

The
Universities Accord

Advancing
Equity in a
Knowledge
Economy

dassh Promoting the
Arts, Social Sciences
and Humanities

Acknowledgement of First Nations

The Australasian Council of Deans of Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities proudly acknowledges First Nations people as the First Peoples and Traditional Owners and custodians of the land and water on which we rely. We acknowledge and respect that Aboriginal communities are steeped in traditions and customs built on a disciplined social and cultural order. This social and cultural order has sustained up to 50,000 years of existence. In particular, we acknowledge the powerful opportunity our sector has to embrace, learn from and improve through better understanding and integration of Indigenous Knowledges.

About DASSH

DASSH represents more than 250 Deans, and Associate and Deputy Deans, from 43 universities across Australia and New Zealand, leading schools and faculties that teach tens of thousands of students and several thousand scholars. DASSH supports those who have responsibility for governance and management of research, teaching and learning across those member institutions.

DASSH members were consulted widely as part of this submission process. They provided feedback through in-person consultations, a national online meeting, a survey, and via various forms of digital communication.

This Submission was prepared in response to the Commonwealth Government's Universities Accord consultation process. We are grateful for the opportunity to engage with the Advisory Panel and to represent the views of our members.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The proposed Universities Accord comes at a critical time. Among the many challenges facing the country two stand out as of particular significance: the transition to becoming a genuinely knowledge-based economy and the retention of our vibrant multicultural democracy in an era of rising authoritarianism and declining public trust. Universities are fundamental to resolving this challenge.

Universities provide the foundations for the high-level thinking, intellectual capacity and rigorous approaches to knowledge and argumentation that are necessary to resolve these challenges. And in turn the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences (HASS) are vital to creating an Australian knowledge economy, securing our democracy and creating the civically minded citizens who will protect our vibrant multicultural society. We welcome the Accord process as an opportunity to reset the sector to position it to be better placed to meet the needs of our society and the broader international community. This includes providing a world-best educational experience for our students, a thriving cutting-edge research community and protecting our stocks of national knowledge.

The Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences are at the heart of this broader mission. The Accord process foreshadows the possibility of institutional diversification of universities which have, since the late 1990s, become largely homogenous institutions. While we recognise the benefits of specialisation and the need for diversification, DASSH strongly urges the panel to recognise that this may well weaken the institutional foundation of critical components of the university and risks the loss of knowledge and expertise nationally. This risk is acutely faced by universities that serve regional Australia and low-socio-economic status (low-SES) groups where the pressures to specialise on applied and vocational programs will be most acute. If this were to occur it would deprive those communities and the nation more generally of the benefits of having expertise in human society, culture, politics and creativity fully integrated into the educational experience and research expertise.

Beyond these broader goals DASSH takes the opportunity of the Accord consultation process to argue for five important changes to the sector:

- A more systematic incorporation of Indigenous Knowledges across all aspects of the academic enterprise. While we must work to improve the access to and success of Indigenous Australians in university education, this should just be the first step toward a fundamental reset of the way universities approach Indigenous Knowledges. From incorporation into university governance to Indigenising our curricula, the Accord provides us with the opportunity to transform our institutions by harnessing the power and potential of these diverse forms of knowledge.
- Valuing the diversity of pure and applied disciplines to drive a genuinely knowledge-based economy. It is critical that Australia moves beyond the extractive industries that have been the foundation of our prosperity in the past. To do this we have to harness big and complex ideas and know how to apply them to our national circumstances. This means recognising the value and importance of the intellectual diversity of our institutions, the importance of both pure and applied forms of knowledge and the vital benefits that come from a rich ecosystem of ideas.
- Replacing the Job-Ready Graduates (JRG) with a fee system that is fairer, equitable and reflects the costs of university teaching and learning. Australia will be a better society when more Australians attend university. The life prospects of students will be improved as their ability to realise their potential is increased and society will in turn benefit. Rather than using price to attempt to pick winners or drive students where

government thinks jobs will be, price should be used to improve access and support the actual costs of university teaching.

- Introduce a National Equal Access Bursary Scheme. The biggest barrier to improving access and equity is the price borne by participants, both in the immediate costs that they must pay to study as well as by the opportunity costs of opting to attend university. Australia has a good level of university participation but to provide opportunities to those least well-represented in the sector and to improve their prospects of success a bursary scheme will provide huge benefits.
- Establish a properly functioning national university admissions system. The legacy of federalism on universities is one which inhibits student mobility, discourages less-well-represented groups and imposes significant administrative costs. Creating a national admissions system will improve accessibility and also increase competition amongst institutions to the collective national benefit.

Arts, social sciences and humanities: Key to Greater Participation

HASS disciplines have the highest student enrolments out of all disciplines

HASS disciplines have higher enrolment numbers than any other discipline including combined STEM disciplines. In 2021, HASS disciplines enrolled a total of 26 per cent of all university students in Australia.

