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EH Course at Swinburne University under scrutiny

19 July 2024

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Swinburne University's proposal to scrap environmental health diploma under scrutiny

Environmental health organisations are urging the university to reconsider its proposal to phase out its Graduate Diploma of Environmental Health Practice.

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Swinburne University's proposal to phase out its Graduate Diploma of Environmental Health Practice is under scrutiny.

Swinburne University of Technology's proposal to phase out a cleanliness and hygiene diploma could put the wellbeing of Victorians at risk, environmental health organisations have warned.

Industry leaders are urging the tertiary institution to continue offering its Graduate Diploma of Environmental Health Practice, after Swinburne University said it was considering to "teach out" the course.

The university's graduate diploma is the only gazetted qualification of its kind in Victoria and provides students with skills to solve a range of environmental health problems.

Graduates can become authorised environmental health officers who carry out public health responsibilities under several hospitality, health and environment acts.



Swinburne University of Technology is reviewing its Graduate Diploma of Environmental Health Practice course.

Such responsibilities include ensuring businesses handle and store food safely, investigating viral outbreaks at childcare and aged care centres and playing a critical role in emergency management events.

But Environmental Health Australia (EHA) national president Philip Swain said if Swinburne University phased out the course, it would further exacerbate skill shortages in the sector, putting the public's health at risk.

"EHA acknowledges the accredited courses around Australia are by necessity somewhat niche, but also vital to the assured level of professional expertise required in communities to maintain environmental health standards and protect Australian communities," he said.

A Local Government Workforce Skills and Capability Survey released in 2022 found 10 urban councils were anticipating environmental officer skill shortages in the future.

Meanwhile, the Victorian Auditor-General's Office also called for the industry workforce shortage to be addressed in last June's Regulating Food Safety report.

It comes as universities struggle to meet enrolment quotas for environmental health, with approximately 150 to 200 students expected to graduate from 11 EHA accredited courses this year.

Kernow Environmental Health and Immunisation senior environmental health officer Sean La Fontaine said primary care costs relating to treating preventable illnesses would occur if Swinburne University ceased the course.

He also said students would have to move to interstate providers to study the graduate diploma if the proposal went ahead.

"(Further skill shortages will) severely limit the ability of the health system to respond to public health threats, potentially resulting in a significant increase in primary care costs related to treating preventable illness," he said.

"It will also have broader implications for the social, economic, and environmental sustainability of the community ... and compromise the effectiveness of the state government's food safety regulatory system which increases the risk of unsafe food practices in food premises."



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Meanwhile, a Local Government Professionals (LGPro) spokesman said “should the graduate diploma be discontinued, a sector already starved of essential professionals could see health standards in our communities affected and the planning and response to health emergencies hindered”.

If Swinburne University was to proceed with a “teach out” of the graduate diploma, no current students or staff would be impacted.

Reviewing courses was also standard practice for the university to ensure its offerings remain relevant and meet student and industry demand.

“The Graduate Diploma of Environmental Health Practice is under review,” a Swinburne University of Technology spokeswoman said.

A Department of Health spokeswoman said environmental health officers had a crucial role in keep Victorians safe and well.

“The Department has been upfront that there are workforce pressures in the health sector, particularly since the pandemic, which is why we developed a 10 year health workforce strategy,” she said.