

INQUIRY INTO AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITY GRADUATES

JUNE 2026





ABOUT THE REGIONAL UNIVERSITIES NETWORK

The Regional Universities Network (RUN) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Senate Standing Committee on Education and Employment's Inquiry into Australian University Graduates.

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.
- 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.

For further information please contact RUN on 0408 482 736 or info@run.edu.au.

OVERVIEW

RUN supports this inquiry in seeking to better understand the graduate outcomes from a university education in Australia today. RUN believes that Australia's university sector is characterised by high-quality providers who constantly improve student experience and graduate outcomes of those who seek higher skills via tertiary qualifications. The extent to which Australia's universities achieve this is evident by Australia's reputation for possessing a world-class higher education system. It is further evidenced by Australia's global standing as one of the leading knowledge economies. Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching (QILT) data from Australia's own students and graduates, alongside those that employ them, show that the university sector serves the national interest at consistently high levels.

Regional universities are guided by distinct social missions that seek to raise the tertiary aspirations, participation, attainment, and career outcomes of regional Australians, especially those from traditionally underrepresented backgrounds. In terms of the quality of university education being delivered to regional Australians, and the extent to which the graduates of regional universities are being taught the skills employers are looking for, regional universities continue to serve the diverse needs of their communities exceptionally well.

In regional Australia, the more pressing question is not whether there are jobs for graduates, but whether there are graduates for the jobs. Regional health services, schools, agricultural enterprises, community organisations and local government are routinely short of qualified staff. Work-integrated learning (WIL), delivered through long-standing partnerships between regional universities and regional employers, is one of the most reliable mechanisms by which those workforces are sustained. Students who undertake supervised WIL in a regional community develop professional capability in the setting they will go on to practise in, build local networks, and are introduced to employers who often offer them work upon graduation.

RUN's submission to this inquiry demonstrates the consistently high quality of university education in Australia, including how graduates of Australian universities are being taught skills that employers are seeking (inquiry Terms of Reference B and C). This submission also provides a comparison of Australian graduate employment to global contexts demonstrating that Australia's graduates are better placed than comparator nations in key metrics such as youth unemployment (inquiry Terms of Reference A and D).

Australian universities constantly respond to the needs of graduates, and communities. The relevance of an Australian university qualification is reflected in high graduate and employer satisfaction, salary premiums (both short- and long-term), and lower unemployment outcomes compared to international comparators. RUN firmly believes that undertaking and completing university study is a life-changing and rewarding endeavour. Australia's economic, societal, and cultural prosperity is a result of high quality graduate outcomes.

CASE STUDY

The University of New England's virtual clinical placement platform utilises generative AI to create dynamic patient interactions across two key areas: aged care management for postgraduate students and community healthcare delivery for undergraduates.

The AI system adapts to student responses, generating interactive scenarios aligned with Australian National Health Priorities and rural healthcare challenges.

The platform's implementation has raised student satisfaction and learning outcomes, and particularly benefits rural and regional students by providing equitable access to diverse clinical experiences to bridge the gap between theory and practice.

THE VALUE OF A UNIVERSITY EDUCATION IN AUSTRALIA

RUN believes that the value and quality of a university education in Australia is as strong today as any other point in the nation's history. The knowledge, skills, and research produced by higher education has enabled Australia to be an economically prosperous, socially equitable, and environmentally sustainable nation¹. Higher education is vital to Australia's future, and the demand for skilled graduates is only forecast to increase².

Internationally, Australian universities continue to excel, with 97 per cent of Australia's public universities featured in the 2026 Times Higher Education (THE) World University Rankings³. The THE rankings assess universities around the world on their core missions of teaching, research, knowledge transfer, and internationalisation. This demonstrates Australia's strong positioning as a global leader in higher education.

Australia's world-leading university sector will continue to serve the national interests into the future. The findings of the Australian Universities Accord Final Report highlight the quality and value of university education in Australia:

"Australia is fortunate to have a high-quality tertiary education system. It performs above the OECD average in delivering high levels of participation and attainment and strong labour market outcomes. Its teachers, trainers, researchers and students are highly motivated, work hard and are making a major contribution to Australia and the world⁴."