More than half of all university students who identify as gender diverse study HASS disciplines

In 2021, 55 per cent of students who identify as gender diverse were enrolled in HASS disciplines

The proportion of low-SES students is 16 per cent, well below the government target of 20 per cent

Students falling into a low-SES cohort comprised 14 per cent of the overall student population in 2006 compared to 16 per cent in 2021

HASS disciplines have a higher proportion of female students than any other discipline

In 2021, 30 per cent of all female students were enrolled in HASS disciplines, while 14 per cent of female students were enrolled in STEM disciplines

More than a third of all Indigenous university students study HASS disciplines

In 2021, 38 per cent of Indigenous students were enrolled in HASS disciplines

Attrition rates are highest among low-SES students

An attrition rate of 18 per cent was reported among low-SES students in 2020

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RECOMMENDATIONS

Indigenous Knowledges: A better way of advancing universities

- 1.1 Recognise that Indigenous Knowledges are a powerful opportunity for national growth and advancement.
- 1.2 Ensure an Indigenous leadership structure that is present in all levels of university academic and professional work.
- 1.3 Incentivise growth of academic programs that centre Indigenous Knowledges, support advancement of Indigenous academics, and achieve impact in all aspects of university systems.
- 1.4 Create a national Indigenous Learning and Teaching Centre to coordinate and advance the impact of Indigenous Knowledges in all aspects of Australian higher education learning and research including country-wide efforts to Indigenise curriculum.
- 1.5 Provide an uncapped number of Commonwealth Supported Places for Indigenous Australians, regardless of postcode and financial status.
- 1.6 Incorporate Indigenous Knowledges into the teaching programs of all universities.
- 1.7 Endorse the AIATSIS *Code of Ethics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research*.
- 1.8 Monitor the reporting rates for the 2020 Bureau of Statistics Fields of Research Codes for Indigenous Studies and related subfields.
- 1.9 Reinstate a high-level federal advisory body such as the Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Committee.
- 1.10 ARC and other major grant funding bodies must have Indigenous governance mechanisms and identified employment strategies.

Driving a knowledge economy

- 2.1 Improve accessibility to higher education for all disciplines. The JRG must be replaced with a system that is fair, evidence-based, and which drives research and knowledge of all disciplines to ensure our future prosperity and security.
- 2.2 Ensure diverse access to higher education for Australian students. This will improve their life chances and increase knowledge and skills across the workforce.
- 2.3 Create an equitable, sustainable and simplified funding model that allows universities to pursue research that is fit for their communities and specialisations.
- 2.4 Ensure merit-based access of all disciplines to research funding, understanding that innovation and national prosperity is driven both by pure as well as applied research.

- 2.5 Commonwealth research funding should reach at least the average of OECD countries.
- 2.6 Create a national graduate research school, providing outstanding research training skills and building cross-institutional and interdisciplinary networks of Higher Degree by Research (HDR) students.
- 2.7 Formalise industry placements as an expected component of all Commonwealth-supported HDR enrolments.
- 2.8 Implement a national strategy to create and protect Australia's language capability, linking primary, secondary and higher education sectors.
- 2.9 Nurture a higher education ecosystem that supports the ability of universities to specialise while recognising the need to protect local community needs.

Setting student fees: An equity agenda

- 3.1 The JRG must be replaced with a system that is fair, evidence-based, and which drives research and knowledge of all disciplines to ensure our future prosperity and security.
- 3.2 University fees should reflect the cost of university education which includes research.
- 3.3 The variance between student and Commonwealth contributions must be consistent across all disciplines.
- 3.4 Ensure that the Higher Education Loan Program (HELP) is fair and equitable, particularly as it applies to women, Indigenous Australians, and low-SES students.
- 3.5 Remove the 50 per cent pass rate requirement for first-year students, enabling universities to ensure progress and completion through needs-based equity measures.
- 3.6 Distribute overall student funding incorporating Indigenous success measures.
- 3.7 Allow a reduced study load for ABSTUDY for Indigenous students.

The National Equal Access Bursary Scheme

- 4 To remove barriers and improve access for all students, DASSH advocates for the introduction of a standardised, means-tested, national student bursary program to be administered by the federal government and offered to low-SES, Indigenous, rural and remote and first-in-family (FIF) students.

National admissions system

- 5.1 Establish a national tertiary admissions system, to simplify access for prospective students to higher education and increase student mobility between states.
- 5.2 Create a transparent and consistent approach to Recognition of Prior Learning through a nationally consistent approach to credit points.

- 5.3 Adopt a nationally consistent grading scheme, in which student marks achieve the same grade regardless of location, to ensure a level-playing field with GPAs, graduate employment and scholarship eligibility.

NOTES

For the purposes of this submission, we have grouped natural and physical sciences, information technology, engineering and related technologies and agriculture, environmental and related studies to be described as Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) subjects. This reflects the terminology used by the Commonwealth Department of Education. We have included agriculture as per a 2020 Chief Scientist Report grouping these disciplines under the banner of STEM.¹

Similarly, we have grouped society and culture and creative arts disciplines under the banner of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences (HASS).

The term 'attrition' is here defined as *a measure of the proportion of students leaving the higher education system after their first year.*² Attrition rate government data reflects Table A universities only in this submission.

Students' socioeconomic status is determined by permanent home address. Low-SES postcodes are defined as the bottom 25 per cent of the population, medium-SES postcodes are in the middle 50 per cent and high-SES postcodes are in the top 25 per cent of the population.³

For the purposes of this document, we define the poverty line as half the median household income of the population. Those below this income are classified as living in poverty.⁴

¹ Office of the Chief Scientist. (2020). *Australia's STEM workforce: Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics*.

