

Open Letter to the Prime Minister: Restoring Equity in Higher Education

We write as individuals with a range of political beliefs whose contributions to Australian life owe significantly to our Bachelor of Arts (BA) degrees. We are deeply concerned that younger Australians today have fewer opportunities than we had to undertake studies in the humanities and social sciences (the core disciplines of a BA). One reason for this contraction of opportunity is the Job-ready Graduates (JRG) Package that the Morrison government introduced in 2021. The Labor caucus at the time criticised the JRG bill for being “inequitable, “pernicious,” and “perverse.” The inequity of JRG is even more stark when we realise that the humanities and social sciences have traditionally been popular choices for Indigenous, regional, and female students.

A Flawed Policy with Damaging Impact

During the debate over the JRG bill, Labor Senators correctly noted that the peculiar targeting of the humanities and social sciences on the grounds of their graduates not being job-ready was also “wrong”. They noted that these disciplines “offer students robust generalist educations, with strong employment prospects upon completion ... [T]he evidence is that, three years after completion, [arts] graduates are employed at the same rate as science or maths graduates.”

Subsequent research, in Australia and elsewhere, confirms this remains the case. The 2024 Australian Universities Accord Final Report declared that the JRG package had “failed.” It highlighted that many more students now face crushing debts, with fees for most BAs approaching \$50,000, and, at the same time, that arts disciplines “critical for future jobs and innovation” are being reduced.

We are profoundly disappointed that the Albanese government has still not acted on its 2021 convictions and repealed JRG. The delay has had cascading and damaging consequences. While overall enrolments suggest continued student interest in the humanities and social sciences, the data is skewed by Group of Eight Universities. Enrolments for many humanities and social science units at other universities—those often favoured by Indigenous, regional and female students—are falling. These universities have, as a result, cut their offerings, made staff redundant, and reduced student choice further. Even Group of Eight universities with stable numbers have interpreted the government’s messaging as a cue to reduce their investment in humanities and social sciences programs.

The Need for Change and the Value of the Humanities and Social Sciences

The need to replace JRG with a fairer and more effective policy could not be more urgent. In an era of severe international turmoil, climate crisis, rising disinformation, and declining trust in democratic principles, a higher education in subjects that stress global knowledges, reasoned debate, and civic literacy is paramount. Graduates of the humanities and social sciences are well placed to address the meaning and source of many of the hatreds and

prejudices driving the world today. Their core skill is in critical and analytical thinking. And through their comparative, historical, or philosophical studies, they understand the singular fragility of democracy.

As our nation faces uncertain geopolitical trends, we must also ask ourselves: if younger Australians do not undertake the study of our region, our contexts, our antiquity, our heritage, and our values, who, precisely, will?

The emphasis of the humanities and social sciences on deep understanding and adaptable proficiencies over narrow training always has been, and always will be, their greatest strength. The diverse careers of the undersigned show that studying arts prepares graduates for a remarkable range of professions. Many members of parliament, indeed, hold a BA degree, including Dan Tehan, who introduced the JRG policy, and the current Minister of Education, Jason Clare.

Our Call to Action

We urge you to abolish JRG and to institute a new fee regime which does not punish students who choose to study the humanities and social sciences. Our university sector should instead reflect the values of a society that takes a humane and ethical responsibility for its past and future.

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Signatories:

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