AUSTRALIAN WOMEN’S HISTORY NETWORK

#SaveArtsDegrees: Humanities is the H in HEART

by [Managing Editor](http://www.auswhn.org.au/blog/author/managing-editor/) Posted on [June 23, 2020](http://www.auswhn.org.au/blog/humanities-and-heart/)

*An Australian Women’s History Network roundtable responds to the federal government’s proposed cost increase to degrees in the Humanities.*

There is much joy to be found in [Chaucer Doth Tweet](https://twitter.com/LeVostreGC/), a Twitter account which pays loving homage to the early modern poet Geoffrey Chaucer, who most famously penned *The Canterbury Tales*(1387-1400). As Chaucer Doth Tweet reminds us, in Middle English, HEART and STEM are indelibly linked.

By now we have all heard of [STEM](https://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/resources/stem/) – Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics. But what about HEART?

*For a future that ys more than disparitye and despair, we neede educacioun, fundinge, and researche yn HEART alonge wyth STEM:*

*H umanityes  
E thiques  
A rtes   
R hetorique & the craft of  
T eachinge*

*— Chaucer Doth Tweet (@LeVostreGC)* [*August 29, 2019*](https://twitter.com/LeVostreGC/status/1166902317058117634?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw)

The Australian federal government’s Friday 19 June 2020 announcement to [overhaul undergraduate university fees](https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-06-19/university-fees-tertiary-education-overhaul-course-costs/12367742) and increase the cost of degrees in the Humanities by 113% has been met with a strong and swift rebuke. Many emphasise the short-sightedness of such a policy. Others note that Humanities, Arts, and Social Science (HASS) graduates have employment outcomes that are on par with – and sometimes even exceed – those in STEM fields, going on to have diverse and thriving careers.

One of the most relevant examples is [Julia Baird](https://juliabaird.me/). A political journalist and broadcaster, Baird is most widely known for her work with the *Sydney Morning Herald*, *New York Times*, and ABC’s *The Drum.* Prior to this she was awarded her Doctor of Philosophy in history from The University of Sydney, which led to her first book [*Media Tarts: How the Australian Press Frames Female Politicians*](https://www.qbd.com.au/media-tarts-how-the-media-frames-female-politicians/julia-baird/9781920769239/)(2004). More than a decade later, Dr Baird penned an acclaimed historical biography, [*Victoria: The Queen: An Intimate Biography of the Woman Who Ruled an Empire*](https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/209795/victoria-the-queen-by-julia-baird/)(2016).

Her most recent work is the outstandingly beautiful [*Phosphorescence: On awe, wonder and things that sustain you when the world goes dark*](https://www.harpercollins.com.au/9781460710890/phosphorescence/)(2020). Countless individuals in Australia and further afield have founda sense of peace and solace inthis work during the upheavals of COVID-19.

As Baird herself [pertinently reflected](https://twitter.com/bairdjulia/status/1273795768269205504) on Twitter, a series of current Liberal Party Cabinet members – including the Minister for Education Dan Tehan, as well as Alan Tudge, Greg Hunt, Marise Payne, Michaelia Cash, and Christian Peter – alongside former Prime Ministers Kevin Rudd, Julia Gillard, and Malcolm Turnbull, themselves benefited from an Arts degree.

For the Australian Women’s History Network, the implications of these proposed policies are most clear for history degrees. But as we at VIDA blog [wrote](http://www.auswhn.org.au/blog/feminist-history-in-urgent-times/) on Thursday 18 June 2020, only one day prior to the federal government’s announcements, restoring the public’s trust in disciplinary expertise “must not be a debate wherein some disciplines are pitted against others.”

And so we are united. A series of organisations have already responded to the federal government’s announcement with media releases, including:

[*Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia*](https://socialsciences.org.au/news/devaluing-humanities-and-social-science-education-will-leave-australia-worse-off/)[*Australian Academy of the Humanities*](https://www.humanities.org.au/2020/06/19/humanities-hit-hardest-when-needed-more-than-ever/)[*Australian Academy of Science*](https://www.science.org.au/news-and-events/news-and-media-releases/funding-australian-university-research)[*Australian Historical Association*](https://www.theaha.org.au/australian-historical-association-responds-to-announcement-of-increased-costs-of-humanities-subjects/)[*Australian Library and Information Association*](https://www.alia.org.au/news/21406/peak-body-libraries-opposes-changes-university-fees-lis-courses)[*Australia and New Zealand Communication Association*](https://anzca.org/news/letter-from-anzca-opposing-changes-to-hass-degree-fees/)[*Australian Society for French Studies*](https://australiansocietyforfrenchstudies.com/2020/06/30/asfs-news-statement-on-higher-education-funding-support-for-decra-applicants-and-extension-of-postgraduate-prize-deadline/)[*Australian Society for the Study of Labour History*](https://www.labourhistory.org.au/statement-on-the-australian-governments-higher-education-funding-proposal/?fbclid=IwAR21TzT2oPEbq_C6KtC-ux3YhxDocjLkbftKNPoQ8QXIS0vST3l791TwskY)[*Australian Women’s and Gender Studies Association*](https://awgsa.org.au/news-cfp/)[*History Council of Western Australia*](https://www.historycouncilwa.org.au/media-releases)[*International Australian Studies Association*](https://inasa.org/blog/inasa-response-to-higher-education-reforms/)[*The University of Melbourne Graduate Student Association*](https://gsa.unimelb.edu.au/media-release-gsa-strongly-opposes-education-ministers-latest-fee-change-plan/)[*Whitlam Institute, Western Sydney University*](https://www.whitlam.org/publications/2020/6/24/statement-education-for-the-public-good)

Associate Professor Tamson Pietsch, Director of the Australian Centre for Public History at the University of Technology Sydney, has also been hosting [The New Social Contract](https://player.whooshkaa.com/the-new-social-contract), a podcast which examines how universities will change under the effects of COVID-19.

Across the week VIDA: Blog of the Australian Women’s History Network will bring you the interdisciplinary voices of the Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences, from historians to education scholars, legal scholars, and political scientists. Together, we assert the importance, the necessity, and the employability of humanistic thinking in these urgent times.

[](http://www.auswhn.org.au/blog/humanities-and-heart/red-heart-on-a-old-opened-book-6349/)An Australian Women’s History Network Roundtable

Professor Michelle Arrow | historian and author of *The Seventies: The Personal, the Political and the Making of Modern Australia* | Macquarie University

Naomi Klein called it the "[shock doctrine](https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/jul/06/naomi-klein-how-power-profits-from-disaster)": the implementation of a series of radical changes under the cover of crisis. When the COVID-19 pandemic forced the closure of Australia’s borders, cutting off the supply of international students who had become an indispensable part of the Australian higher education system, the government had found its crisis. It changed the rules three times to prevent university employees from gaining access to the [JobKeeper Payment Scheme](https://www.ato.gov.au/general/jobkeeper-payment/) and watched on as the sector began to shed jobs and implement brutal restructures. With the [announcement](https://www.sbs.com.au/news/shock-and-dismay-over-short-sighted-policy-that-will-double-the-cost-of-arts-degrees) on Friday 19 June 2020 that commonwealth contributions to higher education will decrease overall, and student fees for Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences (HASS) degrees will increase dramatically – by 113% for most arts degrees – further redundancies in the sector are all but assured.

This "reform" is being sold on a false premise. It assumes that studying Arts and Humanities does not offer students any "employable" skills, when in fact Arts graduates have [far better long-term employability](https://australianjobs.employment.gov.au/jobs-and-training/education-employment-outcomes) than those in STEM disciplines. Because it will dramatically increase student fees for these courses, those who are not dissuaded from pursuing them will be crippled with steeper debts, impeding their ability to achieve long-term financial security. And any move to increase fees for HASS subjects will, of course, [impact](https://www.universityrankings.com.au/gender-balance-ratio.html) far more significantly on women, who make up around 60% of domestic undergraduate students in these areas.

The proposed changes are profoundly counterintuitive. The government awards annual [prizes](https://www.arts.gov.au/pm-literary-awards) in history, literature and non-fiction. It funds HASS research through the [Australian Research Council](https://www.arc.gov.au/) (ARC) and earlier this year, it even created a [special research initiative](https://www.arc.gov.au/news-publications/media/media-releases/research-funding-australian-society-history-and-culture) (through the ARC) to fund projects in Australian history, culture and society. It has mandated the study of Australian history at all levels of the [school curriculum](https://www.acara.edu.au/curriculum/foundation-year-10/learning-areas-subjects/humanities-and-social-sciences). So we are facing a future where Australian history must be taught at school, but student teachers will be discouraged from studying history at university. The fate of the academics who teach these students, who write the books and articles that circulate historical knowledge across our communities, looks very bleak indeed.

It is crucial for historians to organise against these changes. Join your union and get active in campaigns. Email your local MP, the Senate cross-benchers, and the Education Minister. Tell them why history and the humanities matter to our future.