midwifery. The current funding cluster arrangements favour medicine over the other health professions. This disparity is anachronistic and must be addressed.

Nursing and midwifery education will be funded in 2010 at \$11,903 per Equivalent Full Time Study Load (EFTSL) compared to \$19,235 per EFTSL for medical students.<sup>8</sup> The resources required to teach the health sciences to nursing, midwifery and allied health students are the same as those for medical students and a failure to address the relativities is forcing universities to consider abandoning nursing and midwifery courses in favour of other more lucrative courses. Nursing and midwifery courses should be funded by the Commonwealth Government at a level that reflects the true cost of delivering up-to-date, relevant and high quality curricula.

The changes to the student contribution band (that is, from national priority to Band 1), while meaning an increase in the amount payable by the student nurse/midwife, will give the Government fee relief, but will not result in an increase in the amount the Government funds the school of nursing and midwifery. With the disparities in funding of courses as outlined above, and the high cost of nursing/midwifery courses to universities, the ANF urges the Government to move swiftly to provide additional and fairer funding support to nursing/midwifery undergraduate programs. The ANF considers that investment in our nursing/midwifery workforce should be placed as a highest priority by the Government in efforts to address the shortage of nurses/midwives in Australia.

#### **Funding for Clinical experience**

The issue of funding for clinical placements for undergraduate nursing students was considered by the National Review of Nursing Education and the National Nursing and Nursing Education Taskforce (N3ET) reviews. N3ET referred the matter to the Higher Education Review which resulted in an increase in Commonwealth financial contribution to institutions offering nursing/midwifery courses. There was an acknowledgement in this funding decision that “the additional funding will be required to be directed towards the costs associated with clinical practice in nursing ...”.<sup>9</sup> Any funding increases occurring since that time have fallen short of the true cost to education providers and health service providers for clinical placements for undergraduate nurses and midwives.<sup>10</sup>

The COAG announced in November 2008 a commitment to providing funding directly to subsidise clinical training places for nursing and midwifery. In its pre-budget submission to the government ANF estimated a shortfall of about \$3,000 per student per year for clinical education.<sup>11</sup>

Capacity and access to nursing and midwifery clinical placements would improve, particularly in rural areas, if students were assisted with the costs of accommodation and transport necessary to undertake the placement. This was highlighted in recent consultations with the National Health Workforce Taskforce. Rural relocation allowances need to be reviewed to address the requirements of students moving within the State or Territory. Currently the assistance that may be provided to rural nursing/midwifery students is only given if the student has an interstate placement. This funding situation should be amended.

Funding to support clinical placements for nursing students is also inadequate, and is a key factor in the inability of nursing schools to fund sufficient clinical placements for students to meet their education requirements. Increasingly universities are relying on simulated clinical environments to deliver clinical education, however, research to demonstrate the effectiveness and/or limitations of this approach is not available.

The extra costs associated with clinical placement in rural and remote locations should be recognised and funded.

**The ANF recommends that:**

**The Government further improve the level of funding for undergraduate nursing and midwifery education courses to ensure theoretical and clinical placement support at a level commensurate with other health professional courses and which can achieve adequate support for beginning practitioners.**

#### 4. Measuring the Socio-economic Status of Higher Education Students

The ANF does not support the current determination of a student's SES status being made on the geographic area or postcode of the student's home. This definition is not broad enough to take into account individual situations and may in fact disadvantage a student whose postcode is not identified as a low SES area. The ANF agrees that while this gives an indication of the level of disadvantage in a student's community, as the DEEWR discussion paper points out "it is only one aspect of an individual's circumstances and it is important that measures of SES reflect a range of dimensions which indicate an individual student's SES".

The ANF considers that funding support for people of low SES status should commence in pre-higher education school years as it is often the case that these students experience disadvantage in being able to attain the level of education required to enter tertiary level studies. This is due to a variety of reasons such as insufficient family funds to allow them to stay at school or to engage in extra activities which would assist their education, or a home environment not conducive to studying (overcrowding, poor nutrition, English language not spoken in the home, absences from school due to family issues). The ANF is pleased to see that DEEWR has commissioned research in this area by the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education at the University of South Australia. The ANF urges the Government to act on the important findings of the resultant report: *Interventions in schools as a means to improve higher education outcomes for disadvantaged (particularly low SES) students – A design and evaluation matrix for university outreach in schools.*<sup>12</sup>

The ANF is therefore fully supportive of strategies to provide funding for “intensive support” for students during their earlier level studies and then on into their higher education courses. This funding support should cover a range of assistance mechanisms including for example, mentoring, food for healthy eating, extra tuition, extra curricular activities (such as field trips, camps), accommodation, and/or travel.

The emphasis in the discussion paper seems to be on low SES school leavers entering higher education. As mentioned previously, the ANF wishes to again highlight the fact that low SES people wanting to enter nursing/midwifery undergraduate courses will also be from mature age categories, especially single parent mothers supporting dependant families. In this case the income of the ‘parents’ of higher education applicants is irrelevant to the equation of determining SES status.

**The ANF recommends that:**

**The Government pursue strategies for early intervention funding support to low SES students in pre-higher education school years, to facilitate their ability to enter higher education courses.**

## 6. Conclusion

The ANF welcomes the opportunity to provide comment to the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) on the two discussion papers: An Indicator Framework for Higher Education Performance Funding; and Measuring the Socio-economic Status of Higher Education Students.

In summary, the ANF recommends that:

1. The Government ensures that the criteria developed for low SES background takes full account of those factors that distinguish the mature age entry and disadvantage of many females into the Australian education sector.
2. The Government extend the nursing/midwifery scholarship program (in both the number of scholarships and the amount offered), to enable access to funding support for undergraduate courses, to a greater number of people: from low SES backgrounds; from Indigenous and non-English speaking backgrounds; and from all geographic areas.
3. The Government further improve the level of funding for undergraduate nursing and midwifery education courses to ensure theoretical and clinical placement support at a level commensurate with other health professional courses and which can achieve adequate support for beginning practitioners.
4. The Government pursue strategies for early intervention funding support to low SES students in pre-higher education school years, to facilitate their ability to enter higher education courses.

The ANF requests that there be a further round of consultation on these issues which includes resultant additional detail from the consultation process. The ANF would appreciate the opportunity to provide further comment once a greater level of detail is available on what the Government proposes as indicators for higher education performance funding and indicator measures of socio-economic status of higher education students.

## References

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