

Degrees of Difficulty

The Labour Market Problems of Arts and Social Science Graduates

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Australian higher education system is comprehensively rigged against students. It systematically produces more graduates in the humanities and social sciences than the labour market can absorb, and often does not give them skills university graduates should possess.

These problems are very evident in the labour market performance of recent graduates from the humanities and social sciences. They are around twice as likely to be unemployed as others in the labour market. Four months after completing their courses in 1998, 13% of humanities graduates and 14% of social science graduates were looking for work, compared to an overall unemployment rate for people over 20 of 6.9%.

If this unemployment rate is added to underemployment rates, then you have over 30% of graduates in these fields who want full-time jobs but are without them four months out. Even these gloomy figures understate the employment problem, due to the high proportion of students in these fields who remain in full-time study.

Worse still, starting salaries for humanities and social science graduates are declining relative to Average Weekly Earnings (AWE), with humanities graduates earning only 74% of AWE in 1999. Evidence suggests that most humanities graduates will never earn high salaries.

This poor performance in the labour market is not unusual or new. The downward trend in the employability of Arts graduates is a chronic problem that dates back to the mid-1970s.

So what can be done to increase the employment prospects for these graduates? Put simply, creating markets in higher education is the most effective way of minimising the mismatch between graduates and jobs.

The number of Arts students, for instance, is likely to fall if fees are deregulated, as this would remove the current perverse incentive for universities to focus on low-cost courses. Abolishing the student places quota system would allow a freer flow of students to universities and courses that do well in the labour market. Competition would then put pressure on universities to look at their Arts degrees and whether they teach skills that make graduates employable.

Australia should benchmark itself against the United States, where graduates in the humanities and social sciences do only slightly worse in the labour market than graduates generally.

THE LABOUR MARKET PERFORMANCE OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCE GRADUATES

Some academics see universities as places where knowledge is pursued for its own sake, but that is a view radically at odds with the intentions of their students. The overwhelming majority attend university to improve their job prospects.

The vocational function of universities is now so powerfully entrenched that a survey done in 1997 by the Australian Bureau of Statistics found that a greater proportion of students at universities were there for a vocational reason than were students at the more vocationally-oriented TAFE institutes. Some 95.9% of university students were there to get a job, as opposed to 94% of TAFE students.

Aware of students' needs, university Arts faculties make strong claims for the employment prospects of their graduates. The University of New South Wales (UNSW), for example, says that a degree from its Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences will give you a 'unique combination of intellectual and analytical skills which can be transferred from one occupation to another', and gives examples of jobs their graduates hold such as Managing Director of a market research company or State Premier. Later graduates of UNSW's Faculty of Arts and Sciences may, like Mr Carr, have interesting minds, but many would envy his employment experience.

Over 30% of graduates in these fields want full-time jobs but are without them four months out from their degree.

Underemployed graduates

Recent graduates from the humanities (those with degrees in languages, literature, history, philosophy, etc.) and social sciences (those who have studied fields such as sociology, criminology, anthropology, community work and geography) perform poorly in the labour market.

Four months after completing their courses in 1998, 13% of humanities graduates and 14% of social science graduates were looking for work, compared to an overall unemployment rate for people over 20 of 6.9%. In other words, these graduates were around twice as likely to be unemployed as others in the labour market.

The performance of humanities and social science graduates was significantly worse than for other people who qualified for their degree in 1998. Business related courses had a peak unemployment rate of 8.1%. No field within health education did worse than having 5.5% of graduates unemployed. Graduates looking for work in agriculture had a much easier time of it, with only 5.1% being unemployed. Overall, the graduate unemployment rate was 8%.

Unfortunately these figures make the employment situation of humanities and social science graduates appear much better than it really is. There are large numbers of graduates who are working, but only in part-time or casual jobs, and who would like full-time work. For graduates as a whole, this group in early 1999 was 11.2% of those in the labour force. The humanities were much worse at 18% and the social sciences worse still at 20.9%. Add together the unemployment and underemployment rates and you have over 30% of graduates in these fields who want full-time jobs but are without them four months out.

