

InASA: International Australian Studies Association

President: Professor Noah Riseman, Australian Catholic University
Vice-President: Associate Professor Anna Johnston, University of Queensland
Secretary: Dr Michelle Carey, Murdoch University
Treasurer: Dr Melissa Harper, University of Queensland



ABN: 18 096 245 445

Senator Rex Patrick
PO Box 6100
Senate
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
senator.patrick@aph.gov.au

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Dear Senator Patrick,

On behalf of the International Australian Studies Association, we write to encourage you to oppose the government's proposed changes to the funding of university degrees. The proposal will reduce overall university funding, while discouraging students from enrolling in Humanities-based degrees.

The government argues that the proposed changes will maximise students' employment opportunities, but policy research shows that **more than 90% of Humanities graduates are successfully employed post-graduation**. Indeed, they earn more than graduates of sciences and maths ('Humanities graduates earn more than those who study sciences and maths', *The Conversation* 19 June 2020).

These findings tally with industry and employer feedback over many years: that they consider critical thinking, research capacity, and clear communication to be the key, flexible skills that prepare students for job-readiness and employability. According to Deloitte Economics, Humanities graduates offer: a broad range of technical skills; transferable skills that are in high demand from employers; the capacity to solve the 'wicked' problems that the contemporary world manifests (2018 Report). Chief Executive of the Business Council of Australia, Jennifer Westacott, indicated the same in 2016, when she noted that successful business leaders in the twenty-first century would require 'some form of humanities perspective and education'.

Moreover, increased costs for humanities degrees create a **profound equity problem**. They will load Humanities, Law and Commerce students with significantly increased debt, and **dissuade first-in-family students** from entering these broad professional spaces. They will exacerbate inequities between universities, with the more elite institutions more likely to attract higher SES students who can afford the exorbitant costs.

The attention on Humanities degrees has distracted from a sector-wide challenge hidden in the detail of the fee structure. The proposed changes represent a **drop in overall funding for universities**, given that many of the courses with reduced student rates have overall reductions in total cost. This table published in *The Australian* illustrates the hidden costs well:

HOW THE FUNDING SYSTEM WILL WORK



| | Current system \$ | | | New system \$ | | | Change \$ | Percent |
|-----------------------|-------------------|--------|--------|---------------|--------|--------|-----------|---------|
| | Federal | HELP | Total | Federal | HELP | Total | | |
| Law | 2237 | 11,355 | 13,592 | 1100 | 14,500 | 15,600 | 2008 | 15% |
| English | 6226 | 6804 | 13,030 | 13,500 | 3700 | 17,200 | 4170 | 32% |
| Teaching | 11,462 | 6804 | 18,266 | 13,500 | 3700 | 17,200 | -1066 | -6% |
| Maths | 11,015 | 9698 | 20,713 | 13,500 | 3700 | 17,200 | -3513 | -17% |
| Creative arts | 13,547 | 6804 | 20,351 | 13,500 | 7700 | 21,200 | 849 | 4% |
| Communications | 13,547 | 6804 | 20,351 | 1100 | 14,500 | 15,600 | -4751 | -23% |
| Nursing | 15,125 | 6804 | 21,929 | 16,500 | 3700 | 20,200 | -1729 | -8% |
| Engineering | 19,260 | 9698 | 28,958 | 16,500 | 7700 | 24,200 | -4758 | -16% |
| Science | 19,260 | 9698 | 28,958 | 16,500 | 7700 | 24,200 | -4758 | -16% |
| Environmental studies | 24,446 | 9698 | 34,144 | 16,500 | 7700 | 24,200 | -9944 | -29% |

Source: Department of Education, Skills and Employment

Furthermore, there is no sign that the government will significantly lift the caps on domestic student numbers, meaning that these changes will fail to fill revenue gaps effectively. This is further devastation for a sector already reeling from the loss of international student revenue.

We welcome reduced fees for students, but believe this should be across the board of subject areas and degrees. We also would like to see substantially increased university places to support anticipated growth in domestic demand. What we call – and hope – for is a deep and careful rethinking of how we fund the University sector as a whole in the post-COVID landscape, and into the second quarter of the twenty-first century.

In 2014, when this government last attacked university funding and wanted to shift costs to students, Centre Alliance stood proud in the Senate on the side of university students, staff and principles of equity. We ask that you do so again by rejecting this proposal.

We would be very happy to discuss the ramifications of the proposal with you in more detail, as well as other broader issues around higher education and research funding.

Yours Faithfully,

Professor Amanda Nettelbeck

University of Adelaide
Executive Member, International Australian Studies Association

Professor Noah Riseman

Australian Catholic University
President, International Australian Studies Association