

17.8.2020

Dear Minister Tehan

We are writing to you in response to the exposure draft for the Higher Education Support Amendment. The Australian Council of Deans and Directors of Creative Arts (DDCA) and the Australian Council of University Art & Design Schools (ACUADS) are peak bodies representing the Creative Arts HE sector in Australia.

While we are encouraged to see recognition in the funding proposal for the Creative Arts due to its significant contribution to current and future jobs in the creative and allied industries in Australia, as well as the targeted support for indigenous and regional students, we must highlight potential long-term and detrimental effects posed by the policy changes to the programs offered by our colleagues in the arts and humanities sector in general.

Many students choose to study arts and humanities because they want a greater understanding of their society and wish to ultimately contribute to the world in a positive way, through cultural employment or the health sector, but often by bringing flexible skills in critical thinking to broader employment and societal needs. Many in creative arts degrees may also choose to incorporate arts and humanities courses for this reason. The assumptions about future work in a post COVID world in the proposed funding model therefore do not seem to match the vast amounts of research that point to a future workforce that is dependent on the arts, sciences and other sectors working together. Universities need to continue to promote interdisciplinary teaching and research that is underpinned by equitable funding, so that students make choices about their education not because of cost, but based on their abilities, the needs of the future workforce and innovation opportunities.

The nature of work has been fundamentally disrupted; this is expected to continue, indeed to accelerate. As we move into a more automated workforce where much manual work will be replaced by robotics and AI, creative and empathetic graduates will be in great demand as we learn how to humanise our technologies. Again, research tells us that engineers, business and IT graduates will need creative and human skills to enable them to operate and sustain careers in an increasingly disruptive world. This is where creative graduates will drive new thinking, will invent and lead new work and will forge a link between the arts, humanities and the sciences to lead the way to new employment opportunities. The proposed funding model seems to encourage a limited path where students are encouraged to acquire STEM skills by the attractive cost of teaching units. A more equitable funding model would drive interaction both ways, generating STEAM graduates who are ready for a global workforce, a point made clear in any research that has investigated the limits of STEM education. It would also support the intrinsic value of the arts and humanities.

Our peak bodies are struggling with the notion that some students will be advantaged in the proposed model by disadvantaging others, based on their chosen discipline. This seems fundamentally unfair. In particular, a degradation of the arts and humanities in higher education through this funding model will disincentivise study for female, regional, Indigenous and first family at University students, producing an elite education system that lacks diversity in HASS students, while STEM study appears privileged over other disciplines (although the overall reduction in university funding may compromise any STEM “advantage”). This is at a time when the University sector needs broader access to domestic students who traditionally have been excluded from studying at University, especially in regional and disadvantaged contexts.

While we all recognise the need for a swift economic recovery, the proposed changes in funding will have a greater long-term effect on higher education in Australia, well beyond COVID. The principles around modelling policy must be based on clear evidence, expert analysis and robust research. The funding system must be equitable and forward looking, incentivise collaboration in teaching and research, and support students to become fully rounded graduates capable of adapting to new job opportunities in an uncertain future.

Our members hope that the consultation period will lead to a rethink to the proposed legislation for the benefit of all our future students.

Sincerely



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President, The Australian Council of Deans & Directors of Creative Arts



Professor Denise Ferris
Chair, the Australian Council of University Art and Design Schools