

Australasian Council of Deans of Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities

SUBMISSION

Higher Education Support Amendment (Reverse Job-Ready Graduates Fee Hikes and End 50k Arts Degrees) Bill 2025

Education and Employment Legislation Committee

April 2026

Overview

The Job-Ready Graduates Package (JRG) is contributing to inequitable outcomes, increasing student debt and distorting participation across the tertiary education system.

While DASSH welcomes the intent to reduce student contributions for those in the highest-charging band where many Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities (HASS) disciplines are situated, this alone is not a viable solution. Any reform of JRG must avoid reducing overall funding to the sector. This needs to be clearly accounted for in any legislation.

DASSH recommends a targeted redesign of JRG aligned with the goals of the Universities Accord. Reform must support equity and participation in tertiary education without undermining the sustainability of certain disciplines and the overall tertiary system.

DASSH welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback and urges the government to commit to clear principles to reform JRG including:

- Clear, time-bound reform aligned with the Universities Accord
- Protect total funding and system sustainability
- Ensure fair and equitable student contributions
- Base policy on existing evidence and data

As senior leaders of HASS, DASSH is uniquely positioned to provide insight into the effects of JRG given the close connections to students, teachers, researchers and executive decision-makers within universities. Members directly experience the intended and unintended consequences of JRG each day within their institutions, seeing both the impact on students and universities.

We welcome ongoing collaboration with the government and sector bodies to reform JRG in a way that is sustainable for Australia's tertiary education system as a whole.

1. Principles and recommendations for reform

DASSH recommends the following principles:

- **Clear, time-bound reform aligned with the Universities Accord**

We urge the government to commit to a clear course of action to reform JRG including a transparent timeline and defined steps for redistribution and redesign. Funding settings should

align with the Universities Accord and the National Tertiary Education Objective, supporting equity, participation and lifelong learning.

- **Protect total funding and system sustainability**

Reforms must not reduce total funding to the sector. Adjusting student contributions without replacement funding or reinvestment will undermine universities' capacity to deliver high-quality education and risk making some disciplines unsustainable, particularly at regional universities.

- **Ensure fair and equitable student contributions**

Funding settings should support and expand participation, not constrain it. Reform must reduce student contributions for those in the highest-charging band where many Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities (HASS) disciplines are currently situated. Student and Commonwealth contributions must be rebalanced to ensure they are fair, transparent and do not disproportionately burden students without reducing overall funding.

- **Base policy on existing evidence and data**

Reform and policy design should be informed by current and existing evidence of student needs, outcomes, projected earnings and the costs of education. Government should commit to transparent modelling and consultation.

2. Equity and participation impacts

JRG directly undermines and contradicts the government's equity agenda. The *Australian Universities Accord Final Report* (hereafter the Accord) sets a target of at least 80% of the working-age population to have a tertiary qualification by 2050¹. This depends on greater inclusion and participation of under-represented groups, specifically:

- First Nations students
- Students from low socio-economic (SES) backgrounds
- Students from regional and remote communities
- Students with disability

The Accord also recommended that ATEC has a responsibility to “improve access and opportunities for historically under-represented cohorts” and ensure that “higher education is affordable”.²

The proposed *Universities Accord (Australian Tertiary Education Commission) Bill 2025* (hereafter the ATEC Bill) reinforces this objective. Section 14 of the Bill explicitly states that “ATEC must have regard to the objective of improving outcomes for persons facing systemic barriers to education including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, persons with disability, persons of a low SES background and persons living in regional Australia.”³

¹ [Australian Universities Accord Final Report](#), Department of Education, p. 2

² [Australian Universities Accord Final Report](#), Department of Education, p. 227

³ [Universities Accord \(Australian Tertiary Education Commission\) Bill 2025](#), Parliament of Australia

In the second reading speech on the ATEC Bill, Minister for Education Jason Clare spoke on “prizing open the doors of universities to more people from disadvantaged backgrounds.”⁴

DASSH members welcome the Minister’s commitment to equity in tertiary education including student debt relief, indexation reform and student support measures. However, JRG remains a structural barrier to participation. The goals of the Accord will not be realised while current funding settings remain in place.

