



8/9/20

Committee Secretary
Senate Education and Employment Committees
PO Box 6100, Parliament House
Canberra
ACT 2600

Re: Higher Education Support Amendment (Job Ready Graduates and Supporting Regional and Remote Students) Bill 2020

Dear Senators,

On behalf of the Australian Historical Association, I am writing to request that the Senate Education and Employment Committee recommends withdrawal of 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 studying a range of courses including 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 and workplaces where history graduates have long been prominent, and the vitality of our national culture and debate.

From our perspective as the national professional organisation for historians in Australia with over 800 members, a major problem is the 113% increase in fees for most humanities and social sciences subjects. History falls into this category. The high cost of obtaining a degree in these fields will burden 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/Indigenous 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 due to their cost; elective subjects which would help them to develop ethical, creative, and historically informed thinking, vital skills for navigating a post-Covid world.

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.¹ 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.² 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.

Case Study

One specific, and recent, example of how important historical expertise is to Australian society is the posthumous award of the Victoria Cross for Australia to Ordinary Seaman ‘Teddy Sheean’.

¹ 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>

² 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>



The award was recommended by the 2020 Historic VC – Expert Panel, which investigated previously unexamined primary sources held in archives managed by the National Institute for Defence Studies in Tokyo (NIDS). Through connections held by Dr Steve Bullard, it was discovered that the records of the Japanese bomber and fighter squadrons involved in the attack on *HMAS Armidale* had survived the war. Translations of these documents allowed for confirmation of claims that were treated as conjecture by the Australian Official History in the 1950s.

Analysis of these documents by historians revealed new and compelling evidence that supported two crucial justifications for Ordinary Seaman Sheean’s award. Dr Brad Manera investigated Japanese reports of ammunition expenditure to reconstruct the events of December 1942. The high expenditure of 7.7mm ammunition (which is useless against the steel hull of a warship) demonstrated that multiple strafing runs were conducted by Japanese planes against survivors in the water and crewmen attempting to abandon ship. Dr Manera comments “it must have been the sight of the machine gunning of helpless sailors struggling in the sea that inspired Sheean’s calculated and heroic act of self-sacrifice.” Furthermore, these documents confirmed that two of the seven large, twin-engined ‘Betty’ bombers from the 753rd Japanese Naval Air Group were damaged during the attack on *Armidale* – damage that was, in all probability, inflicted by Sheean.

This evidence was critical to convincing the Historic VC – Expert Panel to recommend to the Prime Minister that Ordinary Seaman Sheean be awarded the Victoria Cross. It was provided by professional, trained historians, using primary source documents and analytical skills developed at university. The proposed changes to university funding, increasing humanities degrees by 113%, will threaten the development and retention of this kind of expertise in Australia and put it out of reach for many young Australian students particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. The increases will reduce the chances that grave injustices of the past, such as the disregarding of Sheean’s bravery, will be corrected.

We understand that how universities are funded and their essential role in Australian society requires ongoing 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 recommend withdrawal of the proposed legislation and instead invite the Commonwealth government to go back to the drawing board and revise their higher education policies. The AHA would welcome the opportunity to assist in this regard as we have considerable expertise and experience available in our membership base. I would be happy to discuss this further with you.

Yours Sincerely

Professor Melanie Oppenheimer FASSA
AHA President