

**Submission to the Senate Education and Employment Legislation Committee in
regards to the Higher Education Support Amendment (Job-Ready Graduates and
Supporting Regional and Remote Students) Bill 2020**

Dear Members of the Senate Education and Employment Legislation Committee,

The James Cook University Student Association is the union for students of James Cook University as defined in the JCU Act 1997. All students of James Cook University are eligible and encouraged to become members. James Cook University consists of two major campuses in Townsville and Cairns, with multiple smaller centres spread across regional and remote North Queensland.

This submission has the endorsement of the Council of the James Cook University Student Association and incorporates member feedback.

We welcome the opportunity to submit the following comments for consideration in relation to the Bill.

1. Proposed Changes to Student and Commonwealth Contributions
 - 1.1. Fee Hikes for Humanities Students
 - 1.2. Cuts to Some Student Contributions
 - 1.3. Cuts to Commonwealth Contributions.
 - 1.4. Net Decrease in Course Funding due to the Proposed Changes to Contribution Models
 - 1.5. Recommendation

2. Proposed Changes to Students' Access to the HELP (Higher Education Loan Program) Scheme
 - 2.1. Socio-Economic Realities for Regional and Remote Students
 - 2.2. Students Survivors
 - 2.3. Students with Disabilities
 - 2.4. One Poor Semester Does Not Define a Student's Academic Ability
 - 2.5. Recommendation



1. Proposed changes to student and commonwealth contributions

1.1. Fee Hikes for Humanities Students

We are very concerned by the proposal to increase student contributions for Humanities students by 113%, and to raise student contributions for students studying Commerce, Law and Business by 28%. This fee hike will only serve to push students further into debt. We have consulted widely with our members and have found an overwhelming consensus that students do not pick courses based on fees, but on passions. A student who is passionate about studying in the Humanities will not enrol in a Nursing course simply based on lower student contributions. There is no evidence to suggest that pricing signals on tuition costs will effectively influence course choice for prospective students. Likewise, the suggestion that a student could enrol in units of Mathematics to save money is completely out of touch with the reality of higher education. A Bachelor's program has a finite number of available units, and students are only able to choose from approved subjects based on their study plan. A student studying a Bachelor of Commerce at JCU will take 24 units over the course of their degree; of those 24 units, 7 are common first year Commerce subjects, 1 is a capstone project or internship, 8 are subjects of a student's major, and the final 8 may either be a second major or electives chosen by the student. All electives, however, must be units in Business, Commerce, Tourism or Law. There is no opportunity for a student to choose subjects with a lower student contribution. Likewise, in a Bachelor of Arts, students must take 16 of their 24 units as Humanities subjects with the remaining 8 being a choice of minor (where the vast majority of minors, and all minors that compliment a Humanities major, are in the Humanities and 4 units of a student's choice. Furthermore, students already have the opportunity to save money by selecting cheaper courses and have chosen not to, further demonstrating that the fee structures are not a persuasive factor when choosing a career, which is unlikely to change. Students from regional and remote Australia are among the most likely to be either the first in their family to attend university, of First Nations heritage, from a low socioeconomic background or a combination of these. This means that these students are those that will be the most effected by the proposed fee hikes; regional and remote students will be hit the hardest.

1.2. Cuts to Some Student Contributions

We agree with the notion that student contributions are too high and can act as a financial barrier to higher education. However, any cuts to student contributions must be matched with an equal or greater raise in commonwealth contributions to ensure that our education is still funded adequately and that graduates will be fully skilled and qualified.



1.3. Cuts to Commonwealth Contributions

We are deeply concerned with the massive cuts to Commonwealth contributions in many disciplines. Communications units, for example, will have their Commonwealth contribution cut by 92%. This massive decrease in funding will hurt regional and remote students by severely reducing both their opportunities to study and the quality of that study at a time when regional and remote journalism is already in dire straits. Regional universities and regional students will feel the impact of massive cuts to education much more keenly than students and institutions in metropolitan Australia. Without adequate funding regional universities will not be able to deliver for regional students, forcing more students to either leave regional Australia or abandon higher education altogether.

1.4. Net Decreases in Course Funding Due to the Proposed Changes to Contribution Models

We are extremely concerned with the proposed changes to contribution models. The net effect of these changes will leave many students worse off overall due to net cuts in funding. In the majority of studies where the student contribution is decreased the Commonwealth contribution is not raised sufficiently to offset this decrease resulting in a net cut to course funding. In some cases such as Environmental Studies, drops in both the Commonwealth contribution and student contribution will lead to a net course funding cut of 29%. A net cut of 29% to Environmental Studies equates to \$9,944 per student, per year. In the face of a looming climate crisis and following a disastrous bushfire season exacerbated by climate change, this cut seems particularly egregious. Where student contributions are raised the majority of Commonwealth contributions are cut by more than the raise, leading not only to a net cut in funding, but a greater proportion of the financial burden being laid at the feet of students, who will be paying more to receive less.

1.5. Recommendations

The Student Association has two recommendations to the Committee:

1. Reject the Higher Education Support Amendment (Job-ready Graduates and Supporting Regional and Remote Students) Bill 2020's proposed changes to higher education funding model entirely, as these proposed changes will significantly impact regional students in particular and negatively influence the quality of graduates. As standing, these amendments essentially achieve the opposite of their intended goal.