Recent analysis from Innovative Research Universities (IRU) shows that students in the highest charging band, where various HASS disciplines are located, paid up to \$1.3 billion more in 2024⁵. This is particularly significant given the concentration of equity cohorts within HASS.

In 2024 Society and Culture was the largest study area for domestic Bachelor enrolments (32%) and the second largest for domestic postgraduate enrolments. In the same year⁶:

- Almost 31% of commencing First Nations students were enrolled in Society and Culture making it the largest First Nations cohort.
- Over one-quarter (26%) of female students were enrolled in Society and Culture.
- Students with disability were more likely to choose Society and Culture or Creative Arts over other study areas.⁷

Consequently, JRG is placing great debt burdens on the groups the ATEC Bill seeks to include at a time of increased inflation and cost-of-living pressures. Tertiary education has become less affordable, contravening the inclusivity the ATEC Bill aims to implement.

Increased debt has long-term consequences for the individual and broader community including:

- Reduced capacity for lifelong learning
- Limited career mobility and opportunities for reskilling
- Delayed financial independence

This may further reduce choice and access to housing and homeownership.

Increased student debt also engenders growing strain on the HELP system. Higher initial debt levels create greater long-term fiscal exposure for government with rising numbers of outstanding HELP debt and increased likelihood of non-payment, particularly for lower-income graduates⁸.

⁴ [Second Reading Speech Universities Accord \(Australian Tertiary Education Commission\) Bill](#), Minister for Education Jason Clare

⁵ [Impacts of the Job-Ready Graduates policy and options for reform](#), Innovative Research Universities, p. 3.

⁶ [Perturbed Student Enrolments Pivot Table 2024](#), Department of Education

⁷ [Investigating the relationships between First-in-Family status, equity groups and university access](#), Tomas Zajac, Garth Stall, Wojtek Tomaszewski, N Xiang

⁸ [HELP debt – the evolution of higher education contributions](#), Carol Ey, Parliament of Australia

JRG is making higher education unaffordable for cohorts the government has clearly identified they are seeking to support. Opportunity and access to tertiary education should not be determined by inequitable degree costing arrangements.

If left unaddressed, JRG risks becoming the defining equity legacy of the current Labor government. It will leave a generation of students and graduates with disproportionate debt, and lock others out of education. This stands in stark contradiction to the goals of the Accord.

At the same time, any changes to JRG must support the long-term sustainability of the tertiary education system as a whole. Reducing student contributions without adequate reinvestment will undermine universities' capacity to provide education and limit access for the very students reform is intended to support.

3. Policy failure: price signalling and misalignment

The policy intention of JRG was that differentiated price points would shift demand away from HASS, Law and Business towards other study areas. This approach relied on price signalling through charging bands⁹. Evidence shows this has not worked as intended.

IRU analysis indicates that maximum student contributions for HASS increased from \$6,804 in 2020 to \$14,500 in 2021¹⁰. This represents an increase of 113%¹¹, exceeding the total funding rate despite evidence from Deloitte Access Economics (2019) that HASS was among the least expensive to deliver¹².

The 2024 Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching Graduate Outcomes Survey shows median full-time salaries of \$73,100 for Humanities, Culture and Social Sciences graduates and \$65,200 for Communications graduates. Despite both being below the average across all study areas, these disciplines remain in the highest charging band.

While lifetime earnings vary across individuals and are influenced by factors such as gender and socio-economic background, current settings are placing disproportionately high burdens on students whose earning potential may be lower than those in other fields.

At the same time, overall funding to universities has declined. Universities received up to \$813 million less in 2024¹³, meaning that higher student contributions have not translated into stronger system investment.

