



A submission in response to the Support
for Students Policy Consultation Paper

From the RMIT University Student
Union (RUSU)

Executive Summary

RUSU is supportive of measures to improve the quality and availability of student support available at universities in Australia and of increased institutional accountability in the provision of support to students.

Improved student support has the potential to drastically change higher education outcomes, for both students and providers. The Higher Education Provider Guidelines can be strengthened by including a data driven assessment of the performance of support services, more robust motivation for provider compliance, and by encouraging more holistic Support for Students Policies.

Finally, early intervention will only be successful if students see student support processes as an opportunity to demonstrate satisfactory academic progress, rather than the first step towards exclusion due to unsatisfactory academic attainment.

Our Priorities

PERFORMANCE

Much of the student support available to students is currently funded by SSAF. Universities are not fully accountable to students on how student funds are used, how those student services are performing and whether they reflect value for money for students.

In our submission in response to the Accords Interim Report, RUSU has advocated for student driven funding with additional university finance available for students from underrepresented backgrounds. We suggested that as with SSAF, the additional funding provided to universities for each student from an equity cohort should be legislated to be used for the provision of staff, resources or services that provide support specifically targeted to assist students from equity groups through to completion. It is essential that the majority of this funding is spent internally within educational institutions, with caps placed on the percentage of funding that can be spent on outsourcing support to external organisations or for licencing external services/software. This will ensure greater oversight of support services, more tailored reporting on their efficacy and greater privacy protections for student data. It will also allow for support services to be developed and monitored internally with a greater emphasis on ensuring the success of support services can be demonstrated and therefore represent value for money.

COMPLAINTS

Student support is the key to the goals set out in the University Accords Interim Report. Driving equitable access and completion will require significant investment in student support, and Support for Student Policies will become essential documents, motivating positive outcomes for students and assisting higher education providers to meet goals related to student success.

Robust processes to motivate compliance are therefore required to ensure Support for Student Policies are able to operate as intended.

Key Recommendations

- *As well as applying penalties to higher education providers that are non-compliant with their own Support for Students Policy, the Higher Education Provider Guidelines should also give power to the Minister or their nominee to reverse decisions made by a higher education provider where the provider is non-compliant with their own Support for Students Policy.*
- *The Higher Education Provider Guidelines should be changed to include the requirement for higher education providers to conduct their own internal auditing of decision making under their Support for Students Policy, to assess for fairness, faithfulness and consistency and that those audit reports are submitted as part of the higher education providers periodical reporting to the Minister. In addition to this, the Department can require higher education providers to undergo external auditing (as appointed by the Department) where the Department can demonstrate a higher education provider may be at risk of non-compliance.*
- *The Higher Education Provider Guidelines should include the ability of the Department of Education to award bonuses to higher education providers that successfully support students from equity groups, who are initially identified as at risk of unsatisfactory academic performance, through to successful completion.*
- *The Higher Education Provider Guidelines should include the ability of the Department of Education to apply penalties to higher education providers with decreasing percentage completion rates and award bonuses for those exceeding them.*

IDENTIFYING STUDENTS WHO NEED SUPPORT

Most universities already have some form of monitoring of academic progress in place, which will initially flag students in need of additional support. For students who consistently demonstrate poor academic performance, they are most likely excluded from their program. What these processes lack is a procedural pathway for students to utilise the support available from their university to regain a satisfactory academic status and remove themselves from an academic management/support pathway.

Key Recommendation

The Higher Education Provider Guidelines should be changed to include the necessity for a Support for Students Policy to include (under a support for individuals' section), the level of academic progress a student would need to demonstrate in order to remove a classification of being at risk of demonstrating/demonstrating unsatisfactory academic progress

CONNECTING STUDENTS TO SUPPORT

Despite advances in data management and the sophistication of early identification models, for students, early intervention remains a depersonalised, bureaucratic and unmotivating experience.

Underinvestment in available support and depersonalisation of the early identification process leads to distrust of the overall support system.

Connection to support needs to be holistic, with students at risk of poor academic performance receiving support from staff who can not only identify support services that may be useful to them, but to also assist them in accessing those services, monitoring their continued engagement, removing barriers to their continued access to support, regularly reviewing the support the student

is receiving for efficacy and altering plans for support where required. Students must be the key stakeholder in this process. They must be consulted at every step of the development and implementation of detailed and individualised support plans.

Wherever possible Support for Student policies should be designed to reduce the duplication of student disclosures and remove administrative barriers to seeking support, particularly in cases which involve disclosures of sexual assault and sexual harm, family and domestic violence and abuse.

As stated in the consultation paper, available support should also be age and culturally appropriate.

Key Recommendations

- *The Higher Education Provider Guidelines should include the requirement for support to be holistic, with students to be assisted in the initial and ongoing access to student support services and for support plans to be regularly reviewed by the student and support staff for efficacy.*
- *The Higher Education Provider Guidelines should require higher education providers to engage in regular consultation with individual students being supported under an institution's Support for Students Policy, as an essential part of the successful implementation and functioning of said policy.*
- *The Higher Education Provider Guidelines should require Support for Student Policies to create support processes that reduce the duplication of student disclosures and minimise unnecessary administrative processes/barriers involved in seeking support.*
- *The Higher Education Provider Guidelines should require Support for Student Policies to have sufficient flexibility and linkages within the policy to be able to holistically support students with intersecting vulnerabilities.*
- *The Higher Education Provider Guidelines should include a stipulation that Support for Student policies should not include consideration of inherent requirements as part of a higher education providers' student support processes.*