While Australian universities play an important role in Australia's ongoing prosperity, it is essential to consider the broader economic and geopolitical conditions that universities and their graduates operate within. Universities alone cannot be held accountable for the labour market at any given point-in-time. Nor can they be held responsible for the myriad of domestic and global variables that shape labour markets.

University education is not solely designed to provide narrow technical skills. A university education is primarily positioned towards curiosity and discovery, inquisitiveness and intellectual expansion, personal and social growth, and developing skills that will serve a graduate's entire life. At the very least, a university education equips citizens with:

- critical thinking,
- problem-solving and adaptability skills,
- broad experiences and perspectives,
- greater resilience,
- creative and independent thinking skills,
- technical and research informed knowledge and the methods to discover knowledge,
- increased social skills, and
- a deep and renewed appreciation for lifelong learning.

These are skills that are transferable across a lifetime, rather than existing solely to secure a graduate's first job. Over the career-span of an Australian university graduate, there remains a clear premium derived from a tertiary qualification that benefits both the individual and society alike. RUN firmly believes that Australian universities, especially regional universities, continue to serve the national interests well.

CASE STUDY

Charles Sturt University convened community and industry co-design sessions at six regional locations to bring together regional health, education, agriculture, local government, professional services and community organisations to bring greater curriculum visibility and align workplace learning with what students are being taught.

As one participant remarked: *"I really got a lot out of it and I'm hoping we can work closely together now, as I feel our organisation can be a great place of employment for Charles Sturt students learning to work in communities throughout Western NSW while studying."*

GLOBAL TRENDS IN YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT

RUN believes that while the strength of the graduate job market fluctuates, it is not a credible indicator of university teaching quality, which remains consistently high over time. Using the labour market as proof of university degree quality at any single point in time is problematic, as the labour market is, and always has been, shaped by social, industrial, economic, and/or geo-political influences that are well beyond the control of any university, school or TAFE, in any country.

Notwithstanding this belief, Australia's youth employment rate remains strong compared to global comparators. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) calculate the average youth unemployment rate (age 15–24-year-olds) amongst OECD nations at 11.1 per cent in 2024⁵. Australia's youth unemployment rate of 9.4 per cent in the same year shows that it is largely subject to the same global forces⁶. As demonstrated in *Figure 1*. (below), when viewed over time, Australia has shown to regularly outperform the OECD average for youth employment over the past 20 years. In fact, only twice, and not since 2018, in that 20-year span has Australia exceeded the OECD average demonstrating the strength of Australia's youth unemployment rate.

CASE STUDY

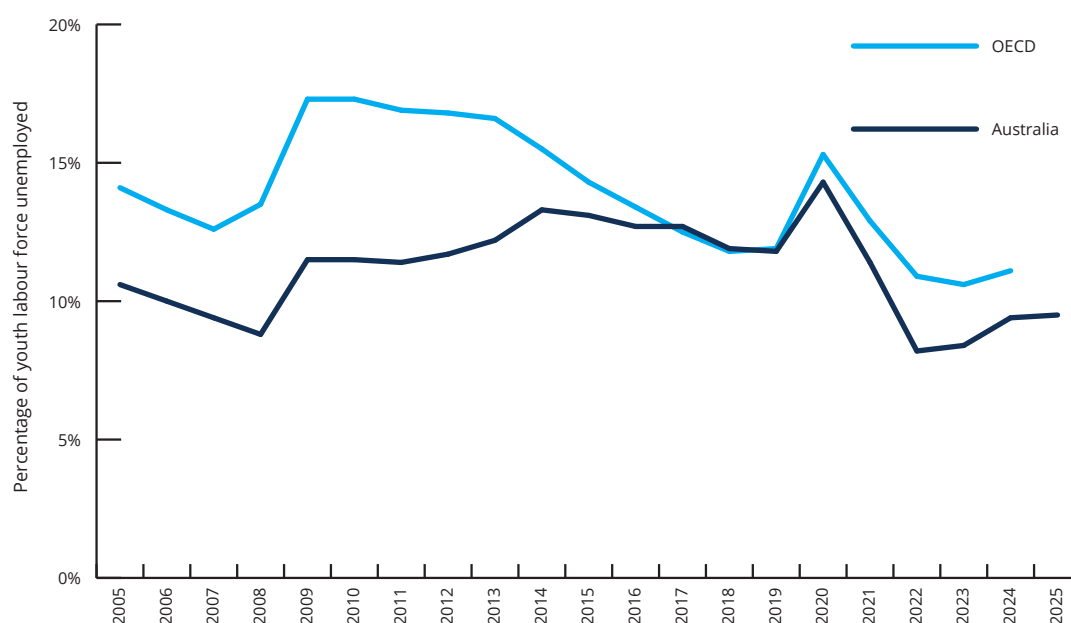
Embedding real industry experience into every course, Federation University's Co-operative Education Model ('Co-op') strengthens employability by building on strong industry partnerships to integrate co-design, co-delivery and paid placements with employers:

- Courses are co-designed with industry, ensuring graduates are job-ready with the skills workplaces need.
- Learning is co-delivered, where industry professionals teach alongside academic staff, bringing practical insight into the classroom.
- Through unique paid placements, students gain hands-on experience in real work settings, ensuring they graduate with both a qualification and a résumé.

From 2026, every course includes at least one industry-connected element, with a roadmap toward fully embedding these experiences across all programs.

Co-op supports regional communities by helping local employers build a skilled workforce, and it creates a pathway for students to study, work and build a future close to home.

Figure 1. OECD youth unemployment over time for Australia and the OECD average



QUALITY INDICATORS FOR LEARNING AND TEACHING

QILT data has been a reliable indicator of the quality of Australian university education, and the desirability of graduates by employers, over many years. As such, QILT data serves as a useful evidence base to examine employer satisfaction with graduates, post-graduation employment rates, and median full-time salaries.

An analysis of QILT data shows that the quality of teaching at Australian universities today is as strong as it has ever been. There are occasional fluctuations in the data, however these are largely outside the direct control of universities, such as the decrease in graduate employment occurring during the period of COVID-19.

Figure 2⁷ (below) shows that while the employment rates of Australian undergraduate graduates fluctuate over time, it tends to remain consistently high. While 2024 saw a slight decrease in graduate employment rates from the 2023 peak, current figures remain historically strong, and indeed higher than pre-pandemic levels.

The overall undergraduate employment rate has remained relatively robust, reflecting the ongoing high value of Australian graduates within an ever-changing labour market.

