



Queensland University of Technology

**Submission to the
Senate Education and Employment Legislation Committee's
inquiry into the provisions of the**

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

April 2026

QUT thanks the Committee for the opportunity to provide this written advice on this Bill and the problem it is designed to address. We are available to provide further input at a public hearing or by other means should that be of assistance to the Committee.

Summary position

The Job-Ready Graduates Package (JRG), which implemented measures legislated in the *Higher Education Support Amendment (Job-Ready Graduates and Supporting Regional and Remote Students) Act 2020* (JRG Act), has led to a litany of poor outcomes for, on the one hand, students, prospective students, graduates and their families; and, on the other hand, universities, employers and civil society.

There has been an enormous volume of commentary on the shortcomings of JRG, and we are confident that the Committee will benefit from many other submissions going into significant detail on a wide range of related matters, so we restrict ourselves to a summary (below) of two cases for urgent reform of JRG: its misguided denigration of the humanities and creative arts; and its deterrence from higher learning altogether of the very cohorts that the Government is rightly seeking to include more equitably in Australian higher education.

However, JRG is more than an unjustifiable fee hike on students and graduates of the humanities and creative arts, its best publicised but by no means only fault. The Job Ready Graduates Package, as its full name states, is a complex, interlinked bundle of measures that cannot be unpicked or repealed one at a time. In addition to the imposition of excessive student debt in these and other fields, other harmful aspects of JRG include its significant under-funding of the total cost of provision in other fields such as nursing, on top of an overall reduction of funding rates for teaching and learning across the board.

To be effective and to avoid inflicting further harm, reform of JRG must deal with the Package *as a package*, addressing all the elements together, to ensure the post-reform regime is fit for purpose. The present Bill addresses only one element of the JRG Package – the student contribution amount – without adjusting the Commonwealth contribution

component or addressing the overall underfunding of Commonwealth Supported Places. While it reduces the distorting student contribution amounts for a range of fields, it also problematically increases them for others. Repealing that single element of JRG – the change to the student contribution amounts effected by the JRG Act in 2020 – without addressing the other aspects would be counter-productive, leaving already under-funded student financing even worse off. The unintended harm to students would be immediate and extensive.

To be clear, QUT supports the broad sentiment behind the Bill, shares the frustration at the damage done by JRG over the last five years, and joins the call for urgent action to replace the flawed JRG regime. We urgently need to place student course financing on a fair, rational and sustainable basis. However, we hold that this work needs to be done holistically to the entire JRG Package, not only to the student contribution component, to avoid inadvertently inflicting further harm on the viability of higher education provision to Australian students.

Recommendations

QUT therefore respectfully recommends that:

1. Rather than passing this Bill, the Committee urges the Government to immediately undertake a review of the effects of the *Higher Education Support Amendment (Job-Ready Graduates and Supporting Regional and Remote Students) Act 2020*, as the Education and Employment Legislation Committee recommended in its report on that Bill;

OR, should the Government not agree to undertake such a review,

2. The Senate establishes its own Education and Employment References Committee inquiry into the effects of the JRG Package on students and universities, including the cost of degrees, student course selection, deterrence from higher education, university course viability, university finances generally, and effects on graduate cohorts in terms of both workforce supply and their own debt burden.

Two cases for urgent reform of the Job Ready Graduates Package

The two case summaries below are distillations of detailed responses from QUT experts in our Faculty of Creative Industries, Education and Social Justice and on our University Equity Committee, respectively. Those colleagues are able to provide further input to the present inquiry, should that be of assistance to the Committee; and stand ready to furnish detailed submissions to either a Government review of the JRG Act or a Senate References inquiry into the effects of JRG (as the case may be), should one be established as recommended.

1. Humanities and creative arts

- Assumptions about the (supposedly poorer) employability prospects for humanities graduates were at the very foundation of JRG's rationale when the regime was

established in 2020. However, the evidence, then as now, does not support the guiding principle that students needed steering away from these courses, for their own good: employment outcomes for Arts graduates are in fact (very slightly) better than for their colleagues with Science degrees; and they enjoy robust employability right across the breadth of the economy. The stated founding logic behind the entire exercise, then, was bankrupt from the start.

