Law Council
OF AUSTRALIA

1 July 2026

Senator Maria Kovacic
Chair
Senate Education and Employment References Committee
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

By email: eec.sen@aph.gov.au

Dear Chair

Inquiry into Australian university graduates

1. The Law Council of Australia welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Senate Education and Employment References Committee in response to the *Inquiry into Australian university graduates*.

2. This submission is informed by contributions from the Queensland Law Society, the Law Society of South Australia, the Victorian Bar, the Law Institute of Victoria and the Law Council's Legal Education Working Group.

3. The Law Council is the peak national representative body of the Australian legal profession. Through our members (state and territory law societies, bar associations and Law Firms Australia) we represent practitioners across firms of all sizes, practice types and geographic settings. We maintain an interest in the operation of the legal education and professional preparation continuum, particularly as it affects graduate transition, supervised practice, early-career development and professional sustainability. As such, the Law Council's submission responds to the Inquiry's Terms of Reference only to the extent that they relate to legal education, law schools and the legal profession.

4. Legal education operates within a complex, highly regulated ecosystem that encompasses undergraduate university study, pre-admission practical legal training (**PLT**), and supervised professional practice. Concerns about graduate employment outcomes, graduate readiness and the student experience post-graduation, must therefore be understood across this broader continuum, rather than being attributed to universities alone or assessed solely through the lens of immediate employment outcomes. Universities do, however, play a critical role in the first phase of professional development.

The state of the entry-level job market for law graduates

Demand for law graduates

5. While data shows recent increases in the size of the legal profession and the number of new lawyers being admitted,[1] this may not necessarily continue to be the case. Competition for graduate positions (particularly in private practice and metropolitan markets) remains pronounced and is likely increasing.

6. The legal profession is experiencing significant disruption, and the Law Council understands that this disruption is beginning to have an impact on the entry-level job market for law graduates. Factors including the accelerating adoption of artificial intelligence (**AI**), increasing business costs,[2] and new regulatory requirements[3] may be making it less financially viable for legal practices (of all sizes) to employ entry-level lawyers.

7. Last year, the Australian Financial Review (**AFR**) published data from its *Law Partnership Survey*, which indicated that the number of graduates employed nationally in the first half of 2025 grew by six per cent, to almost 1700, across the 49 law firms that provided year-on-year figures.[4] Yet more recently, the AFR has reported that graduate hiring among eight of the largest Australian law firms fell by 7 per cent, or 52 positions, to 716 graduates this financial year, down from 768 the year before.[5] The degree to which this decrease in hiring is attributable to AI as opposed to other business or market pressures is unclear.

8. The Law Council is not aware of comparable data for small- and medium-sized practices. However, many of these practices are experiencing rising operating costs. The Law Council understands, anecdotally, that for some smaller firms, the cost of supervising and training a graduate lawyer in the current economic climate is prohibitive and the preference is to recruit lawyers with at least three years' post-admission experience who can immediately add value.

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1 In New South Wales in 2024-25, 2,957 people were admitted as lawyers (an increase of 0.8 per cent compared with the previous year): Legal Profession Admission Board of New South Wales, Annual Report 2024-25 (November 2025) 12. However, the number of people admitted who had not previously been admitted overseas or in another state decreased from 2,694 to 2,680. In Victoria in 2024-25, 2,126 people were admitted as lawyers (a 1.3 per cent increase on the previous year): Victorian Legal Admissions Board, Annual Report 2024-25 (November 2025) 26. Between 2014 and 2024, the number of practising solicitors in Australia increased by 47 per cent: Urbis (for the Law Society of New South Wales, 2024 National Profile of Solicitors (Report, 13 June 2025) 6-7.

2 Such as growing demands on cybersecurity and increasing IT insurance and business infrastructure costs.

3 In particular, ahead of the upcoming commencement of the Tranche 2 amendments to the *Anti-Money Laundering and Counter-Terrorism Financing Amendment Act 2024* (Cth) on 1 July 2026.

4 Edmund Tadros and Hannah Tattersall, 'Law firms take more graduates even as AI does the grunt work', *Australian Financial Review* (online), 29 June 2025.

5 Edmund Tadros, 'Minters breaks the big law silence: AI is eating graduate jobs', *Australian Financial Review* (online), 10 May 2026.

Supply of law graduates

9. There is no sufficiently consolidated national data set that enables clear assessment of how many law graduates obtain work within the legal profession, how many move into adjacent professions, and how many experience prolonged under-employment.

