

## **If Each Action Has an Equal and Opposite Reaction, What is Held in the Future for the Humanities?**

**A discussion paper by Elsie Leask (19/6/2020).**

English mathematician Sir Isaac Newton understood there to be three basic laws of motion, the third of which stipulates for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. With this in mind, we can recognise that any known ‘push’ can expect an equally strong ‘pull’. Newtonian physics, then, can be applied to less visible forces of nature. Namely, I wish to consider the recent educational push for studies in STEMM related subjects and the naturally required (and predicted) pull for studies in the humanities. Just today (19/6/20), the Government has announced that University course fees for areas such as agriculture, education and mathematics have been dramatically reduced. However, course fees in the humanities are set to skyrocket to almost double their original cost for future students. We are now, in the area of humanities, at the full revolution of the educational cycle, where education is only for those who can afford it. In other words, this is now an education that is targeted at the few who are not considered to have the potential to hold jobs that are ‘future-focused’. What a morbidly fascinating paradox- the subjects that teach us how the past has led us to the present and will influence us in the future are not ‘future-focused’.

The New South Wales Education Standards Authority (NESA) states that STEMM involves “essential areas of study that foster students’ skills and prepare them to participate in a rapidly changing world and contribute to Australia’s future development and prosperity” (NESA, 2019). NESA’s consideration of STEMM being necessary to prepare students for the future and more importantly, to assist Australia’s “development and prosperity” (NESA, 2019) communicates a heavy blow to the humanities. If this wasn’t a sign of the humanities being seen as redundant, then surely the aforementioned announcement by education minister Dan Tehan is. With NESA’s consideration and now the tertiary study of humanities being raised in cost for future students, it is clear that the subjects are only to be studied out of interest, not necessity. Certainly, current and new University students are being discouraged from learning about one of the most important and fascinating areas of education there is to be studied. Indeed, when one considers the recent Black Lives Matter movements, heavily influenced by history and the detrimental actions of the past, one surely can see that we do not exist in a vacuum, uninfluenced by anything in the past. Clearly, this decision can be seen as a blatant attack on the already suffering subject area.

Surely The Melbourne Declaration’s hopes of “all young Australians (becoming) active and informed citizens” still stands and is applicable to tertiary students. Perhaps education before the nineteenth of June 2020 was navigating a definition of “active and informed” that included only aspects of learning that were deemed necessary to the economic survival of Australia. Now, it is certain that the “active and informed” definition has found its destination, where the humanities are inapplicable. A student who studies the humanities, then, is an afterthought. A bug in the economic system. NESA considers the humanities as a subject area where “students develop the skills to prepare them to actively and responsibly participate as informed citizens in the contemporary world”. This is indeed true, but NESA have not mentioned any contribution of the humanities to the “development and prosperity” of Australia nor its economically viable future. The young Australian in 2020 and in the grand and unforeseen ‘future’ who studies humanities must not be as “active and informed” as their peer who studies aspects of STEMM.

Historian Edith Hamilton directs our attention to an all too true avenue of human existence; that “men are bound to act in the same way unless it is shown to them that such a course in other days ended disastrously” (Hamilton, 140). This is one of the reasons for which history is so important: by gaining an understanding of the past, we can be better prepared for the future. We are not here by accident. We, as a human race, have a past that has paved the way for our present as we know it. Studies in history help us to understand where we have been which allow us to comprehend where we are now. With this in mind, especially considering the current Black Lives Matter movements, we need to direct our students’ attention to what has happened in the past and what its consequences were so we may act in a better way in the future.

I must stress that this paper in no way intends to devalue STEMM, nor does it intend to place the humanities on a higher pedestal. Simply, I wish to communicate my profound concern for the seemingly strategic limiting of opportunities for further study in the humanities. As a student of history, I have seen firsthand the suffering of humanities in higher education in my current place of study. I fear that this narrowing of opportunity for learning in higher education is seeping into schools especially considering NESA’s views on STEMM studies. In turn, this will reduce the chances of genuinely interested scholars of humanities to pursue their education. If the recent movement to double the cost of study isn’t a nail in the humanities coffin, I don’t know what is. But surely, the inner lid of the casket will be clawed, and the nails will be pushed through by the just breathing, passionate humanities academics and students. Surely, Newton’s third law of motion will see a great resurgence of interest in one of the most important aspects of human existence- understanding where we have come from and why this is important. After all, history is *aere perennius*.

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Elsie Leask', written in a cursive style.

## Bibliography

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