⁹ [Real costs of university teaching](#), Ian Marshman and Frank Larkins, Campus Morning Mail [The government linked the cost of university teaching to funding and student fees, but the numbers don't add up](#), Keith A Houghton, Christine Jubb, Nancy Bagranoff, The Conversation

¹⁰ [Impacts of the Job-Ready Graduates policy and options for reform](#), Innovative Research Universities, p. 5

¹¹ [Australian Universities Accord Final Report](#), Department of Education, p. 154

¹² [Real costs of university teaching](#), Ian Marshman and Frank Larkins, Campus Morning Mail [How will the number of student places increase under the Tehan reforms?](#), Andrew Norton [The government linked the cost of university teaching to funding and student fees, but the numbers don't add up](#), Keith A Houghton, Christine Jubb, Nancy Bagranoff, The Conversation [2019 Transparency in Higher Education Expenditure](#), Department of Education

¹³ [Impacts of the Job-Ready Graduates policy and options for reform](#), Innovative Research Universities, p. 3.

The impacts of JRG on student behaviour have been mixed. Domestic undergraduate commencements declined by 3.5% between 2020 and 2024. In the highest charging band, low SES commencements declined by 19.7%, compared with 8.2% for non-low SES students. In 2024, low SES students comprised only 15.7% of HASS enrolments, well below population parity¹⁴.

JRG is therefore not an effective policy lever. Price signals have failed to meaningfully redirect demand whilst generating barriers for specific cohorts to access education¹⁵. What has changed is not necessarily demand but who is able to participate. Students who are comparatively well-off are still able to choose their degrees according to their interests, while low-income students are pushed to limit their options.

These impacts are not limited to study fields in the highest charging band. The Australian Council of Deans of Science indicate that JRG has produced unintended system-wide effects, including reduced funding margins for STEM disciplines with little evidence of sustained increases in demand¹⁶.

Reform must be prioritised. Student contributions should be recalibrated to better reflect the goals of the Accord. Any adjustments must be considered alongside the overall funding model. Adjustments made in isolation risk creating further distortions in provision and access, particularly in disciplines and regions where delivery is already more vulnerable.

A balanced approach to reform is needed, ensuring that funding settings support equitable access and participation, whilst enabling universities to sustain provision across the full range of disciplines.

4. Regional impact and skills pipeline risk

The impacts of JRG are already being observed across institutions. The following two case studies demonstrates these effects in regional contexts.

Case study one: University of Wollongong

The University of Wollongong (UOW) operates several regional campuses across southeastern New South Wales (NSW). Its main Illawarra campus is located in Wollongong with additional campuses in the Bega Valley, Eurobodalla, Shoalhaven and the Southern Highlands.

UOW data demonstrates how JRG is a significant contributing factor to declining enrolments in generalist degrees including HASS. The following table indicates substantial declines in HASS enrolments between 2021 and 2025¹⁷:

Course enrolment (headcount)	% change 2021-2025
Bachelor of Arts	-45.33%

¹⁴ [Impacts of the Job-Ready Graduates policy and options for reform](#), Innovative Research Universities, p. 9.

¹⁵ [Australian Universities Accord Final Report](#), Department of Education, p. 155

¹⁶ [Funding Clusters and Indexed Rates](#), Department of Education

[ACDS supports the Deans of Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities](#), Australian Council of Deans of Science

¹⁷ Data supplied from the University of Wollongong

Bachelor of International Studies	-54.35%
Bachelor of Social Science	-46.21%
Bachelor of Communication and Media	-11.29%
Bachelor of Creative Arts	-25.21%

At UOW, the Bachelor of Creative Arts (BCA) is the only remaining degree of its kind in the Illawarra and southeastern NSW. The viability of this program is therefore not only an institutional issue, but a regional capability issue.

JRG also sends negative signals to students in regional contexts about the value and pathways of HASS degrees. Senator Nita Green, currently serving as Assistant Minister for Tourism, Assistant Minister for Pacific Island Affairs and Assistant Minister for Northern Australia, holds a Bachelor of Creative Arts from UOW¹⁸. These degrees underpin diverse career pathways and opportunities beyond university.

Figures one and two below indicate the breakdown of students and geographical areas between 2019 and 2023 for the BCA and Bachelor of Performance and Theatre at UOW. The Bachelor of Performance and Theatre is now no longer offered but is a major within the BCA.