10. The Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching (**QILT**) Graduate Outcomes Survey does not distinguish between employment outcomes; it records only whether a graduate is employed.[6] While that data indicates that many law graduates find employment upon graduation,[7] there is no clear data on the numbers making the transition as an admitted legal practitioner holding a practising certificate. Such data may be valuable, particularly for students making decisions about taking on degrees and associated debts, as it may provide upfront reassurance that there is the possibility of entering into the legal profession if that is their future choice.

11. Publicly available data about the number of law students/graduates is limited and it is difficult to assess whether the number of entry-level jobs is keeping pace with the number of law graduates. At the time of writing, the Law Council is exploring options to obtain data about the number of students graduating from Australia's law schools.

12. There are now 37 law schools at Australian universities, reflecting significant expansion since the 1990s. This expansion has been accompanied by sustained growth in enrolments. The Law Council understands that some first-year law school cohorts are now exceeding 1000 law students. This expansion in the pipeline of potential lawyers brings the capacity of the profession, employers and training pathways into question, and particularly affects capacity to provide support through supervised legal practice and early-career development.

13. A further, related issue is the wide variation in entry standards across Australian law schools. Current ATAR thresholds for law range from 75 to 99.5. While diversity of pathways into higher education is important, the magnitude of the spread raises legitimate concerns about preparedness, cohort management and the downstream effects on teaching quality and student experience in intellectually demanding programs such as law.

14. In terms of core attributes, the legal profession requires both highly developed intellectual capability and strong interpersonal and professional judgement skills, including ethical decision-making, communication, resilience and adaptability. These capacities develop unevenly across cohorts of very large size and highly mixed academic preparedness. Supporting the development of these attributes across large and academically diverse cohorts reinforces the importance of considering how legal education, practical legal training and early-career support interact across the full professional continuum.

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6 Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching, 2024 Graduate Outcomes Survey (National Report, September 2025).

7 Ibid 22. According to the 2024 Graduate Outcomes Survey, in 2024, 79.3 per cent of law and paralegal studies graduates were in full-time employment within one year of graduation.

The quality of university education in Australia

15. Australian law degrees are subject to multiple layers of regulation and accreditation, including Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (**TEQSA**) oversight, discipline-specific accreditation standards and state admission requirements.

16. Two national processes are currently considering changes to the *Accreditation Standards for Australian Law Courses*, which provide uniform standards for accrediting, monitoring, reviewing and reaccrediting law courses for admission purposes.[8] These processes include:

    - the Legal Services Council (**LSC**) and Law Admissions Consultative Committee (**LACC**) consultation on proposed revisions to the Accreditation Standards;[9] and
    - a separate LSC and LACC consultation on potential reforms to PLT.[10]

17. The Law Council has provided submissions to each of these processes.[11] The key positions put in these submissions include that:

    - law courses that are accredited for admission purposes should be designed to produce practising lawyers;
    - the embedding of practical training in law courses should be increased;
    - assessment must be rigorous and adapt to the challenges of AI; and
    - wholly online law courses should only be accredited in exceptional circumstances.

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8 For the purpose of this submission a 'law course' refers to a course of study over a number of years such as an undergraduate Bachelor of Laws or a postgraduate Juris Doctor. An accredited law course refers to a law course which has been accredited by an 'admitting authority' as for the purpose of preparing students for admission to the legal profession.

9 Legal Services Council and Law Admissions Consultative Committee, Consultation paper on proposed revisions to the Accreditation Standards for Australian Law Courses (March 2025).

10 Legal Services Council and Law Admissions Consultative Committee, Review of Practical Legal Training (Consultation Paper, April 2026). A similar process is also being conducted limited to New South Wales: Legal Profession Admission Board of New South Wales, Interim Report on PLT Reform (13 March 2026).

11 Law Council of Australia, Submission to the Legal Services Council and Law Admissions Consultative Committee, Proposed revisions to the Accreditation Standards for Australian Law Courses (26 June 2025); Law Council of Australia, Submission to the Legal Profession Admission Board of New South Wales, *Discussion Paper on PLT Reform* (30 October 2025); Law Council of Australia, Submission to the Legal Services Council and Law Admissions Consultative Committee, *Proposed Revisions to the Accreditation Standards for Australian Law Courses -Targeted Consultation* (26 March 2026); Law Council of Australia, Submission to the Legal Services Council and Law Admissions Consultative Committee, Consultation on practical legal training (1 June 2026).

