

Exposure draft for the Higher Education Support Amendment (Job-ready Graduates and Supporting Regional and Remote Students) Bill 2020.

Submission from History Council of Victoria
By email to: Hereform@dese.gov.au

The History Council of Victoria welcomes this opportunity to make a submission on the exposure draft for the Higher Education Support Amendment (Job-ready Graduates and Supporting Regional and Remote Students) Bill 2020.

In particular, the Council expresses its opposition to the proposed increase in the cost of Humanities degrees. [We note in passing that History has in fact disappeared altogether from the new funding clusters envisaged by the legislation (p. 18 of the “Job-ready Graduates Discussion Paper”).]

The Minister has explicitly justified the increases in the costs of Humanities courses because – Languages aside – they do not produce “job-ready” graduates. Our argument is that the Minister and the “Job-ready Graduates Discussion Paper” have failed to produce evidence for this claim.

On the contrary, we argue for the special place of the Humanities, and especially History, in equipping students with developed and employable skills to make judgments about complex issues on the basis of conflicting evidence, to express complicated ideas clearly and to interrogate the bases of human behaviour.

The History Council of Victoria endorses the opening statement of the “Job-ready Graduates Discussion Paper” (p. 3) that “A strong economic recovery will depend on knowledge-intensive jobs held by Australians who are highly skilled, creative and flexible.”

Our national Academy of the Humanities has pointed in detail to the employment of Humanities graduates in teaching, the public service, the arts and recreation. Humanities are the fibre of so much of the innovation, creativity and joy in our culture.

Humanities graduates make careers, even if not in as linear a way as other graduates. The Minister’s stated contrast in the outcomes of STEM and Humanities education flies in the face of evidence from here and overseas.

In 2012 the Gillard government funded the Securing Australia’s Future project to be delivered by ACOLA, the Australian Council of Learned Academies (Science, Social Sciences, Humanities, and Technology and Engineering).

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Chief Scientist Ian Chubb, then Alan Finkel and Michael Barber oversaw eleven multidisciplinary projects ranging from new technologies to education and regional engagement. The eleven project reports were completed in 2017 under the Abbott government.

The final report identified education as one of the five “golden threads” running through the eleven projects, emphasizing both the importance of STEM and of ensuring the excellence of every branch of education.

In particular, the project on “skills and capabilities for Australian enterprise innovation” conducted interviews with managers of the most innovative enterprises in Australia and found them characterized by “people and teams with a mix of skills” and “broad knowledge bases”, including the Humanities.

Overseas quantitative analysis supports this view. In 2013 a US survey of 318 businesses with 25 or more employees showed that nearly all of them thought that the ability to “think critically, communicate clearly, and solve complex problems”—the precise objectives of a Humanities education—was more important than a job candidate's specific major.

The chief executive officers of 30 mostly high-tech companies in Canada — ranging from IBM and Xerox to Motorola— have issued a statement noting that many of their workers began their education in the Humanities.

In their words, “This was time well spent, not squandered. They have increased their value to our companies, our economy, our culture and themselves, by acquiring the level of cultural and civic literacy that the humanities offer.”

The proposed fee increases are an extraordinary and unprecedented initiative to dissuade students from studying History at a time when we can hardly over-estimate the civic importance of a perspective which emphasizes cultural understanding, careful judgement, flexibility of outlook and respect for difference. In a multi-cultural society in a globalising world, that is fundamental.

The Minister of Education would do better to encourage students to embrace their academic interests – whatever they are – with verve and enthusiasm. We urge him to do so.

Yours faithfully,

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