

Murdoch University Guild of Students submission to the Review of Australian Higher Education

Opportunities to participate in higher education

The Murdoch University Guild of Students believes in free, accessible and quality education available to all who seek it. Indigenous students and students from low SES backgrounds, however, have generally lower levels of participation in higher education. Murdoch Guild believes that if student income support was reformed, it would remove an impediment to these groups participating in higher education. The main reforms that need to take place are: lowering the Centrelink age of independence to 18 and increasing Centrelink payments in line with the rising cost of living.

The Murdoch University Guild of Students conducts a student welfare survey every two years. In 2006, 666 students took the survey, more than 60% of whom were living below the poverty line (which was at that time \$533.44 per fortnight). For those students who were not fulltime, 75% (103 respondents) made the decision to study part-time due to financial constraints. Most indicated that they needed to work to support themselves, either because they weren't eligible for Centrelink payments or their Centrelink payments were not enough to live on.

58% of respondents indicated that they often have to go without things they consider essential due to financial constraints. 18% went without new clothes, some for over two years, and could not afford warm clothes in winter. 15% went without adequate food intake, 10% went without adequate healthy food, 7% went without textbooks for university, 4% went without prescription medication, and 2% could not afford basic toiletries such as soap, deodorant, shampoo and sanitary products. 25% of respondents indicated that they had applied for a Centrelink benefit and had been declined, and 83% of respondents indicated that they support themselves at university by working, with the average student working 19 hours a week. 61% of respondents indicated that the need to work interfered with their studies.

The opportunity for many sole and low-income parents to participate in higher education was taken away with the introduction of the Howard government's 'Welfare to Work' legislation package. 'Welfare to Work' removed the ability for sole and low-income parents studying courses of more than 12 months in duration (ie. the majority of university courses and many TAFE courses) to claim the JET (Jobs Education and Training) Childcare subsidy. Many parents who commenced their university study in 2007, and were unaware of the change in legislation, inadvertently accumulated large childcare debts, and many were forced to drop out of university. Murdoch Guild led a campaign in 2007 for the federal government to reinstate the subsidy for parents studying courses longer than 12 months, and won the reinstatement of the subsidy for one year of a parent's course. The Labor government subsequently reinstated the subsidy for a further year, however the real solution to removing this impediment to sole and low-income parents participating in higher education is to reinstate the subsidy for the entire duration of a course.

Higher education's contribution to Australia's economic, social and cultural capital

Murdoch Guild believes that education should be more than what you learn in the classroom – education should be a holistic and fulfilling experience, beneficial to the growth and development of the individual as well as the community. Murdoch Guild created *Students Without Borders* (<http://murdochguild.murdoch.edu.au/swb/>), a social justice and community development initiative that is comprised of many different programs and campaigns. Students can volunteer and get involved with things such as computer recycling (community members donate old computer parts and volunteers with IT skills build them up, and they are donated to students in need), tutoring fellow students, undertaking internships at NGO's, and helping to run campaigns. At Murdoch University, 40 hours or more of volunteer work in an approved volunteer program (eg. Volunteer work with the Guild or Students Without Borders) earns a mention on your 'developmental transcript', which is separate from your academic transcript. Developmental transcripts set students apart from other applicants in the job market, and are an acknowledgement of the value of volunteer work. Murdoch Guild would like to see Students Without Borders programs become accredited units in the university curriculum. In this way the programs can be properly funded by the university, and formally recognise the importance of community engagement in higher education.