

Charles Darwin University

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

April 2026



About Charles Darwin University

Charles Darwin University (CDU) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Senate Education and Employment Legislation Committee on the Higher Education Support Amendment (Reverse Job-Ready Graduates Fee Hikes and End \$50,000 Arts Degrees) Bill 2025.

As Australia's northernmost university and a dual-sector institution, CDU delivers Higher Education (HE) and Vocational Education and Training (VET) across urban, regional and remote contexts throughout the Northern Territory.

CDU's experience is grounded in delivering education aligned to workforce need in a highly constrained labour market, where access, participation and completion are shaped by geographic, socioeconomic and structural factors. Policy settings that affect student demand, course mix and institutional capacity therefore have a direct impact on workforce outcomes in the Territory.

Overview

CDU supports the intent of ensuring that HE funding and student contribution settings are equitable, transparent and aligned with national priorities.

The Job-Ready Graduates (JRG) reforms have had a clear impact on student behaviour and course demand. CDU's experience shows that while student contribution settings do influence enrolment patterns, they are only one part of the picture and cannot, on their own, deliver workforce alignment.

CDU's analysis shows that price signals can shift demand between disciplines, but structural constraints, particularly in workforce priority areas, limit the system's ability to respond.

Summary of Recommendations

CDU recommends that changes to student contribution settings be considered as part of a broader, system-aligned approach to higher education funding and workforce outcomes:

- 1. Recalibrate student contribution settings to improve equity and consistency**
Ensure contribution levels are transparent, internally consistent, and aligned to a clear policy rationale, avoiding disproportionate cost burdens across disciplines.
- 1. Avoid reliance on price signals as the primary workforce lever**
Recognise that student contribution settings alone do not drive sustained growth in workforce priority areas.
- 2. Align funding reform with system capacity constraints**
Prioritise investment in placements, supervision and delivery capacity in health, education and other workforce-critical disciplines.
- 3. Consider the impact on equity and regional participation**
Ensure reforms do not create unintended barriers for First Nations, low SES, regional and mature-age students, particularly at key transition points such as enabling-to-degree pathways.
- 4. Provide stability, clarity and adequate transition time**
Minimise frequent or abrupt changes to contribution settings and ensure sufficient lead time for institutional implementation, student communication and system compliance.
- 5. Recognise the role of regional universities and workforce pipelines**
Account for the downstream workforce impacts of demand shifts across disciplines, particularly in regional and remote contexts where pathways are closely linked to public sector and community service employment.

The Northern Territory Context

In the Territory, HE participation is shaped by:

- Lower overall participation rates
- A higher proportion of First Nations students
- Significant geographic and access barriers
- Acute workforce shortages across health, education and community services

CDU's student cohort includes high proportions of:

- First Nations students
- Low SES students
- Regional and remote students
- First-in-family entrants
- Mature-age learners

In this context, affordability is an important but not decisive factor in student decision-making.

CDU's experience demonstrates that:

- Participation is more strongly influenced by access, preparation and support
- Workforce-aligned disciplines are constrained by system capacity, particularly placements and supervision
- Regional and remote delivery requires sustained investment beyond student contribution settings

Policy settings must recognise that regional universities operate within fundamentally different constraints to metropolitan institutions.

Impact of JRG Settings

CDU's analysis aligns with broader national trends and is supported by internal and sector data.

