

CHASS
what makes us human



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

7 September 2020

Dear Secretary

As President of the Council for the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences (CHASS) in Australia, I write on behalf of CHASS in response to the Higher Education Support Amendment (Job-Ready Graduates and Supporting Regional and Remote Students) Bill 2020.

Others have noted that the proposed changes will likely not have the effects the government desires and may have deleterious unintended consequences. I wish to focus on the value of education in HASS disciplines for producing job ready graduates, and the burden the changes will impose on our next generation of Australians, particularly young women.

While encouraging additional students towards the STEM disciplines has some merit, there is no reason to actively dissuade students from studying subjects like criminology, history or philosophy. To do so runs counter to an emerging consensus that current developments in the domestic labour market makes the skills learned in HASS more valuable. Some of the fastest growing job areas for university graduates are new, many of which require exactly the skills and experiences that the study of HASS subjects can provide. Content Specialists, Customer Officers, Data Scientists, and Sustainability Analysts are in high demand. These jobs did not exist five years ago, and a strong humanities or social science degree provides a foundation for working in these and the new, related fields that will inevitably emerge in the coming years. Australia's global position as an English speaking, cosmopolitan society in the Asia Pacific region, with a world-class higher education sector, means that our competitive advantage lies in areas closely aligned to the study of human action and society in all its myriad forms.

For both STEM and HASS graduates, the transition to the labour force is more complex than in the past and efforts to support work-integrated learning and industry engagement are important. However, investment in this area (which we strongly support) should not be narrowly focused for graduates from a small range of disciplines. Emerging high-end manufacturing and STEM-based industries will increasingly require the skills HASS

graduates bring, as reflected in the cross-disciplinary graduate programs that many STEM employers now offer.

HASS is core to universities continuing role as publicly engaged institutions serving the Australian community. The publics that our universities are part of face challenges, involving significant technological, environmental, economic, demographic and cultural changes. The knowledge and insights drawn from the study of HASS are essential to understanding and supporting the publics our universities serve. This is particularly true for universities with a strong place-based mission, for example in regional areas or in the growing outer suburbs of our major cities. To reduce access to the study of history and society at these universities runs counter to the aim of building skills and knowledge relevant to these regions.

I note with concern that the HASS fields that face the largest fee increases tend to have substantially more women than men enrolled in them. The evidence is that while there may be some shifts at the margins, most women will continue to enroll in these subjects, driven by a passion for their fields of study and recognition of the value of the resulting skills to the community. While the proposed changes are unlikely to improve pathways to employment for graduates, they will certainly burden the next generation with debts that will negatively impact on their future careers and family choices. Analysis shows that if this legislation goes forward in its current form young women will be burdened with approximately half a billion dollars more each year in debt as they invest in their education.

Australia needs to invest in higher education to prepare graduates for the jobs of the future, not saddle them with additional debt. I am encouraged by the additional places to be made available to students in coming years, but this cannot be done without investing in the next generation of HASS students as well. The people and place-focused skills that HASS graduates can provide the Australian community are essential. I am hopeful that this bill will not pass in its current form and there will be a rethinking of the legislation, attentive to the important risks and opportunities I have outlined here. CHASS is happy to offer access to its extensive network of HASS expertise – including expertise on the future of work, student choice and outcomes, and on our higher education sector – to assist in redesigning the legislation.

Sincerely

Dan Woodman
TR Ashworth Associate Professor of Sociology
University of Melbourne
President, Council for the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences.

i <https://www.humanities.org.au/issue-item/the-power-of-the-humanities/>
<https://socialsciences.org.au/publications/the-social-sciences-shape-the-nation/>
<https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/publications/skills-qualified-future-quantifying-demand-arts-humanities-social-science/>
ii https://bcec.edu.au/assets/2020/07/Higher-ed-changes_BCEC_FINAL-130720.pdf