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# Submission from the Journalism Education & Research Association of Australia (JERAA) to the Job-ready Graduates Package draft legislation consultation

**Prepared by JERAA V.P. Research Associate Professor Fiona Martin, University of Sydney and JERAA President Dr Alex Wake, RMIT, with input members of the JERAA executive.**

The Journalism Education and Research Association of Australia Incorporated (JERAA Inc.) is the peak body of Australian journalism educators and researchers from tertiary education and industry organisations. JERAA’s primary aim is to raise the standard of teaching and training in journalism in order to foster excellence and integrity in the future generation of journalism practitioners. JERAA also supports research, with the understanding that this can help communities to identify and analyse important media and communications issues, to resolve problems, and to promote or celebrate excellence in journalism and journalism education. JERAA runs annual awards and grants for journalism students and journalism researchers to recognise and encourage quality in journalism practice, study and research.

At a time when Australian society is dependent on journalism to keep citizens abreast of developments in the global pandemic and natural disasters, and the community is besieged by mis- and disinformation, it is essential to encourage tertiary journalism education. Our universities foster professionals who produce the accurate information, analysis, investigation and ideas which underpin our democratic processes.

It is our view that this legislation will further reduce access to, and equity in, education, and will reduce the diversity of potential journalism graduates, with negative impacts for industry and society.

JERAA contends, as a whole, the government’s package could:

* significantly reduce the pool of job-ready graduates in communications and journalism,
* fail industry by reducing the number of communications graduates at a time when skills demand is high,
* reduce the support many universities provide to students undertaking work placement units, reducing the quality of work integrated learning,
* discourage regional and remote students from studying communications and journalism, particularly on regional campuses,
* decrease the attractiveness of the programs for much needed diverse people in the industry (specifically people from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse backgrounds, those with disabilities etc),
* unfairly punish students who fail for reasons beyond their control, including ill health, mental health, homelessness, economic precarity, being victims of crime, etc.,
* burden female students with greater lifetime debt, as most communications graduates are women.
* reduce the funding available for journalism research, at a time when our nation requires this knowledge more than ever before.

**BACKGROUND:**

This submission strongly opposes placing communications studies into cluster 1 of the Commonwealth funding contribution bands, where it attracts the least funding support of all clusters. This more than doubles the cost of a media and communications degree for students, thus placing the burden squarely on students and their families at a time when communications skills are key to the future of work. It also penalises the next generation of journalists, whose innovation and social connections will be key to media industry sustainability and the integrity of Australia’s democracy.

The Federal Government roadmap for digital media regulation has recently recognised journalism as essential to Australian democracy and regional journalism in particular as critical to “informing and strengthening local communities”.[[1]](#footnote-1)

It is a retrograde move then to increase the cost to students of communications and journalism degrees at the very moment when media industries are trying to innovate to address increased competition from digital platforms. The Federal Government has argued “a sustainable and adaptable media sector is necessary to support the provision of [public interest] journalism.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Making journalism more expensive to study will reduce the pool of young people willing to take on this already competitive career option, limiting opportunities for companies to develop ground up innovation and also decreasing the diversity of people able to enter the media.

Doubling the cost of journalism study makes it less appealing to people from disadvantaged backgrounds including low income, rural, migrant and Indigenous Australians, whose views are important to ensuring Australians receive fair and balanced reporting from diverse perspectives. It also places increased immediate financial pressure on students whose income-earning opportunities have diminished as a result of COVID19. While we recognise the additional support this package proposes for regional, remote and Indigenous students, there is no evidence to indicate that this will offset the significant inequity that higher HECs contributions will have on students’ long term financial outcomes. If journalism is to reflect the experiences of all Australians, and the diverse communities we live in, its study needs to be readily accessible to all and not position graduates to live in greater debt than they already incur.

JERAA condemns the move to increase the cost of communications degrees as short-sighted and lacking in strategic evidence. In Australia, journalism is most often taught within media and communications programs rather than specialist degrees and so journalist graduates acquire transferable skills which make them job ready in fields such as politics, business and research. Recent research indicates that such communications studies are as ‘job relevant’ as nursing or agricultural education. Communications degrees teach several of the core social or ‘soft’ skills that the World Economic Forum argues are essential to the future of work including critical thinking, persuasion, negotiation, and collaboration.[[3]](#footnote-3) Communications skills are also more important to business since the COVID 19 pandemic.[[4]](#footnote-4) Moreover, undergraduate employment outcomes for humanities graduates as a whole are similar to those for science and maths graduates, and their labour force participation rates *are higher*.[[5]](#footnote-5) In those respects it makes little sense to penalise those seeking to study communications, especially in comparison to those who choose a science or maths education.

JERAA also notes that this reform package, despite its interest in boosting funding to regional rural and remote students, delivers no new funding to tertiary education in Australia. Instead it shifts most of the cost of changes to students and their families. As recent OECD report notes Australians already fund more of their tertiary education than people most OECD countries: “private sources account for 60% of the total funding of tertiary educational institutions in Australia, almost double the OECD average” and “almost three-quarters of private expenditure is covered by households, most of which is spent on tuition fees.”[[6]](#footnote-6) This further proposed shift of the cost of tertiary education to private households will unfairly affect those with lower incomes, and is likely to negatively affect equity in access to education. As the government has no regulatory impact modelling to understand the long-term effects of this Bill on education equity, on employment prospects or on workforce availability and industry outcomes, JERAA argues the proposed changes to higher education support should not go forward.

**RECOMMENDATIONS:**

JERAA recommends that the legislation not be passed in its current form and that full and appropriate consultation occur with the higher education sector and relevant bodies on any changes to current funding arrangements.

**Specifically we seek the development and release of a regulatory impact statement, detailing options for achieving the government’s intended goals.**

In the case that the Bill does proceed we would recommend the following amendments:

* Remove journalism and communication from Funding Cluster 1 in recognition of our vital role in the maintenance of democracy, and the struggling nature of the news media industry.
* Increase the maximum student contribution amount for a placein a unit of study in communications.
* Continue to give universities the ability to manage finances to ensure that students benefit from both high-level teaching and research as part of the cost of their university education.
* Create financial incentives, external to the university funding process, to encourage regional and remote Indigenous persons to study, including at regional campuses.
* Increase the FEE-HELP loan fee for undergraduate students from 25 per cent to   
  50 per cent.
* Maintain the number of months a student must be receiving eligible student support payments to be eligible to receive the Fares Allowance under the Social Security Act 1991 (SS Act).

1. Australian Government. 2019. Regulating in the Digital Age: Government Response and Implementation Roadmap for the Digital Platforms Inquiry. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Australian Government. 2019. Regulating in the Digital Age: Government Response and Implementation Roadmap for the Digital Platforms Inquiry. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Blue, Allen. 2020. 5 things we know about the jobs of the future. World Economic Forum. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/01/future-jobs-and-skills-in-demand> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The Global Alliance in Management Education. 2020. Global teams are likely to communicate MORE frequently post-COVID-19, however relationship quality may be compromised, new CEMS research finds. <https://www.cems.org/news-media/news/press-releases/global-teams-are-likely-communicate-more-frequently-post-covid-19-how> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching. 2020. 2019 Graduate Outcomes Survey. <https://www.qilt.edu.au/docs/default-source/gos-reports/2019-gos/2019-gos-national-report.pdf> p.7 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. OECD. 2019. Education at a Glance 2019: Australia. <https://gpseducation.oecd.org/Content/EAGCountryNotes/AUS.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)