TRUTH, TRANSLATED

Plain language for a complicated world. Clear takes on education, geopolitics, political accountability and Big Tech.

EDITION 3 · SEPTEMBER 2026



IN THIS EDITION

The student who never studied

AI agents can now attend classes and earn credentials

The first rung is disappearing

Graduate jobs shrink as AI and costs reshape hiring

What NAPLAN 2026 really says

About Australian children and their schools

Five per cent of everything?

What NATO's Ankara summit means for Australia

Canberra's winter of Big Tech laws

The news levy and the under-16 social media ban

Dr Sukh Rashpal Sandhu | Subscribe free on LinkedIn

EDITION 3 | SEPTEMBER 2026

Contents

Truth, Translated: September 2026 3

The Student Who Never Studied AI agents can now attend classes, complete assessments and earn credentials. 4

The First Rung Is Disappearing: Graduate Jobs Shrink Across Major Economies as AI and Costs Reshape Hiring 13

Truth, Translated: What NAPLAN 2026 Really Says About Australian Children 23

Truth, Translated: Five Per Cent of Everything? What NATO's Ankara Summit Means for Australia 31

Truth, Translated: Canberra's Winter of Big Tech Laws, and the Test That Comes Next .. 39

Follow us on LinkedIn 48

About Truth, Translated 50

INTRODUCTION

Truth, Translated: September 2026

By Dr Sukh Rashpal Sandhu

Edition 3 of Truth, Translated: 5 pieces for September 2026.

Plain language for a complicated world. Clear takes on education, geopolitics, political accountability and Big Tech.

This edition brings together 2 pieces first published in Truth, Translated on LinkedIn, each carrying the date it first appeared and 3 new features written for this edition. Republished pieces appear as they were first published, with their original images; facts, figures and links are as they stood on that date. New features are marked "Written for this edition".

In this edition

- The Student Who Never Studied AI agents can now attend classes, complete assessments and earn credentials.
- The First Rung Is Disappearing: Graduate Jobs Shrink Across Major Economies as AI and Costs Reshape Hiring
- Truth, Translated: What NAPLAN 2026 Really Says About Australian Children
- Truth, Translated: Five Per Cent of Everything? What NATO's Ankara Summit Means for Australia
- Truth, Translated: Canberra's Winter of Big Tech Laws, and the Test That Comes Next

Thank you to every reader who subscribes, shares and responds.

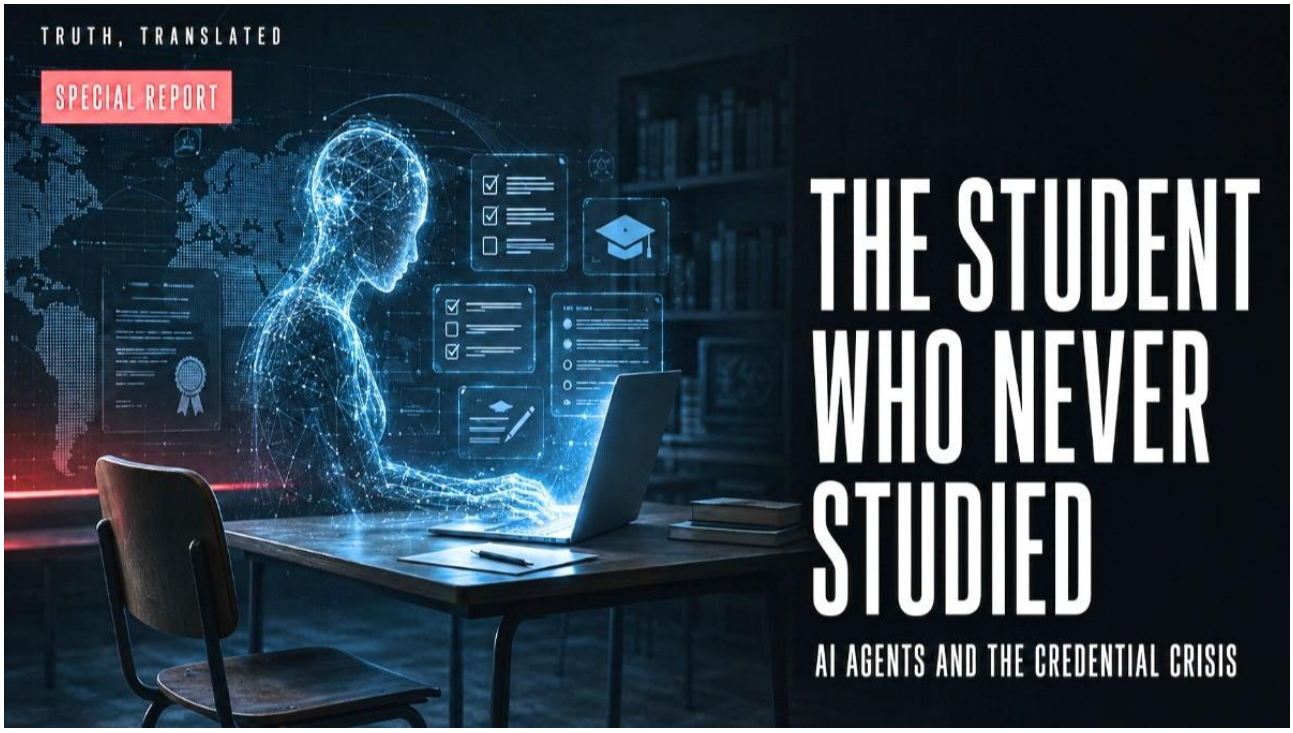
Warm regards,
Dr Sukh Rashpal Sandhu
Author, Truth, Translated

TRUTH, TRANSLATED

The Student Who Never Studied AI agents can now attend classes, complete assessments and earn credentials.

By Dr Sukh Rashpal Sandhu | First published 13 August 2026

AI agents can now attend classes, complete assessments and earn credentials. If the learner is no longer doing the learning, what exactly is education certifying?



By Sukh Sandhu

The global education sector has spent several years asking whether artificial intelligence can write a student's assignment. That question is already becoming outdated.

The more important question is whether an AI agent can become the student.

Autonomous AI agents can navigate learning platforms, process recorded lectures, complete quizzes, generate assessment responses, upload documents, participate in discussion forums and maintain activity over extended periods. Instead of helping a learner complete one task, an agent can potentially perform much of the learner's digital role.

This is not simply plagiarism. It is the automation of educational participation.

When an AI agent completes the learning activities, produces the assessment evidence and submits the work, the institution may be certifying a person who never acquired the knowledge, exercised the judgement or demonstrated the competence represented by the credential.

The latest global figures should alarm education leaders

The most comprehensive international evidence currently available comes from the Digital Education Council's *AI in Higher Education Global Survey 2026*. The study collected **45,398 responses**, comprising **27,284 students and 18,114 faculty members across 35 countries** in Asia-Pacific, Europe, the Middle East, Africa, Latin America, the United States and Canada.

The findings reveal a global education system caught between rapid AI adoption and insufficient institutional control.

The survey found that **66 per cent of students globally are concerned that AI could make learning too shallow and discourage critical thinking and creativity**. In the United States and Canada, this concern rises to **81 per cent**.

Faculty members are similarly worried. **Seventy-three per cent of faculty believe students are using AI at the expense of developing their own skills**. In the United States and Canada, the figure reaches **80 per cent**.

These concerns are supported by early evidence of dependency. Among students already using AI in their learning:

- **21 per cent find it harder to work through problems without AI.**
- **20 per cent believe they depend on AI to produce better work.**
- **19 per cent report retaining less information because they rely on AI.**

These figures represent approximately one in every five AI-using students reporting a possible weakening of independence, performance or knowledge retention.

There are benefits. **Sixty-one per cent of students say AI allows them to spend less time on repetitive tasks and focus more on thinking through ideas**, while **31 per cent say they attempt more challenging work than they would have attempted previously**. The issue is therefore not whether AI is universally harmful. The critical distinction is whether AI supports human thinking or replaces it.

The global survey also identified a serious trust problem. **Sixty per cent of students are concerned that classmates may misuse AI to gain an unfair advantage**. This rises to **73 per cent in the United States and Canada**. When most students are worried that peers may be gaining an undisclosed advantage, academic integrity becomes more than an administrative issue. It begins to affect students' confidence in the fairness of the entire educational environment.

AI is spreading faster than educational capability

The Digital Education Council's earlier global survey of more than **3,800 students across 16 countries** found that **86 per cent regularly used AI in their studies**, with **54 per cent using it at least weekly**. ChatGPT was used by **66 per cent of respondents**.

Yet widespread use did not mean widespread competence. **Fifty-eight per cent believed they lacked sufficient AI knowledge and skills**, while **48 per cent did not feel adequately prepared for an AI-enabled workplace**.

Only **5 per cent of students said they were fully aware of their institution's AI guidelines and believed those guidelines were comprehensive**.

This produces a dangerous imbalance. Students have access to powerful tools, but many do not understand their limitations, ethical boundaries or institutional rules. Institutions are therefore not governing AI adoption so much as attempting to catch up with behaviour that has already become normal.

The 2026 global survey shows that this gap has not been resolved. Only **29 per cent of students globally believe their instructors are well equipped to guide them in using AI**. In the United States and Canada, confidence falls to only **17 per cent**.

Interestingly, **64 per cent of faculty report participating in AI-literacy training**. The difference between faculty participation and student confidence suggests that training attendance alone is not enough. Professional development must change teaching, assessment and communication practices in ways students can actually see.

AI has entered education, but learning value remains uncertain

The 2026 global survey found that only **15 per cent of students experience AI integration across many of their courses**. Another **42 per cent experience it in only a few courses**, while **43 per cent report no AI integration in their courses**.

Among students who had experienced AI integration, only **5 per cent described it as transformational for their learning**. Another **28 per cent said it enhanced their understanding and learning outcomes**.

However, **42 per cent found it only somewhat helpful**, while **24 per cent said it appeared new or novel but delivered limited learning benefit**.

In the United States and Canada, **42 per cent of students exposed to AI integration reported no clear learning value**.

These figures challenge the assumption that adding AI to a course automatically constitutes educational innovation. Technology integration is not the same as learning improvement. An institution can introduce AI tools, announce a digital transformation strategy and still fail to produce better understanding, stronger judgement or greater student independence.

UNESCO's global evidence provides a broader warning. Its *Global Education Monitoring Report* found that education technology products change, on average, approximately every **36 months**, making independent evaluation difficult. Only **7 per cent of education technology companies examined in the United Kingdom had conducted randomised controlled trials**, while only **12 per cent had obtained third-party certification**.

A survey covering teachers and administrators in 17 American states found that only **11 per cent requested peer-reviewed evidence before adopting education technology**.

The pattern is clear. Education systems frequently purchase technology before establishing whether it improves learning. Agentic AI raises the stakes because the technology is no longer merely presenting content. It can act, decide, submit and communicate within the educational environment.

Student AI use is approaching universality

National studies should not be presented as global estimates, but they reveal how quickly AI behaviour can become mainstream.

The United Kingdom's *Student Generative AI Survey 2026*, based on **1,054 full-time undergraduate students**, found that **95 per cent used AI in at least one way** and **94 per cent used generative AI to assist with assessed work**.

The proportion of students directly inserting AI-generated text into assessed work increased from **3 per cent in 2024 to 8 per cent in 2025 and 12 per cent in 2026**.

That represents a fourfold increase in two years.

Almost half of the surveyed students, **49 per cent**, believed AI had improved their overall student experience. However, **65 per cent said assessment had changed significantly in response to AI**, demonstrating the pressure institutions are already experiencing.

Only **48 per cent believed teaching staff were helping them develop the AI skills required for their future careers**, despite **68 per cent believing AI skills were essential for success in the modern world**.

