

Submission on the *Higher Education Support Amendment (Reverse Job-ready Graduates Fee Hikes and End \$50K Arts Degrees) Bill 2025*

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Opinions represented in this submission are my own and do not reflect those of my employers or institutions of study.

I make this submission in three capacities: as an Academic Support Officer working across two University Study Hubs in regional New South Wales; as a PhD researcher at Adelaide University examining the role of Regional University Study Hubs in expanding higher education access for students in regional, rural, and remote (RRR) Australia; and as someone who came to university as a first-in-family student from a regional community.

My three perspectives are not separate: they are the same story, told across time.

I grew up without a family map of higher education. No parent, grandparent, aunt or uncle or sibling could tell me what a HECS debt felt like, or what a university campus looked like from the inside. Nobody in my family could tell me whether someone like me belonged there. I found my way in regardless, and that experience has shaped everything I have done professionally since. Today, I sit across the desk from students who remind me of my younger self: bright, curious, capable, and quietly terrified that higher education is not meant for them.

The Job Ready Graduates scheme did not create that terror, but it made it too loud for them to ignore.

This submission argues that the Higher Education Support Amendment (Reverse Job-Ready Graduates Fee Hikes and End \$50k Arts Degrees) Bill 2025 should be supported by this Committee. It does so not primarily through aggregate data, though the data is damning, but through the lived texture of what JRG has meant for the students I work with, the communities I serve, and the research I conduct. These are students whose aspirations deserve better than a pricing model that treats their chosen disciplines as less worthy, and their futures as less valuable.

The students I work with are not waiting to be inspired. They arrive at the Study Hub already carrying ambitions, questions, and plans. What they are looking for is a reason to believe those plans are viable. The Job Ready Graduates scheme gives them reasons to doubt.

First-in-family students in RRR communities are not bereft of ambition. They are acutely practical, because their circumstances demand it. Without a family member who has navigated higher education, there is no inherited framework for understanding debt, no model for what a graduate career looks like, and no safety net if things go wrong. There are no parents who can absorb a bad semester, cover a bond on a city apartment, or reassure you that \$50,000 of debt is manageable. Decisions are made with eyes wide open, and what they see is daunting.

I was one of those students. I wanted to pursue higher education, and the question was never whether I aspired to it. The question was whether I could afford to take the risk.

That calculation has always been difficult for students from RRR backgrounds. The Job Ready Graduates scheme made it significantly worse. A prospective student in the Hunter Valley or the Mid Coast of NSW must weigh the cost of a degree against the cost of relocation, lost income during study, and years spent in a graduate job market that has been contracting since the Global Financial Crisis. To place a \$50,000 price tag on the degrees most likely to be pursued by first-in-family and RRR students is not a price signal. It is a barrier dressed up in economic language.

Aspiration does not disappear when students decline to take on that debt. It goes underground, becoming a road not taken and a version of a life quietly abandoned. The scheme did not price students out of university. It priced them out of believing that university was a rational choice.

The Regional, Rural and Remote Penalty

The most common question I hear from prospective students in the Study Hub is not about course content, entry requirements, or study load. It is four words: “Is it worth it?” and it shapes every conversation that follows.

I understand why they ask it, because I asked it myself, and so did my family. The graduate job market in regional Australia has not recovered from the Global Financial Crisis in the way metropolitan markets have. A generation of RRR students watched older siblings and neighbours graduate into uncertainty, and that uncertainty became the backdrop against which every subsequent decision about higher education has been made. COVID-19 deepened that scepticism, and recent global economic instability has done nothing to resolve it. When a prospective student sits across from me and looks at a \$50,000 price tag, they are not being irrational, they are being informed by everything they have seen.

I grew up on the MidCoast of New South Wales, and returning there is something I want to achieve one day. But skill shortages in the region make that harder than it should be. Members of my immediate family cannot access the healthcare they need within that region, because the qualified workforce simply is not there.

That workforce gap does not exist by accident. It is partly the product of a higher education system that has made entry into higher education harder for exactly the students those communities need to retain. The Job Ready Graduates scheme compounded this by raising the cost of the degrees that matter most to first-in-family students, not because those degrees lack value, but because they are the degrees through which that cohort most often finds its footing.

This point is critical, and it is one that the scheme's architects appear to have missed entirely. The disciplines penalised by JRG are not dead end, but entry points. A student who graduates with a Bachelor of Arts in English Literature has built the critical thinking, communication, and analytical skills that translate readily into teaching. A student who completes a Bachelor of Creative Industries in Visual Media has developed creativity that helps them communicate to clients who need physiotherapy. A student with a Bachelor of Social Sciences in Politics has enhanced skills in understanding systems that leads them to move into Information Technology. First-in-family students pursue second and third degrees more readily once they have built confidence through a first. The ladder into higher education does not need to be raised, it needs to be lowered.