Even these gloomy figures understate the employment problem, due to the high number of students in these fields who remain in full-time study. Most may genuinely desire a deeper understanding of their field. But it seems unlikely that around a third of people in the humanities and social sciences feel the need to pursue their studies beyond the pass degree, compared to less than a quarter of students generally, out of pure interest. Anecdotal evidence suggests that some of these graduates have re-enrolled because they cannot get work, or because it will be hard to find a good job with less than a Honours degree.

For those graduates who do find full-time work, things are not necessarily as they might have hoped. Median starting salaries for them are below the median for graduates generally, \$3,000 below for humanities graduates and \$1,500 below for social science graduates.

One reason for this is that many are working in areas for which tertiary qualifications are not required, and so are not earning a premium reflecting their extra years of education. Nearly a third of female humanities graduates and 18% of males with full-time jobs are in occupations classified as clerical, sales or service. Some of these jobs are entry positions to careers that will better utilise the graduates' intellectual skills, but certainly not all.

60 **Three turning points for the worse**

These poor results are not unusual or new difficulties, but chronic problems. There appear to have been three turning points for graduates in the humanities and social sciences—i.e. drops in employability from which there has been no full recovery.

65 The first of these occurred in the mid-1970s. In the earliest statistics I have available, for those who completed their degrees in 1973, 6.2% of those in the labour market could not find full-time work. But this amounted to only 106 people, and only 2.2% of graduates overall.

The turning point was 1975, with the proportion of humanities and social science graduates looking for full-time work breaking the 10% barrier. At this point, graduates 70 in these disciplines did not do significantly worse than graduates in other disciplines, being only 10% more likely to be without full-time work.

The next turning point occurred very shortly after the first. In 1977 the proportion of humanities and social science graduates looking for work broke the 20% barrier, with 22.6% looking for full-time work four months after qualifying. Unlike the first downturn, 75 this is not so easily dismissed as simply the product of deteriorating general economic conditions. The gap between unemployment rates for humanities and social science graduates and graduates generally, which had been only 10%, widened to 67%.

The third turning point occurred in 1991, when the proportion of humanities and social science graduates looking for full-time work broke the 30% barrier, dipping even 80 further to over 40% in the following two years, before recovering to the 30-40% range in which it still sits today.

In these later surveys the data is broken down further than in surveys of the 1970s and 1980s. From this more detailed presentation we can see that, at least in the late 1990s, it is the social sciences that are doing particularly badly, both in absolute and 85 relative terms. Compared to graduates generally, social science graduates in 1999 were 82% more likely still to be looking for full-time work four months after graduation.

Low starting salaries

There is a similar trend in starting salaries, which are declining relative to Average Weekly 90 Earnings (AWE). In 1977 humanities graduates earned 96.9% of AWE, indicating that a university degree in this field provided a good start for people wishing to improve their earnings. By the time of the next survey, 1979, things had worsened, with humanities graduates earning 86.7% of AWE. In 1989 humanities graduates fell below 80% of AWE, a position from which they have not recovered. In the 1999 survey they were at 74%. 95 The experience with the social sciences has been very similar.

Part of the decline is due to the numbers of Arts graduates taking jobs that might otherwise have been held by people with less education. One study estimates that about a third of the decline in salaries since 1989 is due to Arts graduates shifting into jobs with lower pay, though the problem of inappropriate jobs has been around much longer 100 than the last decade. As far back as 1973, before any of the shocks occurred, each graduate was directly asked whether or not their job was appropriate to their qualifications, and a third said no. It seems though that this problem may be intensifying.

Interestingly, starting salaries for graduates in the humanities and social sciences do not show the same declining performance relative to other graduates as do their 105 employment rates. Except for one big drop, between the 1977 and 1979 surveys, and a couple of smaller ones in the 1990s, humanities and social science salaries have become lower in relation to AWE at approximately the same rate as graduates from other disciplines. This suggests that these graduates are keeping their part-time and casual jobs rather than taking full-time jobs at low pay, with the effect of maintaining starting salary relativities at the expense of full-time employment. 110

Graduate performance over time

It is sometimes said that while graduates in the humanities and social sciences experience more difficult transition-to-work periods than graduates in other fields, things turn out 115 well enough in the end. Fortunately, the available information does show that things improve, but not by as much as the graduates might hope.