Among British school students aged 13 to 18, a 2025 Oxford University Press study involving **2,000 students** found that **98 per cent had used AI for schoolwork**, while **80 per cent used it regularly**.

More importantly, **62 per cent believed AI was negatively affecting their skills and development**. One-quarter said AI made it too easy to obtain answers without completing the work themselves. Approximately **60 per cent were concerned that AI encouraged copying rather than original work**, while nearly half worried that classmates were secretly using AI without teachers detecting it.

These figures demonstrate that concerns about intellectual dependency are not limited to educators. Students themselves recognise that convenience can become cognitive substitution.

Faculty members are seeing the effects directly

A 2026 survey conducted by Elon University's Imagining the Digital Future Center and the American Association of Colleges and Universities gathered responses from **1,057 American college and university faculty members**.

The survey was non-probability research and should not be treated as a statistically representative estimate of every American academic. Nevertheless, its findings provide a significant view of frontline faculty experience.

Among respondents:

- **95 per cent believed generative AI could make students overly dependent on technology.**
- **90 per cent believed it could weaken students' critical-thinking abilities.**
- **83 per cent believed it could reduce students' attention spans.**
- **78 per cent reported that cheating had increased since generative AI became widely available.**
- **73 per cent had personally dealt with an AI-related academic-integrity matter.**
- **48 per cent believed the quality of student research had deteriorated, compared with 20 per cent who believed it had improved.**
- **74 per cent believed AI would negatively affect the integrity and value of academic degrees.**
- Only **8 per cent believed AI would increase the value of degrees**.

The survey also found that **63 per cent believed recent graduates were not adequately prepared to use AI in the workplace**.

This creates a profound contradiction. Institutions risk allowing students to use AI in ways that weaken independent learning while simultaneously failing to prepare those students to use AI competently and ethically in employment.

The assessment and workforce gap is widening

The 2026 Digital Education Council survey found that only **28 per cent of students globally believe most or many of their assessments reflect the work, skills and judgement they will need in an AI-enabled workplace**.

The remaining **72 per cent do not see consistent alignment** between assessment and future work. This includes **35 per cent who believe only some assessments are relevant** and **37 per cent who believe none or very few reflect future workplace requirements**.

At the program level, only **30 per cent of students believe their program remains current and relevant to an AI-shaped future**. In the United States and Canada, confidence falls to **19 per cent**.

By contrast, **37 per cent of students globally express serious doubts about the future relevance of their program**.

The employer perspective is even more severe. According to the Digital Education Council's 2025 workplace research, **80 per cent of surveyed employers believed higher education was not keeping pace with industry change**.

Meanwhile, **41 per cent of students globally are concerned that AI will reduce employment opportunities in their field before they graduate**. In the Asia-Pacific region, that concern reaches **50 per cent**.

Education systems are therefore facing pressure from both directions. Students need stronger AI capability to remain employable, but excessive dependence on AI may prevent them from developing the reasoning, communication, creativity and domain expertise employers still require.

Autonomous capability is improving rapidly

The risk from AI agents can be understood through computer-use benchmarks.

OpenAI reported in 2025 that its computer-using agent achieved:

1. **38.1 per cent on OSWorld**, which tests general computer-use tasks.
2. **58.1 per cent on WebArena**, which tests browser tasks in realistic simulated environments.
3. **87 per cent on WebVoyager**, which tests interaction with live websites.

For comparison, human performance on WebArena was reported at **78.2 per cent**. The AI agent's 58.1 per cent result was therefore already equivalent to approximately three-quarters of the measured human success rate on that benchmark.

Anthropic subsequently reported an **OSWorld score of 61.4 per cent**, compared with **42.2 per cent only four months earlier**. This was an improvement of **19.2 percentage points**, or approximately **45.5 per cent relative growth**, over a very short period.

Independent researchers created the REAL benchmark to test agents across **112 practical tasks and 11 simulated websites**. Frontier models achieved a maximum success rate of **41 per cent** in the 2025 evaluation.

These systems remain imperfect, but their failures should not reassure the education sector. Academic misconduct does not require perfect automation. An agent can retry an activity, use multiple models or return control to the student for one difficult step. The relevant question is not whether an agent can autonomously complete every course. It is how much student participation it can replace before the institution notices.

Remote monitoring is not a complete solution

Mexico's National Autonomous University provides one of the clearest recent examples of the limits of technical monitoring.

In 2026, approximately **158,712 candidates** completed the university's first fully remote undergraduate entrance examination. The system used webcams, facial and voice recognition, browser restrictions, artificial intelligence and human monitoring.

The assessment was highly competitive, with more than **150,000 applicants competing for 21,962 places**. This meant that only about **14 per cent** of applicants could receive an offer.

After the examination, the proportion of candidates reportedly scoring at least 100 points increased from a historical average of **3.5 per cent to 16.3 per cent**. This was nearly a fivefold increase.

The university initially annulled **3,174 examinations**, equivalent to approximately **2 per cent of all attempts**, following evidence of impersonation, external assistance and possible AI use. Ultimately, approximately **58,000 candidates** were required to complete another assessment in person.

This meant that more than one-third of the original test-taking population was affected by the reassessment decision.

The examination had been moved online partly to improve access for students living far from Mexico City. Its failure demonstrates the difficult balance between accessibility and assurance. Facial recognition, voice recognition, locked browsers and AI proctoring did not provide sufficient confidence in the validity of the results.

Global connectivity multiplies the exposure

The International Telecommunication Union estimated that **82 per cent of people aged 15 to 24 were online in 2025**, compared with **72 per cent of the remainder of the global population**.

Youth internet use had reached at least **95 per cent in Europe, the Americas and the Commonwealth of Independent States**.

At the same time, inequality remains substantial. UNESCO found that during the pandemic, distance learning had the potential to reach more than **one billion students**, but failed to reach at least **500 million students**, equivalent to **31 per cent of learners worldwide**. Among the poorest students, the exclusion rate reached **72 per cent**.

Globally, only **40 per cent of primary schools, 50 per cent of lower-secondary schools and 65 per cent of upper-secondary schools** were connected to the internet in UNESCO's analysis.

These figures expose a double inequality. Connected and affluent students may gain access to increasingly capable AI agents, while disadvantaged learners continue to struggle for basic connectivity. Within connected populations, students who can afford premium AI systems may acquire capabilities unavailable to classmates using free or limited products.

The integrity challenge is therefore also an equity challenge.

The real measure of educational risk

The education sector should not measure the AI-agent threat solely by counting misconduct findings. Detected cases represent only incidents institutions were able to identify and classify. Agentic activity designed to resemble normal student behaviour may never trigger a conventional investigation.

A more meaningful institutional analysis should examine:

- The percentage of assessments that can be completed through a browser without live human interaction.
- The percentage of credentials that can be earned without an identity-verified assessment event.
- The percentage of high-consequence learning outcomes assessed only through written submissions.
- The ratio of students to educators in online programs.
- The percentage of assessments for which learners must explain, defend or demonstrate their work.
- The percentage of educators trained in assessment redesign, rather than merely general AI awareness.

- The number of qualifications in which fabricated competence could create risks for patients, clients, children, workers or the public.

These figures would reveal the institution's actual exposure more accurately than the number of essays flagged by detection software.

What exactly are we certifying?

The evidence does not support a simplistic conclusion that all AI use is harmful. Most students use AI for a mixture of legitimate, questionable and potentially valuable activities. AI can improve accessibility, provide rapid feedback, support multilingual learners, explain complex ideas and reduce unnecessary administrative effort.

The danger begins when support becomes substitution.

An AI tool that helps a student understand a concept can strengthen education. An AI agent that completes the course can make education unnecessary while preserving the appearance that education occurred.

That distinction must become the organising principle of global assessment reform.

A credential should certify more than the successful operation of an online account. It should represent knowledge retained by a human being, judgement exercised by a human being and capability that a human being can reproduce when the AI system is unavailable, incorrect or inappropriate.

The global education sector is approaching a defining moment. It can continue measuring clicks, submissions, completion rates and polished outputs. Alternatively, it can rebuild assessment around verified identity, authentic participation, live explanation, practical demonstration and defensible human capability.

The question is no longer whether AI can pass the course.

The question is whether the student can.

And if the student never truly studied, what exactly has the institution certified?

References

Digital Education Council. (2026). *AI in Higher Education Global Survey 2026*.

Digital Education Council. (2024). *Global AI Student Survey 2024*.

Stephenson, R. and Armstrong, C. (2026). *Student Generative Artificial Intelligence Survey 2026*. Higher Education Policy Institute.

Oxford University Press. (2025). *Teaching the AI-Native Generation*.

Rainie, L., Anderson, J. and Watson, E. (2026). *The AI Challenge*. Elon University and American Association of Colleges and Universities.

International Telecommunication Union. (2025). *Facts and Figures 2025*.

UNESCO. (2023). *Global Education Monitoring Report 2023: Technology in Education, A Tool on Whose Terms?*

Garg, D. et al. (2025). *REAL: Benchmarking Autonomous Agents on Deterministic Simulations of Real Websites*.

OpenAI. (2025). *Computer-Using Agent*.

Anthropic. (2025). *Introducing Claude Sonnet 4.5*.

Weber-Wulff, D. et al. (2023). "Testing of Detection Tools for AI-Generated Text." *International Journal for Educational Integrity*, 19.

Liang, W. et al. (2023). "GPT Detectors Are Biased Against Non-Native English Writers." *Patterns*, 4(7).

National Autonomous University of Mexico. (2026). Institutional updates concerning the online undergraduate admission examination.

TRUTH, TRANSLATED

The First Rung Is Disappearing: Graduate Jobs Shrink Across Major Economies as AI and Costs Reshape Hiring

By Dr Sukh Rashpal Sandhu | First published 25 August 2026

Britain’s graduate labour market has entered its most difficult period in at least a decade. One major jobs platform reported fewer than 8,400 graduate vacancies in July, almost half the number advertised a year earlier.



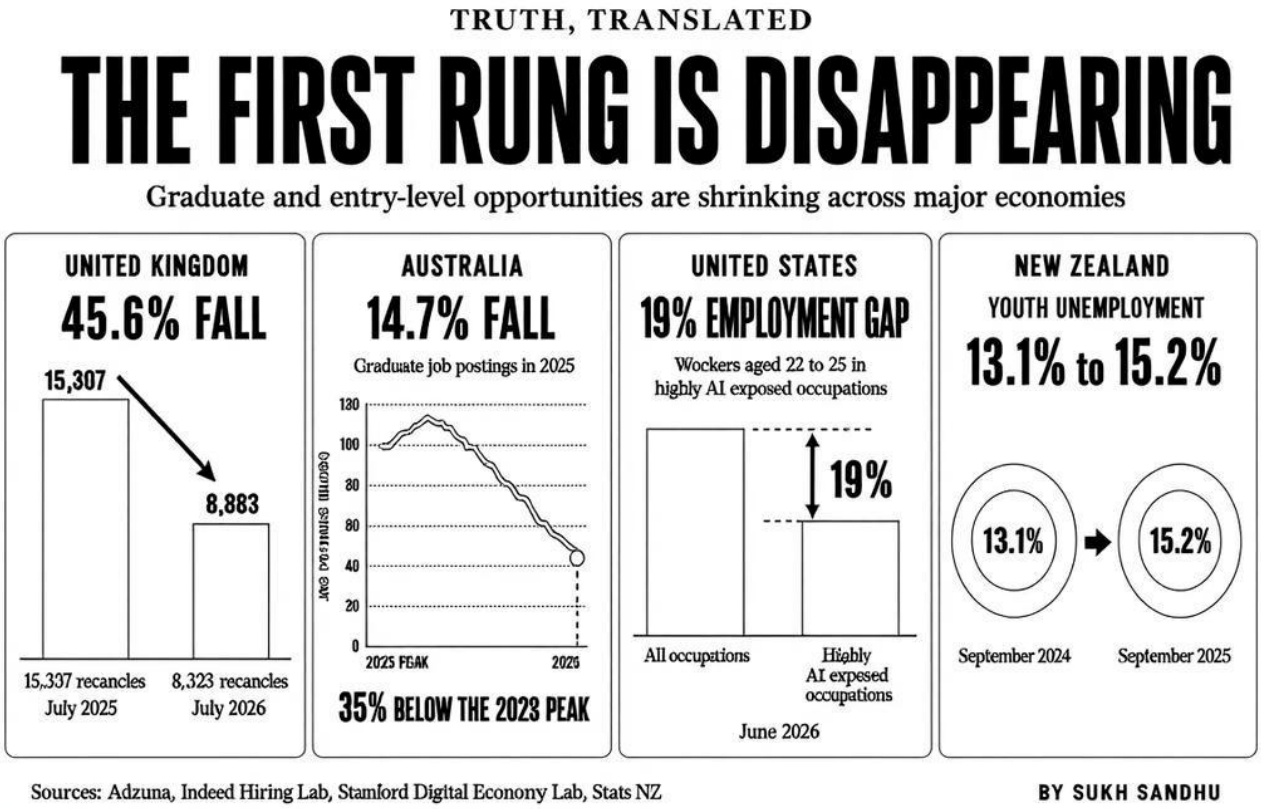


The headline is alarming, but the evidence requires care. It does not prove that artificial intelligence has eliminated half of all graduate jobs. It does show that the traditional first rung of the professional career ladder is becoming narrower, more competitive and more technologically demanding at the same time as employers face weak growth and higher labour costs.