- One of the core aims of an arts degree is to equip students with the skills needed to be engaged citizens in a democratic society—that is, to evaluate arguments and evidence, to question why things are the way they are, to think about how the world could be different, to read persuasive rhetoric critically, to foster independent thinking and to develop clarity of thought and expression. This partly explains why the uptake of BA graduates is so widespread across the workforce – these skills are needed everywhere. While this has always been the case, it will become still more true as the uptake of so-called artificial intelligence (AI) intensifies and becomes ubiquitous. An objective skills-first approach to employability would see students being encouraged to enrol in the humanities, not dissuaded from acquiring these skills of the future.
- It is highly problematic to disincentivise students from studying Bachelor of Arts subjects when as a nation we need to produce graduates who can critically and creatively think about the relationship between technology, society and culture. For Australia to thrive in the digital age, universities must produce a balance of graduate capability across disciplines, including the humanities and social sciences. Many of our biggest challenges are social and centred on complex human relations and technology. These include issues such as social cohesion, the role of digital platforms and AI in our lives, the productive and safe use of social media, mis- and disinformation, and everyday digital capability for economic and social inclusion. That is, the complex problems of our time demand interdisciplinary collaboration, and when citizens' access to holistic education is narrowed, that collective capacity is diminished. Interdisciplinarity cultivates enlightened leaders, skilled and knowledgeable professionals, and engaged citizens capable of critical thought and ethical judgment
- A robust modern humanities education is also a significant national security enhancement. In 2012 the US Council for Foreign Relations released a report that emphatically showed that a lack of global awareness in the American population increased threat levels. They argued that in the increasingly connected and technologically mediated world, a military might be no longer sufficient to ensure national security: rather, the nation needed to invest in its human capital. The US defence and intelligence organisations identified a need for *global awareness* in their recruits: the ability to speak modern languages; understand the histories, politics, culture and traditions of adversaries as well as allies; and have cross-culturally competent defence personnel. This is precisely the classical skillset of the graduate who has sampled the full range of subjects on offer in a Bachelor of Arts course.
- Domestically, Australia should cultivate a highly educated society that can:
 - a. Participate in civic activities with full knowledge and understanding of Australia's history, culture and global context;

- b. Have cross-cultural competence to participate in a multicultural society, as well as understand Australia's allies and adversaries;
 - c. Recognise and counter mis-, dis-, and mal-information that threaten political security, economic prosperity and social cohesion; and
 - d. Articulate and exchange its ideas fluently in English, and in a diversity of languages other than English.
- JRG methodically set out to dismantle the means to cultivate precisely these capabilities, which protect the health of Australian democracy, society and culture, and maximise the opportunities for participation of all our fellow Australians.
 - Creative education is much more than just labour-market training for a much-loved industry, although it is that – even more importantly, it is nation-building activity. Any policy that undermines access to education in the creative arts undermines Australia's cultural and democratic life. If Australians do not tell our own stories through the full gamut of artistic forms, nobody else on Earth will – why would they? Producing new Australian creatives is essential if we are to honour our distinctive cultural heritage and continue to develop the richness and diversity of our unique and dynamic Australian character. We need to recruit, foster and encourage young Australian creatives, not turn them into something they don't want to be, or turn them away altogether.
 - JRG isn't just an economic lever: it's a symbolic one. When Government policy explicitly made humanities and creative arts degrees more expensive, it sent a damaging message about the value of creative work and critical skills. The JRG fee structure is interpreted by students as Government messaging that creative and humanities-based careers are not valued. This affects morale of the staff, learners' sense of legitimacy, and their perception of long-term career prospects. JRG embeds classed and exclusionary assumptions about which disciplines are worthy, producing unequal and excluded student experiences.
 - JRG has led to the continued erosion of creative courses and pathways. Universities have already discontinued dozens of creative arts degrees under financial strain. If JRG persists, more courses will be cut, further undermining the creative ecosystem. There is a fundamental misalignment between national industry needs and university offerings. Creative work is not marginal to the wider economy: census analysis indicates the creative economy employed 5.9% of the workforce (~714,632 people) in 2021, including embedded creatives across industries, and creative production is an important contributor to GDP, beyond its priceless cultural value. Yet in the screen sector, to take one example, workforce demand is growing while training pathways are contracting. This mismatch will hinder production growth, reduce Australia's competitiveness in the global market, and increase reliance on international labour. Without urgent intervention, Australia faces a potential collapse of essential elements of the arts training ecosystem. Australia's creative and cultural future is at risk, and aspects of the arts education ecosystem may collapse.
 - Commonwealth policy identifies the film, television, post-production, digital and games sectors as priority growth industries that generate employment and require a sustained