In the labour market, the unemployment rate for people with degrees in what the Australian Bureau of Statistics calls 'society and culture' was, in May 1997, 5.3%. This is not as good as 'business and administration' at 2.8%, or 'engineering' at 2.7% or 'health' 120 at 1.6%, but it is much better than not completing school at 12.7% and just completing school but not continuing education, at 8.9%.

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The employment rate of 'society and culture' graduates was assisted by having about 14% of graduates not in the labour market at the time of the survey, compared to 10% of graduates overall. This may be due to the high proportion of female students in the humanities and social sciences, creating a relatively large group of graduates who subsequently leave the workforce to meet family responsibilities. 125

While employability improves over time, the evidence is that most humanities graduates never earn high salaries. Data from the 1996 census enables us to break down graduate income by age groups. It showed that the peak median salary for humanities graduates, achieved in the 45-49 age bracket, was \$37,900 a year. That was well below the median salary for graduates overall of \$45,100, indicating that the wage dispersal evident between disciplines as graduates enter the workforce widens over time. 130

In contrast, the social sciences improve, reaching a median salary of \$45,200 in the 45-49 age bracket, just above that for graduates generally. The impression that medicine, law and dentistry are financially rewarding is confirmed by the census data, with their median salaries at age 45-49 being \$78,000, \$63,500 and \$60,800 respectively. 135

An oversupply of graduates

The evidence that humanities and social science graduates do relatively poorly in the labour market is very strong, but why is their performance so bad? 140

Economics teaches us that if supply exceeds demand the price will drop, and if it does not drop far enough some of the good or service on offer will remain unsold. That appears to be what is happening to graduates in the humanities and social sciences, right down to those who stay out of the full-time workforce, presumably because they are not willing to lower their prices far enough. We could get a stronger confirmation of this theory if we could link surges in the supply of graduates to any of the employment or salary shocks. 145

Unfortunately, the federal Education Department's figures on completions begin only in 1984, but there are shocks that need explaining in 1975, 1977, and 1979. We can, however, use some other measures as a guide to what was going on. The 1970s was a period of enormous growth in higher education student numbers. In 1970 there were 154, 470 higher education students, but by 1979 that number had risen to 322,098, a rise of 108%. 150

This was a rise way in excess of employment growth in the 1970s, which was around 13%. In hindsight, it was utterly unrealistic to think that the labour market could satisfy the job aspirations of a student body that was growing at around eight times as fast as it was. The inevitable result was declining employability and salaries. 155

The reason for the 1991 shock is quite clear. By this time, the recession was affecting labour markets badly, with general unemployment being four percentage points higher in April 1991 than it had been in April 1990. Into this seriously deteriorating labour market came a record number of humanities and social sciences graduates, up by 14.8% on the year before. 1991 was a disastrous combination of graduate growth and job contraction. Unemployment did not go below 1991 levels until 1995, but the number of graduates kept on growing—13.5% more in 1992, 7.1% in 1993, 7.4% in 1994, before virtually stalling in 1995 at 1.7%, just as employment began to recover. 160

The universities are clearly turning out many more graduates in the humanities and social sciences than the labour market can absorb. If this happened only occasionally it would not be a problem. But this oversupply is not an occasional event. It has been going on for more than twenty years. 165

Why does the employability gap persist?

Part of the blame for this oversupply of humanities and social science graduates lies with the students themselves. While the overwhelming majority want jobs, they also want an Arts degree. The attraction is not surprising (I completed an Arts degree, and liked it enough to pursue postgraduate study before abandoning it in favour of editing a social science journal) and is well explained in an insightful essay by David Hart on the importance of an education in the liberal arts. 175

Hart set out four ways in which a liberal education could be of benefit. The first was an 'individualising' function; with the idea that 'through reading literature, philosophy, political theory and history the students somehow "find themselves"'. The second was a 'civilising/humanising function', in the sense of 'introducing students to the great ideas, traditions and cultural artifacts of humanity'. The third was a 'democratising function' in teaching students about how the civil and individual freedoms we enjoy were won. 180

190 The fourth was a 'criticising function', 'to challenge all received doctrines, to be sceptical of all so-called wisdom whatever its source might be'.

This all sounds appealing to those with intellectual interests. Indeed, a study by the Centre for the Study of Higher Education at the University of Melbourne shows that 'interest in exploring the area of knowledge' was a strong influence on 92% of applicants in the humanities and social sciences.

