



DSAA
Development Studies Association of Australia

Att. Hon. Dan Tehan
Minister for Education

14th August 2020

Dear Minister,

The Development Studies Association of Australia joins the chorus of voices expressing grave concern at the the draft legislation for the Job- ready Graduates Package released this week. We believe that the changes will have detrimental impacts on Australia's ability to face the challenges of the 21st Century in ways that are fair, just, and that ensure the well-being of future generations.

Our concerns relate to two aspects of the policy announcement: the decision to reduce overall funding per student by almost \$2,000, with average funding now below the cost of teaching, and; the dramatic increase in the fees (113%) for most Humanities and Social Sciences (HASS) courses.

We share the concerns already expressed by academic colleagues as to:ⁱ

- the lack of evidence base providing a rationale for the changes;
- an alarming discourse that falsely projects HASS graduates as less job-ready than Science, Technology and Maths (STEM) graduates: a discourse which contradicts both the Australian Graduate Outcomes survey and the demand for Arts degrees by employees as argued by the World Economic Forum and business leaders in Australia;ⁱⁱ
- the deleterious impact on the capacity of universities to provide a quality learning experience for students due to reduced funding;

In addition to these important points, we wish to highlight from the perspective of Development Studies the potentially negative consequences of this policy for future generations of Australians.

Technical and scientific interventions fail if social and cultural considerations are ignored

Experience has demonstrated that technological and scientific interventions in agriculture, health, infrastructure can fail, or are less effective, if they do not take into account an understanding of cultures, social relations, power and politics, local histories and transnational connections. Development Studies as a field has revealed the often unequal and inequitable outcomes, and adverse consequences of ignoring socio-historic conditions in aid and development programs. These lessons are equally applicable when considering scientific and technological interventions in Australia. Development Studies views STEM and HASS as necessarily interconnected, and both must be invested in if we want to face the challenges of effective and sustainable futures.

A political class and public service unrepresentative of Australia's population

Ample evidence points to the need for elected representatives and public servants in government departments to be broadly representative of the people that they serve.ⁱⁱⁱ Data shows that an Arts degree is the most common qualification of people holding such positions. We are concerned that disincentivising these degrees for people from a diversity of life experiences, will result in an even more homogenous, elite and unrepresentative political and decision-making class. We need leaders familiar with the struggles of everyday Australians, and knowledgeable about diverse Australian and global cultures and histories.

The need for qualified workers for a growing Humanitarian and Development Sector

The Development and Humanitarian field is likely to see significant growth in need and employment opportunities in coming years, with the impacts of Covid-19, population growth and climate change driving large numbers of people into more vulnerable situations globally, and fuelling intra-state and inter-state conflict. International and national non-government organisations, multilateral agencies and private sector companies



require graduates with the skills and knowledge to effectively work in this sector. Graduates of Australian Development Studies courses are extremely ‘job-ready’, and penalising students opting for job-ready courses in a growing, charity-focussed profession like this—with \$50,000 degree debts—is counterproductive in every way.

Detrimental to Australia’s position and relations in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond

Graduates from Humanities and Social Sciences—including Development Studies—are critical to Australia’s ability to maintain mutually beneficial relations within the Indo-Pacific that advance our national strategic interests. Mutual understanding, effective communication, and cultural literacy are all critical to the ability of Australians to work with our partners in the Indo-Pacific. While we welcome the reduction in fees for language training, we agree with the Asian Studies Association of Australia that HASS courses are essential for students to “learn about the societies using those languages and acquire the contextual knowledge needed to make their language skills useful in the job market”.

Inequitable burden placed on youth

From young voters’ perspective, the fee change means they now must pay up to 90%. This is a shocking increase, which is especially traumatic for current students who have endured a year of interrupted studies due to COVID-19. This change in fee structure means future generations of young Australians will have no choice but to shoulder the major burden of the detrimental economic impact of responses to COVID-19, and an impending global economic recession. Rather than unfairly place the burden on the next generation, the Government should make higher education accessible for all, in recognition that young people are the future of this country.

In sum, we condemn the use of the COVID-19 crisis to ostensibly ‘rationalise’ deeply damaging higher educational reform targeting the humanities and social sciences. We see grave costs and consequences for this action, and urge the minister to reconsider.

Sincerely

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Associate Professor Bina Fernandez, Vice President DSAA
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ⁱ https://www.aas.asn.au/content.aspx?page_id=22&club_id=143481&module_id=404873;
<https://www.chass.org.au/media-releases/letter-from-hass-associations-opposing-changes-to-hass-degree-fees/>

ⁱⁱ <https://theconversation.com/if-the-government-listened-to-business-leaders-they-would-encourage-humanities-education-not-pull-funds-from-it-141121>

ⁱⁱⁱ Case in point, the esteemed former Secretary of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, Peter Sherbold, had an undergraduate degree in Political Science and American studies.