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To whom it may concern

### **Higher Education and Research Reform Bill 2014**

Australian College of Nursing (ACN) is pleased to submit comment on the Higher Education and Research Reform Bill 2014. ACN is the national professional organisation for all nurse leaders. ACN is an advocate for the nursing profession, advancing the skills and expertise of nurses to provide leadership in their contribution to the policy, practice and delivery of health care.

ACN welcomes the proposed changes made to the Higher Education Loan Programme (HELP) in particular the new minimum repayment threshold and the introduction of HECS debt indexation relief for the primary carer of a child up to five years of age. These changes alleviate to some extent ACN's fears that long term repayment of education related debt may prove to be a significant financial deterrent for prospective nurses. However, ACN's preferred outcome of any education reform is the maintenance of the current system of financing undergraduate and postgraduate tertiary education.

ACN is deeply concerned that universities will be granted the freedom to introduce a student contribution for students enrolled under the Research Training Scheme (RTS). ACN acknowledges that students can defer this cost through HELP however remains concerned that this new cost may still deter nurses from undertaking research degrees.

The *Explanatory Memorandum* does not identify whether higher degree research undertaken by nurses in nursing faculties fall into the high cost category for which universities may charge students up to \$3,900 per equivalent annual full-time student load (EFTSL). However, as psychology, human movement, engineering and medical studies fall into this category, it is likely that higher degree research in nursing will also be categorised this way.

Nurses who study for a higher research degree in nursing tend to undertake this training after some years of clinical practice when they are well established in their careers. Thus, for these students the undertaking of a research higher degree is costly in terms of salary forgone. Further, these students tend to have established families with the attendant financial responsibilities. They may also still be paying off debt incurred when undertaking the minimum of two tertiary degrees required to prepare for the undertaking of a research degree. ACN is concerned that any cost additional to the already existing financial burden these students shoulder may dissuade prospective researchers from undertaking research training in nursing.

ACN believes that maintaining and building research capacity is critical to maximising the nursing profession's contribution to practice, education and policy in health care. The nursing profession is a major contributor to the production of health care and aged care. Thus, research investigating nurses' actual and potential contribution to health care and aged care is critical at a time when the health care system requires re-orientation to meet future care demands in financially sustainable ways. ACN is concerned that new financial burdens may dissuade research students leaving the nursing profession with a starkly reduced capacity to generate the empirical evidence required for its clinical, education and policy activities. For this reason ACN recommends that nurses who undertake a research higher degree be exempted from paying the student contribution.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to provide final comment on the Bill. We look forward to the outcomes of this Inquiry. Please do not hesitate to contact me for further discussion.

Yours sincerely



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Chief Executive Officer

26 February 2015