² Tertiary Collection of Student Information. (n.d.). *Attrition rate*.
<https://www.tcsisupport.gov.au/glossary/glossaryterm/Attrition%20rate>

³ Department of Education. (2022). *Selected Higher Education Statistics – 2021 Student data*.
<https://www.education.gov.au/higher-education-statistics/student-data/selected-higher-education-statistics-2021-student-data>

⁴ OECD. (n.d.). *Poverty rate*. <https://data.oecd.org/inequality/poverty-rate.htm>

INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGES: A BETTER WAY OF ADVANCING UNIVERSITIES

- 1.1 Recognise that Indigenous Knowledges are a powerful opportunity for national growth and advancement.
- 1.2 Ensure an Indigenous leadership structure that is present in all levels of university academic and professional work.
- 1.3 Incentivise growth of academic programs that centre Indigenous Knowledges, support advancement of Indigenous academics, and achieve impact in all aspects of university systems.
- 1.4 Create a national Indigenous Learning and Teaching Centre to coordinate and advance the impact of Indigenous Knowledges in all aspects of Australian higher education learning and research including country-wide efforts to Indigenise curriculum.
- 1.5 Provide an uncapped number of Commonwealth Supported Places for Indigenous Australians, regardless of postcode and financial status.
- 1.6 Incorporate Indigenous Knowledges into the teaching programs of all universities.
- 1.7 Endorse the AIATSIS *Code of Ethics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research*
- 1.8 Monitor the reporting rates for the 2020 Bureau of Statistics Fields of Research Codes for Indigenous Studies and related subfields.
- 1.9 Reinststate a high-level federal advisory body such as the Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Committee.
- 1.10 ARC and other major grant funding bodies must have Indigenous governance mechanisms and identified employment strategies.

DASSH consulted widely with its membership in preparation for this submission. We spoke to members in Australia and Aotearoa/New Zealand in-person, via a survey, through group discussion and via email. From these interactions members clearly articulated the critical importance of incorporating Indigenous Knowledges into curriculum and research, as well as into the administration of Australia's higher education governing bodies.

It is clear members see fostering greater Indigenous participation, cultivating Indigenous leadership and valuing the contribution that Indigenous people make to higher education in Australia not as a deficit issue, but as a powerful opportunity for national growth and advancement.

The Accord Discussion Paper outlines the government's commitment to strengthening the place of First Nations people, knowledges and culture in Australia's national life. But it is important to note that where there is emphasis on Indigenous participation in the Discussion Paper, it is widely framed as an equity and access issue, viewed as a problem that needs to be fixed, rather than a rich and meaningful opportunity to incorporate Indigenous Knowledges into the governance of the sector more broadly.

If Indigenous participation is only ever viewed in this light, that is a shortcoming that must be improved, the huge potential of Indigenous Knowledges will not be realised.

Because there continues to be real and unconscious racism in the Academy, the project of educating young people appropriately about structural racism and white privilege is critical. This is part of the project of decolonisation. Going further, HASS disciplines are well positioned to support the project of Indigenising the academy – work that must be led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander academics, who are well supported with professional pathways that suit their career aspirations. In the sphere of education, DASSH recommends:

- Incorporating Indigenous Knowledges into curriculum at all universities
- a national Indigenous Learning and Teaching Institute to support the coordination of the country-wide efforts to Indigenise curriculum
- A pathway for Teaching Focused Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders

In the research space, DASSH respects the substantial work undertaken by both Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) and the Australian Research Council (ARC) in recent years, specifically the elaboration of four-digit Indigenous research areas of specialisation for Excellence in Research (ERA). Our members also share the view that dedicated research funding pathways are working relatively well. Rather than making new recommendations in research DASSH recommends that the Universities Accord:

- Endorse the AIATSIS *Code of Ethics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Research*
- Monitor the reporting rates for the 2020 Bureau of Statistics Fields of Research Codes for Indigenous Studies and related subfields.

The Accord process provides a significant opportunity to follow the lead of constitutional reform to enshrine an Indigenous Voice to Parliament in the constitution and Indigenise the governance of universities. Fortunately, this work is well underway. The development of the *Universities Australia Indigenous Strategy 2022-25*⁵ was led by Indigenous leaders in

⁵ Universities Australia. (2022). *Indigenous Strategy 2022-25*.

universities through Universities Australia's Deputy Vice Chancellor/Pro Vice Chancellor Indigenous Committee.

The strategy, in part, focuses on the importance of recognising the value Indigenous people and knowledges bring the university and embedding Indigenous value styles and knowledges into university structures. When Indigenous participation and the incorporation of Indigenous Knowledges are at the forefront in decision making, their influence flows through each institution, meaning that every policy decision will eventually consider the Indigenous experience. Specifically, DASSH recommends that:

- The Accord formally endorse the Universities Australia Indigenous Strategy 2022-2025
- Universities undertake an overview of their governing bodies to ensure inclusion and oversight where appropriate.

DASSH advocates for the uptake of these goals, which have been arrived at through extensive consultation. These goals reflect the views of our own members, who are committed to enabling positive change. It is important that the Panel is aware of the practical, logistical and institutional support the government has for implementing this change. Our Deans are well positioned to participate in this process and are excited to do so.

An Aotearoa/New Zealand perspective

In Aotearoa/New Zealand, Indigenous Knowledges are not considered in a binary way but instead are included in ways that improves research and practice. Our Aotearoa/New Zealand colleagues have seen some of the positive outcomes that flow from this.

Although there are obvious differences between Australia and Aotearoa/New Zealand, the New Zealand experience illustrates how to capture the benefits of greater engagement with Indigenous people and knowledges. One example of the core focus placed on Indigenous Knowledges in the higher education sector is Te Kunenga ki Pūrehuroa/Massey University. The Treaty of Waitangi forms the centre of everything that is done at Massey University with Māori knowledge forming a core part of both teaching and research.