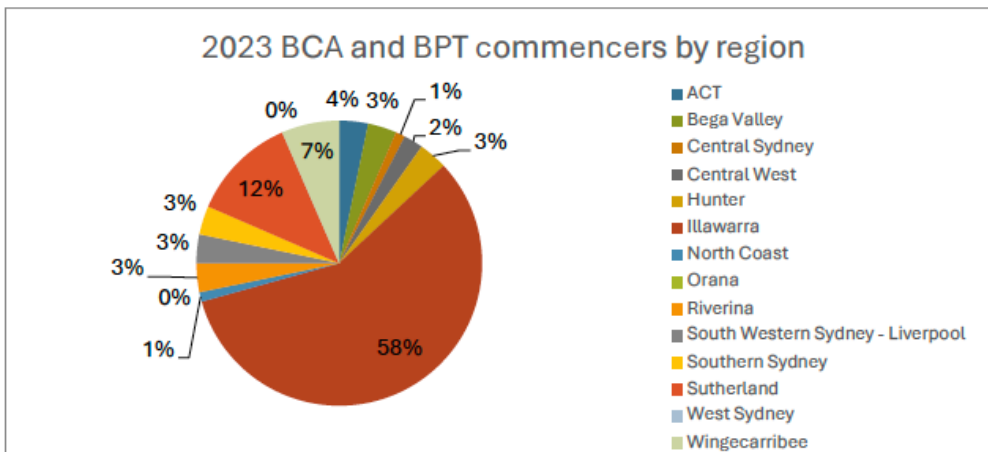
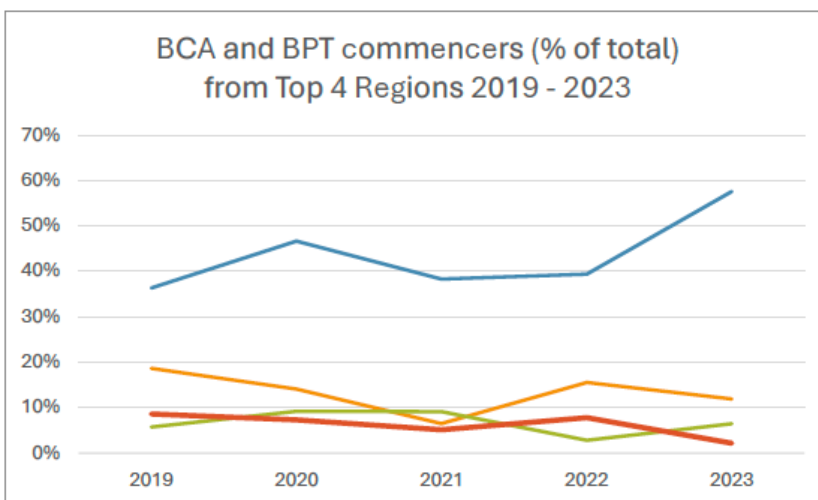


Figure 1. Bachelor of Creative Arts and Bachelor of Performing Arts commencements by region 2023



Illawarra | Sutherland | Wingecarribee | Central Sydney

Figure 2. Bachelor of Creative Arts and Bachelor of Performing Arts regional commencements 2019-2023

¹⁸ [Senator the Hon Nita Green](#), Parliament of Australia

Case study two: Federation University

Federation University is a dual-sector institution providing both higher and vocational education. It has multiple campuses across Victoria including Ballarat, Berwick and Horsham.

Since JRG, the Bachelor of Arts (BA) and Bachelor of Arts (Honours) have experienced downward trends between 2020-2026. The following table indicates the total students and year commencing¹⁹:

Year	Bachelor of Arts	Bachelor of Arts (Hons)
2020	52	65
2021	29	39
2022	35	41
2023	38	45
2024	35	40
2025	14	19
2026	13	16

For the BA, commencing enrolments at Federation University declined from 52 in 2020 to 13 in 2026, with some fluctuation in the intervening years. A similar pattern is evident in the BA (Hons) where enrolments fell from 65 in 2020 to 16 in 2026.

