

The Hon. Tanya Plibersek MP
Shadow Minister for Education
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21 April 2022

Dear Ms Plibersek MP

I am writing to you as President of the Art Association of Australia and New Zealand (AAANZ), a national membership association and peak advocacy body, representing artists, curators, writers and art historians from around the country. I am writing on behalf of our members to urge an Albanese Labor Government to reverse the discriminatory decision made by the Liberal government in 2020 to increase university fees for humanities students by 113%.

This inherently unfair and short-sighted decision has reduced the affordability of university education for many young people in Australia. The fee hike disproportionately disadvantages women, who account for two-thirds of students enrolled in Humanities degrees contributing to more long-term financial insecurity for women and a further widening of the gender gap. The rise in fees also impacts people from poorer backgrounds particularly first-in-family students, mature-age students, First Nation Australian students and those from migrant families. The arts is an important career path for many Australians from diverse backgrounds and our current art sector is thriving as a result of this diversity. However already university enrolments are down and the future health of the arts sector is now under threat.

The basic premise of the decision – that Humanities degrees will be less ‘job relevant’ in the future – was flawed. Job-ready graduates of the future will need backgrounds in the Humanities, and the arts in particular. Indeed the arts are increasingly recognised as integral to STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) and are being integrated into what has become known as STEAM education. STEAM is a global movement that acknowledges that to adequately prepare the workforce of the twenty-first century, societies need to provide education that will produce innovative and agile thinkers. Business leaders from companies including Barclay’s Bank, Microsoft and Xero, to name a few, all comment on the importance of arts education in helping students develop workplace skills. Indeed Steve Jobs, CEO of Apple, explained ‘technology alone is not enough...it’s technology married with the Humanities that yields us the results.’¹ Combining arts and science recognises that it is interdisciplinary innovators who will make the discoveries that will solve the problems of the future and this is key to producing successful economies. The Liberal Government’s decision has created unfair divisions between disciplines actively discouraging students from undertaking Humanities degrees.

The arts are already a significantly underpaid sector and burdening graduates with increased debt through fee hikes creates even more financial disadvantage which does not support a healthy economy. Disincentivising Humanities students on the grounds that jobs in the arts are less relevant to the economy also completely ignores the thriving creative industries which, pre-Covid, injected over \$111.7 billion to the national economy annually.² This sector generated \$3.2 billion in exports and employed over 600,000 people with a further 263,563 workers embedded in non-creative industries, proving a clear industry demand for cross-disciplinary skills.³

Between the 2011 and 2016 census creative employment *grew* in Australia at an average rate of 2.2% which was nearly twice the rate of growth within the wider Australian workforce. The Australian Government's own Bureau of Communication and Arts Research noted that 'creative skills are likely to be vital for future employment as many of the industries projected for fastest growth over the next five years rely on workers with creative qualifications.'⁴

The Australian Government's Skills for the Future website lists creativity, originality and initiative together with analytical thinking and innovation at the top of a list of competencies most frequently identified by Australian companies as the skills that will be in demand in the future. These are the skills the Humanities subjects excel in developing. It therefore makes no sense to actively discourage students from undertaking Humanities degrees on the false assumption that these degrees are not expected to prepare students for employment growth areas. Furthermore, with the forecast obsolescence of many jobs through the exponential growth of artificial intelligence, it is the skills taught in Humanities subjects, particularly the arts, that will prove to be the most resistant to automation in the future.

The public gallery sector, where many Art History and Visual Arts graduates find employment, currently makes substantial contributions to cultural tourism. In 2019 public galleries in Australia were visited by more than 16.5 million people with 44% of all visitors attending regional galleries.⁵ In a population of 26 million this represents over half of the Australian population. The public gallery sector is vital to the economic prosperity of cities and regional towns. There are 408 public galleries in Australia and in one instance a single exhibition held at a regional gallery in Victoria attracted over 140,000 visitors over a four month period injecting \$13.2 million into the local economy.⁶ Galleries and museums make substantial contributions to the economic revitalisation of cities and regional hubs witnessed in the prosperity of Hobart. Following the opening of the Museum of Old and New Art, there have been substantial flow on benefits to local traders sparking a buoyant property market.

