

Media Release

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Unfair student fees undermining Universities Accord goals for participation and equity: IRU report

New analysis from the Innovative Research Universities (IRU) shows increasing financial and social impacts of the Job-Ready Graduates (JRG) policy, with rising costs for students and fewer students from low socioeconomic backgrounds enrolling in university, especially in the most expensive fields.

IRU modelling shows that students paid up to \$368 million more for their education in 2024 than they would have under the pre-JRG system (adjusted for inflation). But despite this increase, universities received \$813 million less overall to teach and support students, due to significant reductions in government funding under the JRG package.

IRU Chair and Vice-Chancellor of Western Sydney University, Distinguished Professor George Williams AO said that JRG reform is critical if Australia is to meet the long-term targets set by the Universities Accord and adopted by government.

“The Universities Accord rightly focused on lifting tertiary attainment to meet future skills needs, with a focus on groups that are currently under-represented in our system,” he said. “But because of JRG we have been going backwards on participation and equity.”

According to the IRU analysis, total domestic Bachelor degree commencements declined by 3.5% between 2020-2024, but low SES student commencements were down 9.8% compared with a 2.2% decline for non-low SES students. For courses with the highest student contribution rates under the JRG policy (including Humanities, Commerce and Law), low SES commencements declined 19.7%.

“We need students from all backgrounds free to pursue their passions and enter the workforce in the widest range of fields,” Professor Williams said. “Pricing some students out of degrees at the point of entry undermines not only their future but also Australia’s future.”

IRU Executive Director Paul Harris said the analysis highlights the need for an ongoing commitment to higher education reform, to deliver on the vision of the Universities Accord.

“We know that major reform is expensive but our analysis shows that it can be done step-by-step, to make student contributions fairer and fix the funding shortfall,” he said. “If we don’t tackle this now, JRG risks creating a two-track education system and society.”

The IRU has costed a three-step process to reform JRG that would leave no student worse off, consistent with recommendations in the Accord final report:

1. Restore the three band student contribution system by reclassifying fields currently in the top-charging band to the second highest band.
2. Restore the Humanities and related fields to pre-JRG rates.
3. Restore STEM fields to pre-JRG funding rates.

iru.edu.au

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Attachments

Discussion paper: *Impacts of the Job-Ready Graduates policy and options for reform*

About the IRU

The IRU is a network of seven public universities across Australia committed to inclusive education and research impact that advance our communities. Its members are Flinders University, Griffith University, James Cook University, La Trobe University, Murdoch University, University of Canberra, and Western Sydney University.

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