Practice readiness

18. There is a perception among practitioners that many law graduates are not as well prepared as they should be when graduating from law school, and that perception is reflected in recent professional surveys.[12]

19. While law courses can develop valuable and transferable skills, the Law Council does not agree with the common view that law is a 'generalist' degree.[13] Accredited law courses should be designed to produce practising lawyers in the same way that other professional degrees are intended to produce professionals in the relevant field (such as medicine). Law courses have a fundamental role to play in equipping lawyers with the choice and ability to practise law (and practise law well) if that is the career path they wish to pursue. By preparing a future independent legal profession comprising skilled, diligent and ethical legal practitioners who are capable of upholding their paramount duties to the court, as well as their duties to clients, the law course ensures that Australian consumers can have ongoing confidence in the administration of justice. Our independent judiciary depends in practice on the existence of such an independent profession. Law courses should not lose sight of this underlying purpose.

20. For several years, the Law Council and its constituent bodies have been engaging with the legal profession to consider how legal education reform can assist the profession to respond to the challenges and workforce realities of the future.

21. Through these discussions, a broad consensus has emerged that a key challenge is ensuring that graduates and early career lawyers are 'practice-ready'. In the context of the legal profession, practice readiness is about ensuring lawyers entering practice possess an adequate level of skill and knowledge, in a supervised context, to meet the needs of their employers, the courts and, importantly, their clients. This is an important matter of consumer protection.

22. We have identified growing concerns about the ability of the current legal education model, across the continuum, to adequately develop the level of skill, knowledge and understanding that should be expected of those entering the profession.

23. Competencies often identified as underdeveloped include foundational understanding of substantive law areas, technical and practical skills required to be a legal practitioner, problem-solving, written and oral communication skills, client management, practice development, understanding of ethics and professional regulation, and technological skills.

24. For example, in providing input to this submission, the Victorian Bar noted that understanding of procedure (both civil and criminal) and evidence, written and verbal communication skills, and legal drafting skills are notable areas of weakness in new

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[12] See, eg, Francina Cantatore, Tanya Atwill and Rachael Field, Bond University, The job readiness of law graduates and entry level solicitors (Final Report for the Queensland Law Society, 1 December 2022); Urbis, for the Legal Services Council on behalf of the Admissions Committee and the Law Admissions Consultative Committee, National Practical Legal Training Research (Survey Research Report, March 2026).

[13] Sally Kift and Kana Nakano, Reimagining the Professional Regulation of Australian Legal Education (Council of Australian Law Deans, 1 December 2021) 91-94.

lawyers. Formal education could provide a more rigorous basis for practice in respect of these areas, including in the way law subjects are assessed.

25. Similarly, the Law Society of South Australia suggests that a greater emphasis could be placed on developing students' capabilities in client interactions, including active listening, empathy, negotiation and the delivery of clear, practical advice. Similarly, law programs could do more to incorporate structured training in collaboration and professional communication, reflecting the reality that legal work is rarely in complete isolation and alternative forms of dispute resolution (such as mediation) are often the primary method of resolving civil disputes.

26. Practical readiness is not only developed in formal coursework and assessment but through exposure to real or simulated legal work. Clinical legal education, university-run practical programs, mentoring, shadowing and placements can all play an important role in bridging the gap between study and practice. However, access to these opportunities is not evenly distributed and can reinforce barriers to entry to the legal profession.

27. Expanding structured and equitable access to practical experience should therefore be a priority. However, the Law Council recognises that this kind of process is made more difficult where class sizes are overly large, where subjects are taught in compressed learning modules, or where there is a heavy reliance on online teaching.

28. It is important to note that the above observations are not intended to suggest that graduates are uniformly underprepared, nor that deficiencies arise solely from curriculum design.

29. However, factors such as increasing cohort sizes, highly variable student preparedness (i.e. ATAR scores), reduced opportunities for in-person engagement, limited exposure to applied assessment, and insufficient access to experiential learning may be contributing to weaker outcomes in those areas of practice-readiness most visible to employers and the profession. In the Law Council's view, the role of undergraduate education in developing practice-readiness is best understood as a balance of quality at scale and of alignment between educational delivery and contemporary professional demands, rather than a basis for diminishing the broader intellectual purposes of legal education.

Incorporating practical skills in law courses

30. Current consultation processes are considering the possibility of embedding greater practical skills teaching and training in law courses. The Law Council is generally supportive of these proposals.[14]

31. In the Law Council's view, practical skills should be progressively developed from undergraduate study through to admission. Legal education should be directed to developing new lawyers to be practice-ready and possess an adequate level of skill

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[14] See, eg, Law Council of Australia, Submission to the Legal Services Council and Law Admissions Consultative Committee, *Proposed Revisions to the Accreditation Standards for Australian Law Courses - Targeted Consultation* (26 March 2026) 9; Law Council of Australia, Submission to the Legal Services Council and Law Admissions Consultative Committee, Consultation on practical legal training (1 June 2026) 12-14.

and knowledge to meet the needs of their employers, clients and the courts with an appropriate level of supervision.