Adzuna recorded 8,383 advertised graduate vacancies in July 2026, down from 15,397 in July 2025. That is a fall of 7,014 positions, or 45.6 per cent, and the lowest monthly total in the company's series, which began in 2016. In 2017, the platform carried more than 55,800 graduate vacancies at its peak, about 6.7 times the July 2026 figure.

Competition is also intensifying across the wider jobs market. Adzuna reported 2.14 jobseekers for every advertised vacancy in July, compared with 1.93 a year earlier. Its total vacancy count fell to 791,490. Entry-level advertisements, a broader category than jobs explicitly labelled "graduate", were reportedly 8.1 per cent lower than a year earlier.

These are platform data, not a census of every job in the United Kingdom. A vacancy may be advertised on another site, through a university, on an employer's own careers page or without the word "graduate". Duplicate advertisements, changes in Adzuna's coverage and employers' choice of job title can also affect the count. The figures therefore measure what Adzuna observed, not the entire graduate market.



Nevertheless, the direction is corroborated by independent evidence. High Fliers Research, which surveys 100 of the UK's leading graduate employers, found that their graduate recruitment fell 6.4 per cent in 2023, 14.6 per cent in 2024 and 5.1 per cent in 2025. Recruitment among these employers was 24.5 per cent below its 2022 level. This was a steeper three-year reduction than the 23.3 per cent fall recorded during the 2008 to 2009 financial crisis. Employers expected a further 0.5 per cent reduction in 2026.

The Institute of Student Employers reported that graduate opportunities among its participating employers fell 8 per cent in 2025. At the same time, the average employer received 140 applications for each graduate vacancy, 14 per cent more than a year earlier and the highest competition recorded since the institute began collecting the data in 1991. Two decades ago, the average was 38 applications per vacancy. In retail, fast-moving consumer goods and tourism, the 2025 figure reached 290 applications per graduate hire; in health and pharmaceuticals, it was 220.

A weak labour market is doing much of the damage

The graduate squeeze is part of a broader slowdown. The Office for National Statistics estimated 707,000 vacancies across the UK in May to July 2026, down 6,000 over the quarter. Excluding the pandemic, vacancies had not been that low since September to November 2014. UK payroll records showed 94,000 fewer employees in July than a year earlier, while the national unemployment rate was 4.9 per cent in April to June.

Young people are carrying a disproportionate share of the pressure. Official estimates show that 1.012 million people aged 16 to 24 were not in education, employment or training in January to March 2026. This was 89,000 more than a year earlier. They

represented 13.5 per cent of the age group. Of the total, 400,000 were unemployed and actively seeking work, while 613,000 were economically inactive.

These numbers are not interchangeable. The youth unemployment rate measures unemployed young people as a proportion of young people participating in the labour force; the NEET rate measures all young people outside employment, education and training. Nor are all NEET young people graduates. Together, however, the indicators show an economy struggling to connect a large cohort of young adults with work and skills.

The ONS has cautioned that its Labour Force Survey estimates remain volatile and that short-term changes in smaller groups should be interpreted alongside longer-run trends. That limitation does not erase the problem: the rise of 89,000 NEET young people over a year and the multi-year deterioration reported by several recruitment surveys point in the same direction.

AI is changing the work, but has not been proven to be the sole cause

AI is an obvious suspect because many traditional graduate tasks can now be completed or accelerated by generative systems. These include basic research, first drafts, document review, routine coding, data cleaning, scheduling and administrative analysis. When an experienced employee equipped with AI can perform more routine work, a business may decide not to add a junior position.

But no published evidence cited here establishes that AI caused the 45.6 per cent fall in Adzuna's graduate listings. The decline coincides with weak hiring, economic uncertainty and higher employment costs. Claims that employers have simply replaced graduates with machines go beyond what the data can support.

The Institute of Student Employers' 2026 survey of 144 employers offers a more measured picture. Eighty-seven per cent expected AI to reshape graduate and apprentice roles: 58 per cent anticipated minor task changes and 29 per cent significant changes. Forty-three per cent said entry-level work had already evolved because of AI, although it had not necessarily been formally redesigned.

Yet 40 per cent expected AI to replace none of their entry-level roles during the next three years, and another 42 per cent expected it to affect only 1 to 10 per cent. Eighteen per cent anticipated replacement above 10 per cent. The immediate story is therefore more about job redesign, higher skill expectations and reduced demand for routine work than wholesale substitution.

Employers identified critical thinking, AI literacy, communication and adaptability as increasingly important, while routine administration, basic data handling and basic writing were expected to decline in value. This creates a paradox for new graduates: employers want judgement and workplace maturity, but the junior tasks through which people historically developed those capabilities are being automated or compressed.

AI is transforming recruitment from the applicant side as well. The ISE found that candidates can produce more CVs, cover letters and scripted interview answers with less effort, contributing to record application volumes. Two-thirds of employers in its 2026 development survey believed candidates were using AI to misrepresent their skills.

Employers are responding with automated screening, shorter application windows, live interviews and additional assessments. These measures may control volume, but they also risk excluding capable candidates who lack coaching, technology or the ability to apply immediately.

The rising price of a junior employee

The cost of employment has increased at the same time. From April 2025, the main UK employer National Insurance rate rose to 15 per cent and the annual earnings threshold at which employers begin paying it fell to £5,000. The National Living Wage for workers aged 21 and over rose to £12.21 an hour in April 2025, alongside increases for younger workers.

These policies raise workers' incomes and fund public services, but they also alter the calculation at the hiring margin. Junior workers require recruitment, supervision and training before reaching full productivity. When payroll costs rise and demand is uncertain, employers may freeze the next graduate intake, leave a vacancy unfilled, use contractors or invest in software. The ONS reported that small businesses themselves cited labour and operating costs as reasons for not recruiting.

That does not mean minimum wages or employer contributions alone caused the downturn. Large graduate employers cut recruitment before the April 2025 changes, and the contraction spans several years. The evidence supports a cumulative explanation: weak economic confidence, higher costs, technological change and exceptionally high application volumes are interacting.

Not every sector is moving in the same direction

Aggregate figures conceal important differences. Adzuna reported recent growth in advertised opportunities in travel, teaching, construction and manufacturing, while healthcare and nursing, hospitality and catering, and logistics and warehousing recorded fewer vacancies. High Fliers found recruitment fell in 10 of 15 major sectors in 2025.

Graduates should therefore be cautious about treating "the graduate market" as one market. Occupational demand, location, professional registration, security clearance and technical skills can matter more than degree status. A role may also be suitable for a graduate without being advertised as a formal graduate scheme.

This distinction explains why some analysts dispute the most dramatic interpretation of the Adzuna figure. Employers may be removing the "graduate" label, recruiting continuously rather than through annual schemes, or hiring for skills rather than degree status. Such changes would reduce classified graduate advertisements even if graduates ultimately filled some of the jobs. But relabelling cannot fully explain the pressure when employer surveys, official vacancy data and applicant competition all show deterioration.

Government intervention is shifting from promises to procurement

The UK Government has announced a £2.5 billion youth employment package, including 300,000 new work-experience and training placements over three years. Its Sector-based Work Academy Programmes combine short training, workplace experience and a

guaranteed interview; government analysis says about four in 10 participants move into sustained employment within six months.

From January 2027, new central-government procurement rules will also give greater weight to local jobs, skills, apprenticeships and work placements. For contracts worth £5 million or more, the weighting for local community benefits will rise from 10 to 20 per cent. The Government says the directly affected contracting market is worth about £90 billion annually, within public procurement from private suppliers that reached £394.8 billion in 2024 to 2025.

These policies may create routes into work, but placement numbers are not the same as permanent jobs. Their success should be judged through publicly reported measures, including completion, progression into sustained paid employment, earnings, job quality and outcomes for disadvantaged groups. The number of opportunities announced is not enough.

Australia has recorded three consecutive years of decline

Australia has not experienced a collapse on the scale recorded by Adzuna in Britain, but its graduate market has clearly weakened. Indeed Hiring Lab found that Australian graduate job advertisements fell 14.7 per cent in 2025. It was the third consecutive annual decline, leaving advertised graduate opportunities 35 per cent below their 2023 peak.

The national result hides an even sharper deterioration in Victoria. Graduate advertisements in that state were 23 per cent below their 2019 baseline in 2025. By contrast, postings remained 37 per cent above the 2019 level in New South Wales, 70 per cent higher in Queensland and 84 per cent higher in South Australia. The figures show that the Australian graduate market is fragmenting by geography and industry, rather than contracting uniformly.

Australia’s downturn also appears concentrated in work most exposed to AI. About 36 per cent of graduate postings in 2025 were in highly AI-exposed occupations, down from about 40 per cent in both 2023 and 2024. The volume of graduate advertisements in highly exposed occupations was almost 30 per cent below its 2019 level and had halved since its 2022 peak.

That relationship does not prove that AI caused the fall. Indeed noted that the decline began in 2023, before most employers had deployed generative AI widely enough to replace substantial volumes of work. Apprenticeship opportunities, which generally have lower AI exposure, were also 46 per cent below their 2023 peak. This supports a broader explanation involving slower growth, the end of post-pandemic over-hiring and weaker employer confidence.

There were signs of stabilisation in early 2026. Australian graduate postings increased 6.4 per cent in the March quarter compared with a year earlier and remained about 1.5 times their 2019 level. Jobs and Skills Australia later counted 212,200 online job advertisements across the whole labour market in July 2026, up 2.7 per cent in the month and about 25 per cent above the 2019 monthly average. The ABS recorded a 4.5 per cent national unemployment rate in July, with employment 1.3 per cent higher than a year earlier despite a seasonally adjusted monthly fall of 15,800 people.

Australian graduates also continued to achieve relatively strong outcomes. The 2025 Graduate Outcomes Survey reported full-time employment four to six months after completion for 75.4 per cent of domestic undergraduates, 85.3 per cent of postgraduate coursework graduates and 84.0 per cent of postgraduate research graduates. The undergraduate median full-time salary was $77,000. However, the survey warned that a methodology change means 2025 employment rates are not directly comparable with earlier years and should not be interpreted as proof of improving conditions.

The headline outcomes also conceal inequity. Only 59.8 per cent of domestic undergraduates from non-English-speaking backgrounds were in full-time employment four to six months after completion, compared with 75.8 per cent of graduates from English-speaking backgrounds.

