



# Australian Historical Association

29/7/2020

Rebekha Sharkie MP  
PO Box 1601  
Mt Barker  
SA 5251

Dear Ms Sharkie MP,

On behalf of the Australian Historical Association, I am writing to request that you oppose the Commonwealth government's proposed changes to university funding. The changes reduce total funding to universities and, at the same time, greatly increase the cost to students of studying subjects such as history. If the stated intention of the policy were to be realised, it would greatly diminish the level of professional competence in history in Australia, with likely effects on the quality of history teaching in schools, the expertise available to public institutions where history graduates have long been prominent, and the vitality of the national culture and debate.

From our perspective as the national professional organisation for historians in Australia, a major problem is the 113% increase in fees for most humanities and social sciences subjects. The high cost of obtaining a degree in these fields will laden history graduates with an unreasonable debt compared to many other graduates. The low cost of delivering such a degree will mean that such students will be subsidising the education of graduates who will likely earn more than them in the future.<sup>1</sup> Such pricing creates a significant equity problem and may well dissuade first-generation/first-in-family and rural/regional students from studying the humanities and social sciences, pursuing careers in fields such as history teaching, and participating in opportunities for lifelong learning. Further, while the policy notes that breadth is to be encouraged, those pursuing STEM degrees will be actively discouraged from enrolling in electives in the humanities which would help them to develop ethical, creative, and historically informed thinking.

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<sup>1</sup> Frank Bongiorno, "Oh, the humanities", *The Monthly*, 22 June 2020, <https://www.themonthly.com.au/blog/frank-bongiorno/2020/22/2020/1592791777/oh-humanities#mtr>



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The premise regarding employability underlying the proposals is not supported by evidence. Employment data shows that humanities graduates such as those in history are employed at a greater rate than graduates from maths and science.<sup>2</sup> Feedback from employer groups suggests that humanities and social sciences graduates are valued for their communication skills, information literacy, and adaptability – attributes which are essential in a rapidly changing economy.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, such courses teach students the importance of critical thinking and historical context – vital skills in the volatile context of Australia’s strategic, policy and environmental challenges. The ability of the public service to provide sound and reliable advice to Australia’s leaders will be diminished if it is not staffed with a cohort of staff who are well-versed in Australia’s social, political, and economic past.

Finally, the changes represent an unreasonable and damaging policy response at a critical time when Australian universities are facing enormous financial challenges. The immediate trigger for these has been COVID-19, the largest public health crisis for over one hundred years, and the loss of international student revenue. We understand that how universities are funded and their essential role in Australian society requires continuing scrutiny. We believe in a strong and healthy tertiary sector, one that can educate the next generations and help Australians address the profound challenges of the next decades. These proposed changes will do none of that.

For these reasons, I urge you to encourage your party colleagues to reject the proposed changes when the legislation comes before the Senate. I would be happy to discuss this further with you.

Yours Sincerely

Professor Melanie Oppenheimer FASSA  
AHA President

Professor of History, Flinders University

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<sup>2</sup> Peter Hurley, “Humanities graduates earn more than those who study science and maths”, *The Conversation*, 19 June 2020, <https://theconversation.com/humanities-graduates-earn-more-than-those-who-study-science-and-maths-141112>

<sup>3</sup> Deloitte Access Economics, *The Value of the Humanities*, July 2018, <https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/au/Documents/Economics/deloitte-au-economics-value-humanities-111018.pdf>