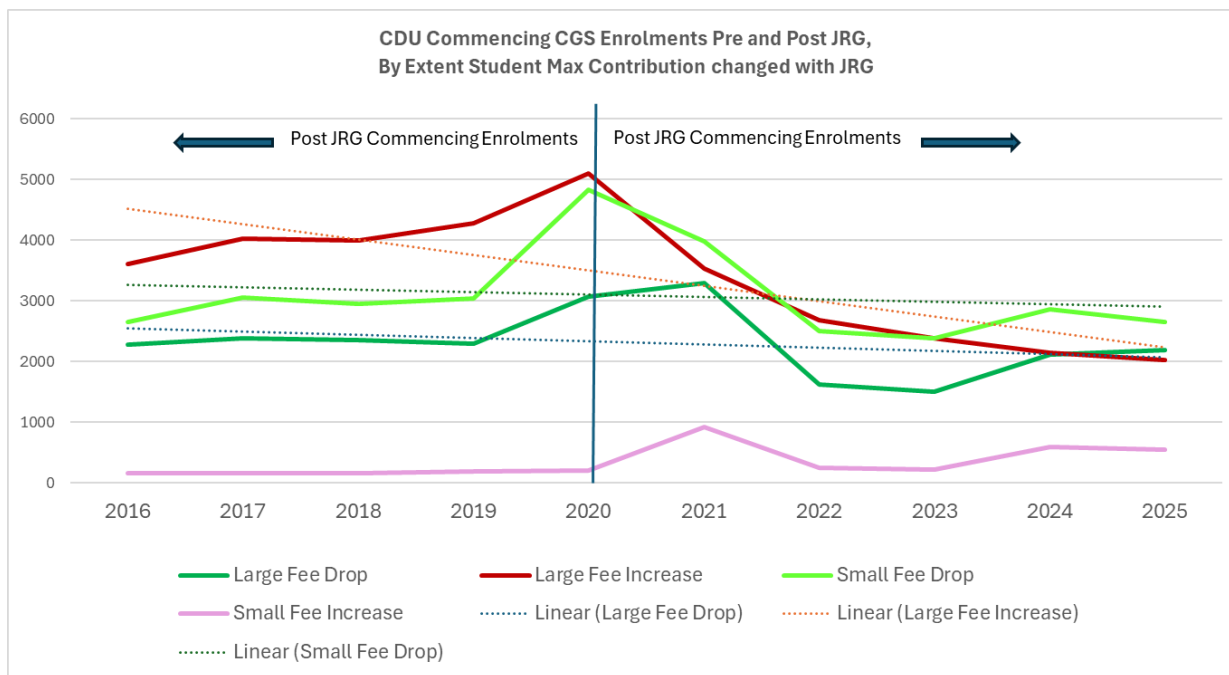
1. Price signals can shift demand, but do not drive student behaviour in isolation

Analysis of commencing Commonwealth supported enrolments before and after the introduction of Job-Ready Graduates shows a clear relationship between student contribution changes and enrolment trends.

- Disciplines subject to large fee increases (including Law, Business, Communications and Humanities) were trending upwards prior to JRG, but experienced a marked decline following implementation
- Disciplines where fees decreased significantly initially continued pre-existing growth trends, however demand has since stabilised rather than expanded
- In workforce priority areas (including Nursing, Teaching and Allied Health), growth remains constrained by placement and delivery capacity rather than student demand

This shows that price signals alone do not lead to sustained growth in areas aligned to workforce need.

Figure 1: Change in commencing CGS enrolments pre- and post-JRG (by student contribution change)



What this shows:

- When fees go up, fewer students choose those courses
- Lower fees haven't led to sustained growth in priority areas
- Limits like placements mean some courses can't grow, regardless of price

2. Workforce priority areas are capacity constrained

Reduced student contributions in areas such as Nursing, Teaching and Allied Health have not translated into proportional growth due to:

- Placement availability
- Supervision capacity
- Infrastructure and workforce limitations

In the Northern Territory context, these constraints are particularly pronounced and act as the primary limiting factor on growth.

3. Equity impacts and pricing inconsistencies

The current student contribution structure has created inconsistencies that are not clearly aligned with earnings outcomes.

For example:

- Students in some low-fee disciplines pay less in real terms than students in the same disciplines did two decades ago, despite significant wage growth
- In contrast, students in disciplines such as communications face substantially higher contributions despite comparable earnings trajectories

This raises questions regarding the consistency, transparency and perceived fairness of the current pricing structure.

Case Study: Contribution Settings and Earnings Outcomes

CDU's analysis highlights inconsistencies between student contribution settings and graduate earnings trajectories across disciplines.

In workforce priority areas such as Nursing, student contributions have remained relatively stable in real terms despite significant wage growth.

The average weekly earnings of a nurse increased from just over \$1,100 in 2009 to approximately \$2,200 in 2025. Over the same period, annual student contributions for Nursing increased only marginally, from approximately \$4,162 to \$4,627.

This reflects a situation where earnings have more than doubled, while student contribution levels have remained comparatively low.

In contrast, disciplines such as Communications demonstrate a different pattern. Earnings for journalists also increased significantly over a similar period.

