

Submission to the Senate Education and Employment Committee Inquiry: Motion to Reverse the Job-ready Graduates (JRG) Package

Submitted by:

LabNorth and Humanities in the Regions—a community of practice of the ACHRC
(Australasian Consortium of Humanities Researchers and Centres)

Executive Summary

This submission is made on behalf of LabNorth and the Humanities in the Regions CoP of the ACHRC, representing academics, educators, and students of humanities, arts, creative arts, and social sciences across regional Australia.

Our position is clear:

- The Job-ready Graduates (JRG) package has caused substantial and ongoing harm to humanities, arts/creative arts, and social sciences (HASS) education in regional Australia.
- This harm is structural, cumulative, and already entrenched.
- A staged or partial reversal will not address these impacts.
- Delaying reversal by deferring to ATEC will be too late.
- Immediate repeal in regional universities is urgent and necessary to restore equity, access, and institutional capacity.

The JRG has accelerated the erosion of regional higher education provision, particularly in disciplines that historically support the highest proportions of equity students. Without decisive intervention, this damage risks becoming permanent.

1. The JRG has exacerbated structural inequity in regional higher education

The JRG did not operate in isolation. It was introduced into a system already characterised by disparities between metropolitan and regional universities, and between disciplines.

As previously documented in our sector work:

- Regional universities serve disproportionately high numbers of first-in-family, low-SES, First Nations, disabled, and regional students, as well as students from other equity groups.
- HASS programs have historically educated the majority of these cohorts.
- Graduates from these programs are more likely to remain in and contribute to regional communities.
- Graduates from these programs lead and deliver social impact and leadership in their communities.
- Graduates from these programs build the capacity for informed and balanced civic participation in regional communities, helping to counter polarised voting patterns through education in critical thinking, communication, and cultural understanding.
- Regional communities in Australia are facing significant skills shortages and retention in creative arts sectors and other areas now no longer serviced by regional universities.

Current sector settings reward economies of scale, and regional universities cannot compete with the facilities, scholarships, course offerings, subject variety, rankings and prestige of their metropolitan counterparts, but serve a significant mission to their communities. HASS programs in regional universities have suffered incommensurately because of the JRG in a sector structured by these policy settings, with impacts most directly felt on equity cohorts in regional communities. Despite stated aspirations by governments to increase regional student enrolments, between 2017 and 2024, domestic enrolments from regional and remote areas fell 7% and the JRG has played a silent but significant role in this negative trend.

The significant fee increases imposed on HASS degrees have:

- Acted as a direct disincentive to participation for equity cohorts;
- Accelerated the out-migration of students to metropolitan universities;
- Undermined the viability of HASS programs in regional institutions;
- Led to the near-disappearance of creative arts subjects and programs from regional universities;
- Intensified internal resource shifts away from HASS toward higher-revenue disciplines;
- Reduced the diversity of accessibility of course and subject offerings available to regional students;
- Resulted in the delivery of hollowed-out, second-class education for regional communities; and

- Significantly weakened the capacity of regional universities to fulfill their community-facing educational missions to provide comprehensive tertiary education.

2. The damage is already visible and ongoing

The effects of the JRG are not hypothetical. They are already manifest across regional universities and regional communities.

We are observing:

- Substantial contraction of HASS programs
- Closure of creative arts programs
- Degrees retained only in minimal or reduced forms
- Closure of majors and subject offerings
- Staff attrition without replacement
- Enrolments declining to unsustainable levels
- Plummeting graduate numbers
- Programs that were small to begin with (in contrast to metropolitan universities) becoming unviable.

Importantly, this contraction is not driven by lack of demand. It is driven by:

- distorted pricing structures;
- internal budget reallocations;
- institutional responses to policy signals embedded in the JRG.

Students in regional areas who aspire to enrol in HASS programs are not shifting their preferences to STEM fields at regional universities; instead, they are increasingly reporting that they feel compelled to relocate or study online at metro institutions in order to access a viable breadth of study options.

This represents a fundamental failure of equity policy, especially since regional universities have historically boasted the highest student satisfaction rates for equity cohorts and have long developed the capacity to understand and support students from their own communities. Increasingly students in regional areas are choosing to not go to university at all.

This is a perverse outcome of the JRG, which has led to greater regional inequity, as not all regional students can study online, many would prefer a robust face-to-face experience in their local community, and the course content at metropolitan universities tends to be generic rather than emerging out of regional challenges or addressing regional concerns.

3. Regional HASS education delivers distinct and nationally significant value

The assumptions underpinning the JRG rest on a narrow conception of “job readiness” that fails to recognise the contributions of HASS education, particularly in regional contexts. As a result of the JRG, however, many regional employers in the cultural sectors are reporting skills shortages and the inability to fill positions because of the erosion of regional creative arts and arts training.

Regional HASS and creative arts university programs deliver:

- Place-based, community-engaged education and research
- Strong alignment between curriculum and regional challenges
- Graduates equipped with critical thinking, communication, and intercultural skills to serve their communities
- Graduates who are more likely to remain in regional areas and contribute to local economies and communities
- High levels of student engagement and support
- Pathways into the creative and cultural industries that underpin regional identity, tourism, and social cohesion
- Workforce capability in sectors not easily substituted by metropolitan or online provision, including arts, community services, and local governance
- Cross-disciplinary skills that support innovation across sectors, including health, education, planning, and environmental management

- Capacity to translate local knowledge, histories, and cultural contexts into policy, practice, and community outcomes at local, state, and national levels
- Contributions to regional leadership, civic participation, and community resilience
- Training that supports communication and engagement across diverse communities
- Foundations for business development and entrepreneurial activity in the creative industries
- Cultural infrastructure that sustains regional communities, including festivals, galleries, museums, publishing, and local media ecosystems

These programs contribute directly to:

- enriched teaching and learning;
- stronger, locally relevant research outcomes;
- community cohesion and civic participation;
- improved decision-making capacity across sectors;
- workforce adaptability in changing regional economies.