On the teaching front, students are encouraged to learn the Māori language and to engage with Māori knowledge through a range of disciplines, including humanities and social sciences, creative arts, business, health and sciences. Research at Massey University is also *informed by te ao Māori (the Māori world). It draws on Māori knowledge, ways of knowing, and associated practices to navigate towards futures that are more just, sustainable and equitable for Māori.*⁶

Recent reforms of the Performance-Based Research Fund (PBRF) have also aimed to improve the diversity of higher education. After an independent review, which was chaired by Māori scholar Professor Linda Tuhiwai Smith, the government implemented a number of changes to the way funding is allocated. In 2021, subject area weightings for Māori and Pacific researchers were increased as was research being conducted in these areas.⁷

⁶ Te Kunenga ki Pūrehuroa/Massey University. (n.d.). *Te Pūtahi-a-Toi: School of Māori Knowledge*. <https://www.massey.ac.nz/about/colleges-schools-and-institutes/college-of-humanities-and-social-sciences/te-p%C5%ABtahi-a-toi/>

⁷ Ministry of Education. (2021). *Performance-Based Research Fund Improvements*. <https://www.education.govt.nz/news/performance-based-research-fund-improvements/>

In Aotearoa/New Zealand, the incorporation of Indigenous Knowledges is not seen as a form of displacement but rather as a way of adding to society. In this way, Indigenous Knowledges are understood as being beneficial not only to Indigenous people but also to the wider community. As part of this process, it is vital that consultation with Indigenous people occurs if Indigenous Knowledges are to be successfully incorporated into the higher education system. The broad approach taken by Aotearoa/New Zealand offers an encouraging sign for Australia as we look to increase participation and improve outcomes for First Nations people.

DRIVING A KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY

- 2.1 Improve accessibility to higher education for all disciplines. The JRG must be replaced with a system that is fair, evidence-based, and which drives research and knowledge of all disciplines to ensure our future prosperity and security.
- 2.2 Ensure diverse access to higher education for Australian students. This will improve their life chances and increase knowledge and skills across the workforce.
- 2.3 Create an equitable, sustainable and simplified funding model that allows universities to pursue research that is fit for their communities and specialisations.
- 2.4 Ensure merit-based access of all disciplines to research funding, understanding that innovation and national prosperity is driven both by pure as well as applied research.
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- 2.7 Formalise industry placements as an expected component of all Commonwealth-supported Higher Degree by Research (HDR) enrolments.
- 2.8 Implement a national strategy to create and protect Australia's language capability, linking primary, secondary and higher education sectors.
- 2.9 Nurture a higher education ecosystem that supports the ability of universities to specialise while recognising the need to protect local community needs.

Valuing the diversity of academic disciplines

DASSH members advocate for a higher education sector in which the value of all disciplines is understood, and in which we recognise that critical problem-solving and world-building is dependent on collaboration between the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences, STEM and other disciplines.

Collaboration ensures a holistic approach to complex problem solving in social, technological, environmental and other contexts. Our combined understandings drive innovation, sustainability, accessibility, effective communication, sound policy, and ethical practice. A sector in which one domain is privileged over others imperils the enterprise as a whole.

The Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences help us understand the historical, social, and other contexts that are the root causes of wicked problems: environmental change, conflict, inequality, poverty and racism.

Among their many attributes these disciplines:

- Provide understandings of human behaviour and its impact on human and environmental security.
- Interpret the ethical and moral dimensions of human behaviour, innovation and technology.
- Hold the language, cultural, communication, and analytical skills to better understand Australia's place in the world, how to advance our interests, avoid conflict and improve human welfare.
- Demonstrate how to build resilient and sustainable communities.

Australia's future higher education system must nourish research and learning within the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences, and ensure the collaboration and partnership of all disciplines.

A research-driven knowledge economy

Australia's future prosperity is dependent on an economy founded upon applied research, innovation and expert understandings. A powerful knowledge economy requires a skilled and knowledgeable workforce, outstanding communication networks and innovative design and problem solving. It is dependent on a flourishing and widely accessible higher education sector.

The Productivity Commission's recent report underscores the importance of diverse forms of knowledge to secure our future. Our knowledge economy must be informed by understandings of how past endeavours shape our present and future worlds. The Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences are therefore critical in the shaping of our knowledge economy.

HASS research is fundamental to the creation of a successful knowledge economy in Australia. A vibrant and productive knowledge economy needs both the technical and commercial innovations of STEM-based research and the social, political and cultural knowledge provided by our disciplines.

Moreover, productivity gains will not be driven simply by the creation of new products. They will arise out of better understandings of human behaviour, organisational effectiveness, and the ways in which technology can be integrated across a range of human and community services. Australia's prosperity will depend on improved communication, trade and knowledge exchange between nation-states, and will be contingent on ensuring human and environmental security within our region.

Our higher education sector must therefore:

- Invest in pure research in all disciplines over the long term, as innovation and understanding are enabled by the outcomes of deep thinking.
- Facilitate applied research and knowledge, including formalised collaboration of industry and university researchers.
- Build national capability in language, to ensure international knowledge exchange, diplomacy and conflict resolution.
- Enable university specialisations informed by the distinct mission and communities in which individual universities operate.

SETTING STUDENT FEES: AN EQUITY AGENDA

- 3.1 The JRG must be replaced with a system that is fair, evidence-based, and which drives research and knowledge of all disciplines to ensure our future prosperity and security.
- 3.2 University fees should reflect the cost of university education which includes research.
- 3.3 The variance between student and Commonwealth contributions must be consistent across all disciplines.
- 3.4 Ensure that the Higher Education Loan Program (HELP) is fair and equitable, particularly as it applies to women, Indigenous Australians, and low-SES students.
- 3.5 Remove the 50 per cent pass rate requirement for first-year students, enabling universities to ensure progress and completion through needs-based equity measures.
- 3.6 Distribute overall student funding incorporating Indigenous success measures.
- 3.7 Allow a reduced study load for ABSTUDY for Indigenous students.

