



5 September 2024

Senate Education and Employment Legislation Committee
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Dear Senate Education and Employment Legislation Committee

Independent Schools Australia welcomes this opportunity to provide a submission to the Senate Education and Employment Legislation Committee's (Committee) **Inquiry into the Universities Accord (Student Support and Other measures) Bill 2024 (Bill)**.

ISA is the national peak body for Independent schooling in Australia. ISA represents the sector on national issues and engages with the Australian Government, national agencies, media, key stakeholders, and the wider Australian community.

Working with the eight state and territory Associations of Independent Schools (AISs), ISA represents 716,800 students, over 1,215 schools and a workforce of 122,000 people.

The Independent sector encompasses considerable diversity in size and location of schools, and the types of students enrolled. The latest available data shows that more than one in six Australian school students attends an Independent school. For secondary students, it is over one in five. Students at Independent schools reflect the full diversity of Australian society – including those who experience one or multiple forms of disadvantage.

Most families with children enrolled in non-government schools are middle-to-low-income earners, increasingly from culturally diverse backgrounds, and residing in outer-suburban and inner-suburban communities. Many of these families are currently facing economic stress and are making substantial sacrifices for their children's education.

Many Independent schools provide a religious or values-based education. Others promote a specific educational philosophy or interpretation of mainstream education. Some have been established by community groups seeking to meet particular needs or to reflect the religious values of a community. Independent Catholic schools are a significant part of the sector, accounting for eight per cent of the Independent sector's enrolments.

Most Independent schools are set up and governed independently on an individual school basis. However, some schools with common aims and educational philosophies are governed and administered as systems, for example, Lutheran schools. Systemic schools account for 20 per cent of schools in the sector.

With the current national teacher shortage impacting Australian schools, many schools are struggling to fill gaps in school staffing including specialist teachers at all levels of school education. Some schools are also seeking a range of other staff to fill areas of need such as in regional and remote schools and in boarding schools in the Independent sector.

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ISA supports the aim of the Bill which is to make higher education more accessible and affordable, as well as drawing teachers into the profession by investing in additional support to tackle the current national teacher shortage.

The Australian Universities Accord Final Report set ambitious goals to boost tertiary education places to meet Australia's future skills demands and sustain a thriving economy. This includes:

- lifting the tertiary attainment rate all working age people (with at least one Certificate III qualification or higher) from 60% currently to at least 80% by 2050
- increasing the proportion of university educated Australians aged 25 to 34 from 45% currently to 55% by 2050
- to achieve this increase, the system will need to more than double the number of Commonwealth supported students in universities from 860,000 currently to 1.8 million by 2050.¹

The vision outlined in the Australian Universities Accord Final Report is to grow and strengthen tertiary education in Australia so that all Australians can obtain the knowledge, skills and understanding to create and thrive in the jobs of the future. This vision is closely aligned to the Better and Fairer Schools Agreement and its commitment to targeted reforms focused on three priority areas:

- equity and excellence
- wellbeing for learning and engagement
- a strong and sustainable workforce.²

ISA recognises the significance of the Higher Education Support Act 2003 (HESA)³ and its contribution to supporting higher education in Australia, ensuring that tertiary education is accessible and attainable for all students. This fosters both equality and excellence. ISA submits the following recommendations for the Committee's consideration:

1. **Addressing Indexation Volatility:** The pressing issue of rising student debt necessitates immediate action. ISA endorses the Universities Accord (Student Support and Other Measures) Bill 2024, which proposes that the Higher Education Loan Program (HELP) cap be determined by the lower value of either the Consumer Price Index (CPI) or the Wage Price Index (WPI), with indexation adjustments retrospectively applied from 1 June 2023. This approach aims to mitigate the volatility of indexation by adopting the lesser of the CPI or WPI, offering some relief to students amid the ongoing cost-of-living crisis, though further measures are needed.
2. **Investing in Our Future:** To establish a robust and enduring education workforce, ISA recommends that increased investments be directed towards incentives that promote

¹ [Australian Universities Accord - Final Report.pdf](#)

² [Better and Fairer Schools Agreement 2025-2034 - Heads of Agreement \(1\).pdf](#)

³ [Federal Register of Legislation - Higher Education Support Act 2003](#)

studies in education across early childhood, primary, and secondary levels, as well as in other areas experiencing significant workforce shortages.

Possible forward-looking investments incentives include:

- 2.1 No HELP indexation for students who complete degrees in education, medicine, and social work.
- 2.2 Introduction of new initiatives to reduce costs for students completing apprenticeships in sectors experiencing skills shortages.

3. **Cost of Living Relief:** In ISA's submission to the Teacher Education Expert Panel Discussion Paper in April 2023, ISA advocated for student financial benefits during mandatory placements. We strongly support the cost of living relief for students enrolled in teaching, nursing and midwifery, social work and nursing in vocational education and training (VET) courses when undertaking mandatory practicums. ISA recommends that the weekly Commonwealth Prac Payment⁴ from 1 July 2025 is also offered to students with mandatory practicums in essential fields such as medicine and psychology. Every school leader knows that to improve wellbeing for learning and engagement, allied health services and medical services such as psychiatry and psychology are critical supports to combat the mental health crisis we currently have in our society.
4. **FEE-FREE Support:** ISA supports FEE-FREE programs for eligible students to build university-ready academic skills, promoting equity in higher education. We recommend eliminating HELP indexation for disadvantaged and under-represented students to enhance their chances of successfully finishing their tertiary courses without the burden of increasing HELP debt.
5. **Student Voice:** ISA supports the proposed amendment to the Higher Education Act 2003, advocating for 40% of Student Services and Amenities Fees collected by higher education providers to be allocated to student-led organisations.

ISA asks the Committee to explore additional incentives and sustained investment to realise the goals laid out in the Australian Universities Accord Final Report. This could be achieved by lowering tertiary education fees through indexation measures and increasing support for specific employment sectors as well as disadvantaged students.

Thank you for your consideration.

Yours sincerely



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⁴ [Commonwealth Prac Payment - Department of Education, Australian Government](#)