



AUSTRALIAN
ANTHROPOLOGICAL
SOCIETY

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

6 September 2020

Dear Committee Secretary,

As President and President Elect of the Australian Anthropological Society (AAS), we write in response to the draft legislation for the Job-ready Graduates Package released last week.

As a member organisation of the Council for the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences (CHASS), the AAS supports the response submitted by CHASS President Dan Woodman on the value of education in HASS disciplines and the burden the changes will impose on our next generation of Australians. We wish to extend these arguments by focusing on one aspect of the legislative package: the redesign of the funding clusters and student contribution bands.

The Discussion Paper for this legislation explains that the proposed changes respond to a “need to increase the level of support going to fields of study that will contribute to national priorities and future prosperity” (p. 16). Among the most radical changes proposed is a dramatic increase in the cost of a degree for students studying in the fields of humanities, arts, and social sciences. These measures, designed to disincentivise students from HASS degrees, are based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the kinds of skills graduates need to be job-ready now and into the future.

Australian government research shows that students who major in arts, humanities, and social sciences are actually *more employable* than science graduates. According to the government’s own Graduate Outcome Survey, in 2019, 90% of the graduates in humanities, culture, and social sciences (HCSS) were participating in the labour force, while only 84.1% of graduates in science and mathematics were. What’s more, the data clearly show a steady rate of full time employment for HCSS and a *downward* trend for science and maths over the past two years. From 2018 to 2019, the number of science and maths graduates employed full time dropped from 64.6% to 63.4%, while HCSS graduates maintained a steady level of full time employment of 64.3 in 2018 and 2019.¹

The skills taught in HASS degrees are in high demand. The World Economic Forum has argued that the three most important skills needed by university graduates to “thrive in the

fourth industrial revolution” are complex problem-solving, critical thinking, and creativity.² As Professor Susan Forde has pointed out, “If the government listened to business leaders, they would encourage humanities education, not pull funds from it”.³ Chief Executive of the Business Council of Australia Jennifer Westacott, for example, observed that the study of humanities produce “people who can ask the right questions, think for themselves, explain what they think, and turn those ideas into actions.”⁴

The same government data in the Graduate Outcome Survey further show that median salaries of arts graduates are slightly higher than those with maths and science degrees.¹ Yet, many HASS graduates choose their course of study because they want to make a difference in society and give something back to their communities, not because they are seeking high salaries. Under the proposed legislation HASS students will pay more for their degrees than students in other fields like dentistry where starting salaries are significantly higher.

If the disincentives embedded in this legislation work, Australians will be worse off. Fewer graduates will have the skills necessary for the work of the future. However, some have argued that price incentives do not work well in higher education.⁵ If this is the case, then the consequence of this legislation will be that HASS students are burdened with much higher levels of debt. The CHASS response to this draft legislation highlighted how this will disproportionately affect women, negatively impacting their future careers and family choices. We wish to add that Indigenous students are also likely to be disproportionately affected by increases in student contributions. Society and Culture is the top field for Indigenous enrolments, meaning that 33% of all Indigenous students enrolled in Universities will pay nearly \$8000 more annually for their degrees.

We support many of the aims of the legislation, particularly the intention to create more opportunities for regional, remote and Indigenous students and support universities to produce graduates who are prepared to do meaningful work in a challenging and swiftly changing environment. However, as we have pointed out, these intentions will not be achieved by the draft legislation as it stands. The proposed redesign of the funding clusters and student contribution bands will effectively undermine the stated aims of encouraging universities to produce job-ready graduates and improving outcomes for Indigenous students. We urge policy makers to rethink this aspect of the draft legislation.

This legislation is driven, in part, as a response to the unprecedented crisis of COVID-19. The Discussion Paper has identified the fact that the “higher education system has a critical role to play in supporting Australians through this period” (p. 4). It predicts an increased demand for higher education and states that it “is critical that we provide extra capacity in the system to respond to these demand pressures” (p. 4). We urge you to redesign this legislation in a way that recognises the distinct contributions that different disciplines make to a healthy society and a thriving economy. The COVID-19 crisis is a good case-in-point for the importance of a range of degrees. We need biologists to understand the virus, we need healthcare professionals to treat the sick, and we need engineers to create respirators. But viruses don’t spread themselves. Humans spread viruses through social interaction. So if we want to understand how to stop a pandemic, we need anthropologists to study human cultures and

how we interact with each other. We need communications majors to get out the message about how to change behaviours that spread disease. We need journalists to report outbreaks. We need philosophers to examine how the pandemic is changing government intervention in our intimate lives. We need legal scholars debating the constitutionality of lockdown laws during protest movements. We need economists figuring out how to manage the biggest economic downturn since the Great Depression. Any legislative changes to higher education support should reflect the value of all disciplines and support individual choice when it comes to education.

Sincerely

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¹ <https://www.qilt.edu.au/docs/default-source/gos-reports/2019-gos/2019-gos-national-report.pdf>

² http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_Future_of_Jobs.pdf; <https://australianjobs.employment.gov.au/jobs-future/skills-future>

³ <https://theconversation.com/if-the-government-listened-to-business-leaders-they-would-encourage-humanities-education-not-pull-funds-from-it-141121>

⁴ https://www.bca.com.au/the_true_value_of_humanities

⁵ <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/uni-fee-overhaul-won-t-change-demand-or-affordability-hecs-architect-20200619-p5549a.html>