

ACHRC

Australasian Consortium of Humanities Research Centres

Committee Secretary
Senate Education and Employment Committees
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

4 September 2020

Dear Secretary,

I write on behalf of the Advisory Board of the Australasian Consortium of Humanities Research Centres (ACHRC) to make a submission to **the enquiry into the Higher Education Support Amendment (Job-Ready Graduates and Supporting Regional and Remote Students) Bill 2020**. We are anxious to lodge a protest against the prohibitive university fee increases for humanities courses proposed in the Bill. Indeed, it is our conviction that the introduction of the fee changes foreshadowed in the Bill – specifically the dramatic increase in the cost of most humanities courses – implies (and will ensure) the irrelevance of the humanities by openly asking potential humanities students either to think again if they want employment, or to shoulder the burden of the nation’s recovery from COVID-19. The Government’s new university fee scheme may be designed (to quote the Minister) to “incentivise students to make more job-relevant choices, that lead to more job-ready graduates, by reducing the student contribution in areas of expected employment growth and demand”. But it is also designed to *disincentivise* students from making what the government is designating ‘job-irrelevant’ choices, drastically increasing the student contribution in areas like the humanities where the knowledge and skills acquired are assumed to be irrelevant to the new work force. “Universities must teach the skills needed to succeed in the jobs of the future”, we are being told, but **there is ample evidence available to show that the humanities *do* teach the skills required to succeed in the jobs of the future and they certainly should not be used to cross-subsidise science, health, architecture, IT, and engineering.**

The upshot of these differential changes to course fees is that Government will be providing substantially less per Australian student, saving itself around \$1 billion a year in a further renunciation of its responsibility for higher education. More egregiously, **the changes the government is proposing will disproportionately impact the underprivileged – women, working people, mature-age students, and people in minority groups, like Indigenous**

students and students from migrant backgrounds; first-in-family students – making the study of the humanities an elitist pursuit, out of reach of all but the wealthy. This coincides with an historic collapse in university funding from international students. It is unlikely that humanities subjects at the Group of Eight universities will experience a dramatic falling off in demand, but in other universities, especially in the regions, such a policy will no doubt radically reconfigure the choices available to potential students. It is not enough for the Minister to suggest that under the new regime “Students will have the freedom to choose what they want to study”, when the Government has priced what some students want to study out of the market.

The proposed fee restructure undervalues the public benefit of (amongst many other academic pursuits) studies in history, society, and culture. If students respond to the price signal, the nation will suffer a generational loss in its capacity to understand our increasingly complex society and its place in an increasingly complex world. If, on the other hand, students were to ignore the price signal, they would be carrying a wholly disproportionate share of the cost. The dramatically steep increase from cluster 1 to cluster 2 in the new fee model is plainly punitive and manifestly short-sighted. And it makes no educational sense. For example, in the not unlikely event of students wanting to understand our largest neighbour, Indonesia – for cultural and/or business reasons, say – they should be able to choose Indonesian history and religion topics as well as Indonesian language without there being an almost fourfold increase in the cost. A system that puts obstacles in the way of young citizens wanting to acquaint themselves with this close, important, and complex nation is very far from being ‘future-ready’. Indeed, such a system seems to imagine a future world with less social and cultural complexity – an odd and reckless prediction to make in 2020, of all years. Again, students will be warned off putting any Indigenous studies in the mix by the punitive new pricing model. Can the Government honestly say that this is not an area of study vital to our understanding and survival as a progressive and productive nation?

Studying the humanities equips students with valuable skills in advanced analysis and interpretation, creative problem solving, effective communication, and the ability to construct reasoned arguments and to question assumptions. The biggest challenges facing us as a nation will only be solved by building trust, finding a shared language, navigating ambiguity, understanding how human ecosystems work, and creating compelling visions of the future. It is flexible and creative thinking around complex problems in a context of dialogue and collaborative investigation that best feeds enterprise and innovation. We need to understand this, and to conceive and structure our educational offerings accordingly, allowing a generous mixture of the humanities to give the STEM disciplines that the Government is prioritising (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) a much richer soil – socially, ethically, intellectually, imaginatively – in which to flourish. The most successful companies, even or especially the new tech companies, thrive by bringing together the humanities with science and technology.

Clearly, recognising the importance of the humanities to all areas of society, including or especially to the corporate world, has never been more urgent. In making their decision to privilege science, health, architecture, IT, and engineering, the Government invokes the

authority of “key leaders from the [Education] sector and industry”. But **this advice is directly contradicted by the findings of reports like the University of Oxford’s *Humanities Graduates and the British Economy: The Hidden Impact* (Kreager, 2013), the Australian Academy of the Humanity’s *Mapping the Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences in Australia* (Turner and Brass, 2014), and Deloitte Access Economics’ *The Value of the Humanities for Macquarie University* (2017).** Since these reports were published, the skills provided by the humanities and the social sciences have only become more important, not less so, and they are likely to become even more important again to a future economy and society in which many of the jobs projected in the Minister’s proposal have been taken over by intelligent machines.

The Board of the ACHRC asks that the Australian Government provide equitable access to higher education for all people, regardless of what they choose to study, and to put aside these fee increases on the grounds that they will impose a greater burden on aspiring humanities students of the next generation. Reducing the demand for humanities subjects will also threaten the livelihoods of early career humanities scholars who have already suffered most from the cutbacks forced on the universities by COVID-19 and the Government’s unwillingness to offer emergency resources. This in turn will impoverish humanities research and the strength, innovation, and contribution to Australian society made by humanities researchers. By obstructing access to the humanities, these initiatives are destined to lead to a significant dearth of knowledge and expertise and a stifling of diverse voices at a time when Australia is most in need of them.

Sincerely,

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