The public galleries have also played an important role in promoting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art which contributes \$70 million to the economy through art sales, exhibitions and events. Australian Indigenous tourism has an estimated value of \$5.8 billion annually, attracting 910,000 international visitors and 688,000 overnight domestic trips in 2016.⁷ One of the fundamental contributors to the success of the Indigenous art market has been the leading role galleries and museums have played educating and familiarising non-Indigenous Australians and international collectors with this complex art form through exhibitions, public programs and publications. This began in 1960 at the Art Gallery of New South Wales and gained momentum in the 1980s when the National Gallery of Australia opened its new building in 1982 with exhibitions that included Indigenous art. By the 1990s all major public art galleries staged significant exhibitions of Indigenous art and actively recruited Indigenous curators, education officers and gallery professionals.⁸ These professionals were enabled through undertaking a humanities degree. Universities first began including Indigenous art into the curriculum in the late 1970s and by the 2000s this had become widespread, playing an important part in the Indigenous art ecology by promoting understanding and ensuring appropriate discourse around themes, ethics and cultural knowledge. This symbiotic relationship between public galleries, universities and the art market has been identified as a key element in the success of the Indigenous visual arts industry.⁹

In addition to economic wellbeing, the arts also enhance the liveability of place and contribute to social cohesion. It is well recognised that the arts and creative industries play a vital role in building resilient communities with direct links to health and wellbeing.⁷ During the COVID pandemic it was the arts that people turned to, to counteract isolation and the mental stress of lockdowns. Yet professional artists and many arts organisations were initially left out of payment support programs. Visiting an art gallery has been demonstrated to lower stress and galleries actively create opportunities for participation and connectedness with others that have been shown in numerous studies to reduce loneliness and depression.⁸ Most galleries have active

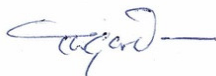
education and public programs that are culturally inclusive and target visitors ranging from mums with babies and people with disabilities and special needs, through to the elderly.

Furthermore galleries employ over 5,000 volunteers, 69% of whom are located in regional towns.⁹ This provides another important opportunity for inclusion. Many galleries around Australia have been at the forefront helping their communities heal from major disasters and during enforced social isolation from COVID-19 people turned to the arts for solace and connectedness, engaging with galleries through online programming. Exhibitions, education and public programs are developed and implemented by people with degrees in the Humanities. Indeed human capital is core to the achievements of these institutions and the current success of public galleries and museums across Australia is directly related to the tertiary education of directors, curators, artists and other gallery professionals. This education was affordable and proportionate and enabled students from a range of socio-economic backgrounds to participate thereby ensuring a wide pool of talented and capable professionals who have subsequently built the prosperity of the sector.

AAANZ commends the Albanese Labor Government's proposed investment in tertiary education by supporting an extra 20,000 university places. However, it is also imperative to ensure the accessibility and affordability of university education, to address skills shortage in the future and to ensure the future prosperity of the country that Labor includes in its Future Made in Australia Skills Plan a return to the previous fee structure for Humanities degrees.

Creative expression contributes to national identity, a sense of place and builds social capital and economic vigour. Abolishing the fee hike for Humanities degrees will ensure the creative industries and cultural sector can continue to grow into the future and make significant contributions to the economy, health and wellbeing of Australian citizens and the liveability of our cities and towns in a post-COVID recovery.

Yours faithfully



Dr Wendy Garden
PRESIDENT
ART ASSOCIATION OF AUSTRALIA & NEW ZEALAND

¹ Steve Jobs quoted in Walter Isaacson, *Steve Jobs*. Abacus: London, 2015, p. 485.

² Australian Government, Department of Communications and the Arts, Bureau of Communications and Arts Research (BCAR), "Cultural and creative activity in Australia 2008-09 to 2016-17." Working Paper, 2018, p. 1.

³ Ibid., p. 14. Refer also Creative Industries Innovation Centre, "Valuing Australia's creative industries" Final Report, 2013.

⁴ A New Approach, "Transformative: impacts of culture and creativity", Report Two, November 2019, p. 31. Refer also BCAR, p. 1.

⁵ Museums & Galleries Queensland and Public Gallery Association of Victoria, "Australian public galleries snapshot", 2020, p. 5.

⁶ Mark Kearney, "Marilyn Monroe exhibition a \$13 million economic windfall for Bendigo." *Bendigo Courier*, 20 October 2016.

⁷ VicHealth, "Audience access standards", 2006, p. 4.

⁸ A New Approach, p. 49.

⁹ Museums & Galleries Queensland, p. 5