



australian  
nursing federation

Australian Government Department of Education,  
Employment and Workplace Relations

**Scholarships for a Competitive Future:  
Expansion of the Commonwealth Scholarships Program**

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The Australian Nursing Federation (ANF) was established in 1924. The ANF is the national union for nurses, with Branches in each State and Territory of Australia. The ANF is also the largest professional organisation in Australia, with a membership of over 160,000 nurses, employed in a wide range of enterprises in urban, rural and remote locations in both the public and private sectors. The ANF's core business is the industrial and professional representation of nurses and nursing.

The ANF participates in the development of policy in nursing, nursing regulation, health, community services, veteran's affairs, education, training, occupational health and safety, industrial relations, immigration and law reform.



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## **Introduction**

The Australian Nursing Federation is pleased to have an opportunity to contribute to the Government's discussion paper 'Scholarships for a Competitive Future - Expansion of the Commonwealth Scholarship Program'.

## **Nursing Workforce Statistics**

At last count from the available figures there were 285,620 nurses in Australia, 230,578 registered nurses and 55,042 enrolled nurses<sup>1</sup>. There are no specific figures for the number working in rural and remote locations however it is estimated that 30% or 82,013 work in these locations. The average age of a nurse in Australia in 2005 was 45.1<sup>2</sup> and approximately 50% of all nurses work part time<sup>3</sup>.

The national nursing workforce shortage is estimated to be around 19,000<sup>4</sup> and using the same formula of 30% of the population in rural and remote locations then this would extrapolate to an estimated 5400 nurses and 600 midwives required to meet demand in these remote locations.

## **Doubling the number of scholarships available by 2012**

The ANF welcomes the proposal by the Australian Government to double the number of scholarships available. It is critical, however that the scholarships are utilised in the most effective manner for the benefit of the profession and the Australian health system. The issues for consideration therefore are to whom should the scholarships be awarded and indeed where geographically are they going to have the most impact. The ANF is particularly interested in scholarships not only for undergraduate nursing positions but also for higher education courses, especially courses that prepare nurses to be able to register as nurse practitioners. There are approximately 200 nurse practitioners<sup>5</sup> in Australia. Nurse practitioners are widely accepted by the community as members of the health care team in all geographical settings. With advanced educational preparation and experience nurse practitioners offer health services in a range of specialities and locations and provide high quality health care that provides positive patient outcomes.

A nurse practitioner offers a range of health care services including initiation of diagnostic tests, prescribing of medication and the authority to make referrals to other health professionals. Nurse practitioners provide pivotal service delivery in all communities.

Authorisation as a nurse practitioner is reliant upon educational preparation to the Masters level, the cost of which is estimated to be around \$10,000 per annum for a period of approximately two years. Federally funded scholarships would reduce the financial burden facing nurses interested in becoming nurse practitioners and would be a necessary step to encourage up take of this positive and vital role.

Currently there are no dedicated Australian Government scholarships for Masters level education leading to authorisation as a nurse practitioner. The ANF recommends up to 500 scholarships per annum as a starting point. These scholarships should be targeted to areas of specific need such as aged care and mental health.

### **Additional Post Graduate Scholarships**

Increasing the number of available scholarships and increasing the quantum of funds available for each scholarship to reflect the true cost to the student is important in encouraging and developing the nursing workforce. Current scholarship schemes are generally oversubscribed, with many more eligible applicants than scholarships available. Poor access to funds limits nurses' opportunities to upgrade skills. It has been shown that access to career enhancing educational opportunities is a critical retention issue for nurses. Lack of access exacerbates workforce shortages and ultimately threatens the quality and safety of care to the Australian community.

Courses that are completed as a post graduate qualification include midwifery, mental health, intensive care, operating theatre and aged care just to name a few. Many nursing specialities' have critical workforce shortages and would benefit from an expansion of post graduate scholarships.

Mental health and midwifery are significant areas of need; the average age of mental health nurses and midwives in Australia is generally believed to be slightly older than the average age of the general cohort of nurses. Currently scholarships exist in both these areas; however, the demographics of both demonstrate clearly that doubling the number is unlikely to achieve real outcomes in the short term. In addition the current mental health scholarships are heavily oversubscribed with many applicants missing out each round. It is therefore the view of the ANF that in these areas trebling the numbers of available scholarships will be beneficial in the longer term.

### **Priority disciplines**

The ANF welcomes the inclusion of nursing as a priority discipline.

As previously discussed the critical nursing workforce shortages in Australia means that prioritisation of undergraduate nursing courses is important for the delivery of quality care and the safety of the community. We as a nation need to 'grow our own' in order to be able to respond to the growth in demand for health services.