CASE STUDY

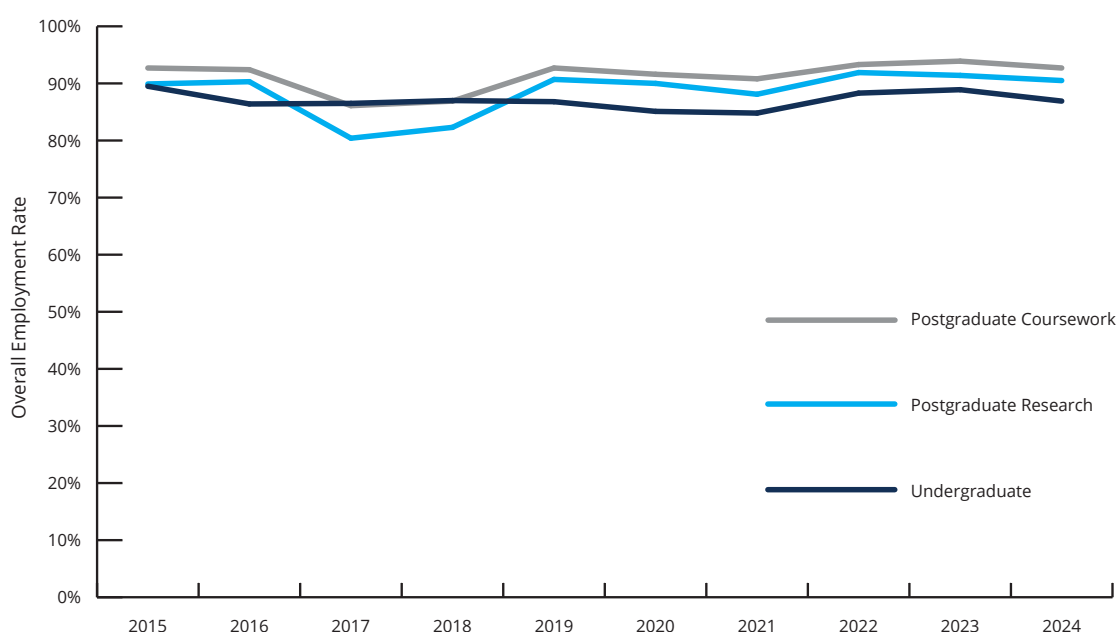
Student Initiative in Lifestyle Education is an evidence-based, service-learning WIL initiative led by Southern Cross University. Partnerships with community organisations address real-world health and social challenges in communities experiencing significant disadvantage, including post-disaster recovery.

In a three-week placement, students design and deliver initiatives including health kiosks, drop-in support services, health education sessions, and arts wellbeing programs, strengthening ties between the university and the community.

Findings demonstrate significant impact at individual and community levels. Approximately 350 community members received health assessments, education, and care planning under professional supervision, improving access to healthcare for vulnerable and isolated individuals, and enhances community wellbeing.

Students report a strong sense of purpose and belonging, alongside the development of skills in community engagement and collaborative practice.

Figure 2. Australian employment rates by year from all provider types



QUALITY INDICATORS FOR LEARNING AND TEACHING

Similarly, Figure 3⁸ (below) highlights the continuous trending increase in starting salaries enjoyed by Australian undergraduates, demonstrating reliable and robust outcomes for university graduates over time.

QILT data also demonstrates that graduates of Australian universities are being taught the skills that employers are seeking. The 2025 survey of employers highlights a continued trend of improvement across all five core skills, from employability (86 per cent) to technical skills (94 per cent), which is the highest score for that category since the project started a decade ago⁹.

Over the last three years, satisfaction across all five areas of skills assessment has been trending upwards. This paints a consistently high and improving picture of graduate attributes desired by employers, suggesting that graduates of Australian universities are indeed being taught the skills employers are seeking.

Additionally, the QILT data comprises of an annual Student Experience Survey (SES), which measures the metrics of skills development, peer engagement, teaching quality and engagement, student support and services, as