32. Greater integration of practical elements of 'lawyering' is desirable in law courses as it provides students with gradual and contextualised development of skills and knowledge and a greater understanding of their future reality. The earlier students have the opportunity to engage in the practical elements of practice, and begin building proficiency, the better.

33. However, the Law Council also recognises that careful design is needed in embedding greater practical training in order to:

    - maintain or improve educational integrity;
    - reflect resourcing limitations and current dynamics within the sector; and
    - reflect the pressures on the members of the practising profession (who may be called on to undertake greater roles in education).[15]

Assessment

34. The Law Council notes that assessment regimes have changed markedly in recent years and that, in some cases, it has been observed that this may have resulted in a reduction in the rigorousness of assessment. We also observe that the integrity of results in assessments is at significant risk because of the rise in availability of technological tools (such as AI, live streaming and chat functionality), as well as content available on the internet (including examinations, lecture notes and ghost-writers).

35. Assessment is a fundamental aspect of legal education. Assessment must be robust, fair and reliable. Given the potential for AI to be misused, assessment should focus on the process by which an answer is produced, not simply the answer. Assessment can also be designed to drive behaviours that develop actual knowledge of the law and a variety of soft skills (including a professional command of writing).

36. While we recognise that the way in which students are assessed is largely a matter for educators, we are concerned that the forms of assessment used in some law schools may not be sufficiently robust to achieve the expected outcomes and likely contribute to concerns about declining standards.

Wholly online courses

37. The Law Council is generally opposed to wholly online law courses. We consider that it should not be possible for a student to undertake a law degree which is wholly online and then enter legal practice in the absence of substantial evidence of course engagement and professionally relevant activity in the process of obtaining a law degree.[16]

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[15] Law Council of Australia, Submission to the Legal Services Council and Law Admissions Consultative Committee, Consultation on practical legal training (1 June 2026) 13.

[16] See, eg, Law Council of Australia, Submission to the Admissions Committee of the Legal Services Council and the Law Admissions Consultative Committee, Proposed revisions to the Accreditation Standards for Australian Law Courses (26 June 2026) [10]-[14].

38. While wholly online courses can offer flexibility and extend access to students in rural, regional and remote areas, the Law Council's primary concern is that professional standards and thresholds must be maintained. Such courses are unlikely to foster a sense of professional community. In our view, accreditation of wholly online law courses should require evidence of significant additional investment in activities that support professional development and engagement.

39. In our view, wholly online teaching often does not support the sufficient development of professional standards of skill and knowledge required for legal practice. Feedback from the legal profession highlights a real concern for the professional development of actual knowledge, communication, writing and interpersonal skills in an environment that is substantially or completely online.

The quality of teaching

40. In theory, the framework of legal education regulation should ensure a consistently high-quality educational offering. However, the quality of the enacted curriculum (what is actually taught) and the experienced curriculum (what students encounter day-to-day) is shaped by structural pressures that are not always visible in formal compliance and accreditation processes.

41. As observed in the Australian Universities Accord Final Report, these pressures are common across the tertiary sector and include workforce composition, workload allocation, institutional policy and imperatives, and teaching scale, all of which directly affect educational practice and student experience.[17]

42. Most law academics do not hold formal education qualifications, yet are required to teach in highly complex environments characterised by:

- large cohorts;
- wide variation in student capability;
- blended, online or hybrid delivery models requiring advanced digital pedagogical skill; and
- increasing administrative demands.

43. At the same time, the Law Council understands that academic workload models in Australian universities typically allocate limited academic time to teaching, with the majority of time required to be devoted to research, grant acquisition and service obligations. Research performance remains the dominant driver of promotion, workload allocation and institutional prestige.

44. While the recent rise of teaching-focused academic roles (including roles for those with recent or current experience in legal practice) is a positive development, a substantial proportion of teaching in law remains undertaken by sessional or casual academics, many of whom have no job security and receive limited academic development. This has important consequences for quality of teaching, continuity and student experience across large programs.

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[17] Australian Universities Accord Review Panel for the Department of Education, Australian Universities Accord (Final Report, February 2024).

45. Accordingly, there can be a material gap between the apparent robustness of regulatory frameworks and the realities of providing a quality university education at scale.