While these trends are multifaceted, the current JRG funding settings are contributing to a bifurcated tertiary education system. This is particularly acute in non-metropolitan and regional contexts where structural and demographic challenges already constrain participation.

For many regional students, HASS disciplines are important access points and pathways into tertiary education. Universities serving regional Australia, such as UOW and Federation, play a central role in supporting regional communities and future workforces. JRG is an active policy setting that undermines their ability to do so. These impacts are not isolated. They point to broader systemic risks for regional provision, participation and workforce development in regional Australia.

The consequences of JRG extends beyond universities. It is resulting in a declining pipeline of graduates equipped with HASS capabilities in regions where these skills are already in demand. This constrains local workforce development, reduces access to education, and limits opportunities for regional communities.

The longer the inequitable impacts of JRG remain unaddressed, the greater the risk that regional universities will be forced to reduce provision and discontinue HASS disciplinary offerings, also resulting in the loss of highly skilled staff. This is already occurring with Southern Cross University closing its Creative Arts degree, reducing opportunities for both students and staff in the region²⁰.

¹⁹ Data supplied from Federation University

²⁰ [Southern Cross University cuts all creative arts programs amid declining demand](#), ABC News

Once disciplines, skills and graduate pipelines are lost, they are difficult to rebuild, particularly in regional contexts where cohort sizes are smaller and provision is more vulnerable. JRG is accelerating declines in student demand and workforce capacity, resulting in losses that will be difficult to reverse.

Crucially, any JRG reforms that reduce HASS student contributions must be accompanied by adequate reinvestment. Without this, there is a significant risk that affected degrees will become financially unsustainable, particularly in regional universities, and may no longer be viable.

5. Changing meaning of “job-ready”

The concept of “job-ready” has significantly shifted since JRG was introduced. The economy, workforce and education are rapidly changing and responding to major shifts including artificial intelligence (AI), digital transformation, climate change and net zero.

The 2025 Quality Indicators Learning and Teaching Employer Satisfaction Survey shows that supervisors’ overall perception of graduates remains steady despite AI. Employer satisfaction of foundational, adaptive, collaborative, technical and employability skills have all increased since 2022²¹.

The survey also found that 84.2% of employer’s reported overall satisfaction with graduates and were highly likely to say their university degrees prepared graduates ‘well’ or ‘very well’ for employment²².

Jobs and Skills Australia (JSA) Commissioner Barney Glover highlighted “cognitive skills around communication, problem solving and teamwork” as being sought after by employers in *The Australian* in July 2025.²³

In October 2025, JSA Deputy Commissioner Megan Lilly also called for recognition of competencies including communication, empathy and teamwork as core workforce capabilities, shifting away from “soft skills” terminology.²⁴

The World Economic Forum (WEF) listed the top ten in demand skills in *The Future of Jobs Report 2025*²⁵:

- Analytical thinking
- Resilience, flexibility and agility
- Leadership and social influence
- Creative thinking
- Motivation and self-awareness
- Technological literacy
- Empathy and active listening
- Curiosity and lifelong learning
- Talent management
- Service organisation and customer service

²¹ [Employer Satisfaction Survey 2025](#), Quality Indicators Learning and Teaching, p. 11 & p. 19

²² [Employer Satisfaction Survey 2025](#), Quality Indicators Learning and Teaching, p. 23

²³ [Jobs and Skills Australia demands 'blended degrees' to get graduates fit for work](#), Natasha Bitá, The Australian

²⁴ [Stop calling them 'soft skills'. Australia's economy can't afford that mistake](#), Megan Lilly, Jobs and Skills Australia

²⁵ [The Future of Jobs Report 2025](#), World Economic Forum

Eight of these top ten skills are directly related to HASS domains. Creative thinking, resilience, flexibility and agility, and curiosity and lifelong learning are identified by the WEF as the fastest growing desired skills by employers. These capabilities are essential in a complex, ever shifting and uncertain global context.

While these skills can be difficult to categorise and measure, evidence shows HASS skills and competencies are increasingly desired by employers. JRG does not reflect this reality.

