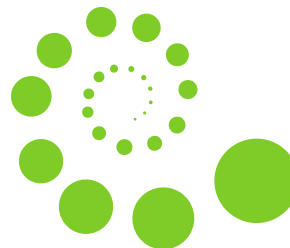


**CHASS**  
what makes us human



8 April 2026

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

**Submission from the Council for the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences (CHASS)**

**About CHASS:** We are a peak body with a membership of over 50 humanities, arts and social sciences (HASS) organisations, including academic discipline associations, universities and members from HASS associated industries.

**A Failed Policy**

CHASS has engaged with the issue of the Job-ready Graduates (JRG) package since its original announcement more than five years ago. It seems redundant to recapitulate at any length the well-established point that the package was uninformed by research or data about graduate employment outcomes. If consulted, these would have shown that HASS graduates earned salaries after graduation that were roughly similar to the salaries of those in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) fields and even a little ahead.<sup>1</sup>

We have pointed out on several occasions that JRG failed to achieve its stated aim of helping to build the workforce needed for Australia's future. It also failed in its immediate objective of redirecting student choice from disciplines disfavoured by the government of the day and towards those prioritised for taxpayer support. The Australian Universities Accord Final Report recognised the failure of JRG, on its own terms as well as in light of the national interest, and it recommended 'that the Australian Government reduce student contributions for those affected by JRG and moves towards a student contribution system based on potential lifetime earnings'.<sup>2</sup>

Like many other critics of this failed policy, we have suspected that its extremely poor design has also been responsible for deterring disadvantaged students from pursuing tertiary study. That suspicion is now increasingly supported by research. A recent Innovative Research Universities (IRU) report indicates that while domestic bachelor's degree commencements dropped by 3.5% between 2020-24, the figure for low SES student commencements is a decline of 9.8%, compared with 2.2% for other students. Low-SES commencements in fields such as the humanities and social sciences, which now charge the highest student fees under JRG, declined by 19.7%.<sup>3</sup> Sector leaders have also warned that First Nations students are bearing a

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Hurley, 'Humanities graduates earn more than those who study science and maths', *The Conversation*, 19 June 2020, <https://theconversation.com/humanities-graduates-earn-more-than-those-who-study-science-and-maths-141112>

<sup>2</sup> Department of Education, *Australian Universities Accord, Final Report* (2024): 5, <https://www.education.gov.au/australian-universities-accord/resources/final-report>

<sup>3</sup> Innovative Research Universities, *Impacts of Job-ready Graduates policy and options for reform* (March 2026), <https://iru.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/Impacts-of-the-Job-Ready-Graduates-policy-and-options-for-reform-IRU-analysis.pdf>. For an overview, see: <https://iru.edu.au/news/unfair-student-fees-undermining-universities-accord-goals-for-participation-and-equity-iru-report/>

disproportionate burden of the costs of the JRG fee structure.<sup>4</sup> This flies directly in the face of Closing the Gap Target 6, which is to ‘increase (by 2031) the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 25–34 years who have completed a tertiary qualification (Certificate III and above) to 70 per cent’.<sup>5</sup> While recognising that there may well be some other factors that contribute to deterring disadvantaged students, JRG is, at best, acting as a formidable barrier to the access and equity objectives that the present government repeatedly attests stand at the centre of its higher education policy.

We also now have research that suggests JRG is preventing the realisation of other government goals, such as those set out in its cultural policy, *Revive: A place for every story, a story for every place* (2023).<sup>6</sup> We note that the Australian Government has announced the beginning of a consultation process for a successor to *Revive*.<sup>7</sup> Research by Sandra Gattenhof and John Nicholas Saunders has shown that declining enrolments in the creative arts subjects in both secondary schools and tertiary institutions, a reduction in the number of creative arts degree courses on offer, and a subsequent drop in qualified creative arts teachers in schools have combined to create a ‘polycrisis’ in arts and creative education in Australia. They find that following the implementation of JRG, undergraduate enrolments in the creative arts, which are at the higher end of student contributions, dropped to their lowest point across the six-year period from 2018 to 2023. There was a decline of 4.5% for the whole period, but of 5.6% between 2021 and 2023, the period of JRG implementation. Again, equity appears to be undermined, since it is regional institutions that are the worst affected. The National Advocates for Arts Education found that 48 creative arts degrees were abolished between 2018 and 2025. Again, while JRG might not have been responsible for all of the said decline, Gattenhof and Saunders contrast the official complacency, and lack of government investment, in dealing with this problem compared with the more generous and coordinated measures implemented to turn around declining numbers in STEM. In the arts, policy settings that were specifically designed to produce decline have been allowed to remain in place, representing underinvestment not only in ‘cultural participation’ but ‘creativity, critical thinking, collaboration, and communication capabilities’.<sup>8</sup>

