



13/8/20

The Hon. Dan Tehan, MP
190 Gray Street,
Hamilton
VIC 3300

Dear Minister Tehan,

On behalf of the Australian Historical Association, I am writing to request that you withdraw the Commonwealth government's proposed changes to university student fees and funding arrangements. 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 particular 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. 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.

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. Feedback from employer groups suggests that humanities



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and social sciences graduates are valued for their communication skills, information literacy, and adaptability – attributes which are essential in a rapidly changing economy. 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. That crisis has itself underlined the importance of historical expertise, as decision-makers have turned to analyses of past crises such as the Spanish Influenza pandemic or the 1930s Great Depression for guidance in dealing with the present one. Government policy decisions, however, threaten to deepen the current crisis and make the sector more vulnerable.

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 withdraw the proposed changes. I would be happy to discuss this further with you.

Yours Sincerely

A handwritten signature in purple ink that reads 'Melanie Oppenheimer'.

Professor Melanie Oppenheimer FASSA
AHA President