

MEDIA STATEMENT

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Am I more than my Avatar? Face-to-Face teaching is vital in universities

Universities face challenging times with significant disruptors to delivery and innovation in education, highlighted recently during the trials imposed by COVID-19. In Australia, additional challenges have included uncertainty around government funding cuts and student fee increases. The requisite move to online teaching with COVID-19 has been global and has been both lauded and criticised by students, staff, universities and government funding bodies, while its true impact remains unknown. The expectation of lower incomes in universities has increased the pressure to grow online course delivery. The essential transition to online learning exposed new opportunities, but not all learning is ideal in a virtual context. Students who signed up for a live experience, are currently missing out on the opportunities of live peer learning and campus life.

The Council of Deans of Nutrition and Dietetics Australia and New Zealand, is clear that whilst online teaching methods may be suitable in some subjects, there are others, especially within health, where 'going online' poses significant risk. Within the dietetic context, to ensure quality and safety of healthcare to the Australian public, in-person teaching and assessment of skills development in medical nutrition therapy, community dietetics and food service management is critical. Further to this the Council of Deans of Nutrition and Dietetics recognises the necessity for regular in-person contact between students and their university lecturers, tutors, placement supervisors, and other students as part of the experiential learning process required to become a member of the health care team of the future.

Professor Eleanor Beck, Chair of The Council of Deans of Nutrition and Dietetics cautions, "Face-to-face contact is vital in the health professions. In-person networking opportunities with peers, tutors and lecturers are part of learning and cannot be achieved adequately online. One year online in an emergency such as a pandemic has been managed, but dietitians like many professionals, require science training in laboratories, skill development in physical assessment, and practical engagement in settings such as commercial and community kitchens. Most critically, all health students need to be assessed on their interpersonal skills in preparation for moving to professional placement and to work with vulnerable individuals and groups in hospital and primary care settings."

With the closing date today for submissions on the Higher Education Support Amendment Bill 2020, The Council of Deans of Nutrition and Dietetics is calling for a commitment to adequately fund and staff universities to ensure that students receive essential in-person teaching. One in two Australians suffer from diet-related diseases and dietitians and professionals require this education to ensure engaged, evidence-based care assists in improving the future health of Australians.

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