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

Submission of Women's Electoral Lobby Australia

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Women's Electoral Lobby was formed in 1972. It is national, independent, non-party political lobby group dedicated to creating a society where women's participation and their ability to fulfill their potential are unrestricted, acknowledged and respected and where women and men share equally in society's responsibilities and rewards. It is an incorporated association.

WEL works within a feminist policy framework. In proposing and analyzing policy solutions, we measure fairness and justice for women and fairness and justice for all in society.

Higher Education Support Act 2003.

WEL recognizes the intention of the amendment introduced into the Senate. It responds to the many concerns raised about the Job-Ready Graduates package introduced through an amendment to the Higher Education Support Act 2003 in 2020 and implemented from January, 2021. WEL shares in these concerns, but does not support the amendment in its current form.

The Act specifies how Commonwealth Grants are calculated for each funding cluster listed, for example, Item 4 cluster - Agriculture, Medicine, Dentistry, Veterinary Science and Pathology receives the highest Commonwealth contribution of \$27,000 and, as a consequence, the student contribution amounts for Agriculture are only \$3950, with Medicine, Dentistry or Veterinary Science requiring a student contribution of \$11,300 and Pathology \$7950. By contrast, the Commonwealth grant for Law, Accounting, Administration, Economics, Commerce, Communications, Society and Culture is \$1100 and the student contribution is \$14,500. (See sections 33-10 and 93-10 of the Higher Education Support Act 2003 as amended.)

This change in Commonwealth funding to higher education providers listed in the Act represented a radical reform to funding per student place. There had been no fundamental change to Commonwealth funding arrangements since 2005.

Senate Bill

The amendment introduced into the Senate in late 2025 confines itself to changing the maximum student contribution for a place in a unit of study to that one cluster of Arts degrees listed as Item 1 in the Act as amended over the years.

Impact of the Job-Ready Graduates Package

The **Australian Universities Accord Final Report** of December 2023 recognised the "large and unfair increases in student contributions" resulting from the introduction of the Job-Ready Graduates (JRG) package. Its aim was to act as a deterrent to students choosing certain areas of study and, instead, hoping that they would select subjects which would address skills in demand and hence, be available on graduation to fill positions in certain areas of employment deemed areas of national priority.

The evidence base for this major reform to higher education funding arrangements was largely created from skills shortage information compiled regularly by Commonwealth agencies. The JRG package was intended to send strong price signals to intending students as well as those guiding them on career choices and opportunities. Hence, popular courses like Communications, Society and Culture and Law attracted the lowest Commonwealth contribution and imposed the highest student contribution.

Courses in some areas benefitted from the change, for example, Education, Languages and Architecture. (See Grandfathered Commonwealth and maximum Student contribution amounts compared with new contributions in the Act.) A study conducted on the impact of the change in WA at the time of its introduction explores potential positive and negative consequences. (See Stuart Hunter. Analysing the Impact of change in government's University fee contributions to student decision-making in WA. www.nagcas.org.au)

Overall and over time, there was a perceived devaluing of Humanities where critical thinking, analysis, problem-solving, teamwork, creativity and communication are the skill sets taught. These are often identified by employers as skills which they value and are consequently in demand.

The proposed amendment, however, does not take into account the complexity and inter-relatedness of the higher education funding arrangements and the effect of any minor change on the overall funding model and hence allocation to providers. WEL understands that you cannot tinker with one cluster of contribution amounts and not adjust others.

The study conducted by the Innovative Research Universities (IRU) published in March, 2026: **Impacts of the Job-Ready Graduates policy and options for reform** highlights this complexity and the financial impact of “unwinding” the package on the Commonwealth budget, estimating the cost of reclassifying fields, restoring the humanities and related fields to pre-JRG funding rates and STEM subjects to pre-JRG funding rates to be an additional \$1.9 billion per annum. (See p. 3)

WEL appreciates that the effect of introducing this amendment opens this complexity and cost into a broader public arena for consideration and discussion. That is a positive outcome. The recent ABC Four Corners – 30 March, 2026 - program exposing some serious University governance issues also raised the JRG with Jason Clare, Minister for Education. He agreed that the JRG had failed. He saw this aspect of reforming funding as a little like “eating an elephant”. He stressed that it was expensive and not easy to fix. It has to be done “one bite at a time”. He would be referring the issue to the soon to be established Tertiary Education Commission to advise on the best way to fix it.

The **Australian Universities Accord** (AUA) review report recommended the JRG package be replaced citing it as a failure to influence student choices; leaving them with high HELP debts that do not reflect their future earning capacity and shifting the cost burden of higher education onto students from the Commonwealth government. (See pp. 153-155) This assessment is also supported by the IRU impact study which calculates students paid \$368 million more in 2024 compared to what they would have paid under pre-JRG rates. (See p. 3)

WEL has not been able to establish from available statistical data whether there has been a differential impact of the change in funding arrangements on female as compared to male students. The study conducted by the IRU, however, citing “Bachelor commencement data from 2020 to 2024”, revealed that these declined by 3.5% overall, but for low socio-economic status (SES) students, commencements were down by 9.8% compared with a 2.2% decline for non-low SES. Clearly, there needs to be more interrogation of available University statistics over time to establish the nature of these falls in commencements. There is also more data required to answer the question of whether there has been a redistribution of student enrolments into courses deemed to meet national skill shortages that are national priorities. The AUA Final Report in recommending the replacement of the Job-Ready Graduates package references a study which found that only 1.5% of students applied to enrol in course they would not have applied for under the pre-JRG student contribution arrangements. (See p.154)

Further, WEL has not been able, in the time available, and from data searches to determine whether employers are benefitting from JRG by succeeding in recruiting of graduates more readily in the fields identified as national priorities. Perhaps this inquiry will be able to establish whether the outcomes of the JRG have done more than cost shift as well as lead to a fall in Commonwealth government contributions as concluded by the IRU: "Government contributions were up to \$1.181 million less in 2024 compared to what they would have been under pre-JRG rates for 2024". (See p.3)

Recommendation

WEL recommends to the Committee that the government undertake to implement a staged approach to abolition of the JRG package restoring a funding model which is fair to all students and based on data linked to earnings potential following graduation and employment in a given field.