International graduates face an additional barrier. Jobs and Skills Australia found persistent mismatch between qualifications and employment, with many former international students working below the skill level associated with their studies. This means strong headline employment rates can coexist with substantial graduate underemployment.

United States data provides the clearest warning about AI-exposed entry jobs

The strongest evidence of an emerging AI-related age divide comes from the United States. Stanford University's Digital Economy Lab analysed administrative payroll records covering millions of workers through June 2026. It found no widespread, economy-wide displacement, but employment among workers aged 22 to 25 in highly AI-exposed occupations was 19 per cent below where it would have been if it had kept pace with employment among young people in less exposed work.

The gap had widened since the researchers first reported it in 2025. Crucially, the change was driven mainly by reduced hiring of young workers, not by employers dismissing large numbers of existing staff. Experienced workers in the same occupational categories did not show a comparable employment gap. Employment fell most clearly where AI substituted for human tasks, while it was stable or growing in occupations where AI complemented workers.

The Stanford researchers described their findings as early warning indicators, not proof of causation. The patterns were smaller after controlling for education, and some divergence predated generative AI. Even with those qualifications, the study supports the central concern facing graduates: employers may be reducing the number of new people they hire into AI-exposed occupations before cutting experienced workers.

US graduate outcomes have weakened on other measures. The Federal Reserve Bank of New York reported that the underemployment rate for recent college graduates reached 42 per cent in the second quarter of 2026, while unemployment remained elevated at about 5.6 per cent. Underemployment means graduates are working in jobs that typically do not require a university degree. It is not the same as unemployment, but it signals that many degree holders are unable to convert their education into graduate-level work.

Separate research by the Federal Reserve Bank of New York has complicated the AI explanation. It found that remote-compatible work accounted for much of the post-pandemic rise in unemployment among young graduates. Employers appear more reluctant to recruit inexperienced staff into remote positions because training, supervision and informal learning are harder to deliver at a distance. This suggests that AI, remote work and weaker organisational investment in junior development may be reinforcing one another.

New Zealand's youth labour market is losing entry points

New Zealand provides further evidence that entry pathways are narrowing. The unemployment rate for people aged 15 to 24 reached 15.2 per cent in the September 2025 quarter, up from 13.1 per cent a year earlier, according to figures attributed to Stats NZ. The proportion of young people not in employment, education or training rose to 13.8 per cent, an annual increase of 1.4 percentage points.

New Zealand employers surveyed in international research also reported slowing or stopping entry-level recruitment as AI changed workforce planning. Junior office and administrative jobs are particularly vulnerable because they contain the routine research, processing and drafting tasks that current AI systems perform most readily.

These indicators cover young people more broadly and should not be presented as a count of disappearing graduate jobs. They nevertheless support the same structural concern seen in Britain and the United States. When junior vacancies contract, graduates compete not only with one another but also with experienced workers, career changers and automated systems for the same work.

Canada shows a younger-worker slowdown, but not an AI jobs collapse

Canadian evidence supports part of the trend while challenging its most dramatic interpretation. Statistics Canada found that employment among workers aged 15 to 29 grew by roughly 5 per cent between November 2022 and December 2025, compared with about 10 per cent growth among workers aged 30 to 49. Employment growth for younger workers was described as generally stagnant relative to the stronger performance of older employees.

The divide was especially visible in coding-intensive occupations. Employment among software engineers, developers, web designers and related professionals younger than 30 stagnated, while gains were concentrated among workers aged 30 to 49.

However, Canada did not record a broad collapse in AI-exposed employment. Employment generally grew across occupations with high and low AI exposure, and workers with a bachelor's degree or higher recorded gains of 10 to 20 per cent across the occupational groups examined. Only about 6 per cent of AI-adopting Canadian businesses reported reducing employment because of AI.

Canada therefore strengthens the argument that early-career hiring is weakening in particular occupations, but it does not support a claim of economy-wide graduate replacement. Statistics Canada concluded that post-pandemic adjustment, demographic change, trade tensions and technology were difficult to separate.

Europe demonstrates why the global claim needs limits

The trend is not universal. Eurostat reported that 83.0 per cent of recent graduates aged 20 to 34 were employed across the European Union in 2025, up from 82.3 per cent in 2024. Among those with tertiary education, the rate was 87.0 per cent. Malta, Germany and the Netherlands each recorded recent-graduate employment above 90 per cent.

Large national differences remain. Greece recorded only 62.4 per cent, Italy 71.8 per cent and Romania 72.7 per cent. These rates cover people who completed upper-secondary or tertiary education one to three years earlier, so they are broader than graduate-scheme vacancies. Even so, the improving EU average is important contrary evidence. It shows that shrinking graduate opportunities in Britain, Australia and selected North American occupations should not be described as a uniform worldwide collapse.

Australia therefore has time to respond before automation and cost pressures hollow out entry pathways. Universities, TAFEs and registered training organisations should teach verified AI capability alongside occupational knowledge. Merely allowing students to generate assignments is not AI capability. Employers should redesign graduate work so AI removes low-value repetition while supervised rotations, client contact, workplace problem-solving and accountable decision-making continue to build professional judgement.

Governments can reinforce this through procurement, wage subsidies and training incentives tied to measurable, sustained employment. Employers benefiting from public contracts or public AI investment should be expected to demonstrate how they will maintain entry pathways and develop new workers.

A career ladder without a first rung

The risk is larger than one difficult recruitment season. Graduate and entry-level roles are how organisations transfer knowledge, renew leadership and develop the experienced workers they will later need. If businesses remove junior positions during a downturn and automate the remaining foundational tasks, they may improve short-term productivity while creating a long-term capability gap.

The most accurate conclusion is neither that the graduate market has disappeared nor that the concern is statistical noise. Multiple measures show a material contraction in UK graduate opportunities, record competition and a worsening transition into work for young people. AI is an accelerant and redesign force, but the available evidence does not justify assigning it sole responsibility.

For graduates, the qualification alone is no longer the differentiator it once was. Demonstrable judgement, communication, technical fluency, work experience and the capacity to use AI critically and ethically are becoming the new entry requirements. For employers and governments, the challenge is more fundamental: preserving the first rung of the ladder while rebuilding it for an AI-enabled economy.

References

- Office for National Statistics, UK labour market: August 2026
- Office for National Statistics, young people not in education, employment or training: May 2026

- High Fliers Research, The Graduate Market in 2026
- Institute of Student Employers, application volumes and graduate competition
- Institute of Student Employers, 2026 entry-level work and AI findings
- HM Revenue & Customs, employer rates and thresholds 2025 to 2026
- UK Department for Work and Pensions, 300,000 youth placements
- UK Cabinet Office, jobs and skills requirements in public procurement
- Australian Bureau of Statistics, Labour Force, July 2026
- Jobs and Skills Australia, Internet Vacancy Index, July 2026
- QILT, 2025 Graduate Outcomes Survey national key findings
- Indeed Hiring Lab Australia, graduate hiring trends in 2025 and 2026
- Jobs and Skills Australia, International Students Pathways and Outcomes Study
- Stanford Digital Economy Lab, employment effects of AI through June 2026
- Federal Reserve Bank of New York, labour market for recent college graduates
- Federal Reserve Bank of New York, remote work and younger workers
- Statistics Canada, employment trends in the generative AI era
- Eurostat, employment of recent graduates in 2025

TRUTH, TRANSLATED

Truth, Translated: What NAPLAN 2026 Really Says About Australian Children

By Dr Sukh Rashpal Sandhu | Written for this edition

Every August the national literacy and numeracy results arrive, and every August they are turned into headlines, league tables and political talking points within hours. The 2026 results, released on 5 August, deserve a slower reading, because the most important messages are not in the headlines at all.

Why this matters more than one test

NAPLAN, the National Assessment Program for Literacy and Numeracy, is sat by students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9. It tests reading, writing, spelling, grammar and punctuation, and numeracy. It is not a measure of a child's worth, a school's soul or a teacher's dedication. It is a national thermometer: a single reading taken at a single point in the year, on a common scale, so that the country can see whether the basic building blocks of learning are getting stronger or weaker over time.

That makes it useful and limited at the same time. Useful, because there is no other assessment that lets parents, schools and governments compare progress across every state and territory on the same yardstick. Limited, because a thermometer tells you the temperature, not the cause of the fever.

In March 2026, a record 4.8 million online tests were submitted by more than 1.2 million students in over 9,400 schools and campuses, according to the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), the independent body that runs the program. The national results were published on 5 August.

What follows is a plain-language translation of what those results show, what they do not show, and the questions they should prompt.

First, a quick guide to the four levels

Since 2023, NAPLAN has reported results against four proficiency levels rather than the old bands. The reset in 2023 matters, because it means comparisons are most reliable from 2023 onwards. ACARA describes the levels this way:

Level	What it means in plain language
Exceeding	The student is ahead of what is expected at that point in the year
Strong	The student meets challenging but reasonable expectations
Developing	The student is working towards expectations

Level	What it means in plain language
Needs additional support	The student is not achieving the expected outcomes and is likely to need extra help

Two of these labels matter most for public debate. "Strong" and "Exceeding" together describe students who are on track. "Needs additional support" describes students at real risk of falling further behind unless something changes.

The headline: broadly stable, with movement underneath

ACARA's overall verdict is that national results in 2026 were broadly stable. There were no reportable changes in overall average scores between 2026 and 2025, or between 2026 and 2023. "Reportable" is a technical word. It means a change large enough that statisticians are confident it reflects real movement rather than the normal noise of testing a different group of children each year.

Around two in three students achieved at the Strong or Exceeding level across reading, numeracy and writing. Around one in ten students was at the Needs additional support level across all year groups and domains.

Read that second figure slowly. One in ten is not a rounding error. In a classroom of 25, it is two or three children. Across a national cohort of more than a million students tested, it is a very large number of young people who, on this measure, are not yet able to read or calculate at the level their year requires.

Stability can sound like good news. In a country that spends heavily on schooling and has spent years arguing about how to teach reading and maths, stability can also mean that the effort is not yet showing up where it is most needed.

The good news: middle years numeracy

The clearest bright spot is numeracy in Years 5, 7 and 9. ACARA reported that national average numeracy scores in those three year levels are the highest since the new proficiency levels began in 2023.

The numbers behind that statement:

- Around 29,000 more students are in the Exceeding category in numeracy than in 2023.
- Around 1,600 fewer students are rated as Needs additional support in numeracy than in 2023.
- There was a reportable increase from 2023 to 2026 in the percentage of Indigenous students achieving Exceeding in numeracy in both Year 7 and Year 9.

ACARA's chief executive, Stephen Gniel, welcomed the improvement and was careful about where it came from. He said the gains were seen "especially among the stronger students."

That qualifier is worth translating. The 29,000 extra students at the top and the 1,600 fewer at the bottom are not the same size. Most of the movement is happening among students who were already doing reasonably well. That is still progress, and it should be

celebrated. But it is a different kind of progress from lifting the students who are struggling most.

Across all year levels, 67.0% of students were at Strong or Exceeding in numeracy in 2026, compared with 66.8% in 2025. The share needing additional support in numeracy was 9.6%, up slightly from 9.2% in 2025. So even within the good news, the bottom of the distribution did not shrink this year.

The warning light: Year 3

The middle years story did not reach the youngest students. ACARA reported that the Year 3 average numeracy score was the lowest since 2023.

Mr Gniel did not soften this. He described the drop in Year 3 numeracy as "clearly concerning." Education ministers have responded with a national Year 1 numeracy check, and ACARA has been directed to review the Foundation to Year 2 mathematics curriculum.

The breakdown shows why this matters. In Year 3, 62.1% of students were at Strong or Exceeding in numeracy, the lowest of the four year levels tested. Eleven per cent of Year 3 students were at Needs additional support.