Misguided intentions and bad outcomes

The Job-Ready Graduates (JRG) package was framed as a policy response to ‘the biggest employment challenge since the Great Depression’ and outlined the three main objectives of the scheme, one of which was to increase the number of graduates in areas of expected employment growth and demand, such as teaching, nursing, agriculture, STEM and IT.

The scheme increased student fees for law and commerce by 28 per cent. For many students in the humanities, arts and social sciences, by 113 per cent.

Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences disciplines enrol the greatest number of students in higher education. We also enrol disproportionately higher numbers of women, Indigenous, gender-diverse and lower-SES students. In other words, some of the most vulnerable members of our community. Yet, these are the disciplines that receive almost no Commonwealth fee support, and which therefore underwrite the support the Commonwealth offers to others.

The variance in Commonwealth contributions to student fees is plainly unfair. Table 1 outlines the student and Commonwealth contributions by discipline cluster. It is notable that while the Commonwealth contributes 63 to 87 per cent of enrolment fees for most discipline clusters, the government contributes only 7 per cent of the enrolment fees for students of Society and Culture disciplines.

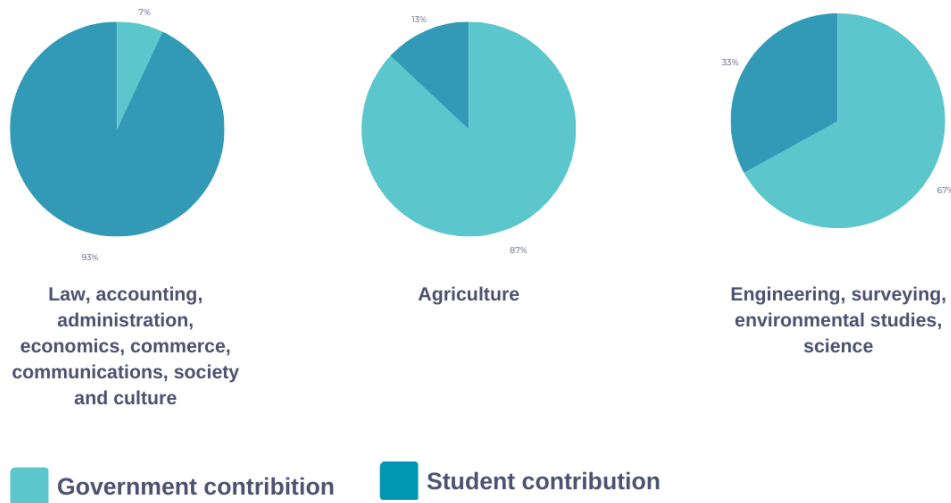
Under the JRG the relative government and student contribution ratio for HASS and related disciplines is 7:93. In no other area of study does the government contribute less than 63 per cent as shown in this table from Universities Australia.

Table 1: Relative government and student contribution by discipline, 2022

Funding clusters	Australian Government contribution	Maximum student contribution amounts	Total resourcing	Relative government and student contribution
Law, Accounting, Administration, Economics, Commerce, Communications, Society and Culture	\$1,109	\$14,630	\$15,739	7 : 93
Education, Postgraduate Clinical Psychology, English, Mathematics or Statistics	\$13,369	\$3,985	\$17,354	77 : 23
Allied Health, Other Health, Built Environment, Computing, Visual and Performing Arts, Professional Pathway Psychology or Professional Pathway Social Work	\$13,369	\$8,021	\$21,390	63 : 37
Nursing, Indigenous and Foreign Languages	\$16,396	\$3,985	\$20,381	80 : 20
Engineering, Surveying, Environmental Studies or Science	\$16,396	\$8,021	\$24,417	67 : 33
Agriculture	\$27,243	\$3,985	\$31,228	87 : 13
Medicine, Dentistry or Veterinary Science	\$27,243	\$11,401	\$38,644	70 : 30
Pathology	\$27,243	\$8,021	\$35,264	77 : 23

Source: Department of Education, Skills and Employment (DESE) 2021, *Indexed Rates for 2022*, <https://www.desegov.au/higher-education-loan-program/approved-hep-information/funding-clusters-and-indexed-rates>

RELATIVE GOVERNMENT AND STUDENT CONTRIBUTION



Time to axe Job-Ready Graduates

JRG does not just impact adversely on the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences. In its submission to the JRG Senate Inquiry, the Australian Council of Deans of Science (ACDS) noted:

‘The ACDS wishes to draw your attention to the highly damaging impacts that will flow from the passage of this Bill. These impacts will significantly undermine STEM education in Australia’s universities. At the same time, they will undermine the capacity of Australian university science to engage with industry, to maintain the research activity that underpins that engagement, and to play its part in building Australia’s economic competitiveness and sovereign capability in manufacturing and industry.’

Concerns have also been raised by industry groups, peak science bodies, peak law bodies, representatives of the arts sector and Universities Australia through Senate Inquiry submissions.

The JRG messaging also implies that employment outcomes for Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences graduates are worse than those of STEM graduates. Yet, QILT data shows graduate employment outcomes across STEM and HASS disciplines are broadly the same.⁸

The JRG goes directly against an equity agenda and goes against the government’s stated goal of creating a knowledge economy. Instead, the JRG introduces perverse incentives for other disciplines outside of our own. More importantly, there is strong evidence that the kind of price signals JRG used simply don’t work.

Negative consequences for Indigenous students

⁸ Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching. (2023). *2022 Graduate Outcomes Survey*.