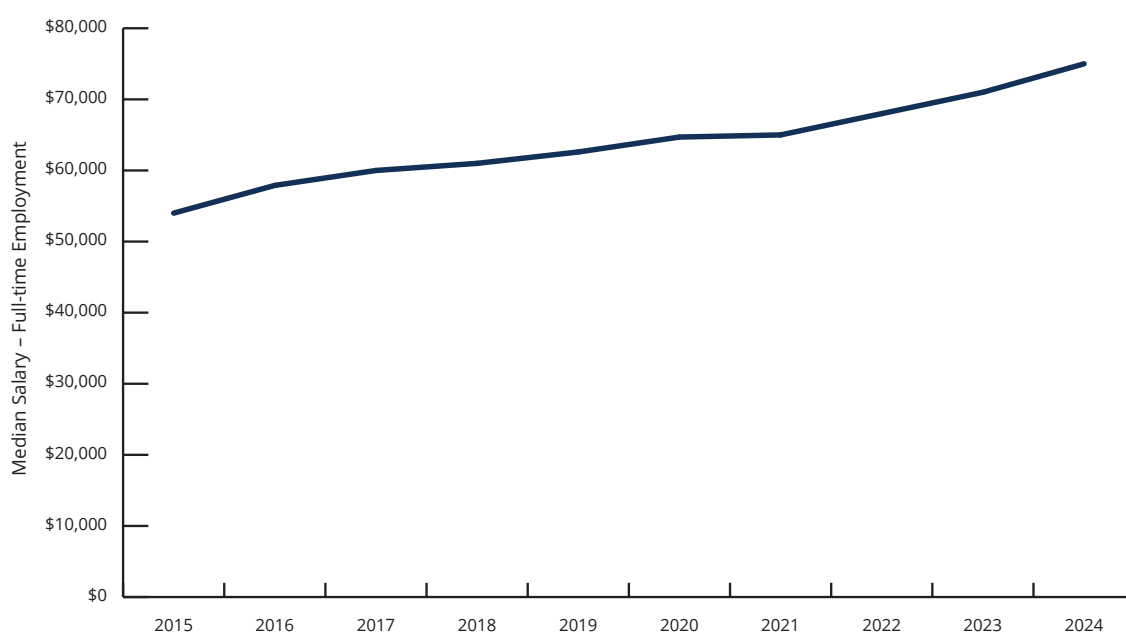
well as learning resources. After an atypical and perhaps unsurprising decrease in SES ratings during COVID restrictions, undergraduate ratings have improved. Indeed, postgraduate coursework results have exceeded pre-2020 ratings in all five focus areas¹⁰.

QILT data confirms that regional universities are consistently outperforming the national average (all universities) in key measures of student satisfaction, graduate employment rates, salaries, and graduate employer satisfaction. 2024 QILT data¹¹ shows that RUN graduates:

- Have an 11 per cent higher full-time employment rate than the sector average.
- Enjoy a \$3,900 starting salary premium above the national average.
- Consistently report higher levels of satisfaction compared to the national average.
- Receive higher satisfaction from employers compared to the national average.

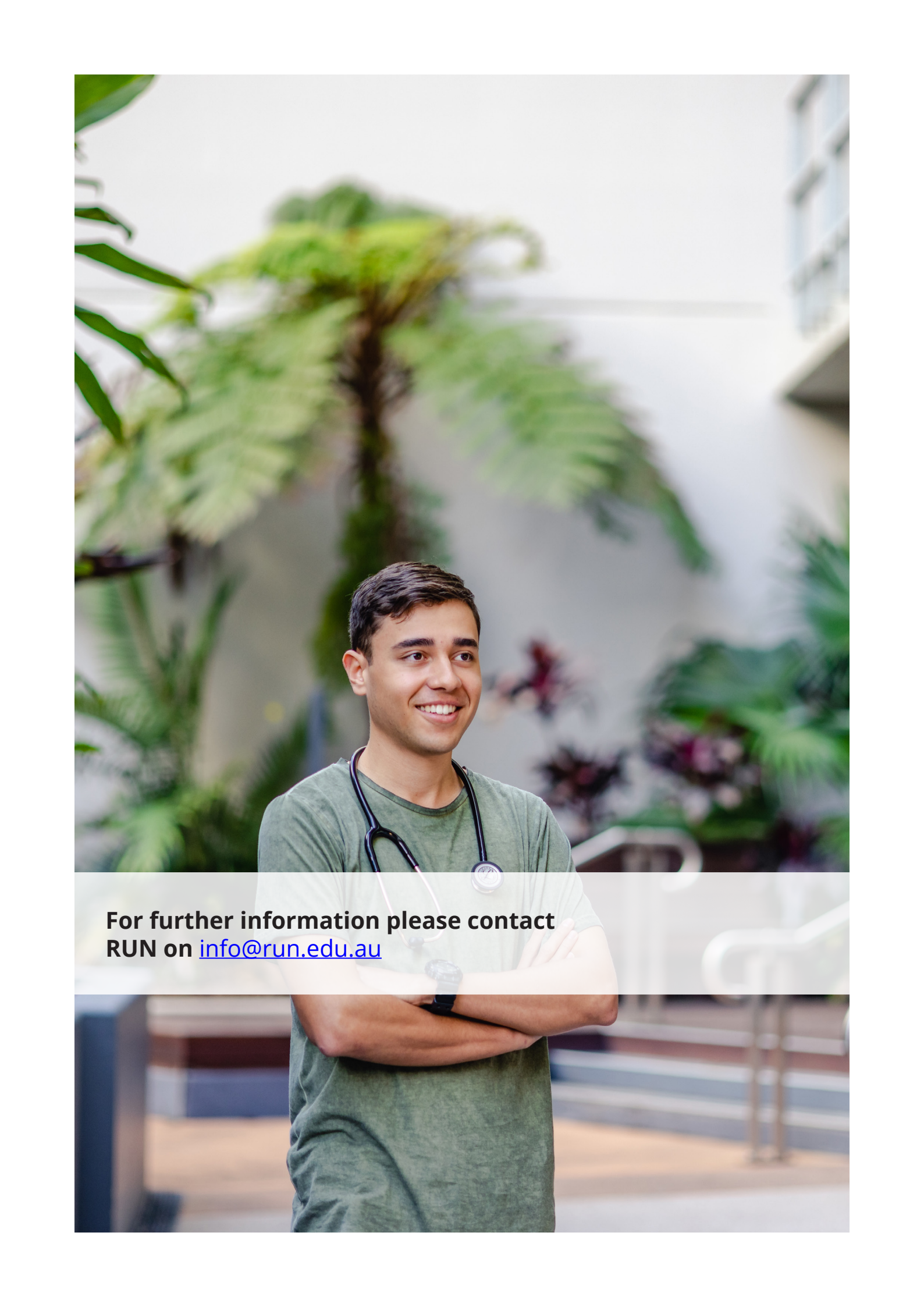
All four key indicators of QILT data reflect a consistently high and robust picture of the quality of teaching at Australia universities.

