

Australian universities are in turmoil and that's not good for VET

By Dr Don Perlgut, CEO, Community Colleges Australia (CCA), 27 June 2020



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(Image: University of Sydney Quadrangle, credit Don Perlgut)

Following new plans for [“job ready” graduates](#) released by the Commonwealth Government, Australian universities are in turmoil. This follows persistent opposition by the Government to [prevent universities from participating](#) in JobKeeper.

Commonwealth Government plans [announced by Minister Dan Tehan](#) will increase the cost of humanities degrees, cut the costs of other degrees, and [increase resources for regional universities](#). The Minister's press release states the rationale: “University students who study in areas of expected employment growth will pay less for their degree as the Government incentivises students to make more job-relevant decisions about their education.”

There are both winners and loses in the Government's plans, which still need to be [passed by the Senate](#). Although some groups – especially regional and smaller universities – [welcomed the changes](#), others did not: [“Baffling,”](#) says former Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull. “It's about [both] funding and ideology,” [says Michelle Grattan](#). The Government's attempts to encourage people into some courses and away from humanities and social sciences by changing their cost to students will fail, [predicts Bruce Chapman](#), architect of HECS. “What we call the price elasticity of demand for education is very, very low,” he says.

Degrees in humanities, society and culture, and communications have been singled out as irrelevant, “yet the skills fostered in these degrees are in high demand: critical thinking, problem-solving, collaboration, strong writing prowess and people skills ... translate across the employment sector,” [write John Fischetti and Catharine Coleborne](#).

The Government “has misunderstood the distinction between areas of employment, which need more people building a career within them (for example, teaching), and areas of study that are already overloaded with graduates (for example, teaching),” [writes Peter Van Onselen](#).

“Can the government predict the jobs of the future?” [asks Professor David Peetz](#), a researcher who specialises in the future of work. His conclusion: “The further you look ahead, the less useful the present is as a guide. This is especially the case in employment because, in a quickly changing world, technology is hard to predict and changing consumption patterns even harder.”

In “The vocationalisation of university education”, [Ian Marshman and Frank Larkins write](#) that, “undergraduate education is now more narrowly about training for a job, no longer

laying the foundations for careers of the future.” They identify six strategic issues with this approach:

- unapologetic pivoting of undergraduate education towards creating a job-ready workforce;
- apparent inconsistent messaging within the policy;
- overall funding for an undergraduate place will decline;
- absence of any initiatives to support universities in rebuilding international student demand;
- likely differentiated impact that the Job-ready Package will have for individual universities; and
- dealing with the fallout of the devaluing of the humanities and social sciences.

The planned changes come on top of [devastating](#) opposition by the Government that has prevented public universities from participating in JobKeeper. It's partly culture wars, writes [Gavin Moodie](#). The result, Margaret Simons says: [universities will need to shrink](#) to survive.

What does the announcement mean for Australian VET and adult and community education?

The proposed '[vocationalisation](#)' of university education is not good for Australian vocational education and training (VET) and adult and community education (ACE). A crisis in any sector of post-secondary education – and believe me, this is a crisis – impacts all of the other sectors.

If the planned university changes were accompanied by a comprehensive strategy to lift both the funding and structure of VET, we might understand. But there appears to be no connection between the two. Worst still, the differences between university education and VET look muddier than ever, not [the seamless system](#) that many hope for.

To be fair, Australian universities and humanities have done themselves no favours. Large lecture courses taught by part-time casual academics have been financially profitable for the universities, but have decreased the quality of education and turned off many potential arts and humanities students.

Many university academics are primarily interested in their own research and publications, frequently with very small audiences, and not sufficiently interested in their students. Universities have not given much weight to the quality of teaching and undergraduate student satisfaction. They have also assumed that an [unbalanced international student cohort](#), many from one country – China, would continue indefinitely. [Large Vice Chancellor salaries](#) and [high student to staff ratios](#) means that universities have lost much [political and broad public support](#).

Governments, both Coalition and Labor, have encouraged these trends for some time. But now the Coronavirus pandemic is bringing Australian universities to their knees. Australian VET and ACE sectors need vital universities, with clear pathways that are so sadly lacking. The ray of hope in these announcements is that regional universities, which historically are more open to ACE provider pathways, may benefit.

Australian VET also needs university graduates for teaching and curriculum design. With literacy, language and numeracy [needs remaining high](#), we desperately need [well-trained LLN teachers](#).

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