The Innovative Research Universities' Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Network submitted an argument to the Senate Inquiry into the JRG, suggesting the policy will counter many of the Indigenous strategic priorities and targets set by higher education institutions in Australia.

The Network argued that the JRG will frustrate strategic goals to increase Indigenous student participation, retention and completion rates, as well as Indigenous workforce participation.

It also predicted that the average fee contribution paid by Indigenous students would increase under the policy. Prior to the introduction of the JRG fee structure, 18 per cent of Indigenous students paid the top level of student contribution, which was \$11,355. Under the JRG in 2023, 40 per cent of Indigenous students pay the highest enrolment fee, which is \$15,142 per year.

'This will result in more Indigenous students paying the highest student contribution level and will likely deter them from enrolling in the degree programs to achieve their career aspirations.'

New principles for fee setting

JRG is bad for students, but especially bad for low-SES and Indigenous students. It is bad for universities, bad for STEM disciplines, it is even potentially bad for budget deficits.⁹

DASSH proposes the abolition of the JRG fee structure in favour of a system that is informed by several principles. Equity should guide fee settings and see that students are not unfairly burdened. University fees should also reflect the cost of delivery and recognise the cost of research, which is what defines universities and makes university teaching distinctive.

When setting fees, the perceived value of a degree is not a useful basis for setting subsidies and prices. In setting student contributions, the government must consider education as a public good as well as a private investment. The current ratio of 7:93 student to government contributions for Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences degrees in no way reflects the contribution our disciplines make to the knowledge economy.

In the case of JRG the HASS disciplines are devalued in a way that ignores not only graduate employment and earning statistics which are on par with STEM graduates. It also ignores the critical role our disciplines play in the world at large.

Expected lifetime earnings based on the discipline studied are a fraught indicator of the future and should not be depended on when setting fees. Actual future incomes are influenced by a wide range of factors including gender and socio-economic status.¹⁰ Lastly the variance in student and Commonwealth contributions must be consistent across disciplines.

Low-SES students need a significantly different means to offset the disadvantage of the first 18 years of their life and education. Deferred cost is important, but it doesn't work in isolation. We need a national bursary system.

⁹ Norton, A. (2022). The inequality of Job-ready Graduates for students must be brought to a quick end. Here's how. *The Conversation*. <https://theconversation.com/the-inequity-of-job-ready-graduates-for-students-must-be-brought-to-a-quick-end-heres-how-183808>

¹⁰ Warburton, M. (2023). *Gender, equity and policy neglect in student financing of tertiary education*. Melbourne Centre for the Study of Higher Education.

THE NATIONAL EQUAL ACCESS BURSARY SCHEME

Our members strongly support the Government's desire to improve equity and access to higher education. One of the biggest barriers to achieving this is the cost of studying. This includes both the immediate cost, felt by students, particularly those from underrepresented groups as well as the opportunity cost borne by choosing to study and not work.

To remove this barrier and improve access for all students, DASSH advocates for the introduction of a standardised, means-tested, national student bursary program to be administered by the federal government and offered to the following student cohorts:

- Low-SES
- Indigenous
- Rural and remote
- First in family.

Under the scheme:

- Students will be able to access this bursary regardless of whether they live with their parents or guardians.
- The student's relationship status will have no bearing on means testing.
- The fixed payment will not be affected by income from employment.
- There will be no restrictions on how the bursary could be spent.

The payment will reflect the gross income earned during an eight-hour shift on a minimum wage. Currently, that amounts to \$171 per week. This calculation will be subject to change as the minimum wage increases. This payment will be tax-free and be paid every week for the duration of the degree, during teaching periods only.

The National Equal Access Bursary Scheme (NEABS) will enable students to participate more fully at university and commit more time to their study—which will, in turn, contribute to faster completions of academic programs and less failure rates. Relieving immediate cost of living pressures will increase student uptake of and access to higher education. For all these reasons, Australia's knowledge economy will benefit from this scheme.

Bursaries in Australia

University students were first provided with financial assistance by the federal government in 1943 under the Commonwealth Financial Assistance Scheme. Under this scheme, eligible students were granted a living allowance and had their university fees paid in full. The level of support which was provided to cover living costs was determined according to family income.

The Commonwealth Scholarship Scheme was later introduced under the Menzies government in 1951. The granting of scholarships was determined according to academic merit, although living allowances continued to be means tested.

Financial assistance for students was reformed again under the Whitlam government in 1974 with the establishment of the Tertiary Education Assistance Scheme. Alongside the abolition of university fees, full-time students were then eligible to receive financial assistance subject to means testing. These reforms intended to increase participation in higher education by reducing financial barriers.

This system of financial aid was reformed yet again in 1987 by the Hawke government, with the establishment of Austudy and, later by the Howard government, the introduction of Youth Allowance.¹¹

Do bursaries boost retention rates?

Research consistently demonstrates linkage between the amount of student aid awarded and higher education retention. Students who, on average, receive more financial aid, tend to be retained at higher rates than others.¹²

A study of 642 undergraduate students awarded a study bursary in the 2010-11 cohort at the University of Barcelona found that:

‘The persistence rates of students with a study bursary are similar to those of students as a whole. This would seem to indicate that study bursaries do help to compensate the difficulties of students from low-income families, which means that study bursaries are a powerful instrument for safeguarding social equity.’¹³

What are current Centrelink payments and do they cover the cost of living?

¹¹ Daniels, D. (2017). Student income support: a chronology. *Parliament of Australia*.

https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/rp/rp1718/Chronology/StudentIncomeSupport

¹² Dixon, W. J. (2018). *Predicting student retention using scholarship and grant aid* [Doctoral thesis, Liberty University], p.45.

