

HELP Cuts - Deeper Than Pockets

The Australian Medical Students' Association (AMSA) has called on the Federal Government to reconsider proposed cuts to HELP funding for university students, warning that they could significantly affect student mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Education Minister Dan Tehan has proposed changes to Government subsidies and student loans, including cutting funding to students who fail 50 per cent of eight or more units in a Bachelor course.

“Medical degrees in Australia differ in course structure and assessment requirements,” AMSA President, Daniel Zou, said today.

“While some medical students may have a choice in their clinical placement, it is common for subjects to be prescribed for them at least in some part of their degree.

“It is also common for academic transcripts to report an overall outcome for several subjects together, which is difficult for students who need more time to learn particular areas.

“The Minister’s proposed overhaul could affect different medical students inconsistently, with higher stakes for some.

“The Government should be promoting increased support mechanisms and structures for students who may be experiencing an adverse life event or are struggling, rather than punishing them with HELP cuts.

“Not only will the possibility of HELP cuts increase stress on medical students, it will also inflate the barriers preventing medical students from seeking mental health services.

“The stigma of mental health issues in medicine remains prevalent to this day. The threat of funding withdrawal when medical students with mental health issues do not perform at their best falls short of compassion, and perpetuates the risky image of perfectionism in medicine.”

Background

- Government funding and subsidies are particularly vital for Indigenous medical students and those from rural and regional backgrounds, and low socioeconomic background, to pursue medical education [1].
- Additionally, these vulnerable groups also carry a heavier mental health burden than the average Australians. A conditional funding system based on academic performance creates financial instability, which is a known risk factor to mental health.
- In the BeyondBlue National Mental Health Survey of Doctors and Medical Students conducted in 2013, 26.6% of medical student respondents identified ‘finances and debt’ as a source of work stress [2], regardless of the circumstances of students from a disadvantaged background amid a global pandemic.

AMSA is the peak representative body for Australia's 17,000 medical students.

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