Whether law graduates are being taught the "skills employers are looking for"

46. University legal education is directed toward the development of:

- deep disciplinary knowledge;
- critical reasoning and analytical capacity;
- research literacy and evaluative judgement; and
- intellectual independence and ethical decision-making.

47. These are valuable and sought-after skills, which are transferrable to other disciplines where undergraduate law students do not wish to or intend to enter the legal profession in the traditional sense.

48. An undergraduate university education in law is not intended to prepare graduates for *unsupervised* professional practice. That is too large of an undertaking in a mere three-year degree and there are subsequent stages of the legal professional formation continuum to support the development of the "skills employers are looking for" and the capabilities employers themselves need to play a critical and ongoing role in developing.

49. However, university legal education must play a part in developing graduates to be practice ready. As discussed further at paragraphs [18]–[29] above, accredited law courses should be designed to equip lawyers with the choice and ability to practise law if they wish. The Law Council has identified growing concerns within the legal profession about the ability of law courses (combined with subsequent PLT) to sufficiently develop the level skill, knowledge and understanding that should be expected of those entering the profession.

Economic, social and psychological effects on graduates

50. It should be noted that there is no direct causal relationship between holding a university degree and obtaining a specific job, whether in law or any other discipline. A university education confers capability, opportunity and preparation, not guaranteed employment.

51. However, law students commonly experience higher levels of stress and anxiety from their academic demands and uncertainty of securing graduate employment.[18] The Law Council is aware of concerns from law students and graduates about anxiety over finding employment as a lawyer. Many are acutely aware of the competition for entry level roles, as well as the uncertainty surrounding the impact of AI on the future of graduate positions.

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[18] See, eg, Natalie Skead and Shane Rogers, 'Do law students stand apart from other university students in their quest for mental health: A comparative study on wellbeing and associated behaviours in law and psychology students' (2015) 42-43 *International Journal of Law and Psychiatry* 81.

52. The period between graduation and entry into legal work can involve significant uncertainty, repeated rejection, financial strain and loss of confidence. These pressures may be compounded by the costs associated with legal study and PLT, particularly where graduates do not move quickly into paid legal work. Graduates who sit between university support systems and workplace support structures may be especially vulnerable to isolation and poor wellbeing outcomes during this transition period.

53. Additionally, the economic, social and psychological effects on law graduates who struggle to find work after graduating are not experienced evenly. Graduates without established professional networks, those with caring responsibilities, those who have changed careers later in life, and those from less advantaged backgrounds may face additional barriers in securing experience and entry-level opportunities.

54. In the context of the comments at paragraphs [5]–[8] above about the entry-level job market for law graduates, the Law Council is also concerned about the cost of law degrees and the level of debt that may be built up by students. For domestic students, tuition for a single undergraduate law degree typically ranges from nearly $70,000 to $114,000 (in addition to PLT cost, which ranges from $9000 to $13,000). In addition to tuition fees, the costs of resources (e.g. laptops, textbooks), travel and accommodation can be significant.

55. In the context of this significant financial cost, and potential social and psychological impacts of being unable to find desired work, it is the Law Council's view that students should be assisted to better understand the quality of their course and the likelihood of finding a job in the law. Transparency is critical to consumer protection and expectation setting.

56. To provide this transparency, law schools could be required to report publicly on key metrics such as entry requirements, cohort size, staff student ratios, retention rates, mode of teaching, graduate outcomes, and fees as a condition of accreditation. This transparency is standard in the United States.[19]

Conclusion

57. The issues raised by the inquiry are significant and warrant careful attention, but they should not be reduced to a single question of curriculum design or graduate employability. Graduate outcomes in law are shaped by the interaction between university education, professional regulation, labour market demand, workplace capacity and the evolving nature of legal practice. In the Law Council's view, a constructive policy response should preserve the intellectual, civic and professional value of university legal education while strengthening the practical pathways, support structures and institutional settings that enable graduates to enter professional life with confidence and capability.

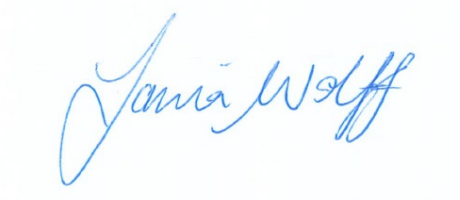
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[19] American Bar Association, *Standards and Rules of Procedure for Approval of Law Schools 2025-2026* (2025) 42 (Standard 509).

Contact

58. Thank you again for the opportunity to make this submission. For further comment or clarification on any of the matters raised in this submission please contact John Farrell, Executive Policy Lawyer [redacted]

Yours sincerely



Tania Wolff
President