

Arts Under Attack: A Multinational Perspective on Creative Arts Education

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As the world modernizes and seeks to prepare future generations for emerging careers, society is positioned to have an increased focus on studies relating to science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). However, it is vital not to lose sight of the benefits and importance of the creative arts and humanities in contemporary society and the ongoing demand for individuals with a background in humanities in the employment market. This essay aims to affirm the significance of this area of education to the functioning of democratic institutions and a constructive community by incorporating two perspectives of arts education in Australia and the United States. The centrality and importance of creative arts and humanities to society must be reinvigorated and re-emphasized without detracting from the growth of STEM. The assault on arts education occurring in Australia and the United States is highly problematic, as it risks damaging the vibrancy of our cultures and our future. The arts must be protected and adequately funded to prepare communities for the future appropriately.

The Benefits of a Creative Arts and Humanities Education

The creative arts and humanities are central components of a productive society and the future. Unfortunately, governments are often quick to assume that the future of the employment market will be underpinned by STEM (Department of Skills, Education and Employment), causing stakeholders to neglect the study of the arts. This perpetuates a negative stigma about art degrees, especially regarding their future viability. However, the humanities and STEM have an undeniable intersection that requires not the neglect of the arts, but rather cooperation between the two faculties for the betterment of society. In many circumstances, scientific facts need interpretation and dissemination of information to the public from those involved in the humanities (Miller). This is currently displayed in the communication between scientists and the general public regarding COVID-19 vaccines and the science behind anthropogenic climate change. Individuals who understand varying societies, cultures, beliefs, and motives are necessary to adequately tailor the communication of facts to specific cultural and ethnic groups. This is depicted in the case of climate change, where politicians, a career closely affiliated with the humanities, are required to communicate why changes in climate and energy policy are necessary to reduce carbon emissions as a result of the science showing that the global climate is warming at an alarming rate. This demonstrates a clear interrelationship between science and politics. As such, STEM must not supplant the arts, but the two faculties should work in tandem to ensure greater efficacy and efficiency when communicating important information.

In a similar vein, arts graduates, having highly demanded core and transferable skills, will be prized in the future labor market. As societies become more interconnected, globalized, and understanding different human societies, cultures, and languages, these graduates will become more valued by employers (Diamond). While occupations involving technical skills risk becoming redundant due to automation, attributes involving interpretation, critical thinking, and problem-solving cannot be replaced by artificial intelligence (Pinto). This includes occupations such as journalism, teaching, law, politics, public service, and consulting. This set of core skills is highly sought after, but neglecting the study of the arts risks failing to provide our society with the skills and attributes needed to prosper in the future.

Moreover, the study of arts is valuable to communities because it provides individuals with the critical and analytical thinking skills needed to hold powerful and wealthy institutions

accountable. The role of the media in ensuring the transparency and accountability of government institutions has always been closely tied to the study of humanities. The humanities afford individuals an understanding of ethics, ideologies, political systems, and their history and the capacity to judge the outcomes of political decisions. These analytical skills and an ability to think independently also enable individuals to make informed choices about who to vote for during elections. Markedly, having individuals with an apt grasp of the humanities is essential in critiquing and analyzing the powerful.

Additionally, as the phenomenon of alternative facts and “fake news” proliferates on increasingly popular social media platforms, a greater number of individuals with a background in humanities are needed to determine the credibility of information. 60% of Republicans falsely agree that the 2020 US Election was ‘stolen’ from President Trump (Jackson). Similarly, 17% of Americans believe that the core teachings of the conspiracy theory, QAnon, are true (NPR/Ipsos). This demonstrates the necessity of having individuals in society capable of debunking mistruths through evidence-based approaches to prevent society’s dangerous fracturing. These are skills that are primarily taught and honed in the study of arts, and hence this is why the arts have an ongoing necessity to our global society.

Furthermore, emphasis on the creative arts and humanities catalyzes cultivating diverse, dynamic, and vibrant cultures. Maintaining a stable, sovereign creative arts industry that produces film, television, music, comedy, theater, and artwork is central to forming a national identity and image. Hollywood films and American television contribute significantly to international perception of the United States (Ying). Similarly, the Australian Impressionist art movement, driven by the Heidelberg School, played a prominent role in facilitating a uniquely Australian style of artwork that espoused Australia’s national ‘bushman’ identity before Federation in 1901. Moreover, the creative arts are pivotal to enriching individuals’ lives. They provide an outlet for social connection and entertainment, which positively impact society through education, mental health, and bolstering local economies (Australian Council for the Arts, 2020). Defunding the arts or not financing it according to its needs, risks prohibiting creative industries from fostering an independent and positive culture.

