

Australasian Council of Deans of Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities

Opening Statements

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

Education and Employment Legislation Committee

April 2026

1. Opening Statement – Professor Lori Lockyer

Chair and Committee members, thank you for the opportunity to appear today.

My name is Lori Lockyer. I am Executive Dean of the Faculty of Creative Industries, Education and Social Justice at QUT and Secretary of DASSH.

DASSH is the Australasian Council of Deans of Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities. We represent nearly 400 Deans and Heads of School across 43 universities in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand. Our members oversee teaching, research, curriculum and workforce development across disciplines that educate a large share of Australia's student.

JRG is first and foremost an equity issue. It is also a workforce issue and a national capability issue.

Current settings are asking students in many Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities disciplines to pay substantially more for their education. Over a 100% increase from pre-JRG rates.

These are the same disciplines where participation is strongest among students the government has rightly prioritised for inclusion: students from low socio-economic backgrounds, First Nations students, regional students, and students with disability.

These cohorts already face structural barriers to education. JRG asks them to carry some of the highest levels of student debt because of their field of study.

This is a fundamental contradiction at the heart of this policy.

JRG is also out of step with the workforce.

Time and time again, when we talk to our HASS alumni, these are CEOs, founders, investors, authors, artists, community leaders across every sector, they tell us the same thing: the skills that set them apart were not technical ones, but their ability to communicate, think across complexity and adapt to change.

These are precisely the capabilities that employer groups and think tanks around the world are now identifying as the most critical and fastest-growing workforce needs.

JRG sends exactly the opposite signal.

The impacts of JRG are sharpest in regional Australia.

When enrolments fall and programs become unviable at regional institutions, communities lose access, workforce pipelines weaken, and skills that took decades to build can be lost. Losses that are very difficult to reverse.

DASSH supports reform that reduces student contributions in the highest charging band, while maintaining overall funding to the sector. Reform should be aligned with the principles of the Universities Accord and must support equity, participation and Australia's long-term capability needs. Lowering fees without replacement funding simply shifts the problem from students onto institutions.

I now invite my colleague, and fellow DASSH Board member, Professor Kate Nash to provide further examples of the impact.

2. Opening Statement – Professor Kate Nash

As you've heard from my colleague Professor Lockyer, the Job-ready Graduates package raises serious questions of fairness and long-term risk. I'd like to focus briefly on its impact on regional universities, students and communities, drawing on my experience as Dean of Arts at the University of Newcastle.

For many regional students, the local university is the pathway into higher education. Regional universities disproportionately enrol and support students who are older, from low-SES backgrounds, First Nations, or living with disability.

Since JRG, that pipeline is being choked off. Our submission includes examples from the University of Wollongong and Federation University showing substantial declines in Arts and related enrolments since JRG was introduced.

In my own school, commencing BA enrolments are down 64% since 2021. Social Science commencements have fallen 77%. First Nations commencements dropped from 37 to 11. And Low-SES commencements have more than halved.

This mirrors national trends. IRU analysis shows that in the highest-charging fields low-SES commencements fell almost 20% between 2020 and 2024. While we know that humanities and social sciences students have strong career outcomes, the cost of study sends a strong signal to regional families. The result is not job readiness it's segregation by background and postcode.

Like my colleagues at Federation and Wollongong I am facing tough decisions about the future of programs and disciplines. Students can no longer study art, politics or German in my school. Other fields — philosophy, ancient history, performing arts, and language programs — now survive as single-staff disciplines. Even where majors persist students have little to no choice in the courses they take.

HASS graduates from regional universities overwhelmingly move into teaching, health, public administration, policy, community services — they are the backbone of regional labour markets.

The Job-ready Graduates policy is not just an equity issue. In regional Australia it is a capacity failure, because pricing equity students out of humanities and social sciences programs erodes place-based workforce and civic capacity and constrains the ability of regional communities to innovate and respond to contemporary challenges.

DASSH members strongly support reform of JRG that reduces excessive student contributions while maintaining overall funding to the sector. Without that balance, regional universities — and regional Australia — will continue to bear the cost.

Thank you. We welcome the Committee's questions.