IRU research also points out that students in 2024 paid \$368 million more than they would have been charged in fees without JRG. Universities, at the same time, received \$813 million less to educate these students. The current fee structure is not only taking money out of university teaching overall, it is doing so in a way that extracts the most money – which can also be expressed as rising student debt – from the students in HASS whose fees are (i) underwriting a reduced government contribution to tertiary teaching and (ii) cross-subsidising students in other degrees, frequently from high-SES cohorts, who will go on to earn the highest salaries across their lifetimes. It should be added that although education courses attract a lower student contribution, so poorly was JRG designed that the HASS studies which education students need to develop their secondary school specialisations – such as in history, philosophy,

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<sup>4</sup> Bronte Charles, ‘Job-Ready Graduates package failing Indigenous students, experts warn’, NITV, <https://www.sbs.com.au/nitv/article/job-ready-graduates-package-failing-indigenous-students-experts-warn/ryh1jb8yg>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.niaa.gov.au/2023-commonwealth-closing-gap-implementation-plan/delivering-outcomes-and-targets/outcome-6-aboriginal-and-torres-strait>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.arts.gov.au/publications/revive-place-every-story-story-every-place>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.arts.gov.au/what-we-do/new-national-cultural-policy>

<sup>8</sup> Sandra Gattenhof and John Nicholas Saunders, ‘The Polycrisis for Arts and Creative Education in Australia’ *Australian Journal of Education*, Online first (2026):1-20, DOI: 10.1177/00049441261421275. Quotation is at: 17.

politics, sociology and legal studies – often attract the highest fees, currently over \$17,000 per year.

In these circumstances, the government’s professed commitment to access and equity should be treated as rhetorical flourish rather than actual policy. The main effect of JRG will be to saddle HASS graduates, who are very often women, First Nations Peoples and students from disadvantaged socio-economic groups, with levels of graduate debt that are excessive and unfair. This will be the legacy of a bipartisan commitment by Australian federal governments to implementing and retaining JRG.

## A Way Forward

The position of CHASS is that the fee schedule for students:

- (i) should not use artificial pricing in a vain attempt to engineer enrolment and labour market outcomes – *the estimate cited in the Universities Accord Final Report (p. 4) was that only 1.5% of students applied for a course different from the one they would have chosen in the absence of JRG.*
- (ii) should not include massive differential prices between courses and instead maintain a flatter structure – *Cluster 1 subjects, mainly HASS, are currently more than three-and-a-half times more expensive than some Cluster 2, 3 and 4 fields.*
- (iii) should be guided by a reasonable assessment of potential lifetime earnings – *most HASS students are paying more than medical students under present arrangements and face a lifetime of student debt.*
- (iv) should be part of a funding package in which the government contribution is calibrated to the cost of delivering the course, so as to ensure teaching is fully funded – *the alternative is the present combination of reliance on international fees, declining quality of education, and rising student debt.*

It has never been the position of CHASS that JRG can be abolished without consideration of the problems of both rising student debt and university underfunding. Any change in fees needs to be part of a larger package that ensures adequate support for the teaching of the HASS disciplines, since the absence of any such provision will reduce the income they earn, with further catastrophic job losses and course cuts on top of those already suffered since the pandemic.

We have already seen thousands of staff lose their jobs, long-standing areas of academic strength destroyed, and units, majors and courses abolished with students sometimes being left midstream. None of this activity has paid the slightest attention to the present or future needs of our society, economy and workforce. Rather, it has been driven by decision-making at the level of the university, which managements justify, with varying levels of plausibility according to circumstance, by reference to ‘costs’ and the unpredictable and indeterminate government higher education policy. The decision to leave JRG in place for years – it will be at least two terms of the present government – while that same government claims to be committed to abolishing it, is a textbook example of the uncertainty university leaders have in their sights.

In sum, the sector is at a crossroads that demands urgent action, not the repeated delay and buck-passing now witnessed for years. We continue to call on members of Australia's Parliament to commit to a university sector in which the HASS disciplines will have a strong presence alongside, and complementary to, STEM and professionally orientated degrees, to ensure that students experience different perspectives and approaches and develop the full range of skills needed in the modern world.

There has never been a greater call than in the present for a workforce and citizenry that have the capacities for critical thinking, creativity, cross-cultural and language learning, information literacy and effective communication that HASS disciplines teach. Nor has there been a moment in the history of the modern world where we have had greater need for problem-solving and crisis-management that draws on both HASS and STEM, as the limitations of narrowly focussed, technocratic understandings multiply the dangers of our times.