¹³ Berlanga, V., Figuera, P., & Pérez-Escoda, N. (2016). Academic Performance and Persistence of Study Bursary Holders. *Revista de cercetare și intervenție socială*, 54, 23-35.

Centrelink uses income and assets tests to work out how much Youth Allowance students and Australian apprentices get. A student who is single, has no children, is 18 or older and needs to live away from their parent's home will be paid a maximum fortnightly payment of \$562.80.¹⁴

Centrelink applies the personal income test when students report their income each fortnight which impacts their payment. There are other tests that can apply and which can result in the lowest payment rate.

Centrelink starts reducing Youth Allowance payments if the student's personal income is over \$480 a fortnight. There is an 'Income Bank' facility that allows students to accrue credit when they do not earn that much. This table shows how a student's income will affect their payment. The amounts are before tax.

Your situation	Amount your payment reduces by if you earn between \$480-\$575 per fortnight	Amount your payment reduces by if you earn more than \$575 per fortnight	Maximum income before your payment reduces to \$0
Single, no children, younger than 18, and live at your parent's home	50 cents for each dollar over \$480	\$47.50 plus 60 cents for each dollar over \$575	\$1,057.17
Single, no children, 18 or older and live at your parent's home	50 cents for each dollar over \$480	\$47.50 plus 60 cents for each dollar over \$575	\$1,152.50
Single or in a couple, no children, and need to live away from your parent's home	50 cents for each dollar over \$480	\$47.50 plus 60 cents for each dollar over \$575	\$1,445.50
Member of a couple with children	50 cents for each dollar over \$480	\$47.50 plus 60 cents for each dollar over \$575	\$1,529.67
Single with children	50 cents for each dollar over \$480	\$47.50 plus 60 cents for each dollar over \$575	\$1,711.84

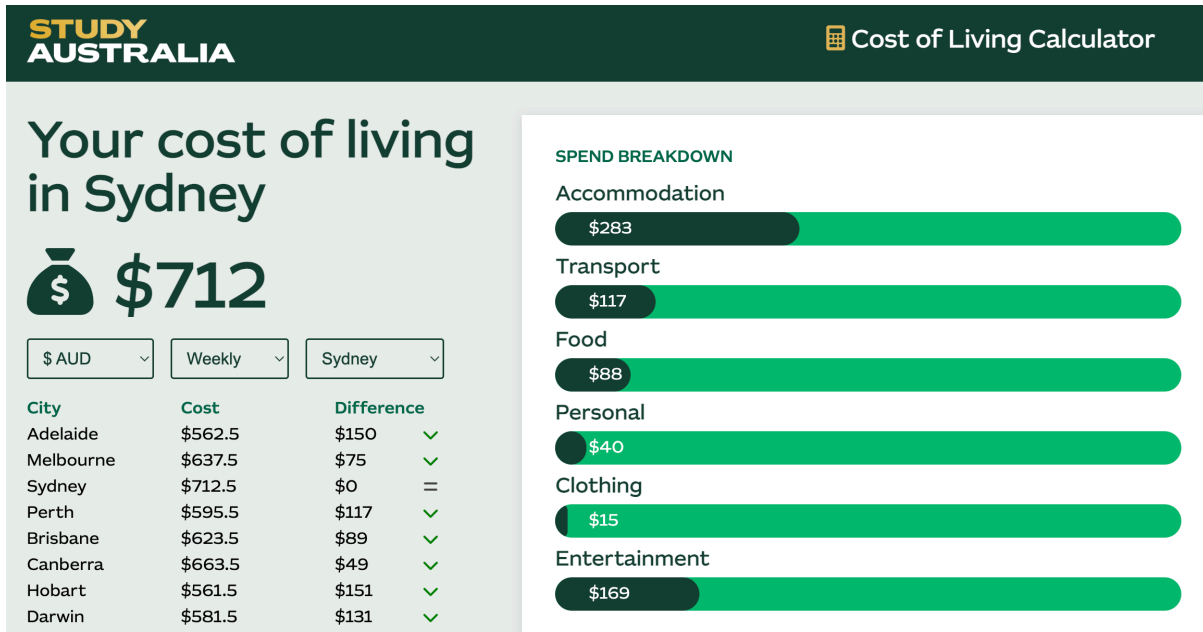
Source: [Services Australia. \(2023\). What the personal income test is. https://www.servicessaustralia.gov.au/what-personal-income-test-for-youth-allowance-for-students-and-australian-apprentices?context=43916](https://www.servicessaustralia.gov.au/what-personal-income-test-for-youth-allowance-for-students-and-australian-apprentices?context=43916)

While expenses vary across Australia as demonstrated below, based on conservative estimates it costs a student \$712 per week to live in Sydney under the following circumstances:

- Living in a very cheap share house
- Using public transport and bicycle
- Rarely eating out and always at the cheapest possible outlet
- Eating the cheapest available food at home
- Using the cheapest available gym, hairdresser and mobile plan
- Buying the most inexpensive clothes available, purchased very rarely
- Attending one music or sporting event each week
- Not participating in group activities or sport

¹⁴ Services Australia. (2023). *Youth Allowance for students and Australian Apprentices: How much you can get.* <https://www.servicessaustralia.gov.au/how-much-youth-allowance-for-students-and-apprentices-you-can-get?context=43916#payment-rates>

- Going out one night a week
- Does not include utility bills



Source: Study Australia. (n.d.). *Cost of Living Calculator*.
<https://costofliving.studyaustralia.gov.au/>

A student on the minimum wage would have to work nearly 67 hours in a fortnight to earn that much – just nine hours shy of a full-time workload. And once they cover the cost of living they will be earning too much to receive any Youth Allowance.

