



GRADUATE WOMEN-NSW Inc

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19 November 2024

The Hon Anthony Albanese
Prime Minister
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Prime Minister,

Re Tertiary Education and HECS

I am writing on behalf of Graduate Women –NSW to thank you for your proposed changes to the HECS scheme and the forgiving of part of students' debt.

As you may remember, GW-NSW has worked for over 125 years to empower women through education. We do this chiefly through a range of scholarships across all levels of education, through donations and sponsorships to education bodies both in Australia and overseas, and through advocacy for the advancement of women and girls in education.

We have been indebted to you for many years for your intervention on our behalf to have the Taxation Act with respect to Education Trust funds modified to add post-graduate studies to the definition of education. Since then we have built our fund to over \$1.2 million and give away c\$55k a year in awards.

While we greatly appreciate, what you are proposing in the HECS changes and refunds we are very concerned that this alone will do little to aid tertiary students especially women. What you need to address immediately to improve the lot of tertiary student and the contribution they can make is to society and the economy is to repeal the legislation for University Funding for Job Ready Graduates.

This legislation is both punitive and discriminatory to women and is also based on a number of erroneous suppositions about the aims and purpose of tertiary education. I have elaborated on this in detail in a letter I wrote at the time to Minister Tehan. I will attach this below.

Thank you again and best wishes,

'Tricia Blombery

Education Convenor GW-NSW

Cc Minister for Education Jason Clare

Attached: Dear Minister Tehan

University Funding for Job Ready Graduates

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Graduate Women-NSW has worked for over 125 years to empower women through education. While we welcome the Government's initiative to develop policies for the funding of tertiary education, we cannot support the decisions you have made recently. We consider these are based on untenable assumptions on the nature of tertiary education, on the need for future growth for training in particular backgrounds, and of the role of price as a motivator in course choices. Furthermore, we believe they discriminate against women and promote further gender inequality.

First, we contend that the development of an education policy to produce job-ready graduates must be based on an integrating system of funding that includes both Universities and TAFEs to provide training to student of varying talents and interests.

Secondly, the assumption that the preferencing STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) courses because industry and employers have stated that future workers will need to interact with technology is flawed. STEM training on its own will become outdated. What is required is critical thinking and creative problem solving which are developed in studies of the humanities that encourage student to explore human-to-human relations and human-to technical and robotic relations.

Again, the assumption that STEM courses will produce job-ready graduates when humanities will not is unfounded. The 2019 Graduate Outcomes Survey showed that, within six months of graduating, 64% of humanities students found full-time work in a wide variety of fields including public administration, business, health, science and technology.

Further, there is little evidence that price is the key determinate in student choices of courses. This is particularly so for women with respect to the technical and scientific fields. Despite many initiatives in recent years, women still only make up 27% of the STEM workforce and only 16% of the qualified STEM workforce. The 2018-19 budget initiative Women in STEM Strategy, the Decadal Plan for Women in STEM developed jointly by the Australian Academy of Science and the Australian Academy of Technology and Engineering, the 2018 survey conducted by Professionals Australia, and the 2019 Advancing Women in STEM report from the Ministry of Industry, Science and Technology all show that there are a multiplicity of factors including pre-tertiary education, conditions of work and opportunities for career development, and unequal financial rewards which are much more likely to influence the course choices of women than the price of the courses.

The differential pricing of courses which penalises the humanities and social sciences acts to increase significantly gender inequality. Figures for the past ten years show that these courses have had a higher proportion of female students. In 2018 two-thirds of student in these fields were women. Women will incur far higher debts in pursuing them and, because of the interrupted career path which has characterised many women, it will take them longer to repay the debt and to be in a position to make significant spending and investment decisions.

Finally, there is a high level of inconsistency in which courses have been price preferenced. I will illustrate this with regard to teaching. Teaching courses are in the lower cost bracket. However, the majority of teachers, including 57% of secondary teachers, do not come to teaching through these undergraduate courses. Rather they enter the profession, frequently after working in a variety of occupations, through

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post-graduate teaching courses undertaken after a primary degree many in humanities and social sciences. If we want excellent teachers for our children, and they deserve no less, teachers need to acquire skills in history, geography, legal studies, languages, civics business studies as well as the arts and communication. Similarly the support staff so important for a student's progress such as school counsellors, career advisors, and social workers need specialised training.

Again, we firmly support your initiatives in developing policies to finance reliably and sustainably tertiary education and training. However, we respectfully request that you look to empirical evidence for supporting your conclusions and reevaluate your assumptions. We ask that you look at an integrated financing system to cover all tertiary training and the development of courses that will integrate STEM training with the logical and critical skills encouraged through the humanities and social sciences. In revisiting your policies we ask particularly that you take into account the negative effects the current decisions will have on women.

Graduate Women – NSW urge your immediate reconsideration of the new tertiary financing plan.

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