195 Consistent with this, Arts is not inevitably a second preference course. University application data from the Victorian Tertiary Admissions Centre shows that the humanities and social sciences have the third highest number of first preference applications of the thirteen main areas of study, making up around a sixth of all such applications. This is only a few percentage points below the proportion of all commencing students who eventually enrol in humanities and social science courses. These are not precise comparisons, because some people apply directly to the universities without going through VTAC, but if Victoria is typical it suggests that only a few thousand commencing Arts students did not make it their first preference.

200 Large numbers of students are happy to study Arts, but there are reasons to think that studying just Arts is not an ideal outcome. Nor may the choice to study Arts be the result of well-informed consideration.

An important factor in the number of applications for Arts is the rationing of places. Universities control the number of places in each field, and the major mechanism for deciding who is admitted to what is performance in the Year 12 exams. Arts is a relatively easy course to get into it. For example, at Monash University in 1999, Arts required a score in the top 20% of Year 12 marks, Commerce in the top 11%, and Law in the top 5%.

210 University applicants do adjust their applications to suit their expected performance, with 45% saying that their likely results are a strong or very strong influence on their field of study preference. Humanities and social science courses might not be a student's ideal-world first preference, but the best they can realistically hope to achieve. If course numbers were less rationed, these students may well have done a different, more vocationally-oriented, course, perhaps as a double degree with Arts, or with some Arts units in the vocational degree.

215 Alongside students making the best of their Year 12 results are those who are simply not making an informed choice. Across all the students surveyed by the Centre for the Study of Higher Education, 35% had little or very little knowledge of employment rates of graduates in their course. Consistent with this level of ignorance, 31% of humanities and social science students gave employment rates for graduates in their field as an influence on course preference, strongly suggesting that they were not aware that employment rates were poor. If course choices were made more carefully the number of applicants for these degrees may well be lower.

230 **Weak markets provide poor information**

People can be rationally ignorant of many things, as the consequences of making a wrong decision because of an unknown fact are not serious. That is hardly the case for something as important as a university education. As we have seen, choice of degree affects employability and lifetime earnings, two things most people go to university to improve.

235 One reason for this ignorance is that relevant information about product performance—normally supplied by producers in the relevant market since they have the strongest motive to explain the strengths of their services and the weakness of their competitors' product—is not provided in higher education.

240 This reticence is due partly to collusion among the universities that limits what they say about each other. The information about graduate employment four months after course completion, along with other data on student satisfaction, is collected by the Graduate Careers Council of Australia (GCCA). The Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee (AVCC), the peak body representing most Australian Vice-Chancellors, has a code of practice on the use of GCCA findings, which states that they must not use them to 'knowingly undermine the reputation and standing of other institutions'. It would be difficult to point out that students of an institution have trouble getting jobs or were not satisfied with their courses without undermining that institution's reputation or standing, and so it is not done. Queensland University of Technology's slogan, 'a university for the real world', is about as close as we get to a swipe at the employability of other universities' graduates.

The fact that all universities offer humanities and social science degrees means they are very unlikely to point out the general weakness of such courses.

HECS is effectively a tax. It is set by the government and goes to the government. The universities do not benefit from it.

Even without the AVCC's restrictions, the fact that all universities offer humanities and social science degrees means that they are very unlikely to point out the general weakness of such courses, as they would be undermining their own Arts Faculties. So none of them have an incentive to inform potential students of the labour market problems that graduates in these fields face. 255

Other institutions are in the situation of offering different, but at least partly substitutable products, so there is some internal competition going on. For example, companies offer different models of some goods, in which customers can make trade-offs between price and quality or additional features. From the point of view of the company, it is better to get the customer to buy something rather than nothing. There is little harm in admitting that the product underachieves in some respect, if you can compensate for that with a lower price. 260 265

Universities face none of these financial compensations for telling the truth. Explaining why this is so requires some knowledge of the three current methods of financing undergraduate education. 270

The hidden economics of enrolments

Most Australian students are in so-called fully-funded places. What this means is that they are funded within a quota of places given to each publicly funded university by the government. There is no single figure accurate for all universities as to how much money 'full-funding' means. A decade ago, the Hawke government developed what was called the Relative Funding Model, to ensure that there was a relationship between the costs of running a course and the subsidy paid. Since then, most new places have been subsidised at an average rate, and no allowance has been made for internal shifts between disciplines. This means that there can in effect be variations between the amounts universities receive per student, even if their course profile is similar. 275 280

