

Position Statement

Urgent support needed for paramedic students experiencing ‘placement poverty’

Key statement

The Australian Government has announced it will invest \$427.4 million from 2024-25 to 2027-28 to introduce a new Commonwealth Prac Payment (Payment) from 1 July 2025 to support eligible teaching, nursing and midwifery, and social work students in higher education and VET in completing their placements. Paramedic students were not included.

The Australasian College of Paramedicine (the College), the peak body for paramedicine representing and supporting paramedics and paramedic students, is calling on the government to include paramedicine in its Commonwealth Prac Payment initiative.

Clinical placements are a mandatory requirement of paramedicine degrees, and paramedicine students experience ‘placement poverty’ in the same manner as their nursing and midwifery peers. Paramedicine students complete up to 18 weeks of placement, which can be located hundreds of kilometres from their homes, causing extreme financial hardship as students seek accommodation, juggle paid jobs and rent/mortgage commitments and other family responsibilities.

Students are not immune to the cost-of-living pressures, and paramedicine students receive very little support via bursaries or grants compared with other student cohorts. Paramedic students need the same support as their nursing and midwifery peers. Most paramedic programs already require paramedic students to compete with nursing and midwifery students for tertiary institution support and this Payment initiative compounds the inequity experienced by paramedicine students.

It’s time to recognise paramedicine students and support the next generation of this critical healthcare workforce.

Background

- Paramedicine students can be placed anywhere in Australia, including regional areas.
- Placement is a mandatory course requirement. Paramedicine students must meet placement requirements to complete the degree, and placements are often a prerequisite to progress in the degree which can, in turn, impact student retention. Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) refers to student retention as an ‘issue of fundamental importance’¹.
- Placement is a subject that accrues a HECS debt.
- Placement occurs frequently throughout the paramedicine course and requires commitment equivalent to that (between four to eight weeks) of full time work. This commitment equates to three months of full time work during the degree, which means students have to take leave from their paid jobs. At times placements may occur for extended periods; students may be required to work full-time for 12 weeks’ straight.
- Placements are typically a row of 12-hour shifts, including night shifts, and almost every paramedic shift involves one to two hours of overtime.
- While students have the ability to preference placement location, not all preferences can be accommodated. Notwithstanding, more than 2,000 students require placements each year. The availability of placements locations is dependent on several other factors, including the availability of preceptors/supervisors, and appropriate case workloads.
- Most universities encourage students to undertake placement in regional or rural locations.
- Placements can occur any time of the year, including over peak holiday periods such as Christmas, Easter and other long weekends; periods that are prone to major increases in the price of accommodation.
- Other disciplines, such as nursing and medicine, have accommodation available to them either free or at discounted prices in rural locations; paramedicine has a very limited number.
- Dealing with post-traumatic events, compounded by financial and other life-load stressors, should ideally be minimised for students embarking on a paramedicine career.

Recommendations

- The College recommends that the Australian Government includes paramedicine in the Commonwealth Prac Payment initiative.
 - This will provide some financial support for paramedic students facing ‘placement poverty’.

¹ Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, (Oct 2022) *Retention*, Australian Government, TEQSA. [Retention | Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency \(teqsa.gov.au\)](https://www.teqsa.gov.au)

- Including paramedicine will support a sustainable healthcare workforce. AIHW data indicates that paramedicine is the fastest growing health profession with a 9% annual growth rate in the past four years.²
- Australian health strategies and reports identify interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary team care as a solution for addressing the major healthcare access issues gripping Australia. Recognising paramedic students as part of this payment will show leadership and alignment with national healthcare reform.
- The College recommends that the Australian Government's Department of Education collaborates with universities to establish, promote and encourage paramedicine students to apply for the Payment.

Stories of paramedic students experiencing 'placement poverty'

A recent survey conducted by Matt Wilkinson-Stokes, a paramedic, PhD candidate at the University of Melbourne and a College member, invited paramedics from across Australia to share their experience of 'placement poverty'. The survey captured a large number of responses from paramedic students (current and recently graduated) who have, or did, experience financial hardship while completing their mandatory placements. Their stories are shared here:

Placement was an extremely difficult time for me due to the financial burden. From paying for accommodation for six weeks as well as not earning any income. I was a mature-aged student with a full-time job, which I had to take time off from to complete my placements and was not able to receive any Centrelink payments during this time. It was a huge stress in an already stressful time of being on road. It was unrealistic to think that people can continuously take that amount of time off work to complete the placement. Although I struggled through, it left me depleted upon returning to my job, only to have to stress again about saving up the money for another six-week block. By the end of my degree, I had no annual leave left and barely \$200 in my account to pay for my AHPRA registration, and then on top of that having to move interstate to commence my paramedic role. I am now two years out of uni and only just able to recuperate enough financially to start to have a bit of freedom.

