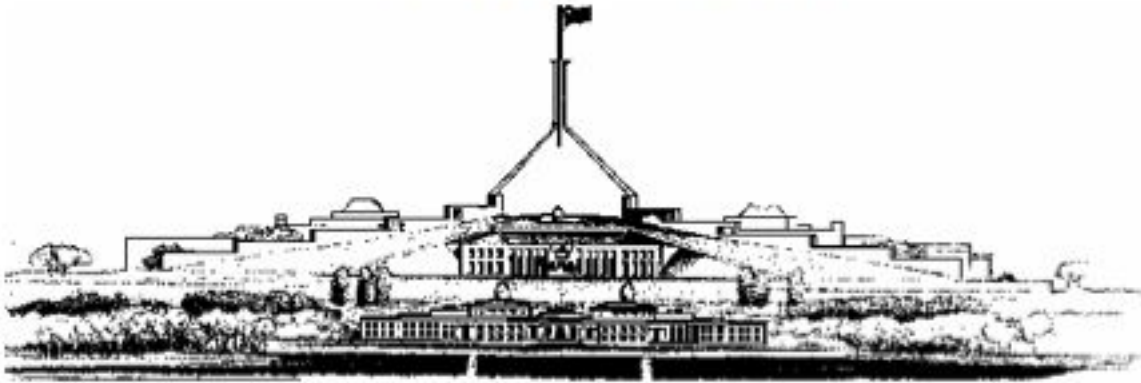




COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



THE SENATE

PROOF

BILLS

**Higher Education Support Amendment
(Reverse Job-Ready Graduates Fee Hikes
and End 50k Arts Degrees) Bill 2025**

Second Reading

SPEECH

Wednesday, 1 July 2026

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

SPEECH

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Questioner
Speaker Walsh, Sen Jess

Source Senate
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Senator WALSH (Victoria—Minister for Early Childhood Education and Minister for Youth) (09:16): I rise to speak on the Higher Education Support Amendment (Reverse Job-Ready Graduates Fee Hikes and End 50k Arts Degrees) Bill 2025. The Albanese government is building a better and fairer education system where no-one is held back and no-one is left behind. That's why we're taking action to help with the cost of living and cost of degrees through our changes to the Higher Education Loan Program. In our first term, we made indexation on HELP debts fairer, and we wiped \$3 billion of student debt for more than three million Australians. We capped indexation to the lower of the CPI and the WPI so that student debt can't grow faster than wages. In our second term, our 20 per cent HELP reduction has cut a further \$16 billion in student debt, and we've raised the minimum repayment thresholds for when people need to start repaying their HELP debt, so people only pay when they start to get the benefit of having a degree.

We promised it before the 2025 election, and we've delivered. That legislation passed in mid-2025, and the ATO has applied the 20 per cent reduction to over three million student accounts. An individual with an average HECS debt of \$27,600 saw around \$5½ thousand dollars wiped from their debt. Our changes to the way the student debt repayment system works provides real cost-of-living help. It means that repayments are lower when people are on lower incomes. For example, for someone on an income of \$70,000, it means they will have around \$1,300 per year back in their pocket.

The Treasurer has also made it easier for people with a student debt to get into the housing market by asking the banking regulators to review their rules, and the banks are starting to provide more flexibility in the treatment of student loans. These commitments build on other significant reforms the Albanese government is delivering for uni students.

From 1 July 2025, the government established a Commonwealth paid prac scheme for the first time. This will support around 68,000 eligible teaching, nursing, midwifery and social work students completing their compulsory prac training at university. We've massively increased funding for Fee-Free Uni Ready courses. These are the bridging courses that help to get students ready to take on a degree. We've committed an extra billion dollars over the next 10 years to help thousands of Australians do one of these courses for free.

The National Student Ombudsman started work from 1 February 2025, and a national code to prevent and respond to gender based violence started in January 2026, which will give the ombudsman's recommendations real teeth. We have doubled the number of university study hubs across the country, including 20 new Regional University Study Hubs and, for the first time, 15 new Suburban University Study Hubs in our major cities' outer suburbs. We've introduced a demand-driven system for all Indigenous students from 2024, meaning, if you are an Indigenous student and you get the marks for the course you want to do, you will get a Commonwealth supported place at university. We have quadrupled the higher education disability support fund for more programs and services that empower students with disability to participate and succeed at university.

We've also established the ATEC, the Australian Tertiary Education Commission, as an independent national steward to oversee, coordinate and reform Australia's tertiary sector. The ATEC will help us steer future reforms, including by providing advice on the cost of teaching and learning and by driving diversity across the sector to deliver for students. It will also have a lead role in delivering a joined-up tertiary education sector to make it easier for students to get the qualifications they need. It's going to drive the big structural reforms needed to break down the invisible barrier stopping a lot of Australians from disadvantaged backgrounds, the suburbs and the regions from getting a crack at university.

The bill in front of us today purports to reverse Job-ready Graduates and end 50K arts degrees. As the Senate committee heard, the evidence suggests that this bill would reduce university funding and could adversely affect course offerings, staffing, research capacity and the sustainability of regional and smaller providers. Fixing the former coalition government's Job-Ready Graduates scheme was a recommendation of the Australian

Universities Accord, alongside a number of other recommendations to reduce student contributions and reform HECS repayment arrangements. As I've already outlined, we've implemented many of those recommendations, including fixing indexation, making the repayment system fairer and reviewing bank lending practices for those with student loans.

On 25 June 2026, the Minister for Education introduced legislation in the House to change the way that university places are funded in Australia, to open the doors of opportunity for all Australians. This legislation introduces a new managed growth-funding system and demand-driven needs based funding for students from low socioeconomic areas, the regions and the bush. This will support an extra \$3.6 billion over 10 years to help more students from disadvantaged backgrounds access and succeed at university.

The government notes the additional recommendations made by the Australian Greens, including making tertiary education free, wiping student debt, fully funding all public universities and increasing Commonwealth contributions to Commonwealth supported places. Our government's ongoing response to the universities accord reflects the range of actions the Albanese government has taken to deliver cost-of-living relief to Australians and to help more students from underrepresented backgrounds to access, participate and succeed in tertiary education. As the Minister for Education has said, the accord is not a plan for one budget but a blueprint for the next decade and beyond. The government will keep working through the accord's recommendations and will take advice from the ATEC as we do our work to build a better and fairer education system.