There is a simple reason educators pay close attention to Year 3. Early gaps tend to compound. A child who does not secure number sense, place value and basic operations in the first years of school often finds each new topic harder than the last. The middle years gains are welcome, but if the pipeline feeding into them weakens, those gains will be difficult to sustain.

The other warning light: reading

Reading is where the 2026 results deserve the most attention, and where some of the political commentary has run ahead of the evidence.

ACARA reported that average reading scores in Years 5, 7 and 9 were lower than in 2025. It also reported a slight increase since 2023 in the number of students needing additional support in reading and writing.

The detailed figures are:

Reading, all year levels	2025	2026
Strong or Exceeding	68.2%	66.3%
Needs additional support	9.3%	10.2%

By year level in 2026, the share at Strong or Exceeding in reading rose from 65.6% in Year 3 to 70.9% in Year 5, then fell to 66.8% in Year 7 and 62.0% in Year 9. The share needing additional support was 11.3% in Year 3, 7.7% in Year 5, 10.7% in Year 7 and 11.1% in Year 9.

Translated: by Year 9, roughly one student in nine is not reading at the level expected. These are teenagers who will soon be choosing subjects, starting apprenticeships or applying for their first jobs, and for whom reading is the key that opens every other door.

Mr Gniel said the decline in Years 5, 7 and 9 reading since last year, together with the rise in students needing support in reading and writing since 2023, needed "collective action."

"The reading wars are over"? Not so fast

On release day, the federal Education Minister, Jason Clare, linked the numeracy improvement to reforms funded through what the government describes as an additional $20 billion for public schools over the next decade, tied to reforms including Year 1 phonics and numeracy checks and expanded small group tutoring. He also declared: "The reading wars are over."

The phrase refers to a long and often bitter debate about how children should be taught to read, with the evidence base strongly favouring explicit, systematic teaching of phonics in the early years. Many education researchers would agree that the argument about method has largely been settled in favour of explicit teaching, and that is a genuine shift.

But it is worth being precise about what the 2026 data can and cannot support.

1. **Method and outcome are different things.** Agreeing on how reading should be taught does not mean that every classroom is already teaching it that way, or that the effects have yet reached Years 5, 7 and 9.
2. **The 2026 reading results went the wrong way in the middle years.** Any claim that reforms are working in reading has to sit alongside ACARA's finding that average reading scores fell in Years 5, 7 and 9 compared with 2025.
3. **One year is not a trend.** NAPLAN is a snapshot of a different group of children each year. A single year's rise or fall should be read alongside several years of data before anyone claims victory or declares a crisis.
4. **Correlation is not causation.** When numeracy rises in the same period that a policy is introduced, the policy may be responsible, partly responsible or not responsible at all. Proper evaluation, not a press conference, is how we find out.

In my view, the honest summary is this: the direction of reform in early reading is sound, and the 2026 results do not yet show it paying off for older students. Both statements can be true at once.

The gaps that never close

The most uncomfortable section of any NAPLAN release is the one about who is falling behind. The 2026 results tell a familiar and painful story.

Indigenous students. Across all year groups, 31.8% of Indigenous students were in the Needs additional support level in reading, compared with 8.5% of non-Indigenous students. In numeracy, the figures were 32.4% and 7.8%. Put plainly, an Indigenous student is roughly four times as likely as a non-Indigenous student to be in the lowest category.

There are signs of progress. As noted earlier, more Indigenous students reached Exceeding in numeracy in Years 7 and 9, and Mr Gniel noted that average Indigenous numeracy scores in Years 5 and 7 were at the highest level since the scale was reset in

2023. Those gains are real and should not be dismissed. But they sit alongside a gap that remains very wide.

Very remote students. Across all year groups, 23.1% of students in very remote schools were at Strong or Exceeding in reading, compared with 70.0% in major city schools. In numeracy, it was 23.1% compared with 70.8%. That is a gap of almost 50 percentage points between children whose only difference, in many cases, is their postcode.

Family background. ACARA reported that average scores for students from the highest socio-educational backgrounds, measured by parental education or occupation, were substantially above those from the lowest, in every year level and every domain.

Boys and girls. Girls outperformed boys in writing in every year group. In Year 7, 69.6% of girls were at Strong or Exceeding in writing compared with 55.6% of boys; in Year 9, 68.1% compared with 52.0%. Boys generally outperformed girls in numeracy, with between 5.9 and 7.8 percentage points fewer girls than boys at the Exceeding level depending on the year.

Mr Gniel described it as "disheartening to see disparities persisting over the years" for students in regional and remote areas, Indigenous students and students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Disheartening is the right word. These gaps are not new, and they are not a mystery. They have appeared in NAPLAN for years and in international assessments for longer. The question for governments is not whether the gaps exist. It is whether funding agreements, workforce plans and curriculum reforms are designed so that they actually reach the schools where the gaps are widest: very remote schools that struggle to recruit and keep teachers, and communities where English may be a second or third language.

Tasmania: the state that went missing

In 2026, one jurisdiction does not appear in the state comparisons at all.

ACARA reported that participation in Tasmanian government schools was low because of industrial action. Education ministers agreed in July not to report Tasmanian state level results for 2026, because participation was far below ACARA's technical data standard for accurate reporting. Pulse Tasmania reported that this made Tasmania the first jurisdiction ever excluded from state by state NAPLAN reporting for this reason.

The background is a pay dispute between the Tasmanian Government and the Australian Education Union, whose members imposed a ban on administering NAPLAN. Each side tells the story differently:

- The Education Minister, Jo Palmer, said she was "extremely disappointed that the union decided to take industrial action" and that the government had tried to maximise participation.
- The AEU Tasmania state president, David Genford, said: "Our collective action sent a powerful message to the government and ultimately secured important improvements."
- The Opposition Leader, Josh Willie, blamed the government and called the situation "a national embarrassment."

Students who did sit the tests will still receive individual reports, and participating schools still receive school level information. What is lost is the state level picture for 2026.

This is a political accountability story as much as an education one. When a jurisdiction drops out of national data for a year, it becomes harder for anyone, including parents, researchers and the state parliament, to judge whether that state's schools are improving. Wherever one stands on the pay dispute, a gap in the public record is a cost borne by the public. It is worth asking how future disputes can be resolved without the evidence base becoming collateral damage.

Nationally, participation remained high, with over 95% of students in Years 3, 5 and 7 completing at least one test and over 92% in Year 9. ACARA noted that localised flooding in the Northern Territory also affected participation, and that Queensland continued an improving trend.

The glitch and the caveat

There is one more detail that rarely makes the news but matters for how the results should be read.

A technical issue with the national NAPLAN platform disrupted the first morning of testing, mainly in schools on the east coast. It affected only the writing test, and only students in Years 5, 7 and 9. National average writing scores were similar to last year, but because the disruption affected students and schools unevenly, ACARA has attached a caveat to the 2026 writing results for those year levels.

Translated: treat any dramatic claims about writing improvement or decline in those year levels in 2026 with extra caution. The body that runs the test has told us, in writing, that this part of the data carries an asterisk.

And on integrity

In a period when many people are worried about cheating in assessment, ACARA's 2026 test incident report found no substantiated cheating breaches on the part of a school. There were 68 substantiated aggregated incidents, up from 51 in 2025 and 53 in 2024, out of about 4.8 million tests. ACARA described the number as extremely small and said it did not affect overall results. That is reassuring, and it is good practice for a national testing body to publish this information openly every year.

What NAPLAN is not

Mr Gniel used the release to remind families how the results should be used. He said NAPLAN "is not a pass or fail test" and should not be used as a proxy for school entrance exams. He described it as a point in time test and one part of a school's assessment program.

That message deserves to be repeated loudly, because NAPLAN results are routinely misused in three ways:

1. **As a verdict on an individual child.** A single test on a single day cannot capture a child's full ability, effort or potential. A child's teacher, who sees their work all year, knows far more.
2. **As a league table.** Raw school averages largely reflect the backgrounds of the families a school serves. Ranking schools on raw scores tells you more about postcodes than about teaching.
3. **As a political scoreboard.** Ministers on all sides have an incentive to claim credit for rises and assign blame for falls. Both tendencies should be treated with healthy scepticism until proper evaluations are done.

Translating the results for parents

If you are a parent reading your child's individual report, a few practical points may help:

- Look at the proficiency level, not just the dot on the scale. It tells you whether your child is on track for their year.
- If your child is at Developing or Needs additional support, ask the school what support is available and what you can do at home. The report is a conversation starter, not a sentence.
- Remember that one test is one day. If the result surprises you, compare it with what the teacher tells you and what you see in your child's schoolwork.
- If your child is at Strong or Exceeding, that is worth celebrating, and it is also worth asking how the school will keep them challenged.

Five questions governments should answer

The 2026 results should prompt clear answers from the people responsible for schools.

1. **What is the plan for Year 3 numeracy, and when will we know if it is working?** A Year 1 numeracy check and a curriculum review are steps. Parents deserve to know what will change in classrooms, and when it will be measured.
2. **Why did middle years reading fall, and what is being done about it?** If the early reading reforms are sound, how will their benefits be carried into upper primary and secondary school, where reading demands become more complex?
3. **How will the one in ten be reached?** Gains among stronger students are welcome, but the share needing additional support has not fallen overall. Small group tutoring is promising; is it reaching the right students, at the right scale, with qualified staff?
4. **What does success look like for very remote schools?** A gap of almost 50 percentage points needs targets, timelines and funding attached, not just acknowledgement in a media release.
5. **How will national data be protected in future disputes?** The Tasmanian gap should prompt all governments and unions to consider how industrial disagreements can be resolved without removing a whole state from the national evidence base.

The bottom line

NAPLAN 2026 is not a story of collapse, and it is not a story of triumph. It is a story of a system that is improving in some places, slipping in others and still failing to close the gaps that matter most.

The numeracy gains in Years 5, 7 and 9 are real and deserve credit, including for the teachers who delivered them. The Year 3 numeracy result and the middle years reading decline are real too, and they deserve the same attention. The gaps for Indigenous students, very remote students and students from disadvantaged families are the oldest story in the data, and they remain its most important one.

Plain language for a complicated result: roughly two in three children are on track, one in ten needs help now, and the children who need help most are, too often, the same children who needed it last year and the year before.

What do you see in the 2026 results? Are the reforms working fast enough for the students who need them most?

Sources

- Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), "Latest NAPLAN data shows improvements in national numeracy levels alongside areas for continued attention", media release, 5 August 2026. https://www.acara.edu.au/docs/default-source/media-releases/media-release-latest-naplan-data-shows-improvements-in-numeracy-levels-alongside-areas-for-continued-action-5-8-26.pdf
- The Hon Jason Clare MP, "NAPLAN results show real improvement in numeracy, but more work to do", media release, 5 August 2026. https://ministers.education.gov.au/clare/naplan-results-show-real-improvement-numeracy-more-work-do
- ACARA, NAPLAN National Results 2026. https://www.acara.edu.au/naplanresults
- National Assessment Program, "Results and reports". https://nap.edu.au/naplan/results-and-reports
- The Educator K/12, Brett Henebery, "2026 NAPLAN results released", August 2026. https://www.theeducatoronline.com/k12/news/2026-naplan-results-released/289082
- School Choice, "NAPLAN 2026: 'Not a pass or fail test' as new results highlight student progress", August 2026. https://www.schoolchoice.com.au/info/naplan-2026-not-a-pass-or-fail-test-as-new-results-highlight-student-progress/
- Pulse Tasmania, "Tasmania has no NAPLAN results after union's test boycott", 5 August 2026. https://pulsetasmania.com.au/news/tasmania-has-no-naplan-results-after-unions-test-boycott/

TRUTH, TRANSLATED

Truth, Translated: Five Per Cent of Everything? What NATO's Ankara Summit Means for Australia

By Dr Sukh Rashpal Sandhu | Written for this edition

On 7 and 8 July 2026, the leaders of NATO's 32 member countries met in Ankara and declared their unity, their commitment to collective defence and their progress towards spending far more on their militaries. Australia is not a NATO member, but the numbers agreed in Türkiye are already shaping the defence debate in Canberra, and the way those numbers are counted deserves a plain-language explanation.