Arts Education in the United States

Despite continued bipartisan support for the arts and humanities in the United States, blatant assaults on federal support for these disciplines occur in political spheres. In 1989,

Republican senator Jesse Helms became instrumental in coordinating attempts to defund the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) after the foundation awarded government funds to artists that were deemed controversial. In multiple instances throughout the 1990s, Republicans in both chambers of Congress attempted to cease funding to the NEA; however, all proposals brought forth by the House were ultimately blocked by the Senate. More recently, the Trump administration's proposed 2018 budget called for the complete elimination of the NEA, along with the National Endowment for the Humanities and several other arts agencies (People for the American Way). His attack on the arts ultimately proved unsuccessful, much like the attacks made by his predecessors in government. Still, the party's persistence in undermining public support for the arts remains concerning (New York Times). It is essential to consider the implications of these recurring attacks on broader cultural attitudes in the country that influence public opinion, and subsequently, the policymaking process regarding arts-related affairs.

In America's K-12 classrooms, arts education is severely undervalued and underfunded. When budget cuts necessitate the loss of academic classes, the arts are always the first to go. Because teachers across the nation are put under pressure to improve outcomes in subject areas measured by standardized testing, which are therefore deemed more "essential," the clear benefits of an arts education are overlooked (Penn State). Active participation in subjects such as music, visual arts, theater, and dance have been proven to increase civic engagement, tolerance, and produce a clear reduction in discriminatory behavior. Nevertheless, the availability of these disciplines continues to decline in almost every area of the country, and the proportion of students engaged in the arts decreases each year (Brookings).

The issues plaguing arts education serve as a microcosm for greater systemic issues of diversity, access, and equity in American society. A recent federal government report found that US schools with higher percentages of minority students and those designated as "needing improvement" under the No Child Left Behind Act were more likely to report decreased art instruction time (United States Government Accountability Office). Because of its absence in many American schools, students and families often have to rely on external programs to receive a quality arts education, often at a hefty price. The tuition and fees for top youth music academies in the country often exceed several thousand dollars per year, not including competition and travel costs, instrument repairs and upkeep, and other necessary materials (Institute for Arts Integration and STEAM). Even with financial aid and scholarship programs in place, it is almost impossible to become a high-caliber musician at such institutions without receiving years of quality private instruction beforehand, which also comes at an exorbitant price. Simply put, the costs are too much to bear for many low and middle-income families. As

a result, an extreme lack of racial and socioeconomic diversity exists within communities and organizations where the arts are permitted to prosper.

Several mentorship programs exist to ameliorate this opportunity gap, an example being Young Music Scholars, a program I volunteer with through (MYAC) in the suburbs of Chicago, Illinois. Members of the symphony orchestra at MYAC, like myself, offer weekly lessons and regular performance opportunities to low-income string players throughout the Chicago area. Participating in this program as a mentor to a cellist not much younger than myself, as well as my other personal experiences as a cellist and singer, have opened my eyes to the issues facing the future of the arts in the United States. So much talent exists in our underserved communities, yet it is actively suppressed. Existing policy frameworks, government support, and sociocultural attitudes are absent or ineffective.

The Assault on the Arts in Australia

In Australia, the creative arts and humanities have been under attack by the federal government, which risks tarnishing the fabric of Australia's culture and education system. In October 2020, the Conservative Coalition government passed legislation that instigated a major shakedown of university funding in Australia (Parliament of Australia). The bill, titled "Job Ready Graduates," was intended to provide further funding to university courses relevant to "occupations of the future," namely STEM careers. However, the price of earning creative arts and humanities degrees suffered a significant hike. Personally, after deferments and discounts, the cost of my undergraduate Bachelor of Arts majoring in history and Mandarin tripled from \$10,632 to \$32,012 AUD. The product of this government decision is that students who are passionate about the arts will likely stay the course in their studies but be punished with higher university fees and student loan debts for following their interests. Secondly, this may influence some students to study cheaper courses even if they are not passionate about it. This creates a miserable society where individuals cannot pursue careers they are passionate about. Additionally, as the fee hike may dissuade individuals from attending university altogether, this will proliferate wealth inequality as individuals from low-income families may be discouraged from going to university, which is recognized as the primary method to become wealthier (Kelly). Moreover, the financial impact of tripling a student's loan debt will be severe. The burden of tens of thousands in debt will be felt when seeking to purchase a home, take out a mortgage, or have children.

