

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

University of Melbourne Student Union (UMSU)

10 April 2026



All Students, One Union. 

University Of Melbourne Student Union

Graduate | Undergraduate | Research | Coursework | Domestic | International

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Education and Employment Legislation Committee
Department of the Senate
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UMSU thanks the committee for the opportunity to contribute to this inquiry. We do not have a great deal to add to the findings already made in the Australian Universities Accord review more than two years ago, which unequivocally recommended that the JRG package be scrapped and replaced. Our submissions are detailed below.

1. Who we are

The University of Melbourne Student Union Inc (UMSU) is an incorporated association and is recognised by the University of Melbourne as the representative body for all its students. UMSU is responsible for a wide range of student representative activities, and its staff run a student legal service, an advocacy service, manage multiple campus facilities and venues and provide diverse student engagement activities and events. It is governed by an elected Students' Council and twelve committees elected by and from students.

UMSU operates under the principles of student unionism, which is broadly defined as student control of student affairs. The UMSU Constitution establishes that UMSU will:

- advance the welfare and interests of students;
- represent students of the University within the University and to the community;
- provide amenities and services, principally for students and other members of the University community, and incidentally to the public.
- provide an independent framework for student social and political activity;
- develop, maintain and support student clubs, societies and associational life generally;
- promote and defend the rights of students to education on the basis of equality, without regard to race, colour, sex, sexuality, gender identity, age, physical disability, mental illness, economic circumstances, political religious or ideological conviction, or national or social origin;
- oppose violence and/or hatred through militarism, nationalism, or discrimination on the basis of race, colour, sex, sexuality, gender identity, age, physical disability, mental illness, economic circumstances, religion, or national or social origin;
- provide a democratic and transparent forum in which students' affairs and interests can be governed in an effective and accountable manner; and promote free and accessible government-funded education.

2. Introduction

The *Higher Education Support Amendment (Job-Ready Graduates and Supporting Regional and Remote Students) Act 2020 (JRG)* was developed under a policy paradigm that underestimated the complexity of the tertiary education system, reducing the sector's issues to the link between education and employability.

It is through this narrow lens that the funding system was altered by changing student contribution amounts across fields of study and modifying Commonwealth funding allocations. Sector challenges were oversimplified to a binary conception of funding inputs and graduate outputs.

However, since 2022, there has been a fundamental shift in the tertiary sector where government has pursued a progressive reform agenda that has included the Australian Universities Accord (2022), addressing student support and cost-of-living through capping HELP indexation and introducing the Commonwealth Practical Placement payment (2024), the establishment of the National Student Ombudsman (2025), mandating the National Code to prevent and respond to gender-based violence (2026) and the establishment of the ATEC as an independent steward of the sector (2026). Given this progressive agenda, it is disappointing that little has been done to reverse the adverse effects of the JRG package on students.

In September 2020, UMSU submitted their feedback on the JRG Bill to the Senate Education and Employment Legislation Committee. In the conclusion, UMSU argued:

“The changes the Bill entails place the burden on students, disproportionately affecting young people. Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are further disadvantaged by the Bill.”¹

The tenor of our position has not changed in the intervening years and our observation that the legislative changes would significantly and excessively affect young people and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds has proven accurate.

The JRG package, in essence, is a form of financial coercion that doesn't work. Education should be an enabling public good. Yet the JRG package has reframed tertiary education as a private burden, with the greatest weight placed on student cohorts least able to absorb it.

The *Higher Education Support Amendment (Reverse Job-Ready Graduates Fee Hikes and End 50k Arts Degrees) Bill 2025* is an opportunity for the Federal Government to correct a policy agenda and continue with its progressive reform program of a sector that is a strategic national asset driving both economic productivity and social mobility.

2.1. Summary of Recommendations:

UMSU recommends that:

1. the Senate vote in favour of the *Higher Education Support Amendment (Reverse Job-Ready Graduates Fee Hikes and End 50k Arts Degrees) Bill 2025*;
2. the Committee investigate linking university funding to institutional measures connected to the provision of well-resourced student services, including adequate funding for independent student-led unions, independently verified through quality assurance mechanisms; and
3. the Committee investigate whether the Australian Tertiary Education Commission (ATEC), once established, should consider and provide advice regarding student contributions when advising the Commonwealth Government on university funding.

¹ UMSU, [“Submission for the Inquiry into the Higher Education Support Amendment \(Job-Ready Graduates and Supporting Regional and Remote Students\) Bill 2020”](#) (September 2020) 10.

3. Submissions

It is our submission that the Senate support the passage of the *Higher Education Support Amendment (Reverse Job-Ready Graduates Fee Hikes and End \$50,000 Arts Degrees) Bill 2025*. UMSU has been a fierce critic of the Job-ready Graduates package, which was developed under a narrow policy framework that oversimplified the complexity of the tertiary education system by prioritising a narrow interpretation of employability outcomes above all other considerations.

Consequently, the legislation has reshaped university funding and student contribution amounts through blunt financial levers that fail to account for equity, student choice, and the broader public value of higher education. The inequitable financial consequences of this package are borne disproportionately by students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, placing a high cost on social mobility through education, and validating longstanding concerns raised by UMSU during the original legislative enquiry.