The short version

If you only have a minute, here is the summit in five lines:

1. NATO leaders reaffirmed their commitment to collective defence, and the summit focused on delivering the target agreed in The Hague in 2025: 5% of GDP on defence and defence related spending by 2035, of which 3.5% is for core defence. The Ankara declaration itself does not restate those percentages.
2. European allies and Canada reported large spending increases, and the alliance announced tens of billions of dollars in new joint procurement.
3. Allies pledged €70 billion in support for Ukraine for 2026 and at least the same in 2027.
4. The summit was overshadowed in places by the United States President's disputes with individual allies, including Spain and Denmark.
5. Australia sent its Minister for Defence Industry, not its Prime Minister, and is meanwhile changing the way it counts its own defence spending.

The rest of this article translates each of those lines.

What NATO is, and why its numbers travel

NATO, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, is a military alliance founded in 1949. Its core promise is in Article 5 of the Washington Treaty: an armed attack on one member is treated as an attack on all.

Australia is not a member and is not covered by Article 5. Its central alliance is with the United States through ANZUS. But Australia is one of four Indo-Pacific partners of NATO, alongside Japan, South Korea and New Zealand, often called the IP4. Since 2022, leaders or ministers from these countries have been invited to NATO summits.

The reason NATO's numbers matter here is simple. Washington increasingly uses NATO spending benchmarks as the yardstick for all its allies, not just those in Europe. When a target is set in The Hague or Ankara, it soon appears in conversations in Canberra, Tokyo and Seoul.

The 5% target, translated

At its 2025 summit in The Hague, NATO agreed that members would spend 5% of GDP on defence and defence related items by 2035. That headline figure has two parts:

Part	Share of GDP	What it covers, broadly
Core defence	3.5%	Armed forces, weapons, equipment, personnel, operations
Defence related	1.5%	Things that support defence and resilience, such as critical infrastructure protection, civil preparedness and the industrial base

Two things are worth understanding about this.

First, 5% is a very large number. For most of the period since the Cold War ended, many European members spent well under 2% of GDP on defence. Moving to 3.5% on core defence alone means, for many countries, close to doubling the share of national income spent on the military.

Second, the 1.5% category is deliberately broad. It gives governments room to count spending that is linked to security but is not soldiers, ships or missiles. That flexibility makes the target politically achievable. It also means two countries can both report reaching "5%" while spending very different amounts on actual military capability. Whenever you see the 5% figure in a headline, it is worth asking how much of it is core defence and how much is the broader category.

How 2% became 5%

It helps to remember how quickly the benchmark has moved.

At the 2014 Wales summit, held months after Russia annexed Crimea, NATO members pledged to move towards spending 2% of GDP on defence within a decade. For years afterwards, many members fell well short, and the gap became a recurring point of friction with Washington across several US administrations, not only the current one.

Russia's full scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 changed the politics. European governments that had treated 2% as a distant aspiration began treating it as a floor. By 2025, the alliance had agreed in The Hague to a far higher ambition: 3.5% for core defence and 5% in total by 2035.

Translated, the benchmark that dominated alliance debate for a decade has, in the space of about three years, been replaced by one more than two and a half times larger. That is the backdrop against which Australia's own figures are now being judged.

What happened in Ankara

The Ankara summit was the first NATO summit held in Türkiye in more than two decades. Analysts described it as a shift from planning to delivery: the job was less about agreeing new targets than about showing that the Hague targets were being met.

The Ankara Summit Declaration, adopted on 8 July, is short. Its key points, as published:

- **Collective defence.** The declaration opens by restating allies' "ironclad commitment to our collective defence under Article 5 of the Washington Treaty."
- **Spending.** It states that European allies and Canada increased core defence investment by more than US$139 billion in 2025.
- **Industry.** Leaders announced more than US$50 billion in new multinational procurement, and committed to expanding joint manufacturing and reducing defence trade barriers among allies. Priority areas include precision strike, air and missile defence, uncrewed systems, artificial intelligence and a transatlantic "warfighting cloud" for sharing data.
- **Ukraine.** Allies pledged €70 billion in equipment, assistance and training for Ukraine in 2026 and committed to at least equivalent levels in 2027. The declaration does not set out a timeline for Ukraine's membership.
- **Burden shifting.** The text describes Europe and Canada taking on more of the alliance's defence, and uses the phrase "a stronger Europe in a stronger NATO."
- **Iran.** The declaration states that Iran must never have a nuclear weapon and calls for freedom of navigation in the Strait of Hormuz.

Defence analysts at Janes estimated that average core defence spending among non-US members rose from 2.2% of GDP in 2025 to 2.4% in 2026, with wide variation between countries.

What the declaration does not say

Sometimes the plainest translation is to notice what is missing.

- **China is not named.** The declaration refers only in general terms to "strategic competition." For Indo-Pacific partners such as Australia, that is significant. It suggests that NATO members could not, or chose not to, agree on language about the country that dominates Australia's own strategic planning.
- **No firm next summit.** The Atlantic Council reported that the declaration does not commit to a date for the next summit. NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte confirmed afterwards that the next one will be in Albania, with timing not yet set.
- **Partners appear mainly as industrial collaborators.** The text mentions partnerships chiefly in the context of defence industry cooperation.

The politics around the table

Summit declarations are drafted to project unity. The meetings around them often tell a messier story. Based on reporting and analysis by the Atlantic Council:

- President Donald Trump criticised Spain at the start of the summit over its reluctance to commit to the 5% target and over its refusal to allow US aircraft to use Spanish

bases for operations against Iran. Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez emphasised Spain's existing contributions.
- President Trump renewed his talk of acquiring Greenland, which is part of the Kingdom of Denmark, a NATO member. Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen pushed back strongly.
- The Atlantic Council reported that, after returning home, President Trump speculated about withdrawing US forces from Europe if he was not satisfied on Greenland; other reporting it cited also linked the question to Iran.
- On Ukraine, the Atlantic Council described President Trump's meeting with President Volodymyr Zelenskyy as their warmest in some time, with discussion of licensing Ukraine to build Patriot interceptors and of drone co-production.

Afterwards, President Trump declared the summit a success, pointing to higher spending by allies, and Mr Rutte also presented it as a success for the alliance.

How should a general reader weigh this? A fair summary is that the alliance's spending trend is clearly upward, the formal commitments were reaffirmed, and the political relationship between Washington and some European capitals remains strained. Analysts disagree on how much the strains matter. Some see routine summit theatre. Others argue that a written reaffirmation of Article 5 carries less weight when the largest member's leaders publicly link troop deployments to unrelated disputes. Both readings are held by serious people, and readers should be wary of anyone who presents only one.

Where Australia fits

Australia was represented in Ankara by Pat Conroy, the Minister for Defence Industry and Minister for Pacific Island Affairs. Before leaving, he said "Australia's partnership with NATO serves to support a world that is peaceful, stable and prosperous," and argued that security in the Indo-Pacific and the North Atlantic are linked. His program focused on defence industry collaboration and support for Ukraine, following an additional A$100 million in military assistance to Ukraine announced the month before.

The Atlantic Council noted that top level attendance from the IP4 has fallen sharply, from all four leaders in 2022 and 2023 to just one in 2025 and again in 2026. In Ankara, South Korean President Lee Jae Myung was the IP4 leader who attended. In 2025, Australia sent its Deputy Prime Minister and Defence Minister, Richard Marles; in 2026 it sent its Minister for Defence Industry, a cabinet member but not one of the government's most senior figures.

There are reasonable arguments on both sides of that choice. One view is that Australia's priorities are in its own region and the Prime Minister's time is better spent there. Another is that leader level attendance signals that Australia takes the link between European and Indo-Pacific security seriously, at a time when Ukraine relies on Western support and the war has drawn in North Korean troops and Iranian designed drones. Readers can decide for themselves. What is clear is that the signal sent has changed.

Australia's own numbers, and a change in the ruler

The most important Australian story connected to the NATO targets is not who went to Ankara. It is how Australia now measures its own defence spending.

On 16 April 2026, Defence Minister Richard Marles released the 2026 National Defence Strategy at the National Press Club. The government announced an extra A$53 billion for defence over ten years, said defence spending would be 2.8% of GDP in the 2026 Budget year, and said it would rise to 3% of GDP by 2033.

Those figures sound like a dramatic jump, because for decades Australia's defence spending has hovered around 2% of GDP, and the previous plan was to reach about 2.3 to 2.4% by 2034.

The explanation is that the government has adopted a new measure, aligned with NATO's methodology, which counts items such as military pensions that were not included in Australia's traditional figure. Under the old measure, current spending is around 2% of GDP. Under the new one, it is reported as 2.8%.

Analysts at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), writing in May, estimated that on the traditional appropriation measure, the trajectory reaches around 2.5% of GDP by 2033 to 2034, compared with about 3.0% on the NATO style measure calculated by Defence. They added that they could not verify Defence's NATO style calculation because the detail had not been published, and they noted that even the higher figure is below the 3.5% core defence minimum that NATO members have agreed.

The Opposition's defence spokesperson, James Paterson, called the change an "accounting trick."

Translating the accounting argument

Is changing the measure a trick, or a sensible move? The honest answer is that it can be either, depending on how it is done.

The case for the change. Different countries count defence spending differently. NATO has a published definition that its members use so that their figures can be compared. If Australia is going to be compared with NATO members, as it increasingly is by Washington, there is logic in using the same ruler. Pensions for veterans and some defence related civilian costs are real costs of maintaining a military.

The case for scepticism. Changing the ruler changes the headline without adding a single ship, aircraft or soldier. If the new number is presented as a large increase without making clear how much of the rise comes from counting differently, the public can be misled about how much more is actually being spent on capability.

What accountability requires. In my view, the fair standard is simple: publish both numbers, every year, side by side, with the method explained. That would let the public see real growth in defence capability separately from changes in accounting. ASPI's point that it could not verify the NATO style calculation is exactly the kind of gap that should be closed.

The pressure from Washington

None of this is happening in a vacuum. In 2025, US Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth urged Australia to lift defence spending to 3.5% of GDP. At the 2025 election, the Coalition pledged to reach 2.5% of GDP within five years and 3% within a decade. The Hague figure of 3.5% for core defence remains the benchmark among NATO members, and the Ankara summit was framed around delivering it.

For Australia, the question is not whether to copy a European target. Australia's strategic circumstances are different: it is an island continent with a small population, a vast maritime approach, major commitments under AUKUS to acquire nuclear powered submarines, and a region in which the military build up of the past two decades has been rapid. The real question is what capabilities Australia needs, by when, and what they cost. A percentage of GDP is an output of that calculation, not a substitute for it.

That is the core translation of the whole debate. Percentages are easy to put in a headline and easy to compare across countries. They say very little about whether a country is buying the right things, whether projects are on time and on budget, or whether the workforce exists to operate what is bought. ASPI's analysis of the 2026 Budget noted that the government is, in the authors' words, "paying for the people in advance of the equipment they will operate." That is a far more useful line of inquiry than whether the headline number begins with a 2 or a 3.

What it means for ordinary Australians

Defence spending can feel remote. It is not. Every dollar committed to defence is a dollar not available for hospitals, schools, housing or tax relief, or a dollar that must be borrowed. A move from around 2% to 3% of GDP on any measure is a choice about national priorities worth tens of billions of dollars over a decade.