In relation to undergraduate nursing courses it goes without saying that the critical shortage of nurses in this country warrants a significant increase in scholarships and particularly but not exclusively Indigenous health scholarships.

Indigenous health provides unique challenges and it is vital that every effort is made to strengthen the Indigenous workforce to ensure the delivery of culturally appropriate care. This requires the encouragement of as many Indigenous people as possible entering health careers by offering supported pathways to education and increasing investment in Indigenous educational places.

Expansion of programs such as the Koort Mooditj pre-nursing program which prepares Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students for first year nursing studies and the Marr Mooditj which has dedicated itself to educating Indigenous people in primary health care are two examples. Increasing scholarships to programs like this is without question an area of great need.

Additional scholarships for Indigenous Australians in already established areas include the Puggy Hunter scholarships currently co-ordinated by the Royal College of Nursing Australia. These scholarships are dedicated to health professionals, not exclusively nurses they currently number approximately 60 per annum, doubling to 120 and beyond in the future would certainly make a significant difference to health outcomes for our Indigenous communities. However, it is the view of the ANF that Puggy Hunter scholarships dedicated specifically to nurses would also be appropriate.

Other undergraduate scholarships that need urgent attention are those for aged care. Currently there are approximately 250 undergraduate aged care scholarships available through the Australian Government. These scholarships are very heavily oversubscribed by as much as three times the number available. Doubling that number annually and increasing beyond that number is imperative if we are to continue to provide safe quality care by registered nurses in residential aged care facilities.

The ANF does not support the inclusion in the priority scholarships of the emerging roles of physician assistant and primary health care practitioners.

The ANF does not consider that workforce shortages will in any way be assisted by the creation of new roles when we are unable to educate and retain sufficient numbers of the already well established professions, especially since we have many more eligible applicants for undergraduate nursing places, than places available. Efforts must therefore concentrate on increasing the numbers of available places for professions which have well demonstrated clinical capacity to meet health care needs but lack the necessary resources to educate enough of them and for whom the health system lacks sufficient incentives to retain them.

### **National Accommodation Scholarships**

With 35 schools of nursing and midwifery across Australia one could assume that interstate travel for the purpose of higher education would not be necessary. This of course is nonsense when you consider that more and more people wanting to

study nursing are turned away from universities forcing multiple applications to different universities often in locations that are not close to home. This is particularly the case with students from rural and remote locations but of course is not limited to them.

Accommodation and travel costs are critical factors in determining access to nursing courses. The cost of studying remotely creates a burden on families of students and can often become prohibitive. Additionally 92% of the profession is female and the added burden of child care costs is one that cannot be ignored. Therefore the ANF recommends that nursing scholarships reflect the real cost of living away from home, including accommodation, transport and living expenses and child care.

Currently scholarships generally fall short of the real costs and should be indexed to take account of inflation.

It is the position of the ANF that eligibility criteria for accommodation scholarships be based on a distance of 100kms from home, taking into account travel intrastate as well as interstate for higher education. This is the distance currently used by the Royal College of Nursing Australia when allocating funds through the scholarships that they administer.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The ANF welcomes the doubling of the number of scholarships and the inclusion of nursing as a priority discipline however, we cannot support scholarships for emerging health roles when we have a workforce which is not utilised to its full potential. It is our view however that doubling will only serve as a solid first step and that continued increase of the numbers and availability of scholarships should be a priority if we are to truly address the nursing skills shortage in Australia.

There are a number of areas within nursing that need urgent attention. These include but are not limited to:

- Nurse practitioners;
- Aged care;
- Midwifery;
- Mental health; and
- Indigenous health.

It is the view of the ANF that 100kms is a reasonable distance to be travelled after which the accommodation scholarship eligibility criterion is satisfied. This distance should apply for interstate travel as well intrastate.

The ANF thanks the Australian Government for this opportunity and anticipates further discussion and debate around this issue.

## REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW). 2008. *Nursing and midwifery labour force 2005*. p.7; Table 2: Registered and enrolled nurses, 2001 to 2005.
- <sup>2</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW). 2008. *Nursing and midwifery labour force 2005*. p.9; Table 5: Employed registered and enrolled nurses: age and sex, 2001 and 2005.
- <sup>3</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW). 2008. *Nursing and midwifery labour force 2005*. p.13; Table 8: Employed registered and enrolled nurses: average total weekly hours worked, proportion working part-time and 50 hours or more per week, 2001 to 2005.
- <sup>4</sup> Australian Health Workforce Advisory Committee. 2004. *The Australian Nursing Workforce – An Overview of Workforce Planning 2001-2004*. AHWAC Report 2204.2, Sydney.
- <sup>5</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW). 2008. *Nursing and midwifery labour force 2005*. p.2.