

**A Submission to the Australian Universities Accord  
September 2023**

**Response to the Australian Universities Accord  
Interim Report**

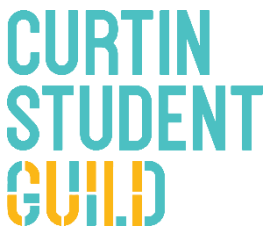
**Submitted by:**

**Curtin Student Guild**

**Dylan Botica, President, Student Guild**

**Veronika Gobba, VP - Education, Student Guild**

**Mitch Craig, PSC President, Student Guild**



The Curtin Student Guild pays respects to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members of our communities. It acknowledges the Wadjuck people of the Noongar Nation and Wongutha people of the North Eastern Goldfields who are the first peoples of the land in which the Student Guild operates. This is stolen land that was never ceded.

This submission can be made available in alternative accessible formats upon request to [hello@guild.curtin.edu.au](mailto:hello@guild.curtin.edu.au).

## Introduction

The Curtin Student Guild was established in 1969 to provide essential services, represent the interests, and advocate on behalf of students at Curtin University. We believe that students are the key and most important stakeholders in tertiary education and that reform to Universities is urgently needed. The Guild welcomes the opportunity to make this submission to the Australian Universities Accord Interim report. We note the Panel's intention to keep these submissions to fewer than three pages.

## Accord Priority Actions

### Agreement:

- **Creating further Regional University Centres (RUCs) and a similar concept for suburban/metropolitan locations.**
- **Cease the 50% pass rule.**
- **Extending demand-driven funding to metropolitan First Nations students.**

### Conditional Agreement:

- **Extension of the Higher Education Continuity Guarantee into 2024 and 2025.**
- **State and territory governments and universities to improve university governance.**

We support the priority actions above but note that:

- A majority of support services will reside at Universities' main campuses, not RUCs; ensuring that there is a way for students at RUCs to connect with these services is essential.
- The JRG package amendments must be abolished entirely.
- There must also be better embedding of First Nations culture, knowledge and success in all aspects of University operations.
- Funding certainty should not come at the expense of expediting improvements to funding for the sector, particularly those that improve student outcomes and benefit student organisations.
- University governance reforms should be completed in partnership with student guilds. "Governance Improvements" that worsen student experience and reduce transparency are not wanted. Legislating the existence of all student unions, as is the case successfully in Western Australia, and incorporating student guild membership of governing bodies, will enhance transparency, accountability, and the student experience.
- The Curtin Student Guild strongly opposes proposed forced mergers in Western Australia that will worsen the student experience. A merger would undermine the principle of universities being good employers as there would be an unwelcome cut in staff.

## Considerations the Curtin Student Guild Strongly Supports:

- **Providing financial support to students on compulsory placements.**
- **Reducing the cost of living barriers to higher education through improved income support measures and more opportunities for part-time study.**
- **Increasing the HECS minimum repayment threshold and improving repayment arrangements.**
- **Changing income support payment arrangements to lower the age of independence and support part-time students and unpaid work placements.**
- **Ensuring the integrity and accessibility of visa pathways for international students**
- **Increasing PhD stipend rates.**
- **Offering postgraduate and postdoctoral researchers extra skills-oriented training in parallel with PhD study or postdoctoral work.**
- **A universal learning entitlement, so that if a student is qualified for admission to a course in higher education, they will receive Government support.**
- **Reducing the cost of living barriers to higher education through improved income support measures and more opportunities for part-time study.**

## Considerations the Curtin Student Guild Strongly Opposes:

- **HELP-style ICLs for student living expenses, particularly due to placements.** Students should be supported not indebted to go to University. The previous scheme resulted in spiralling debts for some former students.
- **International student fee income levy** being applied to Public Universities, which will further entrench international students being viewed as “cash cows”. This would further entrench the current system whereby international student fees are used to cross-subsidise research.

## Considerations the Curtin Student Guild provides comment for Amendment:

- **Targets for students from underrepresented backgrounds and equity groups to reach parity by 2035** are important, but intake targets are meaningless when these students are less likely to find success at University. Graduate numbers and retention rates should be benchmarked, not intake targets.
- **Serving the professions including critical professions of "teaching, medicine, engineering, dentistry, nursing, veterinary science and allied health"** tend to require unpaid placements. This must be recognised as a significant barrier to serving the professions.