Figure 3. Australian undergraduate starting full-time salaries by year from all provider types



REFERENCES

- 1 Australian Government Department of Education. (2024). Australian Universities Accord Final Report. Accessed via <https://www.education.gov.au/australian-universities-accord/resources/final-report> on 14 April 2026
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Australian Government. (2026). Australia shines again in Times World University Rankings 2026. Accessed on via <https://www.studyaustralia.gov.au/en/tools-and-resources/news/the-world-university-rankings-2026> on 8 May 2026
- 4 Australian Government Department of Education. (2024). Australian Universities Accord Final Report. Accessed via <https://www.education.gov.au/australian-universities-accord/resources/final-report> on 14 April 2026
- 5 OECD. (2026). Youth unemployment rate. Accessed via <https://www.oecd.org/en/data/indicators/youth-unemployment-rate.html> on 24 April 2026
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 The QILT Team. (2025). Graduate Outcomes Survey. Australian Government Department of Education. Accessed via <https://www.qilt.edu.au/resources?survey=GOS&type=Reports> on 22 May 2026
- 8 The QILT Team. (2025). Employer Satisfaction Survey. Australian Government Department of Education. Accessed via <https://www.qilt.edu.au/resources?survey=ESS&type=Reports> on 22 May 2026
- 9 The QILT Team. (2025). Employer Satisfaction Survey. Australian Government Department of Education. Accessed via <https://www.qilt.edu.au/resources?survey=ESS&type=Reports> on 22 May 2026
- 10 The QILT Team. (2025). Student Experience Survey. Australian Government Department of Education. Accessed via <https://www.qilt.edu.au/resources?survey=SES&type=Reports> on 22 May 2026
- 11 The QILT Team. (2025). Graduate Outcomes Survey. Australian Government Department of Education. Accessed via <https://www.qilt.edu.au/resources?survey=GOS&type=Reports> on 22 May 2026

A young man with dark hair, wearing a green t-shirt and a stethoscope, stands with his arms crossed and a friendly smile. He is positioned in the center of the frame. The background is a bright, modern interior space with large, lush green plants and a white wall. A semi-transparent white banner is overlaid across the middle of the image, containing contact information.

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