

# The Cherry Ripe and the Shrinking Promise of Higher Education

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*In recent years, many Australians have noticed something unsettling: Cherry Ripe bars seem to have grown smaller while their price has crept steadily upward. What was once a generous, satisfying treat now feels slimmer, lighter, and less substantial—yet more expensive than ever. This small but symbolic shift provides a surprisingly apt metaphor for the state of higher education over the last decade. Universities, much like the shrinking Cherry Ripe, offer a product that looks familiar on the outside but contains less of what once made it feel rich, meaningful, and nourishing, even as the cost to students continues to climb.*

## A Smaller Treat

A decade ago, higher education felt like a robust, full-sized offering: strong funding per student, manageable staff workloads, and a clearer connection between university learning and future opportunity. Today, however, the “portion size” of education has quietly but consistently diminished. Students often receive fewer contact hours, larger class sizes, reduced access to academic staff, and more reliance on casual or sessional lecturers. These changes are not always obvious from the glossy brochures or marketing messages—just as the Cherry Ripe wrapper has not necessarily signalled what’s missing—but the lived experience has shifted. The learning environment feels stretched, lighter, and at times hollowed out. What remains is still recognisably a university experience, but not the one many students of earlier generations would recognise.

## Educational Value

At the same time, the price has risen. Student debt has grown significantly, government contributions per student have fallen in real terms, and many universities have redirected resources toward commercial ventures, branding, digital expansion, or administrative structures that don’t always translate into richer learning. Just as consumers sense the unfairness of paying more for a smaller chocolate bar, students increasingly feel they are investing heavily in a degree while receiving less educational value in return. The emotional response is similar too: frustration, resignation, and a quiet erosion of trust. The product has not disappeared, but the relationship between cost and substance feels misaligned.

## **External Pressures**

The shrinking Cherry Ripe also reflects a deeper structural reality: both the confectionery industry and the higher education sector have responded to external pressures—economic, political, and competitive—by trimming the edges of what they offer while maintaining the illusion of consistency. Universities have been squeezed by funding caps, unpredictable policy changes, global competition, and at times unrealistic expectations for revenue generation. The result is a system that is still wrapped in the bright foil of ambition and aspiration, but whose internal ingredients are stretched thin. What was once dense, rich, and reliably fulfilling may now feel fragmented or compromised, not through lack of care but through accumulated pressures and repeated efforts to do more with less.

*Ultimately, the shrinking Cherry Ripe is a reminder that subtle reductions—fraction by fraction, year by year—can fundamentally alter the value and experience of something people once trusted. Higher education finds itself in the same position. Unless the sector invests in rebuilding substance—supporting staff, enriching teaching, prioritising students, and restoring the integrity of the learning experience—the wrapper may remain, but the centre will continue to diminish. And like any customer who notices that their favourite treat is not what it used to be, students will eventually look elsewhere.*

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