That choice may well be justified. Many security experts argue that the region has become more dangerous and that Australia's defence force has been under resourced relative to the risks. Others argue that the money would be better spent on diplomacy, aid and resilience. A democratic debate needs the public to understand what is actually being proposed. That requires:

- clear figures on both the old and new measures;
- a published account of what capabilities the extra money will buy, and when;
- independent scrutiny of major projects, especially the largest and most complex;
- honesty from all parties about trade-offs, including what would be cut or borrowed to pay for higher spending.

What to watch next

1. **The NATO style calculation.** Will the government publish the full method behind its 2.8% and 3% figures, so that independent analysts can check them?
2. **Washington's yardstick.** Will the United States press Australia publicly to reach 3.5% on core defence, and will it accept a NATO style figure that includes pensions as meeting its expectations?

3. **Ukraine support.** NATO members have committed €70 billion for 2026. Will Australia's contributions continue at a similar pace, and how will they be reported?
4. **Delivery, not dollars.** Will the extra funding translate into capabilities that arrive on schedule? This is where accountability ultimately lies.
5. **The Indo-Pacific link.** If NATO texts continue to avoid naming China, how will Australia make the case that Indo-Pacific and Euro-Atlantic security are connected?

The bottom line

The Ankara summit confirmed a historic rise in Western defence spending and a durable, if strained, transatlantic commitment to collective defence. For Australia, its most immediate effect is to sharpen a domestic question: how much are we really spending on defence, and what are we getting for it?

Plain language for a complicated world: a target is only as honest as the ruler used to measure it, and a percentage is only as useful as the capability it buys. Australians deserve both numbers, the old and the new, and a clear account of what the money is for.

Do you think Australia should measure its defence spending the NATO way, the traditional way, or both?

Sources

- Foreign Policy, "The Ankara Summit Declaration" (full text), 8 July 2026. https://foreignpolicy.com/2026/07/08/nato-ankara-summit-declaration-full-text-trump-ukraine-russia/
- Atlantic Council, "Eleven takeaways from the NATO Summit in Ankara", July 2026. https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/dispatches/eleven-takeaways-from-the-nato-summit-in-ankara/
- Janes, "Ankara summit underscores NATO unity as defence spending risks persist", July 2026. https://www.janes.com/defence-intelligence-insights/defence-and-national-security-analysis/ankara-summit-underscores-nato-unity-as-defence-spending-risks-persist
- Asia Pacific Defence Reporter, "Conroy heads to Türkiye for NATO summit", 7 July 2026. https://asiapacificdefencereporter.com/conroy-heads-to-turkiye-for-nato-summit/
- The Daily Aus, "Govt to spend extra $53 billion over 10 years on defence", 16 April 2026. https://www.thedailyaus.com.au/news/govt-extra-53-billion-defence
- Marc Ablong, Mike Hughes and Linus Cohen, "2026 cost of Defence: the budget is a promise to the future paid for by the present", The Strategist (ASPI), 28 May 2026. https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/2026-cost-of-defence-the-budget-is-a-promise-to-the-future-paid-for-by-the-present/
- The Nightly, "Defence Minister Richard Marles talks defence spending with US counterpart Pete Hegseth", 2025. https://thenightly.com.au/politics/australia/defence-minister-richard-marles-talks-defence-spending-with-us-counterpart-pete-hegseth-c-18867680

- The Nightly, "Indo-Pacific leaders skip NATO, leaving New Zealand's Christopher Luxon in the cold", 24 June 2025. https://thenightly.com.au/world/indo-pacific-leaders-skip-nato-leaving-new-zealands-christopher-luxon-in-the-cold-c-19134025

TRUTH, TRANSLATED

Truth, Translated: Canberra's Winter of Big Tech Laws, and the Test That Comes Next

By Dr Sukh Rashpal Sandhu | Written for this edition

Between late August and mid September 2026, the federal Parliament passed two laws aimed squarely at the world's largest technology companies. One makes platforms pay for Australian journalism or pay a charge. The other gives the online safety regulator sharper teeth to enforce the ban on under-16s holding social media accounts. Both are being described as world leading. Whether they work will depend on something no Act of Parliament can guarantee: enforcement.

Why these two laws belong together

At first glance, a scheme to fund newsrooms and a crackdown on underage social media accounts look like separate issues. They are not.

Both are about the same basic question: can a mid sized democracy make global platforms follow its rules? In both cases, Australia had already passed a law. In both cases, the platforms found ways to meet the letter of that law while avoiding much of its purpose. And in both cases, the Government responded in 2026 by trying to close the gap.

That pattern is the story. Translating it requires going back a few years.

Part one: paying for news

The original deal, and how it unravelled

In 2021, Australia introduced the News Media Bargaining Code. Its idea was simple. Platforms such as Google and Facebook were earning advertising revenue on the back of news that Australian journalists produced. The Code created a process that could force the platforms to negotiate payment with news businesses, with an arbitrator in reserve if they could not agree.

In practice, the Code worked mostly as a threat. Google and Meta, the owner of Facebook and Instagram, signed commercial deals with many Australian publishers so that the Code never had to be formally applied to them. Those deals were reported to be worth a significant amount each year to Australian newsrooms.

Then in 2024, Meta closed its Facebook News tab in Australia and the United States and did not renew its news licensing agreements with Australian publishers. Meta had already

shown it was willing to walk away: in February 2021 it blocked news on Facebook in Australia for several days while the Code was being debated. The weakness in the Code was exposed: a platform could avoid its obligations simply by stepping away from news. You cannot be forced to pay for something you say you are no longer using.

The fix: a charge you can avoid by making deals

The Government's answer is the News Bargaining Incentive. In plain language, it works like this:

1. Large social media and search platforms with significant Australian operations face a charge based on their Australian digital advertising revenue.
2. They can reduce or cancel that charge by signing commercial deals with Australian news businesses.
3. If they choose not to make deals, the money raised goes back to the news sector through a separate scheme, the News Journalism Payments scheme.

The Communications Minister, Anika Wells, and the Assistant Treasurer, Daniel Mulino, said the Incentive "fixes a loophole" in the Bargaining Code. In other words, a platform can no longer escape its obligations by withdrawing news, because withdrawing news no longer removes the bill.

How the design changed in four months

The scheme changed significantly between its draft and its final form, and the changes tell you a great deal about who was pushing in which direction.

Feature	April 2026 draft	Early August revision	Final, as passed
Charge	2.25%	2.5%	2.75%
Base	Total Australian revenue	Australian digital advertising revenue	Australian digital advertising revenue
Deals with news businesses	4	6	At least 8
Cap on any single news business	25% (implied)	Cut to 17%	Restored to 25%: no one news business group can offset more than a quarter of the charge
Loading for deals with smaller publishers	170%	Reported as 170% or 200% (accounts differ)	200% (150% for larger publishers)

Sources for the table: the April and August designs as reported by Press Gazette, AdNews and the University of Technology Sydney's Centre for Media Transition; the final settings from the legislation as enacted (the News Media Bargaining Charge Act 2026 and the News Media Bargaining (Administration) Act 2026, assented to on 26 August and in force from 27 August) and the joint ministerial release. Reporting when the deal with the Coalition was announced described a 2.5% rate calculated on two years of revenue rather than three; the Charge Act as passed sets the rate at 2.75%. The April draft applied to platforms with more than A$250 million in Australian revenue; the Act as passed applies to platforms with more than A$250 million in relevant Australian digital advertising revenue. Professional networking services such as LinkedIn were added to the scheme's

scope in August, and Australian Associated Press will receive 5% of all revenue collected under the Incentive.

Translated, the story of those changes is as follows.

The base got narrower. Moving from total revenue to digital advertising revenue reduces the amount on which the charge is calculated. The rate went up to compensate in part: to 2.5% in August, and to 2.75% in the legislation as passed.

News Corp objected. When the August revision was announced, News Corp Australasia's executive chairman, Michael Miller, said: "These changes gut the incentive for tech platforms to strike fair deals with Australian media." Large publishers were concerned that the total pool would shrink and that requiring more deals would spread the money more thinly.

The deal count went up, and a cap came in. Requiring at least eight deals, with no single news business group able to account for more than a quarter of the charge offset, is designed to stop a platform from meeting its obligations by signing one or two large deals with the biggest media companies and ignoring everyone else.

Smaller publishers got a bigger weighting. A 200% loading means that a dollar paid to a smaller or medium publisher counts twice towards the offset, compared with one and a half times for larger publishers. That is a deliberate nudge towards regional and independent newsrooms.

The politics of passage

The Government reached agreement with the Coalition before the final legislation was introduced on 13 August, and the bills passed Parliament on 20 August 2026. The ministers' release that day said the scheme would put Australian journalism on a more sustainable footing.

When the agreement was announced, Ms Wells said: "Quality journalism does not happen on its own." Mr Mulino said: "Public interest journalism is not free to produce."

The platforms were not persuaded. Meta had earlier argued that a "government-mandated transfer of wealth from one industry to another" would not deliver a sustainable news sector. Google said it rejected the need for the measure.

The honest critique

The Incentive is a serious attempt to fix a real problem. It also has real limits, and some of the sharpest critiques come from researchers who support the goal.

Professor Derek Wilding of UTS's Centre for Media Transition, writing as the final settings were negotiated, argued that the scheme mainly helps larger publishers, with smaller outlets relying on residual funds and government grants. He criticised what he called a "double dipping" mechanism, under which companies that strike deals also get early access to the residual levy funds. And he questioned the decision to leave artificial intelligence to a separate, future regulatory response, given that AI systems increasingly summarise and repackage news without sending readers to the original source.

That last point may prove the most important. The Bargaining Code was designed for a world of search results and social feeds. The next challenge is AI answer engines, which can give a reader the substance of a news story without the reader ever visiting the newsroom that paid to report it. A scheme built around advertising revenue from search and social media may already be aimed at yesterday's business model.

Part two: keeping under-16s off social media

The law that started in December

On 10 December 2025, Australia's social media minimum age law took effect. Platforms covered by it, including Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok and YouTube, must take reasonable steps to prevent Australians under 16 from holding accounts. It was the first law of its kind in the world, and it passed Parliament with support from both major parties.

What the first months showed

The Government reported that more than 5 million accounts held by under-16s had been removed, deactivated or restricted since the ban began. That is a large number, and it is evidence that platforms did act.

But the eSafety Commissioner's first compliance update, published at the end of March 2026, described a more mixed picture. According to reporting by The Register:

- A survey of 898 Australian parents found that around seven in ten said their child still had an account.
- eSafety observed poor practices, including messaging that encouraged under-16s to attempt age checks, and allowing children to retry the same age check repeatedly until they obtained a result saying they were over 16.
- Reporting pathways for parents trying to close an underage account were difficult to use.
- eSafety said it was investigating potential non-compliance by five platforms: Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok and YouTube.

In early July, AAP reported research published in the BMJ finding that more than four in five Australian under-16s were still on social media.

The fix: more power to demand evidence, bigger penalties

On 28 June 2026, the Prime Minister and the Communications Minister announced new legislation. Ms Wells said: "I am not satisfied that tech companies are doing everything they can to keep under-16s off their platforms." Mr Albanese said "it's clear big tech are not doing enough to comply with the law."

The Online Safety Amendment (Strengthening Enforcement for the Social Media Minimum Age) Bill 2026 was introduced the next day. In plain language, it does two things:

1. **It lets the regulator demand proof.** The eSafety Commissioner can compel platforms, and third parties such as age assurance providers and app stores, to hand over information and documents showing what they have actually done. That replaces

a system that relied heavily on what the platforms chose to report about themselves. The Commissioner can also summon people to give evidence and answer questions.

2. **It raises the stakes.** The Act doubles the maximum civil penalty for breaching the minimum age obligations, from 30,000 to 60,000 penalty units, which for a company means 300,000 penalty units. The Government's June announcement described this as a rise from A$49.5 million to A$99 million, using the penalty unit value of A$330 that applied until 30 June 2026. From 1 July 2026 a Commonwealth penalty unit is worth A$364, so the new maximum for a company is A$109.2 million, the figure given when the law passed. Penalties for failing to comply with information notices also double.