These outcomes are central to national priorities but are not captured in the flawed economic logic underpinning the JRG.

4. Institutional incentives cannot be relied upon to correct these effects

It is important that the Committee recognises the limitations of relying on institutional responses.

Current university funding and governance structures:

- Incentivise high-revenue disciplines (e.g. health & medicine, engineering & technology; business, commerce & management; IT, data science, and computing);
- Disincentivise investment in HASS programs;
- Encourage internal resource concentration rather than redistribution.

HASS disciplines:

- generate lower research income per capita;
- are often treated within universities as cost centres rather than strategic priorities.

Since the introduction of the JRG, universities have further:

- shifted load to high-revenue disciplines (health, business, engineering)
- reduced their exposure to low-international student margin and low-grant income fields (HASS)

Rebuilding HASS means shifting resources away from these protected streams: something university leadership and executives are structurally disincentivised to do.

Proposals for mission-based compacts do not adequately address this issue. In practice, such frameworks are likely to reinforce existing priorities, with universities advancing cases aligned to revenue-generating research and international student visas aligning with workforce pipelines rather than broad-based educational provision that serve domestic student equity groups.

There is limited evidence that institutional leadership will, under current settings, prioritise the restoration of HASS capacity, not least regional HASS capacity that urgently needs attention now.

5. Staged reversal proposals are insufficient

Proposals to reverse JRG settings incrementally are extremely unlikely to address the scale and urgency of the current situation. Introduced during the COVID-19 period, the JRG intersected with an already fragile environment for regional universities. While many metropolitan institutions have since recovered student load, regional universities, particularly in the humanities and creative arts, have experienced ongoing decline.

In these contexts, reduced enrolments have had compounding effects: smaller cohorts lead to reduced staffing, which in turn constrains the range of majors and subjects that can be offered, further limiting the

viability and attractiveness of these programs. This cycle has, in some cases, resulted in degrees being maintained in only minimal form, with diminished capacity for robust, face-to-face teaching.

There is a growing concern that students from equity cohorts may be enrolling in relatively high-cost degrees without access to the breadth, depth, and educational experience that would ordinarily be expected. This raises important questions about both equity of access and equity of educational provision in regional Australia. There is a significant risk that regional students—already disadvantaged within a metropolitan-centric system—are being left with reduced educational options while incurring the same level of debt as their metropolitan peers. This is a form of compounded inequity, directly introduced by the JRG.

A staged approach would:

- Prolong uncertainty, inhibiting program redevelopment;
- Fail to restore student confidence in HASS pathways;
- Prevent institutions from committing to staff recruitment and curriculum rebuilding;
- Allow further cohort decline, deepening existing losses
- Fail to reverse the hollowing out of regional HASS programs that deliver significant community education to equity cohorts, leading to the inevitability of more course cuts.

In regional systems already operating at or below critical thresholds, delay will result in irreversible loss of capacity.

6. Immediate repeal is required

We recommend:

1. Immediate repeal of JRG fee increases for HASS disciplines rather than a staged approach,
2. Or, if this repeal is not possible, an immediate repeal for regional universities, matched by an injection of cross-subsidisation of HASS by Commonwealth support, to incentivise the return of student enrolments to regional campuses and communities that have sustained the most damage due to the JRG.

To remove the price barrier currently deterring participation, **we also recommend:**

1. Targeted financial support for regional study, including reduced fees or loadings for students studying at regional universities.
2. Investment in rebuilding regional HASS capacity
3. Reform of funding mechanisms to restore programs, subjects, and academic staffing—which have been intensively eroded in regional universities since the introduction of the JR—to ensure that resources do not simply follow student demand into metropolitan institutions, but actively support regional provision.

Conclusion

Regional higher education is critical to Australia's social, economic, and democratic future. Humanities, arts/creative arts, and social sciences education play a central role within this system. The Job-ready Graduates package has undermined this role. Only 26.9% of people in inner regional areas and 21.1% in outer regional areas hold a bachelor degree or higher, compared to 48.6% in major cities. This participation has been dropping since the introduction of the JRG. Creative arts degrees have all but disappeared from regional universities during this period and regional employers in creative arts industries are facing skills shortages, which the so-called Job Ready Graduate legislation has exacerbated.

Humanities degrees will be the next victims, with flow on effects to the social fabric of regional communities. That is because the real victims are equity students in our regional communities, and our regional communities more broadly. Historically, humanities and creative arts courses have educated the lion's share of regional equity students who do find their way to university, and the regional universities have historically and sustainably done so with higher rates of student satisfaction than their metropolitan counterparts—delivering content and support that is fit for purpose for the lives of these regional equity students.

A partial or delayed response is too late, but it is one that executives within the university sector will likely argue for in order to retain income streams that put their own financial rewards before that of equity groups and regional communities. Nor can the reversal of the JRG wait for the formation and review of ATEC. These policies are failing regional Australia in a way that cannot be restored. Regional universities are unable to fulfil their mission to community in the current policy environment created by the JRG. Immediate and full repeal of the JRG is required to restore equity, rebuild regional capacity, and ensure that where a student lives does not determine the quality or scope of their education. Only immediate and full repeal of the JRG will address the equity issues that its introduction has compounded, and which are deeply felt in regional communities in Australia.