

I write to take up the invitation to comment on the exposure draft of the Higher Education Support Amendment (Job-ready Graduates and Supporting Regional and Remote Students) Bill 2020. I do not propose to comment on it comprehensively, and I note that there is much to applaud in it, including the encouragement for the stem of STEM subjects which I fully support.

But I must object to the deliberate and systematic bias against the humanities, for the following reasons.

1. The assertion that humanities graduates are not 'job-ready' is specious. They have a record of doing well in a wide range of careers, as a study of employment trends will show. Many of the present government's most trusted advisers (Michael Thawley and Peter Varghese, to name two departmental secretaries) have come into the public service with honours degrees in history; I reached the senior executive level from the same educational background. Carly Fiorina became chief executive of Hewlett Packard with a first degree in medieval history.
2. The policy is illiberal. It is not the business of government, especially a government that claims to believe in individual choice, to dictate what students study. And dictate is what this policy tries to do with its heavy-handed 'incentives' which do not reflect the relative costs of providing degrees. Nor will coercing students into subjects for which they are not suited advantage them or the community. In any case, much of the present expense comes from the suffocating bureaucracy that now surrounds universities and the associated compliance costs, rather than the real cost of teaching or providing (declining) library services.
3. The policy is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the purpose of education. Teaching professional and job skills has a place, but is not the whole of it. Rather, it should be looking to produce informed and responsible citizens with a sound grasp of their own and other countries' histories, societies and cultures as well as an understanding of science and a facility for informed, critical thinking. Arts, culture and history are not frivolous luxuries and personal indulgences but important to a healthy society. Sir Robert Menzies, founder of the modern Liberal Party, spoke eloquently to this point and I refer you to his remarks.

In saying this, I am conscious that there is a degree of illiberality and ideological conformism in parts of the tertiary education sector. If the government finds this a problem, the solution is to engage in the contest of ideas, not by retreating into crude anti-intellectualism and imposing it on the education system.

Yours sincerely

Peter McDonald