On top of these places are partly-funded places, or 'over-enrolments' as they are often called. 'Over-enrolments' is a misleading term, as the university may have the capacity to take them. What they are 'over' is the university's government quota, not its capacity. Last year there were about 27,000 partly-funded places, for which the universities received about \$2,500 each. 285

Students in both the fully- and partly-funded places pay the Higher Education Contribution Scheme charge, known as HECS. They pay different rates based on the type of course, with Arts being in the cheapest category. The charge can be deferred, and repaid via an income-contingent loan. HECS is effectively a tax. It is set by the government and goes to the government. The universities do not benefit from it. 290

In a separate category are the full-fee paying students. The vast bulk of these are from overseas, but there are also a small number of Australians, admitted on a very limited programme of the Howard Government. A university can only offer a fee-paying position to an Australian if they have filled all their within-quota places, and fee-paying domestic students cannot constitute more than 25% of the course. 295

In the first two categories of places we can see a financial reason why universities would not want to alert students to the employment implications of their course choice. They cannot earn more by advising students to upgrade to a qualification that might perform better in the labour market. Their subsidy will not improve; indeed they would lose money if they transferred a place from the humanities or social sciences to the more employable but also more expensive-to-provide engineering or health fields. Because all the charges paid by HECS-liable students go to the government there is no incentive there either; the university may offer a premium product, but it cannot charge a premium price. 300

I do not for a moment believe that universities look at the distribution of places from a purely economic standpoint. If they ruthlessly pursued the economic incentives they face, enrolments in the expensive-to-provide courses would have declined over the last decade, but in fact they increased by nearly 38,000. This was less than the more than 67,000 extra places in cheap-to-provide courses, but still nearly as large as the number of students in our biggest university. 305 310

What these economics of enrolments do mean is that there are strong disincentives to focus on those areas of relatively high expense, even if they are producing good employment outcomes. Of the nine fields that experienced growth in their numbers of commencing students between 1989 and 1999 the two expensive strong employment performers—health and engineering—ranked only 5th and 7th respectively in their growth rates, while the two cheap strong employment performers—law and business 315

320 related courses—ranked 1st and 2nd respectively. These results suggest that while universities do keep an eye on the labour market, they respond according to their own internal economic situation.

Increasing employability

325 What can be done to increase the employability of humanities and social science graduates? The most obvious thing is to cut their numbers and increase them in other areas which have better employment records. Not only would the students switched do better, but there would be less competition for the jobs which are suited to humanities and social science qualifications.

330 This, however, should not be done by government telling the universities how many students to have in which courses (and universities cannot in any case control the numbers exactly, as they do not know how many students will accept offers, or how many will defer or drop out during the year). The government has only quantitative data on the past. It does not have the vital information about the availability of academics, students and jobs that together should form the basis of enrolment decisions.

335 What the government can do is remove the distorting elements of its higher education policies. The most important restriction to abandon is that on charging fees. If universities can cover their costs by charging fees, they will be able to tailor their course offerings more closely to real demand, since they will not incur losses by doing so. If there had been a proper educational market in place over the last decade, it is unlikely that the number of extra places in the humanities and social sciences would have been as high as 24,213, or the number of extra places in engineering and health as low as a combined total of 16,334.

340 Some of the same effect could be achieved by re-adjusting the subsidy system, so that universities were paid according to the costs of the courses their students were actually doing. This would make it more financially attractive to offer places in the expensive-to-provide areas.

345 Adjusting subsidies is, however, a second-best option. Governments will always be driven by their own macroeconomic requirements rather than the financial needs of the universities, so they will cut university funding to meet Budget targets. The average amount universities receive per student has, with only a few interruptions, been in decline since 2000's first year students were toddlers. Any policy which links university income to the Commonwealth Budget is one that has a limited effectiveness, since fiscal cycles cannot be expected to match shifts in costs of courses.