#7, A registered paramedic in Australia

I am from country Victoria, so had to move to Melbourne to undertake my studies, which in itself was financially difficult. I was unlucky with where my placements were, as they were either the

² Department of Health and Aged Care. [Place unknown]: Australian Government Department of Health and Aged Care; 2021. Allied Health Professionals: ATSI Health Practitioners; 2021 [Date cited 2023 Jul 31]. Available from: Allied Health factsheets

opposite side of the state as my hometown or too far away to reasonably travel from my uni accommodation. I had one placement in Whittlesea, which was about an hour-and-a-half from my residence, so I wasn't able to stay (my rental contract also ended halfway through my placement which didn't help either). This meant that I had to pay for accommodation instead. This placement was a couple weeks before Christmas, so school holidays. I had two blocks of three days, with my accommodation costing about \$1,500 in total. This doesn't include food, fuel for the 4.5-hour trip from home, and other placement expenses. I was so short on money that I nearly couldn't afford fuel to get home. To make it worse, I had another equally expensive placement in February. Honestly, I am still recovering financially from my uni and placement experience. I've never known financial stress like it.

#9 A registered paramedic in Australia

I was a mother of three when I did my university degree. It was necessary for me to still work at least 25 hours a week due to financial difficulties. If I was the recipient of this weekly allowance, it would've been so much easier. I was only getting a few hours of sleep at night and still having to learn, treat patients, drive to and from placement, complete university assessment, etc., and all usual duties at home as a mother.

#10, A registered paramedic in Australia

One of my university placements I slept in my car between shifts as there was no affordable accommodation in the town (popular holiday town) during my placement period.

#12, A registered paramedic in Australia

I often think about all the talent the country and its communities lost due to people having to choose between uni or paying rent and eating.

#13 A registered paramedic in Australia

I had to sleep in my car for a week because I couldn't afford accommodation in the area I had placement. I went to the local outdoor showers to shower after placement and had to eat fast food and I had no means of cooking.

#14, A registered paramedic in Australia

I recall spending one day working 11 hours as a lifeguard before driving 90 minutes to a 12-hour placement night shift, driving back to work immediately after night shift and working six hours, sleeping in my car for four hours before driving back for another 12-hour placement night shift. I started crying on my way home the following morning, knowing I had to return to work later that afternoon in order to take advantage of available shifts to afford to eat, despite being so tired that I couldn't quite contain my emotions. I knew it wasn't safe to drive, but realistically had no choice and no support, being financially independent from my parents. I did this several times throughout my degree and would regularly be unable to afford to eat lunch. Now I really try to look after any

paramedic students on placement with me. I buy them coffee and bring in communal food (so they don't feel it's charity). I can't imagine how hard it is now with the fuel prices and cost of living crisis, and I fear that the cohort of paramedic students will be limited to those who can afford it. We are at risk of creating a generation of paramedics that do not represent the communities they serve - paramedics are advocates for the underserved and uninsured, let's give our students a fair go by reducing placement poverty.

#16, A registered paramedic in Australia

Can't work and unpaid placement causes extreme financial stress.

#18, A registered paramedic in Australia

I had only \$15 in the bank at one point while in placement.

#19, A registered paramedic in Australia

Going on long placements (especially four to eight-week placements) means that often times individuals who work and study at the same time miss work, which also usually means a loss of regular pay.

#20, A current paramedicine student in Australia

As a part of my second year of study, I was required to undertake a three-week mandatory placement in January. I was placed in a seaside location, three-and-a-half hours away from my home. The first day of placement coincided with the peak holiday season, where I was required to pay upwards of \$7,000 for three weeks accommodation. This was in addition to the inability to work during this time.