The delay, and who caused it

This is where the political accountability story becomes interesting.

The bill passed the House of Representatives on 1 July. Two days later, AAP reported that the Coalition and the Greens had combined in the Senate to prevent its immediate passage, and that a Senate inquiry would examine it and report in late August.

The two sides gave very different accounts:

- The Prime Minister called the lack of support "extraordinary," describing the bill as short and simple and saying the regulator needed the powers.
- The Coalition's communications spokesperson, Sarah Henderson, said the Coalition was not convinced the bill went far enough, describing the ban itself as rushed, poorly designed and badly implemented, and arguing that the amendments needed to be stronger.

Both positions deserve to be taken seriously. Senate scrutiny of legislation that expands a regulator's coercive powers is a legitimate function of Parliament, not obstruction for its own sake. At the same time, a delay of more than two months on a bill the Opposition had said did not go far enough is a position voters are entitled to question.

The bill ultimately passed Parliament and received Royal Assent on 11 September, when the minister issued a statement confirming the new powers and penalties. It took effect the next day, 12 September. A law that Labor and the Coalition had both supported in principle in December 2025 took until September 2026 to receive the enforcement tools that both sides, in different ways, said it needed.

A short glossary

A few terms come up repeatedly in this debate. In plain language:

- **Bargaining Code:** the 2021 law that created a process for forcing platforms to negotiate payment with news businesses. It still exists; the Incentive sits alongside it.
- **Offset:** the amount by which a platform's charge is reduced because it has signed deals with news businesses. A loading of 200% means each dollar paid to an eligible smaller publisher reduces the charge by two dollars.
- **Age assurance:** the umbrella term for methods of estimating or verifying a user's age, from asking for a date of birth to facial age estimation or checking identity documents.

- **Information gathering notice:** a legal demand from the regulator requiring a company to hand over specified information or documents. Ignoring one carries its own penalty.
- **Civil penalty proceedings:** a case brought in the Federal Court in which the regulator asks the court to impose a financial penalty. The maximum penalty is a ceiling, not an automatic fine; the court decides the amount.

Translating the pattern

Put the two laws side by side and a clear pattern emerges.

First law, then workaround. The Bargaining Code was sidestepped by withdrawing from news. The age ban was partly sidestepped by weak age checks and easy retries. In each case, the platforms did something, and in each case it was less than the law intended.

Second law, closing the gap. The Incentive removes the option of escaping by walking away. The enforcement bill removes the option of self reporting without verification.

What remains untested is enforcement. A charge that is never levied, a power that is never used and a penalty that is never sought are signals, not consequences. The real test of both laws begins now.

Accountability runs in three directions

It is tempting to frame these laws as government versus Big Tech. A plainer and fairer translation is that accountability runs in three directions.

Platforms are accountable for what they do, not what they announce. Removing 5 million accounts is significant. So is the finding that children could retry age checks until they passed. The new law gives the regulator the means to see the evidence behind the announcements.

Government is accountable for measuring and publishing. The public should be told, regularly and plainly, how much money the Incentive raises, which publishers receive it, and how much reaches smaller and regional newsrooms. On the age ban, the public deserves regular, independent data on how many under-16s still hold accounts, not just how many accounts have been removed.

Parliament is accountable for timeliness and scrutiny together. Both laws went through committees, negotiations and amendments. That is how good legislation is made. But when a law that both major parties supported is left without enforcement tools for months, the cost falls on the families the law was meant to protect.

What the platforms are likely to argue

To be fair, the platforms have arguments that deserve a hearing.

- On news, Meta and Google argue that a mandated transfer from one industry to another does not create a sustainable business model for journalism, and that news is a small part of what users want from their services. There is a real policy debate about

whether direct public funding of journalism, with strong independence protections, would be cleaner than a charge on platforms.
- On age limits, platforms and some privacy advocates argue that stronger age verification requires collecting more personal data from everyone, adults included, and that determined teenagers will find ways around any system. Some child safety researchers also worry that pushing children off mainstream platforms could drive them towards less regulated corners of the internet. eSafety's March update found no significant migration to non-compliant services in the early months, but that will need to be monitored.

None of these arguments cancel the laws. They are reasons to watch the evidence closely, and to adjust if the data shows unintended harm.

What it means for Australian families and readers

For parents: the enforcement law means the regulator can now demand that platforms prove what they are doing. If your child under 16 still has an account, the platform is the party with the legal obligation, not the family. eSafety's website explains how to report an account.

For news readers: in time, the Incentive may mean more funding for Australian newsrooms, particularly smaller ones, which have been hit hardest by the shift of advertising to platforms. It will not, on its own, rebuild local journalism. That will still depend on readers who value it and pay for it where they can.

For everyone: both laws rely on the same principle, that companies operating in Australia must follow Australian law even when they are larger than most governments. That principle is worth defending regardless of one's view of the details.

What to watch next

1. **The first enforcement decision on the age ban.** eSafety said in March it was investigating five platforms. With new information powers in place, will it seek civil penalties in the Federal Court, and against whom?
2. **The first Incentive year.** How many deals will platforms sign, with whom, and how much will reach smaller and regional publishers?
3. **Meta's response.** Will Meta sign deals, pay the charge, or test the law in some other way?
4. **AI.** Will the Government extend the logic of the Incentive to AI services that summarise news, as researchers have urged?
5. **Independent data.** Will the Government publish regular, independent estimates of how many under-16s still hold accounts?

The bottom line

Australia spent its winter of 2026 telling the world's largest technology companies that a workaround is not compliance. The News Bargaining Incentive says that walking away from news does not walk away from the bill. The enforcement law says that announcing results is not the same as proving them.

Plain language for a complicated world: laws are promises, and enforcement is where promises are kept or broken. The next twelve months will show whether these two promises are kept.

Do you think these laws will change how the platforms behave in Australia, or will they find the next workaround?

Sources

- News Media Bargaining Charge Act 2026 and News Media Bargaining (Administration) Act 2026, assented to 26 August 2026; News Journalism Payments Act 2026. Federal Register of Legislation, https://www.legislation.gov.au
- Online Safety Amendment (Strengthening Enforcement for the Social Media Minimum Age) Act 2026, assented to 11 September 2026. Federal Register of Legislation, https://www.legislation.gov.au
- Crimes (Amount of a Penalty Unit) Instrument 2026 (penalty unit of A$364 from 1 July 2026). Federal Register of Legislation, https://www.legislation.gov.au
- AdNews, "Last minute News Bargaining Incentive tweaks 'a meaningful improvement'", 13 August 2026. https://www.adnews.com.au/news/last-minute-news-bargaining-incentive-tweaks-a-meaningful-improvement
- The Hon Daniel Mulino MP and The Hon Anika Wells MP, "Support for Australian journalism passes Parliament", joint media release, 20 August 2026. https://ministers.treasury.gov.au/ministers/daniel-mulino-2025/media-releases/support-australian-journalism-passes-parliament
- The Hon Daniel Mulino MP, "Consultation on the News Bargaining Incentive now open", media release, 28 April 2026. https://ministers.treasury.gov.au/ministers/daniel-mulino-2025/media-releases/consultation-news-bargaining-incentive-now-open
- Press Gazette, "Australia to tax Meta if it doesn't pay news publishers", August 2026. https://pressgazette.co.uk/platforms/australia-to-tax-meta-if-it-doesnt-pay-news-publishers/
- Derek Wilding, "Parliamentary negotiations on platform bargaining", Centre for Media Transition, University of Technology Sydney, 13 August 2026. https://www.uts.edu.au/news/2026/08/parliamentary-negotiations-on-platform-bargaining
- Australian Associated Press (via The Canberra Times), Noah Secomb and Lucinda Garbutt-Young, "Major parties agree on pay-up rules for social media", 13 August 2026. https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/9329395/major-parties-agree-on-pay-up-rules-for-social-media/
- Mumbrella, Nathan Jolly, "News Bargaining Incentive and gambling ad reforms passed in parliament", 21 August 2026. https://mumbrella.com.au/news-bargaining-incentive-and-gambling-ad-reforms-passed-in-parliament-934064
- Prime Minister of Australia and Minister for Communications, "Stronger powers and double the penalties for world-leading social media law", media release, 28 June 2026. https://www.pm.gov.au/media/stronger-powers-and-double-penalties-world-leading-social-media-law

- AdNews, "Penalties doubled for breaches of social media age ban", 29 June 2026. https://www.adnews.com.au/news/penalties-doubled-for-breaches-of-social-media-age-ban
- Australian Associated Press (via Illawarra Mercury), Tess Ikonomou, "Delay to strengthen social media laws 'extraordinary'", 3 July 2026. https://www.illawarramercury.com.au/story/9304138/delay-to-strengthen-social-media-laws-extraordinary/
- The Register, "Australian social media ban enforcement report", 31 March 2026. https://www.theregister.com/2026/03/31/australian_social_media_ban_enforcement_report/
- MLex, "Australian parliament passes bill amending under-16 social-media ban", 14 September 2026. https://www.mlex.com/mlex/data-privacy-security/articles/2524610
- Biometric Update, "Australia expands eSafety powers, doubles penalties in platform accountability push", 11 September 2026. https://www.biometricupdate.com/202609/australia-expands-esafety-powers-doubles-penalties-in-platform-accountability-push

STAY CONNECTED

Follow us on LinkedIn

Enjoyed this edition? Each of these newsletters publishes new pieces on LinkedIn. Subscribe, like and share to read them first, and join the conversation in the comments.



Truth, Translated You are reading this newsletter

Plain language for a complicated world: education, geopolitics, political accountability and Big Tech.

Subscribe on LinkedIn

https://www.linkedin.com/newsletters/truth-translated-7450724196525035520/



Letters of the Heart

Real stories, timeless wisdom, and soul-deep inspiration.

Subscribe on LinkedIn

https://www.linkedin.com/newsletters/letters-of-the-heart-7329273590376210432/



The Hope Dispatch

Uplifting news, inspiring stories, and positive change from around the world.

Subscribe on LinkedIn

https://www.linkedin.com/newsletters/the-hope-dispatch-7338912777081638914/



The HealthTech Herald

The latest breakthroughs at the intersection of health and technology.

Subscribe on LinkedIn

https://www.linkedin.com/newsletters/the-healthtech-herald-7338913774701027328/



Connecting the Dots

Where compliance, risk management, digital innovation, and bottom-line growth intersect.

Subscribe on LinkedIn

https://www.linkedin.com/newsletters/connecting-the-dots-7397392757360648192/

Follow the author: Dr Sukh Rashpal Sandhu on LinkedIn

BACK PAGE

About Truth, Translated

Truth, Translated is a LinkedIn newsletter written by Dr Sukh Rashpal Sandhu. Plain language for a complicated world. Clear takes on education, geopolitics, political accountability and Big Tech.

Read and subscribe

New editions continue to be published on LinkedIn. Search for Truth, Translated on LinkedIn to subscribe.

Disclaimer

The views in this collection are the author's own. Pieces are reproduced as first published, and facts, figures and links are current at their original publication date. Nothing in this collection is legal, financial, medical, migration or regulatory advice.

Copyright

Copyright Dr Sukh Rashpal Sandhu 2026. All rights reserved. Images are reproduced as they appeared in the original posts.

Truth, Translated | Dr Sukh Rashpal Sandhu | sukh@sukhsandhu.com

Masthead

Author: Dr Sukh Rashpal Sandhu

Publisher: Dr Sukh Rashpal Sandhu

Edition: 3, September 2026

Contact: sukh@sukhsandhu.com

Truth, Translated is published on LinkedIn by Dr Sukh Rashpal Sandhu. This edition collects the pieces in the order they were first published, with their original images.