University Study Hubs exist to do exactly that, providing supported higher education access to students who do not have capacity to relocate to metropolitan campuses. The students who walk through our doors are not looking for permission to aspire, they are looking for a pathway that does not begin with an insurmountable financial decision. The Job Ready Graduates scheme made that pathway steeper for the students who could least afford it.

Raising the Ladder Twice: Impact on Research & Productivity

It took me fifteen years of exposure to education and higher education before I had the confidence to apply for a PhD. Fifteen years of teaching, advising, lecturing, and researching before I believed that the contribution I had to make was worth the attempt. That is not unusual for someone who came to higher education without a map. First-in-family students do not arrive at postgraduate study quickly. We arrive there carefully, after building enough confidence in our own intellectual legitimacy to take the next step.

The Job Ready Graduates scheme raises the ladder at the first rung, but its consequences reach much further than undergraduate enrolment. Between 2015 and 2024, domestic research student numbers at Australia's Group of Eight universities fell by almost 20 percent, a decline of nearly 3,800 students, with overall HDR enrolments across those institutions growing by just 0.4 percent over the same period, only because international student numbers rose by close to 40 percent (Matchett & Winkler, 2026). Larkins describes this as a deeply worrying outcome for the future of domestic research training, noting that some universities are now reporting that scholarship funds available for domestic PhD students exceed student demand (Matchett & Winkler, 2026). Universities Australia and the Australian Council of Graduate Research corroborate this picture, finding an eight percent drop in domestic PhD enrolments between 2018 and 2023, against a backdrop of population growth exceeding seven percent over the same period (Universities Australia & Australian Council of Graduate Research, 2025). PhD candidates are not a peripheral part of the higher education research workforce, and when their numbers decline at this rate, the consequences for research output and the future academic pipeline are serious and sustained.

The funding pressures that JRG has helped create inside universities compound this problem in ways that are structural rather than incidental. When universities are required to do more with less, the internal allocation of resources does not happen in a vacuum, and social science research consistently becomes the poor cousin of disciplines whose cost base and government funding ratio is more in their favour. Staff who supervise, mentor, and support HDR candidates find themselves working under conditions of sustained uncertainty, and I have witnessed supervisors told on no fewer than three occasions that their positions were at risk. I have seen the downstream effects of that instability on research relationships and on candidates who depend on continuity of supervision to complete their work. I have experienced it myself, watching internal systems contract, stifling research progress, redundancies strike, and eventually seeing both myself and my research pushed out of an institution in the name of organisational efficiency. The outcome was to dust myself off, apply to a new institution and restart my PhD from scratch. Five years of research stifled by the conditions that JRG helped create.

A first-in-family student who takes on \$50,000 of undergraduate debt is a student less likely to then absorb the financial sacrifice of PhD stipend living. Alternatively, they decide to juggle their research with full-time work, stretching out the time to completion and doubling the chances of them withdrawing (Torka, 2020). A student who graduates into a contracting job market is a student who cannot afford the luxury of pursuing a future in research. The instability hanging over every academic in every Australian university becomes visible to every potential HDR student watching the sector from outside and wondering whether the path is worth the cost.

Conclusion

A scheme designed to produce job-ready graduates has made it harder for the regions that need them most to develop them. At a time when productivity is a central economic priority for this government, it makes no sense to sustain a pricing model that works against its own stated purpose.

I am arguing in my submission that the Committee and the Senate support the bill, and that it should be understood as a starting point rather than a destination. Undergraduate fee relief is necessary, but the compounding disadvantages faced by geographically diverse and first-in-family students do not stop at the end of a bachelor degree. Greater funding support is needed

across the full arc of the educational journey, including at the postgraduate and HDR level, where the financial, geographic, and cultural barriers are most acutely felt.

I have made it to where I am in spite of this system, not because of it. Getting here has required twenty-two years of persistence, a willingness to rebuild more than once, and access to support that many of the students I work with do not have. I can sit across from a prospective student who reminds me of my younger self and tell them the path is possible, because I have walked it. But every time the ladder gets raised, that conversation gets harder. There is only so far those of us who have climbed the ladder can stretch down to reach the people coming after us. This bill is an opportunity to lower the rungs, and the Government should take it.

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Works Referenced:

Matchett, S., & Winkler, T. (2026, April 8). Staffing crisis on Australia's research horizon. *Future Campus*. <https://futurecampus.com.au/2026/04/08/staffing-crisis-on-australias-research-horizon/>

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Universities Australia & Australian Council of Graduate Research. (2025, January 17). *PhD poverty crisis: Declining enrolments risk our economic future*. Universities Australia. <https://universitiesaustralia.edu.au/media-item/phd-poverty-crisis-declining-enrolments-risk-our-economic-future/>