



Submission to:
Committee Secretary
Education and Employment Legislation Committees
Department of the Senate
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600
AUSTRALIA

The Australian SHAPE Futures EMCR Network

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

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to this inquiry.

The Australian SHAPE Futures EMCR Network (SHAPE Futures) strongly supports the Higher Education Support Amendment (Reverse Job-Ready Graduates Fee Hikes and End 50k Arts Degrees) Bill 2025.

As Australia's first network supporting Early and Mid Career Researchers (EMCRs) working in the social sciences, humanities & creative arts within and beyond academia, SHAPE Futures believes that it is essential that the Job-Ready Graduates (JRG) fee hikes are immediately repealed due to the devastating impacts they have had on students and scholars in the SHAPE disciplines and which have had a further negative effects on Australian society more broadly.

Our submission covers three matters which we believe require consideration by the Committee:

- (1) The importance of SHAPE degrees to Australian workforce and society;
- (2) Disproportionate impact of JRG fees on underrepresented students;
- (3) Effects of JRG on early and mid career (EMCR) researchers in SHAPE disciplines.

Each matter will be addressed in turn.

(1) Importance of SHAPE degrees to Australian workforce and society

The knowledge and skills developed while undertaking a SHAPE (Social Sciences, Humanities, and Arts for People and Environment) degree are vital to the Australian workforce and Australian society more broadly. These degrees have been especially impacted by the JRG scheme, such as through the increase in the cost of Arts degree to over \$50,000. It is thus vital that the JRG is repealed as it currently creates a significant barrier to student enrolment in SHAPE-related degrees and the survival of SHAPE disciplines in Australia.



SHAPE skills are a vital part of achieving the growth in research, development, and innovation as set out in the recent [Ambitious Australia](#) report. The knowledge and skills developed as part of a SHAPE degree are highly transferrable, with those from SHAPE backgrounds often working in tandem with those in STEM fields to ensure that innovations are developed in a responsible, ethical and effective manner.

Degrees in the SHAPE fields are particularly important given current world events. The significant upheaval caused by the growing use of artificial intelligence means that it has never been more essential that Australians can study degrees in which humans are centred, including when looking at human interactions with technology and the issues this can raise in terms of ethics and social life. As AI systems become increasingly sophisticated and able to take on many of the technical tasks previously performed by humans, skills like critical thinking, ethical reasoning, and creativity are becoming more important than ever. These skills are the [cornerstone of an education in SHAPE disciplines](#). Accessing this education needs to be affordable and under the current JRG scheme it is not.

Geopolitical upheavals are also revealing the importance of the social sciences, humanities and creative arts for understanding and responding effectively to significant world events. This includes fields such as history, political science, international relations, sociology and geography, just to name a few. These degrees offer students a valuable pathway for understanding the world around them and responding to complex current affairs, and yet the costs of studying these fields under the JRG acts as a significant impediment to student enrolment.

(2) Disproportionate impact of JRG fees on underrepresented students

[Research has shown](#) that SHAPE disciplines attract a significant number of Indigenous and low-SES students as well as students with a disability and from remote or regional communities. These students are underrepresented in higher education, with the recent [Australian Universities Accord](#) calling for greater participation among this cohort by 2050.

By burdening these students with higher fees, the JRG scheme has made it more difficult for them to earn a degree in SHAPE fields as well as in a number of other fields. This has been reflected in research from the [Innovative Research Universities](#) which shows that commencements by low-SES students in highest student contribution subjects (including SHAPE disciplines) have declined by 20 per cent since 2020. This is the result of the JRG's introduction.

The disproportionate impact of the JRG scheme is thus contributing to a narrowing of education towards only those with the means to study. This is inequitable and directly contradicts the more inclusive approach to education envisaged by the [Australian Universities Accord](#).



(3) Effects of JRG on early and mid career (EMCR) researchers in SHAPE disciplines

It is important to note too that it is not only students, both prospective and current, who have been impacted by the JRG Scheme. Early-and mid-career researchers (EMCRs) in SHAPE disciplines, who face precarious work environments, have already left the higher education sector and not always by choice. This precarious environment is reflected in widespread [cuts to SHAPE departments](#) occurring in institutions across Australia. Retaining the JRG scheme will only continue to compound this alarming trend.

Our Network conducted a survey of Australian SHAPE EMCRs between September 2022 and April 2023, in the years after the JRG was introduced. Our survey shows that a lack of employment security is one of the biggest challenges facing EMCRs in these fields. Almost half of respondents (47 per cent) reported feeling insecure in their employment, with a reported 25 per cent of respondents having left the higher education sector altogether.

The JRG has played a significant role in these trends, with reductions in student enrolments having been used by university management as [justifications for decisions to close courses](#) or significantly reduce staff numbers in the SHAPE fields. With many SHAPE experts leaving the sector, and without a pipeline of new students entering the field, Australia is at risk of further undermining our sovereign knowledge base.

To conclude, we believe that the three issues we described above – the importance of SHAPE degrees to Australian workforce and society; disproportionate impact of JRG fees on underrepresented students; and effects of JRG on early and mid-career (EMCR) researchers in SHAPE disciplines - provide valuable reasons for the Higher Education Support Amendment (Reverse Job-Ready Graduates Fee Hikes and End 50k Arts Degrees) Bill 2025 to be passed. As such, we request that these issues receive careful consideration by the Committee during the inquiry. Lastly, while repeal of the JRG scheme is an important step towards a fairer system for those undertaking a degree in SHAPE disciplines, our Network also believes that there is a need for a wider conversation around the cost of tertiary education, including considering the possibility of free or heavily discounted university fees.

Thank you for considering our submission.

Prepared by Dr Alexandra Ridgway, Dr Emily Fitzgerald and Dr Rebekah Harms on behalf of SHAPE Futures

Contact

Dr Alexandra Ridgway

Chairperson

The Australian SHAPE Futures EMCR Network

████████████████████

www.shapefutures.com.au