

19 March 2017

Open letter

## ***LAW SCHOOLS SUPPORT FUNDING FOR LEGAL ASSISTANCE SERVICES***

*As Deans of Australian Law Schools we write to express our concern at proposed Federal Government funding cuts to the legal assistance sector set to commence on 1 July 2017. We encourage the Federal Government to reverse this impending 'funding cliff' and to work with service providers to ensure adequate funding is available so that people across Australia can assert their legal rights and access justice.*

### ***Community Legal Centres – A Vital Part of the Legal Assistance System***

*Community Legal Centres are a vital component of a network of legal services that assist individuals with their legal problems, many of whom experience multiple disadvantages and who cannot independently navigate our complex legal system. Reduced funding will mean diminished service capacity which will have flow-on effects throughout the sector and ultimately on the effective and efficient administration of the justice system as a whole.*

### ***Australian Law Schools and Community Legal Centres – Clinical Partnerships***

*Australian Law Schools are proud of their enduring relationships with Australia's legal assistance sector, in particular through their partnerships with Community Legal Centres in the area of clinical legal education.*

*Many Law Schools strategically partner with Community Legal Centres to develop dynamic learning opportunities for law students in a clinical legal setting. Exposing students to public interest legal work is a central feature of a well-rounded legal education, and law clinics allow students to learn vital practical legal skills in a social justice context. Student interest in clinical legal education is extremely strong across Australian law schools, with high enrolments in law clinic courses.*

*The foreshadowed funding cuts will threaten our strategic relationships with Community Legal Centres to offer clinical legal programs. These partnerships rely heavily on the sustainability of Community Legal Centres to provide necessary infrastructure, supervision and human resourcing to support our law students. The funding cliff thus undermines our institutions' ability to educate the next generation of lawyers about the importance of access to justice in Australia.*

### ***A Long-Term Investment***

*We note the significant return on investment that Community Legal Centres could deliver through additional funding, as recommended by the 2014 Productivity Commission Inquiry into Access to Justice Arrangements. Implementing the Commission's recommendation to inject \$200 million per year into the sector will replenish the existing shortfall in funding and will represent the start of a long-term investment to support a resilient and sustainable legal assistance sector.*

*Community Legal Centres are a vital network of frontline organisations doing important work in the public interest. Funding cuts set to commence in 2017 will weaken the third mission of university law schools to effectively engage with our communities, as well as the overall efficiency of the Australian legal system.*

*We call on the Australian Government to reverse the cuts and invest in the legal assistance sector to promote access to justice for people across Australia.*

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