pipeline of skilled graduates. Film industry incentives administered through the taxation system, including offsets applying to production and post-production activity, are framed as mechanisms to support international competitiveness and local employment outcomes. Yet JRG fee settings directly contradict this policy objective by increasing the cost of degrees that supply the screen workforce – the very fields that educate the workforce required to deliver on Government-backed screen industry growth strategies.

- The same conflicting conditions apply to every other creative field including music, writing, visual art, design, drama, dance, musical theatre, sculpture and ceramics, photography and fashion. JRG discourages enrolment in relevant degrees and undermines workforce readiness when Government investment is actively expanding employment demand. This policy incoherence could be corrected at a stroke by reforming JRG.

2. Equity

- JRG increased student contributions in a number of fields (particularly humanities, commerce and law), which appears to have had a disproportionate impact on low SES students. JRG appears to be influencing degree choice for low SES students, with price potentially steering them away from higher cost fields.
- Furthermore, there is evidence that higher costs in their chosen fields of study are keeping some low-SES students out of higher education altogether: new university enrolments from low-SES students fell almost 10% between 2020 and 2024, compared to negligible decline for non low-SES students.
- In higher fee fields (e.g. humanities, commerce and law), low SES commencements fell by close to 20% over the same period. This has longer term implications for social mobility, in that it might effectively be pricing low SES students out of certain higher-income professions.
- It is well documented that equity students tend to be more debt averse and more exposed to cost of living pressures. This is playing out in the context of rising student debt, rental and cost of living stress and lower rates of student income support, which likely amplifies the behavioural impacts of higher fees (i.e. debt aversion). Recent QUT Student Experience Survey responses reveal some alarming trends in the Education and Work section along these lines (high hours of weekly work, students self-reporting feeling ‘out of control’ with finances, regularly skipping meals and essentials, etc).
- JRG’s initial 50% pass rule was another example of a punitive measure that had a disproportionate impact on equity cohorts (particularly low SES and regional students). While that regressive and damaging measure has now been removed, it reinforced broader equity concerns about JRG at the time of implementation that still apply to the rest of the Package that is still in place.

- There is also a profound system-level impact on student equity: JRG has reduced funding per student for universities overall, which puts further pressure on the sector’s capacity to provide the kinds of academic and wraparound supports that equity students rely on.
- Students are paying significantly more overall under JRG, while university funding per student has declined.
- JRG is a deeply regressive policy that works against lower SES students and acts as a perverse disincentive for students to engage in units that have the best chance of promoting the knowledge, understanding and tolerance necessary for broader social cohesion.
- There is ample evidence of significant harm inflicted by JRG and no evidence that it has achieved anything. This policy failure alone is a compelling argument for reform.
- At a policy level, JRG now feels like an unfortunate political legacy that is increasingly out of step with current national needs. The Accord Final Report recommended urgent reform of JRG, and the wider agenda (managed growth, demand-driven equity, needs-based funding, inclusion and opportunity, etc.) is clearly oriented towards expanding participation and improving outcomes for all, including and especially for equity students. In that context, the current fee settings under JRG are difficult to reconcile with these objectives.
- As the late Graeme Turner reminds us, universities are “the central location for the production, preservation and dissemination of knowledge” and for building civil society. When we as a nation define education solely in terms of labour-market outcomes, sideline the Arts and retreat from public critique, we erode the deeper promise embedded in the right to education: the promise that education equips people not only to work, but to think, to question, to imagine, and to participate in shaping a shared future. Ensuring genuine access to Arts education is therefore not indulgent or nostalgic; it is a commitment to the full realisation of the human right to education in an age of globalisation, technological disruption and democratic strain.