

InASA: International Australian Studies Association

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On behalf of the International Australian Studies Association, we write in response to the government's proposed changes to funding of university degrees as outlined in the **Australian Government's Job-ready Graduates Package**.

**We express our concern about the process and timing of the Job-ready Graduates package:**

- first, that this inquiry allows a very short period in which to elicit responses;
- second, that the Government cannot provide evidence that this proposed legislation is based on detailed modelling or consultation;
- and third, that these substantial changes to domestic university funding are being introduced during an unprecedented period of local, national, and global disruption during COVID-19. While Australian universities are reeling from the disruption to their renowned and successful international education—which brings considerable economic, educational, and cultural benefit to the broader Australian public in return—the Government's proposals severely disrupt domestic education funding principles and processes.

As the peak professional body representing Australian Studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences, **InASA shares with the Minister for Education a sense that study of Australian history, culture and society is integral to our national wellbeing, our enviable economic and social stability, and our sense of civic pride and knowledge**. We welcomed the Minister's announcement of the Australian Research Council Special Research Initiative in society, history and culture (Media Release 27 January: [The Hon Dan Tehan MP](#), Minister for Education). Our members have been active participants in this initiative, as applicants, mentors, and members of the ARC assessing and advisory committees, and we welcomed this clear direction from the Minister's office about the importance of Australian-based research and social leadership.

**The legislation for the Job-ready Graduates Package sends a message from Government that is at odds with this previous initiative**. The proposal will reduce overall university funding, while explicitly discouraging students from enrolling in the Humanities-based degrees that fuel the students, courses, and industry-linked initiatives that underpin research into Australian topics.

These proposed changes to Humanities funding do not appear to be based on reliable research about graduate employment, including that commissioned by the Federal Government. Policy research shows that **more than 90% of Humanities graduates are successfully employed post-graduation**. Indeed, they earn more than graduates of sciences and maths ('Humanities graduates earn more than those who study sciences and maths', *The Conversation* 19 June 2020).

These findings tally with industry and employer feedback over many years: that they consider critical thinking, research capacity, and clear communication to be the key, flexible skills that prepare students for job-readiness and employability. According to Deloitte Economics, Humanities graduates offer: a broad range of technical skills; transferable skills that are in high demand from employers; the capacity to solve the 'wicked' problems that the contemporary world manifests (2018 Report). Chief Executive of the Business Council of Australia, Jennifer Westacott, indicated the same in 2016, when she noted that successful business leaders in the twenty-first century would require 'some form of humanities perspective and education'.

Moreover, increased costs for Humanities degrees create a **profound equity problem**. Humanities, Law and Commerce students will accrue significantly increased debt, and dissuade first-in-family students from entering these broad professional spaces. They will exacerbate inequities between universities, with the more elite institutions more likely to attract higher SES students who can afford the exorbitant costs. Women will be particularly impacted by fee changes, with life-long effects exacerbating already inequitable earning potential and economic stability (*The Conversation* "Why degree cost increases will hit women hardest" — <https://theconversation.com/why-degree-cost-increases-will-hit-women-hardest-141614>).

We welcome reduced fees for students, but believe this should be across the board of subject areas and degrees. We also would like to see substantially increased university places to support anticipated growth in domestic demand. We know that Covid-19 has hit youth unemployment especially hard, and universities will be crucial to equip them with skills that they can deploy across their working lives. What we call—and hope—for is a deep and careful rethinking of how we fund the University sector as a whole in the post-COVID landscape, and into the second quarter of the twenty-first century.

There are some parts of the proposed reforms that we welcome:

- the Tertiary Access Payment to assist students from regional and remote areas to relocate for university
- reduced waiting period for students on Youth Allowance, Austudy, and Pensioner Education Supplement to access the Fares Allowance
- establishment of the National Priorities Industry Linkage Fund (NPILF) to support the growth of work-integrated learning at universities. Indeed, work-integrated learning is already common at Australian universities—including in Humanities and creative arts degrees—and having financial resources backing it will improve the ability to generate partnerships, placements and other opportunities for students.

Notwithstanding these aspects, overall we do not support the reform package. Australian university teachers, researchers, and professional staff would be profoundly damaged by the introduction of this legislation as it currently stands, particularly given the dual assault of the financial consequences of the global pandemic. Again, the Government has commissioned research into these pressing issues of national importance, and it would be prudent to make changes based upon evidence. We point, amongst other reports, to *The Australian academic profession in transition: Addressing the challenge of reconceptualising academic work and regenerating the academic workforce* (Bexley, James, and Arkoudis, for the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations 2011). Post-COVID, national sovereignty and security are core issues across many sectors: the destabilisation of Australia's world-class university sector through hasty legislative change poses a major risk. The proposal itself has already attracted unfavourable international media attention, and done reputational damage, particularly in the Humanities and Social Sciences.

The discussion paper on the 'Job-ready Graduates' proposal says 'The Government listens to the higher education sector' (p. 23). We would welcome the opportunity to have a frank discussion with any committee member about the challenges confronting the sector and offer real solutions that would produce better outcomes for students and staff alike.