

10 April 2026

The Regional Universities Network (RUN) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Higher Education Support Amendment (Reverse Job-Ready Graduates Fee Hikes and End 50k Arts Degrees) Bill 2025 consultation process.

RUN is a national collaborative group of six regional Australian universities:

- Charles Sturt University
- CQUniversity Australia
- Federation University Australia
- Southern Cross University
- University of New England, and
- University of Southern Queensland.

This submission reflects the positions of RUN institutions, and in doing so, also aims to represent the views of the communities which RUN universities serve; the one-third of Australians who live outside of metropolitan centres in regional, rural, and remote locations. RUN believes that all Australians, regardless of background or geography, should have access to an equitable standard of university opportunities, tertiary facilities and research services.

Impacts of Job Ready Graduates Package

The implementation of the Job-Ready Graduates package resulted in a significant shift in the way higher education is funded in Australia. It has seen some students paying more for their chosen degrees, some students paying less, and other students being largely unaffected by their choice of degree, compared to previous settings. As such, the Job-Ready Graduates package has been shown to generate mixed cost outcomes for Australian students, as well as the universities they rely upon.

RUN acknowledges the favourable cost impact that the Job-Ready Graduates package afforded many students – such as those studying Agriculture, Teaching, Nursing, Health, IT, and Engineering, for instance. Within regional communities experiencing acute and widespread skills shortages, the graduates of these courses are in high demand. Indeed, in 2024 approximately four in every ten domestic RUN students were studying in the fields of education or healthcare¹. Students studying these offerings at Australia's regional universities are far more likely to be from a low socio-economic, regional/rural/remote, or First Nations backgrounds. For these students and the underserved regional workforces they graduate into, the Job-Ready Graduates package would be seen by many as a net positive outcome.

However, RUN also acknowledges that the Job-Ready Graduates package created unfavourable student cost outcomes to many other students, such as those studying Cluster 1 degrees including Law, Accounting, Administration, Economics, Commerce, Society and Culture, and Communications. RUN acknowledges that the additional cost burden imposed by the Job-Ready Graduates package upon students studying some Cluster 1 courses are unlikely to align to a graduate's future career earnings prospects. RUN also acknowledges that the heightened cost impact falling upon students studying Cluster 1 courses may

¹ Department of Education. (2024). Selected Higher Education Statistics – 2024 Student data. Accessed via <https://www.education.gov.au/higher-education-statistics/student-data> on 28 March 2026.

not always be reflective of the value these students provide their chosen workforces and communities upon graduation.

The Australian Universities Accord found that, despite higher fees, student enrolment patterns did not shift significantly as a result of the Job-Ready Graduates package reforms, suggesting that cost is not the primary factor in course selection, while recommending that the Job-Ready Graduates package should undergo urgent remediation². RUN agrees with the broad consensus of the sector, and the findings of the Accord's Final Report, that the Job-Ready Graduates package should be revisited and reformed in whole, as a priority.

The Proposed Bill

As an enduring principle, RUN believes that every Australian student who meets entry requirements to study at an Australian university ought not to face any upfront cost to their study, via the continuation of Australia's world leading income contingent loan system. RUN also believes the student contribution component of any degree ought to be balanced with the corresponding Commonwealth contribution component in a fair, equitable, and transparent manner, structured so as to authentically meet the true cost of university teaching. Finally, RUN believes that tertiary education in Australia should be made as accessible and inclusive to any deserving student as possible, regardless of their geography or chosen university.

RUN welcomes the underlying intent of the Bill, insofar as it seeks to more equitably address the financial contributions being made by some students towards the cost of some degrees at Australian universities. However, RUN cannot support this Bill as currently presented.

The focus of this Bill is limited to the student contribution and does not consider the Commonwealth contribution component towards Cluster 1 courses. The Bill also does not consider the balance between Commonwealth and student contributions of Cluster 2, 3 or 4 courses. RUN believes that any reform of the Job-Ready Graduates package should involve a considered review of both the student and Commonwealth contributions. Such a review must assess the true cost of education for all Funding Clusters so as not to undermine the integrity of Australia's world class university system. The approach to a review and reform of the Job-Ready Graduates package must be undertaken in a principled, transparent, and systematic manner, and performed by the ATEC in full consultation with a broad range of stakeholders.

Secondly, RUN cannot support this Bill by virtue of Section 53 of the Australian Constitution: the Senate may not amend any proposed laws appropriating revenue or moneys of the Government³. The Bill as currently structured would seek to decrease the student contribution for Cluster 1 degrees but would be unable to offset this by increasing the associated Commonwealth contribution, meaning universities would be required to meet the resulting funding shortfall in the cost of course delivery. This outcome will produce unintended and disproportionate consequences for Australia's smaller and/or

2 Department of Education. (2024). Australian Universities Accord Final Report. Accessed via <https://www.education.gov.au/australian-universities-accord/resources/final-report> on 13 February 2026.

3 Parliamentary Education Office and Australian Government Solicitor. (2008). Australia's Constitution with Overview and Notes by the Australian Government Solicitor. Accessed via https://www.aph.gov.au/-/media/05_About_Parliament/52_Sen/523_PPP/2023_Australian_Constitution.pdf on 27 February 2026.

regional universities, and the high concentrations of underrepresented student cohorts they enrol.

RUN estimates that, should this Bill pass, the shortfall in funding would exceed \$1.3 billion each year, which would be borne by Australia's universities on an ongoing basis. For the fields of education identified in the Bill, it would result in a 42 per cent reduction in aggregate student contributions for RUN universities. To provide context to the financial environment that RUN universities operate under, between 2022 to 2024 RUN universities recorded a combined deficit of more than \$500 million⁴. For many universities that are already in financial difficulties – regional or otherwise – the financial impact of this Bill would be impossible to absorb without significant consequence. In the absence of a corresponding increase in Commonwealth Contributions to offset falling student contributions, many Cluster 1 courses would simply become uneconomical to teach. A logical conclusion of this scenario would be the withdrawal of these courses from being offered at many Australian universities. This would be a perverse and retrograde outcome for many Australian students, workforces, industries, and communities.

Conclusion

As the Bill's Second Reading Speech rightly identified, universities are today teaching more with less. This is especially true for Australia's smaller and regional universities, whose important social missions position their campuses within economically unscaled and thinly populated regional markets. RUN Universities are also tasked with the important role of hosting the nation's highest concentrations of students from underrepresented backgrounds. RUN enrolls, for instance, approximately one in every five students from a low socio-economic background, one in every three students from a non-metropolitan background, and one in every five First Nations students currently studying at an Australian university⁵. RUN's duty is to ensure the university services provided to its diverse and dispersed communities remain accessible and viable. As such, RUN cannot support this Bill in its present form, given the unacceptable risk it poses to the ongoing viability of delivering higher education to regional Australians. This does not diminish RUN's acknowledgement of the underlying intent of the proposed Bill.

Recommendation

RUN recommends that the Bill not be passed. Rather, the process of the Job-Ready Graduates package review and reform should follow the broader, systems-wide approach recommended by the Australian Universities Accord, undertaken by the Australian Tertiary Education Commission.

Further enquiries can be addressed to:

Chief Executive Officer
Regional Universities Network
ceo@run.edu.au

- 4 Department of Education. (2025). Financial Reports of Higher Education Providers – 2024 Finance Publication and Tables. Accessed via <https://www.education.gov.au/higher-education-publications/finance-publication> on 27 March 2026.
- 5 Department of Education. (2024). Selected Higher Education Statistics – 2024 Student data. Accessed via <https://www.education.gov.au/higher-education-statistics/student-data> on 28 March 2026.