2. Make higher education free for students and fully publicly funded again.



2. Proposed Changes to Students' Access to the HELP (Higher Education Loan Program) Scheme

The Student Association finds the announcement that students who do not succeed academically will be barred from accessing the HELP Scheme for the remainder of their degree abhorrent. We fundamentally reject any proposal that has the potential to raise barriers to accessing higher education. Over 87% of students nationwide rely entirely on HELP to study, meaning that students that are locked out from HELP are locked out from higher education.

2.1. Socio-Economic realities for Regional and Remote Students

Regional and Remote Students are far more likely than metropolitan students to be of a low socio-economic background. What this means in practice is that students from regional and remote Australia are far more likely to be among the 87% of students nationally that are entirely reliant on HELP to be able to attempt higher education. These students are unlikely to have the financial safety nets available to them that students from a more privileged background do. Regional and remote students are reliant on securing part-time work to have the financial means to study, as the income support available through Austudy and Youth Allowance is simply not enough to survive on alone. Where students are forced to spend time working on top on studying full time, this leaves less time for focused, effective study. For students from a low socio-economic background, higher education represents an opportunity for social mobility. A threat to these students' ability to continue their higher education is a threat to these students' opportunity for social mobility. There is already a crisis in higher education, as seen in the NUS & ACOSS Starved of Opportunity Survey where 80.1% of respondents on income support said they struggled with the costs of essential study items and additional fees charged by universities. These are costs including textbooks, technology recourses, lab coats, uniforms, required field trips and public transport, none of which are covered by HELP. 35.2% of respondents said they have had to withdraw from study due to financial pressures already, while a further 36.8% have seriously considered it.

To then threaten these students, who are already struggling financially, with cutting them off from their education will only further impact these students. If a student fails just four subjects in their first year, they will be cut off from higher education and social mobility. First year students are often 17 or 18 years old, experiencing their first taste of self-directed learning and – commonly for regional and remote students – living away from home for the first time. This is a difficult transition, which is only compounded when they are the first in their

family to go to university, as nearly 40% of JCU students are. These students do not have the financial safety net to study effectively; they do not have well-developed support networks to help them through the transition to university life; and they are often living far from friends and family at home, adding to a sense of isolation. Under this proposal these students are given just one chance to make it work before they could be cut out of higher education and a shot at social mobility altogether. This makes accessing higher education an even more fraught proposal for rural and remote students.

2.2. Student Survivors

At Australian universities 1 in 5 students experience sexual harassment, with a further 1.6% of the students experiencing sexual violence. These student survivors are often significantly affected academically by their trauma and a lack of institutional support. The Student Association is incredibly concerned that these students could lose their access to higher education as a result of trauma adversely affecting their studies. For students in this position to receive special consideration and support academically from JCU, they must report and therefore relive their trauma. This disincentivises students from reaching out for institutional support, and especially so when the perpetrator is a staff member at the University. Furthermore the students who do suffer from the trauma of sexual violence often are unable to support themselves through work. These students are left in the position of reliving their trauma and potentially asking the institution that continues to employ the perpetrator of the sexual violence against the student for support, or losing their ability to study as a result of surviving sexual violence.

2.3. Students with Disabilities

Students with a disability are already more likely to have lower rates of success at university. This means that students with disabilities will be significantly more likely to be affected by the proposed changes to HELP than those without. This is not inherent because of disability, but because of a systemic failure to adequately support students with a disability. Students with disabilities are already more likely to drop out of university than students without. The proposed changes to HELP would see many students with disabilities cut off from higher education due to systemic failures, further widening the gap between Australians with a disability and Australians who do not have a disability and entrenching a cycle of poverty.

2.4. One Poor Semester Does Not Define a Student's Academic Ability



Many Student Association members, including council members, struggle or have struggled academically in their first year of study, failing over 50% of their classes. Under this proposal, these students would be cut off from HELP. The vast majority of these students are currently performing very well academically, even amidst a global pandemic, because they were offered a second chance to succeed. Many Australian scientists, engineers, doctors, nurses, and teachers would not have their qualifications today if the proposed changes had existed a decade ago. This proposal will have direct and long-term negative consequences for Australia as a whole. It will actively reduce the future number of doctors, nurses, engineers, scientists, and teachers in Australia, further exacerbating shortages in the very fields into which the proposed bill hopes to funnel more graduates. To kneecap Australia's future based on 17-year-old students having a rocky transition to university life is ludicrous, and yet, that is what this bill will achieve.

2.5. Recommendations

The Student Association has two recommendations to the Committee:

1. Reject the Higher Education Support Amendment (Job-ready Graduates and Supporting Regional and Remote Students) Bill 2020's proposed changes to HELP entirely as the proposed changes will only further impact already disadvantaged students and does not reflect the reality that many students do achieve high grades even after a difficult first semester.
2. Make higher education free for students and fully publicly funded again.

Yours sincerely, on behalf of the James Cook University Student Association,

Tom O'Grady (he/him) | President

Building 133, Student Services Mall | Townsville Campus

Opening Hours | Mon – Fri 8.30am – 4.30pm

(07) 4781 6831 | www.jcusa.edu.au

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