Reversing the JRG fee structure represents an opportunity to correct a failed instance of financial coercion and reaffirm higher education as an enabling public good rather than a private burden. In addition to supporting the current Bill, UMSU recommends that Senate Education and Employment Legislative Committee examine linking university funding to the provision of well-resourced student services including student-led organisations and ensure that student contribution impacts are formally considered within future funding advice provided by ATEC.

However, the Bill is too narrow. It reverts maximum student contribution amounts for certain affected units of study to what they would have been on 1 January 2026 had the 2020 JRG amendments not commenced. It is a fee-reversal Bill, not a broader reconstruction of higher education funding. Accordingly, UMSU regards the Bill as a corrective measure rather than a complete solution. We believe that students should not keep paying inflated fees under a policy that failed, however reversing those fees does not by itself fix the wider damage already done by JRG, including the debt burden already accumulated by students since JRG began, and the broader funding architecture that shifted cost onto students.

UMSU is also of the view that the Bill has a number of structural weaknesses. It appears to reduce student contributions without itself restoring the associated Commonwealth funding settings. UMSU is concerned that this could result in further cuts to overall university funding unless the Commonwealth fills the gap. For this reason, we strongly urge the Committee to ensure passage of the Bill is accompanied by replacement public funding, so universities do not try to claw back the shortfall through cuts to teaching quality, staffing, or student services.

Further, the Bill does not cancel or credit the extra debt students incurred from JRG settings before that date. Accordingly, while UMSU supports immediate prospective relief, the Committee should also consider how to address students already carrying inflated HELP debt because of JRG.

Finally, UMSU emphasises that the problem addressed by this Bill is not confined to the slogan politics of ‘\$50,000 arts degrees’. The underlying issue is that JRG imposed an arbitrary and inequitable burden on students in affected fields and attempted to steer student choice through price signals rather than support informed educational participation.

We would like to see law reform that ultimately realises a fairer higher education funding system in which students are not punished with disproportionate debt for their choice of study.

Recommendation 1

That the Senate vote in favour of the Higher Education Support Amendment (Reverse Job-Ready Graduates Fee Hikes and End 50k Arts Degrees) Bill 2025.

UMSU supports the *Higher Education Support Amendment (Reverse Job-Ready Graduates Fee Hikes and End 50k Arts Degrees) Bill 2025* and recommends that the Senate pass it.

The Bill should be passed because it reverses a failed element of the Job-Ready Graduates package: the increase in student contributions for humanities and other disciplines that left students with higher debts without delivering the behavioural change the policy promised. The policy rationale for JRG did not produce the intended shift in enrolment behaviour and instead imposed inequitable debt burdens on students.

UMSU additionally submits that reversal of the fee hikes should be accompanied by further policy work on the quality of student services and on ensuring future advice to government about university funding expressly considers the effect of student contributions on access, equity and student wellbeing.

Recommendation 2

That the Committee investigate linking university funding to institutional measures connected to the provision of well-resourced student services, including adequate funding for independent student-led unions, independently verified through quality assurance mechanisms.

Reversing fee hikes is necessary, but affordability alone does not determine whether students can access and succeed in higher education. Students' ability to participate fully in university also depends on the availability and quality of student services, including independent advocacy and legal advice, financial counselling, welfare initiatives, disability support, mental health services, and effective responses to gender-based violence. These services are integral to creating the conditions that make meaningful access to education possible.

If public funding settings are to support both student participation and student success, there is a strong case for examining whether some component of university funding should be linked to the adequate provision of student services, including adequate funding for independent student-led unions. This should not depend on self-reporting by institutions alone but should instead be connected to independently verified quality assurance measures, including mechanisms of the kind considered in submissions to TEQSA and other sector reviews. This would help ensure that student-facing services are properly resourced, transparent, and subject to external scrutiny rather than treated as discretionary or secondary matters, and support the institutional integrity and accountability provided by student unions.

Recommendation 3

That the Committee investigate whether the Australian Tertiary Education Commission (ATEC), once established, should consider and provide advice regarding student contributions when advising the Commonwealth Government on university funding.

The JRG package illustrates the risks of making major funding decisions without sufficiently accounting for the effect of student contributions on equity, course choice, and long-term debt burden. Student contribution settings are not a minor technical issue within university funding, but rather they directly shape access to higher education and the distribution of costs between students and government.

For that reason, UMSU submits that the establishment of ATEC presents an opportunity to improve the quality of future advice to government. In providing advice on higher education funding, ATEC should be required to consider the effect of student contributions, including whether proposed settings are evidence-based, equitable, and consistent with participation objectives. That would reduce the risk of future reforms reproducing the flaws of the Job-Ready Graduates model, where high student charges were justified by behavioural assumptions that did not materialise in practice.

4. Conclusion

UMSU supports the Bill and urges the Senate to pass it.

The Committee should also take this opportunity to consider the broader policy settings that shape students' experience of higher education. Reversing the Job-Ready Graduates fee hikes is an important corrective step, but it should be accompanied by further work on the quality of student services and on ensuring that future higher education funding advice properly accounts for student contributions and their effects.

This would produce a more equitable funding framework and help ensure that students are not again asked to bear the cost of policy settings that are unsupported by evidence and damaging in practice.

For more information about this submission, please contact:

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