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Hon. Dan Tehan MP
Minister for Education
House of Representatives
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

By email: Hereform@dese.gov.au

Dear Minister

I am writing to you in relation to the exposure draft for the Higher Education Support Amendment (Job-ready Graduates and Supporting Regional and Remote Students) Bill 2020 (the Bill).

Mental Health Victoria (MHV) is the peak body for the mental health sector in Victoria. Our members include consumer and carer groups, hospitals, community health and mental health services, medical associations and colleges, police and emergency services associations, unions, local governments, and other bodies across the health and related sectors.

MHV has applauded the Australian Government's ongoing leadership on mental health reform and its recognition that improving mental health and wellbeing is a vital economic as well as a health and social issue. The Productivity Commission has estimated that mental ill-health costs Australia \$180 billion per annum in lost economic opportunity.

As you will be aware, the pandemic is placing further pressure on already-strained mental health systems across the country. However, from 2021, major reforms are expected following the final reports from the Productivity Commission and the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System. Other relevant reforms include the Department of Health's upcoming national trial of Adult Mental Health Centres, expansion of MBS services, and various state and federal pandemic-related investments.

Australia needs a much larger, well-supported and well-distributed workforce to deliver these reforms. But at present, there are numerous challenges facing the mental health workforce, including shortages, maldistribution, skillset deficiencies, and recruitment and retention difficulties. These challenges must be addressed, and MHV has made a number of recommendations to address them in relevant submissions and communications.

MHV supports the Bill's objective to reorient higher education funding architecture towards jobs of national importance. Given the imminence of major mental health system reforms, the Bill comes at a critical time when a focus on expansion across the mental health workforce is required most.

We particularly welcome the Bill's intention to reduce student contribution fees for mental health related courses including nursing and clinical psychology. These changes stand to encourage more students to study these courses, thus strengthening the pipeline for mental health practitioners and the professions working closely with them in the future mental health system.

However, we share the concerns raised by the Australian Psychological Society and the Australian Association of Social Workers that the Bill as drafted will have unintended consequences. Increases in student contribution fees for behavioural sciences will make the undergraduate study of psychology and social work more expensive.

We further note that changes to Commonwealth and student contribution amounts may result in universities receiving net decreases in funding to run courses such as nursing and behavioural sciences. While we accept the need to match government funds with training costs, we are concerned that these additional financial pressures may create perverse incentives for universities to rationalise or scale back on the mental health components of related courses to make up funding shortfalls.

To ensure Australia has the requisite workforce to deliver these historic reforms, MHV recommends the Bill be amended to:

- maintain or reduce student contribution amounts for all courses aligned with degrees in psychology, social work or other mental-health related professions, including behavioural science courses
- ensure net funding changes do not impact the capacity of universities to deliver higher education training in mental health.

MHV again thanks the Australian Government for the opportunity to contribute to this vital piece of work, and welcomes any further opportunity to provide more detailed advice.

For further information on this submission, please contact Larissa Taylor, Director of Policy, on (03) 9519 7000 or l.taylor@mhvic.org.au.

Sincerely,



Angus Clelland
Chief Executive Officer