

SUBMISSION TO THE SENATE EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT LEGISLATION COMMITTEE CONCERNING THE VET STUDENTS LOAN BILL (2016) INQUIRY

This submission is made on behalf of the Hearing Care Industry Association (HCIA).*

It relates to the Diploma of Audiometry course Ref HTL757415.

In making this submission, we note that the decision to keep certain courses on the VET Fee Help schedule was made based on

1. the skills need list that the States and Territories already have in place and
2. on areas of national economic need

in order to ensure that the courses Australian students are studying (and that taxpayers are subsidising) have the maximum chance of leading to jobs.

While we have no argument with this sentiment, we believe an error has been made in relation to the Diploma of Audiometry that will have a substantial negative impact on industry and the public. We hope that this is an oversight and ask that Audiometry be reinstated as a Fee-Help eligible area of study.

HCIA is an industry association whose members employ a highly significant number of hearing health professionals in Australia. We fit approximately approximately 60% of all adult hearing devices used in the Australian market. We provide services under the Australian Government Hearing Services Program; the National Disability Insurance Scheme; state based workers compensation schemes and in the private market. For the adult market, hearing devices are fitted by both Audiologist and Audiometrists. Audiology is a University based applied science degree and Audiometry is a 2 year TAFE diploma. For routine device fitting, the work of Audiologists and Audiometrists is interchangeable.

At the present time, Australia is facing a shortage in the Audiology and Audiometry workforce. We face substantial difficulty in employing enough practitioners to help service the ageing Australian population as evidenced by the fact that HCIA members are routinely required to bring overseas trained clinicians into Australia utilising 457 visas. There is no doubt that the need for the services of Audiologists and Audiometrists will only increase over time.

Audiology (the applied science degree) appears on the skills needs list in all states and in many cases that definition can be used interchangeably with Audiometry (the TAFE Diploma). While there are some diagnostic services that can only be provided by Audiologists, both Audiologists and Audiometrists provide a similar service with respect to the routine fitting of hearing aids. Audiometrists work primarily with adult clients and provide a range of services to school aged children. They focus on hearing and auditory function assessment and (re)habilitation.

Audiometrists achieve this by applying a range of diagnostic tests and rehabilitation approaches including:

- counselling,
- the prescription and fitting of non- implantable devices and aids, for example bone conduction aids and earplugs, including custom noise, swim and musician plugs,
- FM and other remote sensing systems,
- hearing aids and hearing assistive technology and
- the provision of rehabilitation for tinnitus.

Audiometrists provide a critical service to hearing impaired Australians and any reduction in their number will only have detrimental effects on the care that HCIA members can offer. Given the ageing of the Australian population, the need for Audiometrists will only increase.

In 2015, 80 students Australia wide were enrolled in Audiometry. In 2016 the number is 113. Over one third of these TAFE enrolled students currently utilise VET Fee Help. In asking for this to be reconsidered, we would make the following points:

1. While Audiometry is not specifically listed on the State skills need list, Audiology is listed on the need list of all Australian States and as has been mentioned, the work of Audiometrists is in large part, interchangeable with Audiology.
2. Audiometry is taught by two TAFE colleges in Australia. TAFE Randwick (face to face classroom option) and OTEN Strathfield NSW (distance learning program with some residential schools). There has been no recent substantial expansion of this area and no report or evidence of abuse, whatsoever.
3. There is demonstrated need for these graduates as evidenced by the fact that industry requires to bring people in on 457 visas,
4. There is very strong linkage of graduates with industry and high post graduation employment outcomes. While the Department of Education & Training 'My Skills' website doesn't specifically detail the Diploma of Audiology from other similar courses in the medical technology area, the percentage of graduates who are employed or in further training after course completion for Medical Technology is a very high 93.5%. It is our view that this figure would be even higher for Audiometry-perhaps the highest for any TAFE course in the country.
5. Once trained, a very large number of Audiometrists spend a lifetime in the profession. They are a strong and cohesive group, represented by the Hearing Aid Audiometrist Society of Australia (HAASA), which is the longest established professional body in the hearing industry, having been founded in 1961. They are also represented by the Australian College of Audiology, the only professional body who represents both

Audiometrists and Audiologists throughout Australia. AcAud has written to the Minister for Education and Training about his issue expressing their significant concern about the removal of the Diploma of Audiometry from the VET Fee Help Scheme.

6. Fees for this course are \$8,340, reasonable for and comparable to other medical technology/science based course.
7. To subsidise Audiology, which is University based and not Audiometry, which is TAFE based, will lead to increased costs in the hearing care industry as routine work will be of necessity increasingly if undertaken by more expensive practitioners. In an area that is already facing serious workforce constraints, this will have a negative impact on HCIA members.

Currently one in six Australians suffer from some degree of hearing loss and by 2050 this is forecast to grow to one in four Australians. The forecast increased prevalence of hearing loss is largely driven by our ageing population. The costs of hearing loss to Australia were estimated at \$11.5b in 2005, which represents 1.4% of Australia's then GDP. The largest element of this cost, at over half the total, was lost wages and productivity among people with hearing loss. The value to the nation of retaining or re-engaging people with a hearing loss in the workforce is thus significant.

Hearing assessment and support services are already difficult to access in regional and remote parts of Australia where there is already a greater need. For these reasons, we call on Government to reinstate Course HTL757415, a Diploma of Audiometry onto the VET Fee Help schedule.

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* HCIA members include Hearing Life, Connect Hearing, Oticon Australia, National Hearing Care and Bay Audio