#21, A registered paramedic in Australia

Queensland uni grad. Completed 2 x six-week blocks of placement at Airlie Beach in 2022. Housing crisis for short-term rentals back then was atrocious! I spent \$1,900 for six weeks for a one-bedroom share house with no annual leave available to use as I was a casual at my old job. My second stint I could stay with a paramedic costing \$650. My last block I essentially had to lie that I had COVID so I could receive the one-off pandemic disaster payment to pay for my groceries!!!

#24, A registered paramedic in Australia

During my third-year placement I was placed at a station more than four hours from my residential address. This placement occurred in a town known to be a holiday destination and was during Schoolies. I was given my placement allocation less than two weeks before the placement start date. When booking accommodation there was nothing available in the immediate area of the station. I had to book accommodation approximately 40 minutes from the station. As this was during holiday time there wasn't a lot available and as a result I had to book four different places for the placement block and move all my stuff at the end of each week. In total, accommodation came to around

\$4,000 and this didn't include meals. On top of the accommodation, I paid for meals and fuel to drive to and from the station as well as back home on days off to save accommodation money. At the end I had depleted most of my savings. I estimate the total price of that placement to be \$6,000 and still on top of that for the placement subject attracts a hefty HECS debt price.

#25, A registered paramedic in Australia

In my first year I was placed in outer Sydney and needed to spend \$100 a night on the cheapest motel to stay there for a week whilst I completed patient transport placement (\$500 on just accommodation). If I had to be in Sydney for ambulance placement it would cost me over \$2,000 for four weeks. This is a ridiculous cost for students who already have a reduced ability to work and save money.

#27, A current paramedicine student in Australia

For my placements I've had to work three jobs on top of full-time study including night shifts as I know it will be 4+ weeks of no income. During placement I have to pay for accommodation, food, and transport whilst still paying rent at home. My last placement wiped my savings completely. I'm always picking up extra shifts as I know I can't afford to not have extra funds for my next placement. Because I have classes and study every day, I can only work at night. This means I sometimes get 2/3 hours of sleep before uni. I can't work my jobs when I'm placement because they're usually hours away from home, and the shift duration wouldn't make it feasible anyway with the usual uni work needing to be completed at the same time.

#28 A current paramedicine student in Australia

Having lost income to undertake placements whilst then having additional costs associated with placements created a large financial stress upon myself and family as well as additional anxieties about how we would manage. For us, the greatest stressors were: Additional childcare costs (for extra days + extended hours in care) were an additional \$220 - \$250 p/w; additional travel and parking costs ranged from \$70-150 p/w. I actively put off placements until the last possible moment so that we had more time to save and lessen the financial impact and avoided proper meals on some placements - opting for small things such as a piece of fruit or muesli bars as they were cheaper.

#30, A registered paramedic in Australia

I am a second-year paramedicine student in Tasmania. On my first placement, I had 12 shifts, approximately 12 hours each. Around half of these shifts ran over, between 30-90 minutes on average. The paramedics get paid overtime rates. I used to joke that my overtime rate was double my base rate, and that it was fine that I was missing dinner with my partner or couldn't make plans. After doing two day shifts and two night shifts, I had four days 'off'. The first day was spent entirely sleeping to recover from the long night, and the remaining three days were spent trying to catch up on university work for the other three units for that semester. Assessment tasks and unit content did not stop while we were on placement. I was forced, due to these circumstances, to not work for

nearly a month and losing all the associated income. I was also commuting more than usual, as my assigned station was 50 minutes' drive from my home. The combination of increased stress, fatigue, constant university work and the inability to earn any income was intense and detrimental. This is the way it has been for me, for my fellow students, and for all those before me. Just because it is, doesn't mean it should be. With all of that said, I am one of the lucky ones. My partner earns a good wage, and we have a house together, and she was able to support me. This placed increased financial pressure on her. Not everyone is so lucky, and not everyone has the support that I have had. If this was emotionally, physically, mentally and financially draining for me, WITH all of my support, what is it like for those with less? If you want to create a greater class and wealth divide between people who choose these careers and people who don't, then all you have to do is nothing.

#34 A current paramedicine student in Australia

Australasian College of Paramedicine

The College is the peak professional body representing and supporting paramedics and student paramedics across Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand. The College champions the role of paramedics in emergency, urgent and primary care, and we are committed to enhancing patient-centred care. The College is future-focused and brings together paramedics from across Australasia to represent, advocate, promote and celebrate the achievements of this integral health profession.