JRG is an active policy that sends a negative and inaccurate signal about the core competencies, skills and knowledge sought by employers. It discourages engagement with disciplines and capabilities that are most in demand.

Governments should not discourage students from pursuing critical disciplines by disproportionately inflating the cost of certain degrees.

Funding settings must enable the continued deliver of these capabilities across the tertiary education system. Reform should adjust student contributions in the highest charging band without diminishing overall investment. Any reduction risks constraining universities' capacity to deliver the skills and knowledge in growing demand.

This balance is critical. Without it, the system cannot deliver equitable access, sustain provision, or build the capabilities Australia needs.

6. Sovereign capability implications

JRG is not just a funding issue, it is a national capability issue.

In the current context of climate change, net zero and rapid technological change, HASS capabilities are particularly significant and future focused. Graduates are equipped with the skills and knowledge to navigate change, disruption and opportunities.

JSA Commissioner Barney Glover stated at the *Financial Review* Higher Education Summit in August 2025 that “the role the humanities play will be vitally important. We don’t want distinctiveness. We need curriculum that enables more crossover fertilisation between the humanities and sciences.”²⁶

The Australian Council of Deans of Science have similarly emphasised that national capability depends on the full spectrum of disciplines. Science, technology and innovation rely on HASS insights including history, philosophy, public policy and communication²⁷.

Without HASS perspectives, the application of scientific knowledge to real-world challenges is significantly constrained. These disciplines help address inequity and mitigate risks that arise from the “unbridled pursuit of technology alone”²⁸.

²⁶ [‘We can’t force people to wisdom’: why no one is studying arts](#), Julie Hare, Australian Financial Review

²⁷ [ACDS supports the Deans of Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities](#), Australian Council of Deans of Science

²⁸ [ACDS supports the Deans of Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities](#), Australian Council of Deans of Science

This reinforces that HASS capabilities are not separate from, but integral to the development and application of STEM.

JRG directly undermines these goals. It reduces the capacity of universities to deliver disciplines that support the public good including HASS. It shifts costs onto students in areas that are critical for Australia's future.

More than ever, there is a need to ensure equitable access to these disciplines which underpin social cohesion, innovation and collective thinking. Stronger safeguards are required so that students are not steered away from competencies that are beneficial to Australia as a whole.

DASSH supports the government and ATEC in prioritising Australia's long-term capabilities, national resilience and equitable democracy.

The National Tertiary Education Objective (NTEO) in the ATEC Bill states that ATEC's functions must be premised on promoting a "strong, equitable and resilient democracy" and driving "national, economic and social development and environmental sustainability (Section 13) (1) (a) (b)).²⁹

In his address, '*Building Australia's Future*', Prime Minister Anthony Albanese stated that "education is the most powerful weapon we have against disadvantage – and it is the best investment we can make in building Australia's future." He said that this depends on "investing in the skills and capacity of the Australian people."³⁰

JRG directly contradicts these priorities. It remains a structural barrier to addressing disadvantage and ensuring an equitable system of education. However, reforms that remove funding or limit universities' ability to deliver education would also work against these objectives. Reform must balance improved student access and participation with the capacity of universities to sustain provision across the system.

It also has broader consequences beyond the tertiary education sector. JRG does not only affect universities. It shapes the capabilities Australia builds, the skills that will be available in the workforce and the opportunities available to individuals and communities.

DASSH urges the government to recognise that JRG is not only an issue affecting universities. It is an issue that affects the prosperity, resilience and future of all Australians.

About DASSH

The Australasian Council of Deans of Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities (DASSH) is a network of nearly 400 of Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand's most senior leaders in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities across 43 universities. Our members play a critical role in shaping curriculum design, skill development and knowledge creation, which are essential to securing Australia's sovereign capabilities as a sustainable democracy. They also contribute towards creating well informed citizens who strengthen social cohesion and public trust, delivering benefits across the whole of society.

²⁹ [Universities Accord \(Australian Tertiary Education Commission\) Bill 2025](#), Parliament of Australia

³⁰ [Building Australia's Future](#), Prime Minister Anthony Albanese

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