



Policy submission

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

Submission to: the Education and Employment Legislation
Committee

April 2026

Submission to the Education and Employment Legislation Committee inquiry into the *Higher Education Support Amendment (Reverse Job-Ready Graduates Fee Hikes and End 50k Arts Degrees) Bill 2025*

The Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia (the Academy) is an independent, not-for-profit organisation that brings together the multidisciplinary expertise of our nation's leading thinkers to provide practical, evidence-based advice on important social issues facing society.

As the pre-eminent organisation in Australia representing excellence across the social science disciplines, we welcome the opportunity to respond to the *Higher Education Support Amendment (Reverse Job-Ready Graduates Fee Hikes and End 50k Arts Degrees) Bill 2025 (the Bill)*

To discuss any matters raised in this submission, please contact Andrea Verdich, Policy Director on 0438 218 352, or andrea.verdich@socialsciences.org.au.

The government should urgently reform Job-ready Graduates (JRG) to restore equity, fairness and sustainability in Australian higher education

The Academy welcomes the committee's focus on the significant and unresolved issues arising from the Job-ready Graduates (JRG) package. Since JRG was announced in 2020, it has been subject to well-founded criticism. The Academy's submission to the draft legislation cautioned:

“the idea that price signals will shift course enrolment demand is not supported by the evidence –and may lead to unintended and perverse consequences”.

The evidence increasingly shows that JRG has not achieved its stated objectives and is impeding the government's efforts to improve access and equity in higher education. Key concerns with the policy include:

- **Significant increases in student contributions**, particularly in the social sciences and humanities subjects like Arts, Business, Law and Society and Culture. The increases have imposed unfair debts on students that many may never fully repay. Despite the sharp increases, there is little evidence the policy has changed student behaviour.
- **Reduction in government funding per student**, universities are receiving less funding overall to teach and support students. The cuts to overall funding rates also reduce university capacity to combine teaching and research.
- **Disproportionate impact on equity cohorts**. Nearly one third of all First Nations students in Australian universities are enrolled in courses that fall into the top-paying degree field of Society and Culture. Degrees where student fees have increased under the JRG have historically served as an entry point to higher education for those from disadvantaged and first in family cohorts. JRG is making higher education unaffordable for equity groups the government has clearly identified that they are seeking to support, as evidenced in the mandate of the recently established Australian Tertiary Education Commission (ATEC).

In the recent Four Corners investigation *Campus Chaos*, the Minister for Education Jason Clare recognised JRG's shortcomings:

"Oh, I've said it's failed. I've also said it's expensive to fix and not easy to fix. I've also said that the tertiary education commission that we're setting up right now... will have a role in making sure that we find out the best way to fix this."

Most significantly, the Australian Universities Accord Final Report concluded JRG had "failed" and needed "urgent remediation". Yet, two years have passed since the Accord was released and the sector is still waiting for clarity on the timeframe and process to replace or fundamentally reform the policy.

The Academy urges the Australian Government to commit to a clear course of action, setting out a timeline and the steps being taken to reform Job Ready Graduates and restore equity and access to higher education for all Australians. Reform should be aligned with the Australian Universities Accord recommendations and informed by the ATEC costing and pricing work.

A simple reversal is not the ideal solution

While the Academy supports the intent of the Bill—to make higher education more affordable and equitable for students—we do not consider a simple reversal of the student fee increases introduced under JRG to be the ideal solution.

While some students may pay less, it exacerbates underlying higher education funding problems. Any changes to fee structures needs to be considered as part of a larger reform package that ensures adequate support for teaching and research across all disciplines.

A sustainable and fair funding system

Recent [Innovative Research Universities](#) analysis confirms that the Job Ready Graduates package contributed to an estimated \$813 million reduction in university base funding in 2024. Alongside pandemic disruptions and rising operational costs, this financial pressure is limiting universities' capacity to deliver high-quality education to meet Australia's future knowledge and skills needs.

Universities Australia has highlighted the sector's critical financial challenges, noting that over 40 per cent of universities have operated at a deficit for most of the past five years, with regional campuses particularly vulnerable.

Ongoing financial precarity and JRG pricing signals and incentives are placing the sustainability of academic programs—and related research—at risk, particularly in the social sciences. Over the past year, there have been increasing course and subject closures in key social science disciplines, including education, sociology, political science, history, economics, and international relations.¹

Education in these fields brings knowledge, skills, and analytical ways of thinking that are in high demand across a range of industries and occupations and central to Australia's workforce capability and long-term prosperity.

Analysis of Australian social science graduate outcomes confirms they have strong employment prospects. Almost 90% of social science undergraduates are employed fulltime three years after graduation.² This sits alongside strong employment outcomes for graduates from professional accredited social science courses such as Law, Education, and Psychology. Society and Culture

¹ Media reports of course and subject closures [at UTS](#), [at Macquarie](#), [the ANU](#) and [the University of Canberra](#).

² 2024 [Graduate Outcomes Survey - Longitudinal](#)

graduates, which saw some of the most significant student cost increases under JRG, have the highest rating of employability skills and adaptive skills across all study areas.³

The Bill, as currently drafted, reduces student contributions without any necessary increase in Commonwealth funding. This will further threaten the viability of the social sciences in the higher education system, with implications for Australia’s future skills needs.

There needs to be a decisive shift towards an equitable and sustainable funding framework for Australian universities.

The role of the Australian Tertiary Education Commission

The Academy strongly supports a central role for the ATEC in advising government on a transparent higher education costing and pricing model. This would allow for more predictable and sustainable pricing aligned to the actual costs of teaching and research, and the consideration of regional needs, workforce sustainability, and equity for all Australians.

We understand that the ATEC Costing and Pricing Working Group has begun a rapid review of international best practice in course costing, alongside a detailed examination of options for developing a new costing model.

The Academy urges the ATEC to urgently progress the critical costing analysis, which provides the essential foundation for a sustainable pricing model that supports quality and equity in higher education.

Pricing reform must consider the broader context of student support

Higher education pricing reform cannot be considered in isolation from the broader landscape of student support. In a cost-of-living crisis, where housing, utilities, and essential expenses such as food and fuel are rising sharply, it is clear that student contributions—even when deferred—can amplify financial stress and disproportionately affect low-income and regional students.

A holistic approach to pricing reform across all courses must therefore integrate these support mechanisms, ensuring that policy changes do not inadvertently undermine access, equity, or the ability of students to complete their studies successfully.

³ [2024 Employer Satisfaction Survey](#)