350 The government should also end the system of a quota of places for each university. Abolishing this would allow a freer flow of students to universities and courses that do well in the labour market. Introducing this competitive element would also help ensure that all universities improve their performance. At the moment pegging the number of 'fully-funded' places below actual demand, and using quotas to limit the number of students good universities can take, protects poor performers by virtually guaranteeing that there will be students who attend them, albeit as their university of last resort.

Improving Arts degrees

365 Competition will encourage the universities to take a closer look at their Arts degrees and whether they do teach employable skills. The self-perception of Arts faculties is that they provide 'skills of research, analysis and the ability to write clearly and concisely' (UNSW) and, similarly, develop 'important skills such as the capacity to analyse information, write with clarity, undertake research and develop effective presentation skills' (Monash). Employers do not entirely agree. A survey carried out by ACNielsen Research Services, though with a small sample, found that employers gave humanities and social science graduates 'above average ratings for many skills but not for literacy and for personal presentation and grooming.' That literacy is an area in which humanities and social science graduates were lacking is particularly disturbing.

370 In defence of humanities and social science graduates, employers were not overly impressed with other graduates either. The ACNielsen surveys showed that among basic skills the most important was oral business communication, but that graduates did not perform particularly well. Among more academic skills, the most important in the eyes of employers was creativity and flair, but this too was lacking, as was a capacity for independent and critical thinking, good problem solving and the ability to think logically and orderly. The main areas in which graduates did do reasonably well were computer skills, written business communication skills and motivation.

Governments will always be driven by their own macro-economic requirements rather than the financial needs of universities, so they will cut university funding to meet Budget targets.

A major problem is that while the skills referred to in the UNSW and Monash promotional material *can* be learned in humanities and social science degrees, they are not systematically *taught*. They tend to be learnt indirectly by observing others, through practice in researching and writing essays, and through feedback on assessed material. If the student is resourceful, and has teachers with the ability and time to provide guidance, then these skills will be learned and enhanced. However, an employer would be unwise to assume that the graduate had high level thinking and writing skills.

Arts—and indeed all other degrees—may well be improved by following an initiative of Australia’s major private university, Bond. At Bond they have a core curriculum that all bachelor degree candidates must complete. While there is some choice within basic clusters, all students must complete units in communication (oral, written and visual, along with the nature of communication processes and difficulties), information technology (working effectively with contemporary information technology), values (foundations of moral, ethical and social theories; using theoretical ideas in formulating arguments) and organisations (appreciating the dynamics and strategic positioning of organisations and working in groups).

Employers who have a Bond University applicant can be reasonably assured that he or she has basic general skills in all these areas. They cannot be so assured with a graduate from some other university. At the moment Bond’s competitive advantage in course provision is undermined because its competitors receive massive subsidies; in a real market I have little doubt that it could quickly gain students. The introduction of real competition between universities would encourage them to follow Bond’s example.

Another development that could boost the more systematic teaching of useful skills is direct testing. The Australian Council for Educational Research, on behalf of the government, is developing a Graduate Skills Assessment test, which aims to measure generic skills. If employers come to regard the GSA highly, as seems likely given the difficulties in working out what skills graduates really have, there will be more pressure on the universities to incorporate direct teaching of these skills into their courses.

Conclusion

We cannot expect humanities and social science graduates to quite match the labour market performance of those with more directly employable degrees. But we can hope to narrow the employability gap. In the United States humanities and social science graduates do have higher than average graduate unemployment rates, but among graduates a year out only about 10% worse. In Australia, for these graduates as a whole, they do about 50% worse over time, and up to 90% worse four months after graduation. We should make the United States our benchmark.

This is not a benchmark we will achieve under our current higher education system. By abolishing price signals and controlling place numbers the system does disastrous damage to the information flows and incentive systems that, in properly functioning markets, help tell producers about consumers’ needs and give producers a financial reason to satisfy those consumer needs.

A better system would make students the universities’ paymasters. Students would pay fees set by the university, after deduction of whatever subsidies were available. The role of government would be to offer subsidies where appropriate, and to provide loans to students who are unable to pay fees upfront. This would transform the dynamic of Australian higher education, changing the universities’ financial imperative from satisfying government quotas to meeting student needs.

The current Australian higher education system is comprehensively rigged against students; the last relic of an era in which the economy was organised for the benefit of producers, not consumers. For today’s teenagers, change cannot happen too soon.

**For references listed according to line number in right-hand margin,
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