



Australian Government
Department of Social Services

Guidelines for the approval of Masters courses for student payments

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Introduction

Since 1 January 2008 eligible students may qualify for student payments such as Youth Allowance (student), Austudy and the Pensioner Education Supplement when undertaking approved Masters by coursework programs.

The qualification criteria for student payments under the *Social Security Act 1991* include the requirement that a student must be enrolled in an approved course of study at an approved institution.

The purpose of the Masters by Coursework program is to support students gain qualifications for entry-level employment in their chosen profession. This process is to determine whether Masters by Coursework qualifications offered by higher education providers should be approved to enable students undertaking those courses to receive student income support payments.

Please note that Research degrees and doctorate courses are not considered “tertiary courses” for student payment purposes and cannot be approved.

To qualify as an approved course for student payments purposes, a Masters course must be approved by the Minister for Social Services and listed in the *Student Assistance (Education Institutions and Courses) Determination 2019* (the Determination) under subsections 3(1) and 5D(1) of the *Student Assistance Act 1973*.

The Department of Social Services (DSS) coordinates the formal approval process, issuing invitations to higher education providers to submit courses for consideration, assessing the applications and providing a consolidated list to the Minister for consideration. Assessment rounds are run twice a year.

These guidelines provide advice to higher education providers on the process for seeking approval for Masters by coursework programs for student payment purposes.

Accredited graduate certificates and graduate diplomas are already separately approved for student payment purposes and should not be submitted through this program.

Combined Bachelor/Masters courses do not need to be separately submitted for approval. Only the Masters course component requires approval under this program.

Note: only a higher education provider may submit an application for a Masters course to be assessed against these guidelines. Applications from students cannot be accepted.

The list of currently approved courses is available at:

<https://www.legislation.gov.au/Series/F2019L00062>

Contact us

For more information regarding the Masters by coursework approval process, please email DSS at Mastersapps@dss.gov.au.

Criteria for Masters Course Approval

A specialist tertiary qualification is required for employment at entry-level in the relevant profession.

A specialist tertiary qualification must be essential for entry-level employment in a specific profession, as a legal or professional requirement. If the Masters course is considered a specialist tertiary qualification for entry-level employment to the profession then the course **MUST** be:

- Fully accredited by a recognised professional, state or territory governing body; and
- required for admission to a profession.

If the Masters qualification does not meet these requirements it cannot be approved for student payments.

Before applying, please note the following:

- Courses with qualifying, provisional, conditional, or no accreditation status are not considered to be fully accredited and are unable to be accepted. Accreditation must be relevant for all graduates of the Masters course. Proof of full accreditation must be provided at the time of application.
- An industry preference for accreditation is not a legal or professional requirement.
- A course does not meet the criteria of a specialist tertiary qualification if it is not required for a specific profession, but instead provides a qualification for a broad field of employment within an industry or a range of industries.

If a Masters course satisfies the above conditions, then a course may be approved for student payment purposes where the course also meets at least one of the following three criteria:

Note: Masters courses are considered on a course-by-course and institution-by-institution basis. Masters courses that are approved at one institution will not necessarily be approved at another institution given variations in course structures, duration and other course offerings at the institution.

1. Minimum legal or professional educational requirement

A Masters course may be approved where the course is the minimum educational qualification legally required for practice in a profession, or where recognised professional organisations have set a Masters qualification as the entry-level requirement for professional registration.

Example: Registration with Audiology Australia is necessary for employment as an audiologist in Australia. Completion of an accredited, two-year master qualification is the minimum qualification to work as an audiologist. This course could meet the minimum pathway criterion.

2. Fastest pathway offered by the higher education provider

A Masters course may be approved where it is the fastest pathway offered by a higher education provider for a student with an unrelated or indirectly related bachelor degree to gain an entry-level qualification for professional practice.

Where professionally accepted entry-level qualifications are offered at the diploma, graduate certificate and graduate diploma level, and these courses are shorter in duration, the Masters level course cannot be approved as the fastest pathway. If, however, these qualifications are the same duration as the Masters Degree, the Masters course may be approved as the (equal) fastest pathway to professional entry.

If enrolment in a Masters course is only open to holders of an undergraduate degree in the same field, and that undergraduate degree is sufficient for entry-level employment in the field, then the Masters course will not meet the fastest pathway criterion. If it provides a pathway to professional entry for students with an unrelated degree then it can meet the fastest pathway criterion.

Example: Registration with the relevant state or territory teaching regulatory authority is necessary to work as a teacher in Australia. A person with an unrelated undergraduate degree (e.g. Bachelor of Arts) can complete an accredited two-year Master of Teaching qualification to register to work as a teacher. As an undergraduate teaching degree is typically four years and the Master of Teaching qualification is two years, this course could meet the fastest pathway criterion.

3. Only pathway offered by the higher education provider

A Masters course may be approved where it is the only pathway to entry-level employment in the profession offered by the higher education provider.

