



The study of the past and telling its stories are critical to our sense of belonging, to our communities and to our shared future.

[Value of History Statement](#)

SUBMISSION: Higher Education Reform Package 2020

Professional Historians Australia (PHA) opposes the proposed amendments to fees that would substantially increase student contributions to studying humanities subjects at university. PHA is not convinced that these changes will meet the intended goal of the package, to create more job-ready graduates. Moreover, it considers the package takes too narrow a view of how to measure the returns of higher education to Australian society.

About us

Professional Historians Australia (PHA) represents over 500 professionally accredited historians across all Australian states and territories. Professional historians are trained to research and present history in many different ways and for broad audiences. They work in government departments, universities, schools, museums and galleries, private firms (usually in the heritage sector), libraries, archives, local councils, the media and as sole traders and consultants. They research an array of subjects, from community and company histories to heritage. They undertake family and oral history projects and curate exhibitions. Their work is published in a variety of formats such as books, information pamphlets, heritage reports, exhibitions, walking tour apps, websites and in the media.

Our objections

PHA is in favour of some of the stated aims of the Job-Ready Graduate's Package, namely to create more opportunities for regional and remote students, to encourage greater participation by Indigenous students in universities, and to ensure transparency and accountability for all those investing in the system.

However, PHA is very concerned that the structure of the package not only underestimates the value of the humanities to the Australian economy, but also to liberal democracy. The new fee costings are neither fair nor transparent.

Predicting skills needs and student choices

The measures assume that governments can predict labour and skill demand, despite a strong body of research providing evidence to the contrary. There is only a loose match between the qualifications that people have and the jobs they do. Nor, as a senior Education Department official told the Senate recently, is it possible to predict students' subject choices. For these reasons, as well as the less mentioned but important fact that education has value beyond its economic returns, governments would be wiser to be less prescriptive about telling people what to study or what jobs they may end up in. What is easier to predict is that in the knowledge economy, where routine tasks are increasingly being outsourced to machines, human workers need a broad set of sophisticated soft skills. For years, employers have been

calling for graduates who are creative, innovative, and flexible critical thinkers. This is where history and the humanities come in. Studying history can cultivate strong analytical skills. By thinking about context and contingency, and by appreciating the complexity and limitations of human endeavour, students of history cultivate transferable skills that can be applied in many vocations: politics, journalism, public service and other administration, teaching, as well as in the nation's cultural institutions. Historians develop the ability to process and synthesise vast amounts of information; a crucial skill in our world overflowing with information. Like all humanities, history also teaches verbal and written communication skills.

Costings

The background paper that accompanies the package does not adequately explain the rationale for the fee hikes. It does not, for example, set out why languages are more in demand in the labour market than other subjects in the humanities and social sciences, nor how costs of delivery are calculated. Further, as respected experts on higher education policy like Andrew Norton have observed, the proposed arrangements are likely to have perverse effects on the subjects universities offer and the number of new places to be offered in 2021, precisely when demand may be higher because of the economic downturn. This is in part due to how universities will manage an overall reduction in the funding they receive, as well as measures to ensure currently enrolled students do not have to pay more next year. This 'grandfathering' does not, however, take account of those Year 12 students who had to make decisions about their final-year subjects well before these reforms were mooted: this is very unfair on a cohort of students already massively disrupted by COVID-19.

Given studying history can impart the very skills valued by employers, this is precisely the wrong time to make history an expensive subject, thereby particularly discouraging those students from lower socio-economic backgrounds who are especially sensitive about the debt they will accrue. The current proposal threatens to create another inequity, where only those willing to take on a much higher HECS debt will be in a position to study history properly.

The role of history in the nation and the regions

Higher education is about more than getting a paid job. It is also a process that helps individuals make sense of the world. Studying the past offers insights into the present. Equally important is the role of history, and the humanities more broadly, in telling the national story and informing participation in civil society and democracy. These are subjects that must be taught in schools, and therefore studied comprehensively by future teachers. One single unit of study is no substitute for proper historical training in preparation both for the profession and for a career in teaching.

The reform package purports to support regional development. The Indigenous, European and multicultural histories and heritage of the regions are central to Australia's national identity. The study of these histories needs to be encouraged and expanded across the education system. In addition, these are facets that underpin regional tourism and can contribute to the diversification and growth of regional economies. Again, this is precisely the wrong time to discourage students from learning about the past.

Summary

Professional Historians Australia believes that the proposed legislation to restructure university finances will have a detrimental effect on Australia's future economy and society. The 'Job-ready Graduates' package will reduce university funding overall and therefore reduce opportunities for many, including in those areas of study identified as critical to future employment. The increase in costs for humanities and history degrees will discourage students across the socio-economic spectrum, while conversely encouraging universities to push those degrees to make up the shortfall in government funding. The skills developed by history degrees, including critical thinking, analysis and creative communication, are crucial to the future of Australia's economy and society, and should not be restricted to a small cohort of the population. To deplete the nation of history and humanities graduates and researchers would be a short-sighted move, with negative consequences for Australia's political and cultural fabric, as well as its workforce.



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