What is most disappointing about the “Job Ready Graduates” law is its baselessness. Humanities graduates have higher employment and earnings than graduates of Australia’s science and mathematics faculties (Quality Indicators for Teaching and Learning). Arts and law graduates average an employment rate of 91.1% and 95.8%, respectively, with arts graduates earning \$70,300. Math and science graduates have an employment rate of 90.1% and an average income of \$68,900 (Quality Indicators for Teaching and Learning). This shows a direct contradiction in the “Job Ready Graduates” scheme and means that the new tertiary fee restructuring does not effectively equip students for future employment.

Moreover, the new price of arts and humanities degrees is not commensurate with the amount of support and guidance received by students. The work inherent to the humanities and creative arts is mainly self-guided, involving minimal contact hours and private study, consulting readings, and writing essays. The price does not match its worth for an arts degree involving minimal staff support, guidance, and resources. This is yet another reason why the fee hike is unjustified.

In Australia, there are strong social security safety nets for students. The Higher Education Contribution Scheme does not require students to repay their student loans until an annual income of approximately \$47,014 AUD is reached (Australian Taxation Office). Even so, the fee increase is immoral and illogical from the standpoint that it discourages students from undertaking degrees necessary for the future job market. Overall, the defunding of the arts is an inexcusable act that defies logic and morality and does not appropriately prepare Australia for the future.

In addition to this, the scheme disincentivizes students from undertaking degrees in the fine arts, which are also victims to the funding hike. Moreover, the creative arts industry in Australia has profoundly struggled during the pandemic. Due to pandemic-related social distancing and travel restrictions, a lack of work and revenue has caused unemployment to become rife in the industry (The Music). Unfortunately, the industry was one of the first-affected sectors, and they will likely be the last to reopen (Smale & Johnson, 2020). Even so, Australia’s creative industries were chronically underfunded by the Federal Government prior to the pandemic, and expectedly, the Federal Government failed to provide adequate assistance during the pandemic.

This functions to discourage students from the creative arts because post-degree employment prospects are bleak. Creative arts graduates have one of the worst employment

rates of graduate students, at 89.3% (Quality Indicators for Teaching and Learning). This is mainly due to the industry having a severe funding shortfall as the government's financial support for the arts fell by 4.9% between 2007-08 and 2017-18 (Australian Academy of the Humanities). The pandemic exacerbated the damage, as around 255,000 gigs or events were canceled, 500,000 people were impacted, and at least \$280 million was lost (Lost My Gig). Short-term financial assistance was provided to businesses and individuals affected by COVID-19 restrictions; however, the support was terminated in March 2021, despite a continuation in lockdowns and pandemic-related restrictions that prevented the creative industry from reopening.

The more students are deterred from contributing to the arts, the more talent and potential will wither away (Hall). As fewer people engage in the study of the creative arts, the less creativity and imagination there is in communities, undermining the entire culture of our society. Specifically, the creative arts have been under assault continually by conservative governments, which have engaged in a protracted culture war with the arts. This is because it believes the education of the humanities and creative enterprises are peddling a political message ideologically opposed to its interests (Barnes). Renowned as having a progressive political center and a more diverse, feminist, and critical scholarship since the 1960s (Guillory), the humanities and creative arts faculty has had an evident antagonism with cultural conservatives. As such, desolate employment opportunities due to years of underfunding and a rising cost for completing degrees in the creative arts endangers the future of Australia's culture and national identity.

Conclusion

The arts and humanities provide essential benefits to the constructive functioning of our society and enhance our readiness for the future. However, in both the United States and Australia, the arts and humanities are underfunded, inaccessible, and inequitable at present. If there is no such improvement, the arts will likely be denied their true capacity to flourish and provide the myriad of benefits to a thriving and prosperous culture. Stakeholders and students of the arts must call on local, state, and federal governments to protect the arts and make education in such disciplines accessible for all. Only through collective action can arts education be genuinely reinvigorated.

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