The National Union of Students released a report last year and found that found:

- The majority of students aged 18-21 (over 450,000) are excluded from Youth Allowance payments due to the Age of Independence being set at 22.
- Young people aged 18-21 who do receive Youth Allowance are mostly paid at less than \$182 per week, or \$26 per day.
- 18 to 21-year-olds paid at a higher Youth Allowance rate because they are considered independent are still paid \$273 per week below the poverty line.
- Youth Allowance payments are indexed at lower rates and less frequently than other social security payments like the Age Pension or Disability Support Pension, creating significant disparities in payment rates based on age.
- Commonwealth Rent Assistance payments do not match the realities of renting in Australia. Analysis of 45,000 rental properties in 2022 found that 0% were affordable for people on Youth Allowance.¹⁵

Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program

¹⁵ National Union of Students. (n.d.). *Research*. <https://changetheage.asn.au/research/>

There are a wide range of initiatives currently in place to help low-SES, Indigenous and rural, regional and remote students. It is a complex landscape that has changed over time. This submission is simply touching on a few of the initiatives in place and exploring, in particular, some examples of bursary payments.

Over the last 30 years, the Australian government has developed targeted policy initiatives to address inequities in educational outcomes for young people including the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP).

The HEPPP was introduced in 2010 to help grow numbers of domestic undergraduate students from low-SES backgrounds and retain them. Bursaries and scholarships form part of the HEPPP program among other activities.¹⁶

The outputs of the HEPPP are wide and varied. A random survey of equity scholarships funded through the HEPPP highlight major variances in eligibility and value.

Case study: Removing Barriers to Access Bursaries

The in 2019, the University of New England (UNE) published its *Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program - Participation Component 2019 Progress Report*.

It reported on the range of projects offered under HEPPP funding and included the Removing Barriers to Access Bursaries program. The project's aim was to provide bursaries to low-SES students to improve their experience and outcomes. Students decided how best to use these funds.

The project was designed to help with expenses associated with undergraduate education, like accommodation, childcare, textbooks and access to the internet.¹⁷

Under the program a cash bursary was offered. In May 2019, the UNE Residential College identified low-SES college students who were 'at risk' or in 'need of financial assistance' to remain enrolled for term 2, 2019.

Sixty-six low-SES students were identified and offered a \$1,500 cash bursary, with 62 acceptances for use on ongoing expenses associated with undergraduate degree. In term 2 a \$1,500 cash bursary was offered to 200 low-SES students with 160 acceptances. In term 3 the same bursary was offered to 150 low-SES students with 76 acceptances.

In total for 2019, 583 students were offered financial assistance through this project, and 426 students accepted a Removing Barriers to Access Bursary. A Qualtrics Survey was distributed to students with feedback requested to determine the benefits, improvements and the overall success of the Bursary.

The 2019 Removing Barriers to Access Cash Bursary recipient outcomes were tracked to reveal 84 per cent of the cohort remained enrolled throughout 2019 and into 2020.

A targeted national approach

¹⁶ National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education. (2017). *Higher education participation and partnerships program: seven years on*.

¹⁷ Department of Education, Skills and Employment. (n.d.). *Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program - Participation Component 2019 Progress Report*.

The HEPPP was established to drive increased participation, but it is difficult to see how this program is delivering that outcome. The way funds are used and distributed is at the discretion of each university with no uniformity across the sector. Students have no access to standardised support and scholarships are tied to institutions.

This needs to change if cost of living relief is to genuinely drive-up participation. A wholesale shift in approach is necessary and we believe the best way to achieve this is through a nationalised bursary scheme.

By standardising financial support measures that are universal, available at any institution, in any state and means tested to target those most likely to miss out on a tertiary education the government will capture a cohort that is currently slipping through the cracks.

NATIONAL ADMISSIONS SYSTEM

- 5.1 Establish a national tertiary admissions system, to simplify access for prospective students to higher education and increase student mobility between states.
- 5.2 Create a transparent and consistent approach to Recognition of Prior Learning through a nationally consistent approach to credit points.
- 5.3 Adopt a nationally consistent grading scheme, in which student marks achieve the same grade regardless of location, to ensure a level-playing field with GPAs, graduate employment and scholarship eligibility.

The current system is bad for equity

In 2016 the Higher Education Standards Panel reported to then Education Minister Simon Birmingham with recommendations on how to improve the transparency of higher education student admissions. It stated:

‘A paradoxical situation has arisen. Entry into universities has become more equitable. Yet there is evidence that families with less experience of higher education, which are economically disadvantaged or live in regional Australia, are less able to understand how admissions processes operate. This is particularly the case where dedicated school-based career advisers are not available to lend support.’

It said choice is being undermined by information about the system’s operation that is confusing, ambiguous, misunderstood and unevenly distributed. There is no common language adopted across the sector to describe entry requirements, the ATAR calculation is different in each jurisdiction, driven by different approaches to assessment in their secondary education systems and information is not always accessible.

While changes have been implemented in recent years the system remains convoluted, difficult to navigate and confusing.

A national admissions system will do two big things:

It will make it simpler and easier for prospective students to apply for university, meaning those less likely to engage with the system will find it easier and more attractive.

And a national system will also produce efficiency gains. With six different admissions bodies across eight states and territories processing applications in different ways and producing ATAR scores differently, duplication, repetition and mistakes will happen disadvantaging students. A national admission system will streamline the process for students and administrators. It will also likely drive increased competition for students amongst universities.