However, student contributions for Communications degrees have increased substantially, with students now paying approximately three times more than they did in 2009.

These examples illustrate that current student contribution settings are not consistently aligned with graduate earnings outcomes.

4. Key insight

Taken together, CDU's analysis indicate that:

- Student contribution settings do influence behaviour, particularly in equity cohorts
- However, they are not sufficient to drive system-level workforce outcomes
- Structural constraints remain the dominant limiting factor

Operational and Student Behaviour Impacts

CDU's experience as a regional, dual-sector institution provides additional insight into how student contribution settings operate in practice.

1. Student behaviour and price sensitivity

Student contribution settings materially influence enrolment decision-making, progression patterns and retention outcomes, particularly for equity cohorts.

Based on CDU experience:

- Students respond to price signals between disciplines
- Some students defer or decline offers where debt levels are perceived as high
- Contribution differentials influence course selection decisions

These effects are more pronounced among First Nations, low SES, regional and mature-age students.

2. Enabling to degree transition

CDU has a significant Enabling education footprint, with many students progressing into Commonwealth supported undergraduate study. Contribution settings are particularly impactful at this transition point.

Observed and potential impacts include:

- Reduced conversion from enabling to undergraduate study, as students transition from tuition-free pathways into HELP-supported programs
- Increased early attrition risk due to financial pressure
- Extended time-to-completion where students reduce study load to manage perceived debt

These effects are amplified in regional and equity cohorts. In the context of the Universities Accord's focus on participation, it is important to consider how contribution settings affect enabling-to-degree progression.

3. Student advising and communication impacts

Frequent or significant changes to contribution arrangements create:

- Increased enquiry volumes
- Greater demand for fee and HELP advice
- Heightened confusion around eligibility and loan arrangements
- Increased risk of misinformation

Stability and clarity in contribution settings support better student decision-making and reduce administrative burden.

4. Compliance and systems implications

Changes to contribution structures require:

- Reconfiguration of student management systems and reporting frameworks
- Staff retraining and updated communication processes
- Management of increased compliance risk during transition periods

For a dual-sector institution such as CDU, these impacts are amplified across multiple funding and reporting systems. Adequate lead time and clear implementation guidance are essential.

5. Regional workforce considerations

In the Northern Territory context:

- Arts and social science disciplines often provide pathways into teaching, community services and public sector roles
- Price signals that materially alter demand may have downstream impacts on regional workforce pipelines

It is critical that reforms consider regional flow-on effects.

6. Summary of impacts

Student contribution settings influence:

- Enabling-to-degree progression
- First-year retention patterns
- Course selection behaviour
- Student advisory workload
- Institutional compliance and reporting risk

This reinforces the importance of:

- Recognising the sensitivity of equity and regional cohorts to debt signals
- Ensuring stability and clarity in contribution settings
- Providing adequate transition time
- Aligning with Universities Accord participation objectives

CDU Position on the Bill

CDU supports a review and recalibration of student contribution settings to improve equity and system coherence.

However, CDU emphasises that:

- Reversing fee settings alone will not address workforce shortages
- Changes must be considered alongside system capacity, particularly in clinical and education placements
- Reforms should avoid unintended impacts on participation among equity and regional cohorts

CDU does not support policy settings that rely solely on price signals to deliver workforce outcomes.

Key Considerations for Reform

CDU recommends that the Committee consider the following:

1. Align funding with delivery capacity

Investment is required in:

- Placements
- Supervision models
- Regional delivery infrastructure

2. Ensure equity and transparency in student contributions

Contribution levels should:

- Be internally consistent
- Reflect a clear policy rationale
- Avoid disproportionate financial burden

3. Recognise the limits of behavioural price signals

Student choice is influenced by:

- Aspiration
- Academic preparation
- Access and support
- Geographic and cultural factors

4. Support regional and dual-sector institutions

CDU requires:

- Flexible funding models
- Recognition of higher delivery costs
- Support for integrated VET–HE pathways

Conclusion

CDU supports the intent to improve equity and coherence in HE funding arrangements. Meaningful reform must extend beyond student contribution settings to address the structural constraints that shape participation, delivery and workforce outcomes—particularly in regional and remote contexts.

A balanced approach, combining fair pricing with targeted investment in capacity and pathways, will be essential to achieving sustainable reform.