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universities  
australia**

<https://puau.org>

## **Response to Australian Universities Accord**

### **Priority Action 2:**

**Cease the 50% pass rule, given its poor equity impacts, and require increased reporting on student progress.**

*Introduced as part of the JRG package, the 50% pass rule disproportionately disadvantages students from equity backgrounds. Enhanced reporting on student progress will increase the focus on improving the success rates of at-risk students. While the Review believes other aspects of the JRG package need reform, this change should proceed at the first possible opportunity.*

### **Key points**

- **Education should serve first the individual and society, and our economy should serve both**
- **PUA believes that all education should be free in Australia**
- **Any financial assistance offered by government to assist students should be so regulated that universities are unable to appropriate that money for any other purpose**
- **We have created a system that profits from international students without any effective regulation to ensure that they get value for the money we force them to spend**
- **Our secondary education system also needs improvement**

## **The 50% pass rule**

The government has already committed to removing this rule, subject to legislation. However, this question should provide an opportunity to consider broader issues that are relevant to it. The intentions of the previous government, although contentious in some respects, were arguably not unreasonable in relation to this rule, insofar as they sought to ensure not that students would be prevented from studying, but rather that universities would ensure that all students received the assistance they need. Removal of this rule does not benefit students if it means that the length of their degrees become drawn out and that they therefore incur higher HECS loan debts.

PUA unequivocally endorses the right of every person to undertake education of their choice in order to develop and fulfill their individual potential, and, very important, not specifically, necessarily, or solely for the purposes of employment and national economic priorities. ***Education should serve first the individual and society, and our economy should serve both, and not be viewed as an end in itself or as something that dictates our life choices.*** This is consistent with Australia's ratification of the 1966 UN International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights in 1975. That agreement also defines it as a universal human right to *free* higher education at public expense, and PUA notes that this right was included in the ALP's own Accord with the ACTU in 1983, until abrogated by the introduction of the HECS scheme in 1989. University studies remain free in many non-Anglo-Saxon countries. ***PUA believes that all education should be free in Australia.***

It has been a political objective to enable more Australians to attend university since the Whitlam government, which introduced free higher education. Some economic benefit was assumed to result from a more educated population through earlier decades, but it was the Hawke government that assumed that more Australians becoming university graduates would specifically translate into more economic growth and development, and that it was essential to ensure that we were all better equipped to meet the challenges of technological and other changes, and who introduced a wide range of changes in education & training provisions to that end. While many more Australians have now become tertiary graduates, some because training programmes previously provided in other settings were transferred into universities and Colleges of Advanced Education (CAEs) were upgraded to universities, that increase in graduates has not resulted in a stronger and more developed and diversified national economy, arguably due to insufficient government and private sector venture capital investment, chronic under-funding of public services delivery resulting in unsustainable and insecure careers for many professionals (including academics), and under-employment and exploitation of many tertiary graduates, among other things. Graduating more university-educated Australians without corresponding investment in appropriate jobs for them does not result in any development and growth of our economy. University education is not, for many, the opportunity of upward social mobility and greater opportunity that it is advertised

as being. Such education has also not ensured that all graduates now have the knowledge and skills that they are expected to have, because universities have failed to provide a standard of education that might have ensured that they do. Had university managements been doing their job, Australia should never have had a 30-year-long skills shortage.

PUA shares the view that students from various disadvantaged backgrounds should be assured whatever support they require to enable them to successfully complete tertiary education, but government has failed to address many of the causes of that disadvantage. The Closing the Gap agenda has not been successfully implemented, and has therefore not effectively reduced or eliminated the disadvantages experienced by First Nations Australians (see Response to Recommendation 3); that agenda was itself a belated response to known problems of far longer standing. Our public-private school system is known to create lifelong inequality that also affects prospective university students; that system is caused and perpetuated by a bipartisan political refusal to fully fund a public school system capable of educating every child to Year 12 to the same standard and with the same opportunities, and *successive governments have seen greater advantage to themselves, but not to their fellow Australians, in unequally subsidising more non-government schools.*

*Any financial assistance offered by government to assist students should be so regulated that universities are unable to appropriate that money for any other purpose,* but are compelled to use it fully and solely for the purposes for which it is stipulated. Further, they should be fully transparent and accountable in their use of it, including assessment to determine its effectiveness and sufficiency. It would perhaps be advisable that all students with disabilities are provided with the services or assistance that they need through the NDIS and that universities should not be directly responsible for any such services, beyond ensuring that they can be accommodated on campus. Substantial portions of university revenues are not spent for the sole purposes for which universities exist, namely, research and teaching, but are misappropriated and wasted for other purposes, while international students' fees are not actually paying for the education they are supposed to be receiving, including additional tuition and academic support.