## Student Priority Areas

The following are priorities the Curtin Student Guild has identified are either not included in the interim report, require additional context or need to go further to address the needs of students.

**Recommendation: Legislate that 100% of the Student Services and Amenities Fee (SSAF) goes to student organisations.**

100% of the SSAF to student organisations is not only fair but also strategically beneficial for the entire higher education sector. There must be student control of student affairs and this is only effectively delivered through Universal Student Unionism and a Student Services and Amenities Fees that is sufficient to fund the needs of students delivered by a well-resourced student guild (or similar).

Universal student unionism is essential for a well-rounded higher education experience. Student unions are a cornerstone of campus life, providing vital services, support, and opportunities for students. Implementing universal student unionism ensures that every student, regardless of their institution, has access to these benefits.

Universal student unionism ensures that all students, regardless of their individual preferences or awareness, are represented within the student union. This fosters a more inclusive and democratic student body. It allows for a more comprehensive representation of the diverse student population, ensuring that the union's activities and advocacy efforts reflect the full spectrum of student interests and needs:

- Student organisations rely on SSAF funding to operate. Ensuring they receive 100% of SSAF allows them financial autonomy, reducing the need for annual negotiations and power imbalances with university management.
- Students pay tuition fees for their education, and SSAF serves to enhance their non-academic experience on campus. By allocating SSAF to student organisations, it ensures that students' contributions directly benefit their extracurricular activities and support services.
- Adequate funding empowers student organisations to effectively represent students' interests, advocate for their rights, and provide essential services and programs.
- With 100% SSAF allocation, student organisations are better equipped to transparently manage and account for the funds, promoting responsible financial stewardship.
- 100% of SSAF to student organisations aligns with the principle that this fee is intended to enhance the student experience and ensures that students have direct control over the use of their contributions.

**Recommendation: Enhance student voice through active participation in governing bodies, senior executive committees and all decision-making bodies at higher education institutions.**

Including representatives of student organisations in governing bodies and senior executive teams brings diverse perspectives to the table, enriching discussions and decisions.

- Students are the primary stakeholders in higher education, and their input is crucial for creating policies, curricula, and campus environments that meet their needs.
- Involving students in decision-making promotes transparency and accountability. It ensures students' concerns are heard, considered, and acted upon.
- Participation in governance offers students a unique educational experience, teaching them valuable skills in leadership, negotiation, and problem-solving.

Appointing governing body members through the student guild offers efficiency, expertise, unity, and accountability. It streamlines the process, leverages specialised knowledge, fosters a unified student voice, and ensures immediate accountability. This approach ensures that a student guild can effectively fulfil its primary purpose: promoting effective representation within the governing body.

By enhancing student voice and representation, we strengthen the overall quality and responsiveness of higher education institutions. It fosters a sense of ownership and engagement among students, contributing to their academic success and well-being.

There must also be further student involvement and structures in decision-making across the sector, including with the regulators and Government.

**Recommendation: Stop Young Australians entering into debt to access a University education and lift the HDR stipend.**

Degree costs have surged, taking up to 44 years to repay. The Curtin Student Guild supports repealing Job Ready Graduates to reduce the financial strain on students.

Government-funded tertiary education can be achieved by removing fossil fuel subsidies and further adjusting the tax policy. Federal and State Governments have already begun to deliver fee-free TAFE, which has highlighted how free education provides benefits including:

- Increased accessibility.
- The development of human capital.
- Increased capabilities.
- Enhanced innovation.
- Increased productivity across the whole economy.
- Increased social mobility.
- Increased tax receipts.
- Alleviation of the gender wealth gap.
- Ability to meet the demands of upskilling Australia's workforce which is expected to require 33% more training by 2040.
- Reduction of the financial burden on Generation Z who by 2055 will have 3.2 workers supporting each Australian aged 65+ compared to 7.4 baby boomers in the mid-1970s.

The Australian government must also fully fund research instead of relying on students, particularly international students, to do so.

For Higher Degree by Research students/ junior academics, stipends have dropped in real value dramatically, and the minimum RTP rate now sits below the Henderson poverty line. HDR stipends should be tied to the minimum wage after tax; these students are a vital part of Australia's research workforce and many more PhD graduates will be needed in the future economy. Stipend rates should not keep students in poverty, this issue should be addressed promptly.