For example, entry-level employment in the profession may be possible with a bachelor degree, however the higher education provider may not provide this qualification at the bachelor level and instead only offers a Masters level qualification.

If the higher education provider offers any other courses such as a diploma, bachelor degree or graduate diploma that are sufficient to gain entry-level employment in the field, the course will not meet this criterion.

Example: Registration with the relevant body is required to work as a physiotherapist. University A does not offer a four year Bachelor of Physiotherapy but does offer a Master of Physiotherapy for students who have already completed a Bachelor of Science. As the Masters level course is the only pathway offered by University A, this course could meet the only pathway criterion.

Courses that do not qualify for approval

A Masters level course considered desirable for professional development but that exceeds the minimum educational requirement for an entry-level position does not meet the criteria and cannot be approved.

Research degrees and doctorate courses (AQF level 10) are not eligible for student payments and cannot be approved.

Courses that are not required for a specific profession, for example, that lead to a broad field of employment cannot be approved.

Courses that have qualifying, provisional or conditional accreditation, but have not yet been granted full accreditation by a recognised professional body cannot be approved. Applications should be submitted when full accreditation has been provided. If full accreditation is likely to be provided within four weeks of the closing date of applications then providers are encouraged to contact Mastersapps@dss.gov.au for further advice.

Note: Students must generally be studying full-time to be eligible for student payments. Some limited exceptions apply for students with a disability and for the part-time rate of the Pensioner Education Supplement. If the Masters course is only available part-time then this will limit eligibility for student payments. See the Social Security Guide for more information on concessional study-load students (<https://guides.dss.gov.au/social-security-guide/1/1/c/290>).

Application process

When the round opens, an invitation pack will be provided to all higher education providers seeking applications for the approval of Masters by Coursework programs. The application form is also available online at: www.dss.gov.au/Masters. An application form should be completed for each course submitted for consideration.

The Determination is a legislative instrument under subsection 5D(1) of the *Student Assistance Act 1973*. Any amendments to the Determination must be approved by the Minister for Social Services and tabled in both houses of parliament in order to be enforceable.

Therefore, DSS cannot accept applications for course approval, or amendments to courses currently listed on the Determination, outside of a formal assessment process.

Completed applications and supporting documents should be emailed to Mastersapps@dss.gov.au.

Submissions MUST include all relevant supporting documents such as evidence of accreditation.

Applications that cannot be substantiated by relevant supporting documents cannot be assessed and will be returned to the higher education provider.

Late applications will only be accepted with prior approval. Late applications lodged without approval cannot be accepted and will be returned to the higher education provider.

Resubmitted courses

If a course has been submitted in a previous assessment round and was not approved, the course should **not** be resubmitted unless there has been a change of circumstances and the course now meets the criteria (for example, the course has attained full accreditation).

Assessment process

DSS reviews and assesses the applications against the criteria. If an application is incomplete (for example, the submission is unsigned or relevant supporting documents have not been submitted) DSS will request the missing information from the higher education provider. The higher education provider has **five working days** to provide the requested information. If the missing information is not provided within this timeframe, the application cannot be assessed and will be returned to the higher education provider.

DSS submits a summary of the assessment and a list of recommended courses to the Minister for Social Services. The Minister will determine which Masters courses are eligible for student payments and amend the Determination to include these courses. The amended Determination is then registered on the Federal Register of Legislation and DSS will advise higher education providers of the outcome of their submission in writing.

Appealing a decision

Where a higher education provider disagrees with the outcome, such as where a Masters course has not been approved, the higher education provider may write to the Minister to seek reconsideration of the decision. The higher education provider will be required to demonstrate that the course meets the approval criteria.

Previously approved courses

Masters courses, and the higher education provider that offers them, that are currently listed in Schedule 3 of the Determination are approved for student payment purposes and do not need to be re-submitted for approval.

DSS may conduct reviews of approved courses from time to time, to determine whether the approved courses are still offered by the higher education provider and continue to meet the criteria for approval.

Change of name requests

Provider and course names must exactly match that listed in the Determination for students to be able to receive student payments. The details of any name changes will need to be provided using the 'Approved Masters course name change' form available at www.dss.gov.au/masters.

If an approved Masters course has substantially changed (for example, course duration, other course offerings at the higher education provider, accreditation or professional requirements) the higher education provider is required to advise DSS. DSS will review the changes and may ask that the course is submitted for re-assessment.

Note: In the event that students are still enrolled under the old course name, please ensure you note this on the form, along with when these students are expected to complete the course. If the change of name is approved, DSS will add the new course name and retain the old course name to ensure continued student payment eligibility.

Note: Any amendments to the Determination can only be processed as part of a formal application process

Course removal requests

Courses that are no longer being offered and do not have any students currently enrolled should be removed from the Determination. Course removal request should be made by completing the 'Course removal request' form available at www.dss.gov.au/masters.

Note: if a course is closed for enrolment to new students, but existing students are still undertaking the course, please submit the request to remove the course once all current students have completed the course.