Universities have not to date ensured that all students, including international students, have access to the academic support that they may need on campus. Ordinarily, lecturers would provide some individual mentoring and assistance to students, but the majority casualisation of the lecturing workforce, the fact that sessional lecturers are not paid sufficiently to provide such assistance (including emailing and face-to-face consultation), and that in some cases they have been advised by universities not to do so (e.g. to not spend the time necessary in marking assessments and providing detailed feedback on them), means that a majority of our academics are unable to provide such mentoring, unless unpaid and on their own time. Full-time continuing lecturers similarly now have excessive workloads that preclude them offering the support that they might once have provided, and they cannot be freely or regularly available to hundreds of students. This

situation has been caused by government and university managements, and needs to be dramatically improved as a matter of urgency. At the same time, ***it should not be the responsibility of academics to teach students how to write grammatically correct, well-researched, and coherently structured and argued essays; they should have already learned how to do that.*** It is not evident that government or the Panel have fully taken on board the pedagogical implications of the current working and employment conditions of university lecturers, or the impact of the mass redundancy of an estimated 40,000+ academics since 2020 upon their capacity to assist students, or that there is an intention to redress that impact.

International students, including graduate students, whose first language is not English are often admitted to Australian universities with poor English comprehension, spoken and written ability. This raises important but unasked questions about the actual benefit of any education they receive here. Neither the admission procedures that should require evidence of fluency in English nor the private language colleges that they attend prior to commencing university are guaranteeing that they all meet expected standards. On campus, there are also no appropriate services to assist them to which lecturers can refer them, either for English or for other academic tuition in the preparation of their assignments where their education in countries of origin has been completed at standards lower than those in Australia. ***This means that we have created a system that profits from international students without any effective regulation to ensure that they get value for the money we force them to spend.***

Students also fail their courses for reasons over which they have little control. Most students are forced to work while studying in order to support themselves. Under arrangements introduced by the Whitlam government, this was much less of a problem or necessity than it now is, while government scholarships are no longer adequate relative to costs of living and rents – which they once were. International university systems offer models in which student accommodation needs, subsidised meals provided on campus, and family financial assistance to support children until completion of tertiary education & training, are all considerably better addressed than they are in Australia. The more students have the ability to study full-time without any financial or practical insecurity and without having to sacrifice study time to non-academic tasks, the better learning outcomes and student “experience” would be, but that can only be addressed by government.

Students who are forced to work to support themselves would be advised to enrol part-time in their courses and to take twice as long to complete. This is problematic, for different reasons, for students, for government, and for universities, but it would be a necessary alternative if we refuse to provide better for students so that they do not need to work while studying .

The phenomenon known as “soft marking”, with which all academics will be familiar and which is likewise of long standing, consists in students being passed by academics or by deans and management, who have not met minimum academic standards in their assessment exercises. This

widespread practice occurs in parallel with the failure assumed by the 50% rule. This can include transfer of grades from one exercise to another in order to pass an assessment which, if graded independently, they would not have passed. Academics are pressured into this by management, and risk redundancy or other penalties for non-compliance. This is because universities have been put into the position by government of depending upon student completion for their funding and rankings. Failing students is not something that any academic willingly does, but it is essential to the maintenance of minimum required academic quality & standards, and those standards become meaningless if every student is passed and graduates, irrespective of their actual academic ability and performance. Academics should be the sole arbiters of student performance, without managerial interference and without extraneous priorities influencing their assessments, and those standards must be maintained if Australia's educational reputation is to be maintained.

Pressure upon Australian youth to complete tertiary education & training in order to qualify for employment and to support national economic priorities, combined with the fact that the only realistic alternative for most is offered by the TAFE/VET system, limits people's choices. Not everybody is suited for university, but government assumes that everybody is equally capable of completing tertiary studies even without having access to assistance and additional help that they may need.

The 50% rule raises a large number of associated questions and challenges that have not been sufficiently considered, addressed or acknowledged by government and the Accord Panel, and that oversight is to the detriment of millions of Australians and international students. ***Many of those problems have originated in the assumption that education is not an expense that the public should bear*** (contrary to extensive international practice), and that students should bear as much of those costs as can be imposed upon them, without any due consideration of the benefits to the entire community that they will make, and without any due consideration of the fact that our entire economy is incapable of fully and appropriately employing every single graduate in areas relevant to their potential and education, and that in the past 30 years this higher education policy has made exactly no quantifiable positive difference to Australia's economic growth and development. ***Our students are being force-fed through a secondary and tertiary education system with distinct weaknesses that need to be addressed urgently and into a game of Russian roulette in terms of whether they will ever obtain desirable, appropriate, or sustainable employment at the end of it. That is unacceptable.***

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Public Universities Australia