

15 August 2020

By email: Herereform@dese.gov.au

Re: Higher Education Support Amendment (Job-ready Graduates and Supporting Regional and Remote Students) Bill 2020

End Rape on Campus Australia Ltd (EROC Australia) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback in response to the exposure draft for the *Higher Education Support Amendment (Job-ready Graduates and Supporting Regional and Remote Students) Bill 2020*.

EROC Australia is a not-for-profit organisation that works to end sexual assault and harassment within higher education communities. Our work includes, but is not limited to, providing direct support to students who have been impacted by sexual assault or sexual harassment, many of whom will be directly affected by some of the proposed changes in the *Job-Ready Graduates* package.

We enclose our submission for your consideration.

Kind regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Sharna Bremner".

Sharna Bremner

Founder & Co-Director – End Rape on Campus Australia

**Submission to the Department of Education, Skills and Employment
re Job-ready Graduates Package**

August 2020

Since forming in 2015, EROC Australia has provided support to numerous students whose educations have been significantly impacted as a result of the sexual violence they have experienced.

Overwhelmingly, this violence is perpetrated by a fellow student (66%), according to the Australian Human Rights Commissions' *Change the Course* report, which was released in 2017¹. For too many of these students, the trauma and fear that they experience following an assault is compounded by inadequate responses and support from their institution.

EROC Australia welcomes the government's efforts to ensure that HECS-HELP debts can be forgiven if a student's progress has been affected by special circumstances.

The students that we support often tell us that the 'fail' or 'withdrawal' grades on their transcripts serve as a permanent reminder of their assault. They worry about how those grades will impact their ability to apply for graduate study, get internships, or gain employment in their chosen careers. That distress is compounded by the fact that they will often graduate with higher HECS-HELP debts than their peers. Making it easier for HECS-HELP debts to be forgiven would help to ensure that student survivors are not subject to financial penalties for being assaulted.

EROC Australia is deeply concerned by the measures in the *Job-ready Graduate* package that:

- would require universities to ensure that all students are 'academically suitable' for their course of enrolment, and that they are 'engaged with the course and maintaining a reasonable completion rate'; and
- would remove access to a Commonwealth support place, HECS-HELP or FEE-HELP as a result of low completion or progression rates.

While there is a dearth of research regarding the academic impacts of sexual violence in higher education settings in Australia, research from abroad shows that:

- Women who had experienced sexual violence in their teens earn lower grades during their first year in higher education than women who had not experienced sexual violence;²

¹ Australian Human Rights Commission. *Change the course: National report on sexual assault and sexual harassment at Australian universities*. Australian Human Rights Commission, 2017, p.56

² Jordan, Carol E., Jessica L. Combs, and Gregory T. Smith. "An exploration of sexual victimization and academic performance among college women." *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse* 15, no. 3 (2014): 191-200.

- Students who are sexually assaulted while enrolled at a higher education institution experience significant drops in their grade point averages;³ and
- Sexual assault significantly affects a student's ability to focus, complete tasks, and attend class.⁴

These outcomes do not suggest that a student is not 'academically suitable' for their course. Rather, they are the result of experiencing a traumatic event, over which they had no control.

While working with students who have been sexually assaulted while enrolled at Australian universities, EROC Australia has observed:

- That most student survivors will fail or withdraw from at least 50% of their courses in the semester following their assault as a direct result of the trauma that they have experienced;
- That students who are sexually assaulted by a fellow student or university employee experience heightened levels of fear that prevent them from attending their campus to access library services, academic support services, or other forms of learning assistance;
- That accessing special consideration or academic accommodation processes requires a student to re-tell their story multiple times, to several different university employees. This process has the potential to cause significant re-traumatisation, so many students survivors are reluctant to make applications; and
- That demonstrating that being sexually assaulted has adversely affected their academic performance requires student survivors to continually provide documentation from a treating mental health practitioner, such as a psychologist, which presents a substantial financial challenge to students who are unable to afford treatment, or who have already used their ten Medicare-subsidised mental health appointments in that year.

Furthermore, it is our experience that student survivors of sexual violence who engage with their university's formal complaints or reporting processes are more likely to fail or withdraw from at least 50% of their courses in subsequent semesters. This is due to those processes taking an average of three to twelve months to be completed, often without any interim measures being put in place to ensure a student survivors safety on campus.

³ Mengo, Cecilia, and Beverly M. Black. "Violence victimization on a college campus: Impact on GPA and school dropout." *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice* 18, no. 2 (2016): 234-248.

⁴ Walter, Jon Douglas. "The Effect of Sexual Victimization on the Academic Performance of College Women." PhD diss., Washington State University, 2009.

Additionally, the student survivors that we support often find themselves unable to gain regular employment due to the effects of trauma. As such, they lack the financial capacity to pay non-Commonwealth supported tuition rates, or to be able to pay their tuition upfront.

EROC Australia believes that the measures relating to academic performance would have a devastating impact on the ability of students who have experienced sexual violence to gain an education. It would, in effect, serve to punish those students who have been sexually assaulted.

EROC Australia urges the government to review the underlying causes of lower progression or completion rates, and to take steps to ensure that universities are providing adequate support to students whose academic performance may be affected, instead of penalising them by removing their access to Commonwealth supported places and HECS-HELP.