

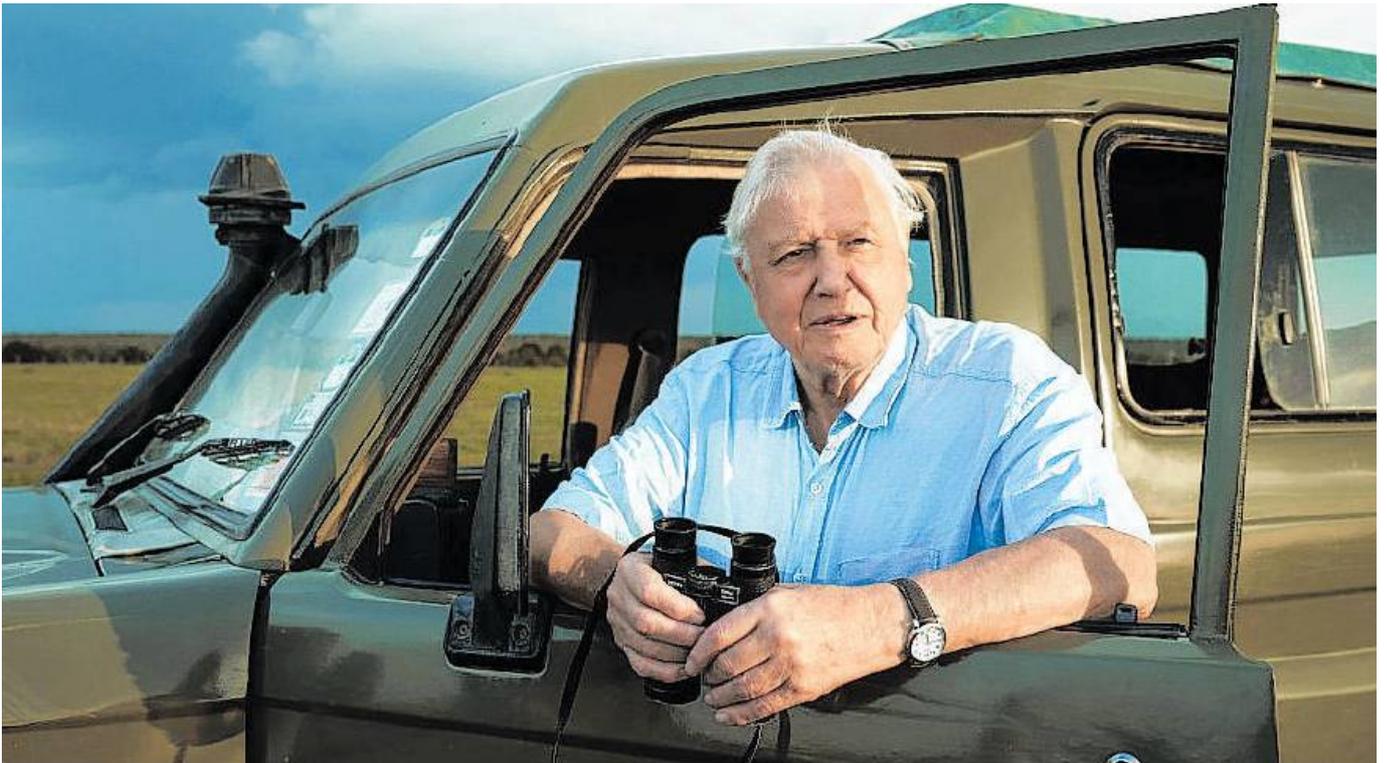
End the humanities attack

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You've probably never heard of Franz Boas — widely known in academic circles as a pioneer of modern anthropology.

You may have heard of Kathy Reichs, who created the character and television show *Bones*.



David Attenborough is one of the world's best-known anthropologists.

You most certainly have heard of Sir David Attenborough. What you may not know is the Reichs and Attenborough are anthropologists.

Reichs has a masters and a PhD in physical anthropology and Attenborough studied social anthropology. Why does any of this matter?

It matters because the University of WA has recently announced that it will cut its social sciences program, effectively abolishing anthropology and sociology as a course of study and research area. The impact will not just be felt in the 16 full-time academic jobs that are set to go.

It will also be felt by students who pursued a degree in the social sciences because they have a passion for understanding our world and our place in it.

There is a bit of stereotype out there of anthropologists and sociologists as navel gazers who spend their years studying phenomenon of little relevance to today's rapidly changing world.

Science and technology are considered the way forward and much has been invested in encouraging young people and women into science, technology, engineering and maths as fields of study. Rightly so. But it should not come at the expense of the humanities. Last year, the Morrison Government introduced sweeping reforms that increased the cost of humanities degrees exponentially in a bid to move students away from studying degrees in humanities courses.

Progressive cuts to higher education funding by the Coalition Government have disproportionately impacted the humanities, with the Government mounting the nefarious argument that humanities courses do not lead to jobs.

The truth is that conservative governments have traditionally been antagonistic to the humanities in the false belief that the humanities produces left-wing loonies more interested in studying the migration of Argentinian ants than contributing to "important stuff".

In 2018 then education minister Simon Birmingham vetoed 11 research grants approved by the Australian Research Council — mostly in the humanities. As possibly the only member of Parliament to have successfully applied for an Australian research council grant (twice), I can tell you it is a long and rigorous process.

A single grant application can run into a hundred pages and take years to develop. That a minister could overrule a panel of subject experts that had thoroughly assessed applications as worthy of a grant, was shocking and disturbing. The humanities matter — perhaps now more than ever. In the midst of a global pandemic where States are locking down and Australians are being asked to wear masks in public, socially distance, stay at home and get vaccinated, understanding human behaviour is not just the important stuff — it's the necessary stuff.

Historically, anthropologists have studied cases of epidemic control and shed light on vaccine hesitancy, quarantine and health behaviours like mask wearing. During the large-scale outbreak of the Ebola virus (2013–2016) anthropologists were critical in developing an effective response to the emergency.

As we embrace a future that will be increasingly shaped by artificial intelligence, the humanities will be crucial not just to the foundational understanding of the ethics of technology and how it interacts with society but to the development of artificial intelligence itself.

While technical experts will come up with the artificial, sociologists, anthropologists and human behaviour experts will bring the intelligence part of the equation. You can't have artificial intelligence without the intelligence.

Big tech companies know this, as do large corporations who employ anthropologists to gain market insights. In fact, social scientists work across the corporate, government and not-for-profit sectors in different capacities and career pathways in the technology sector are increasing as more companies realise the value of understanding how consumers interact with their products.

My research as a professor in counter-terrorism drew on the social sciences — anthropology, sociology and social psychology to develop an understanding of online radicalisation and ways to detect potential operatives.

That research has been used in several countries to develop interventions and responses to terrorism. To claim humanities degrees do not lead to jobs is simply false. To claim subject areas such as sociology and anthropology have no relevance to the future of work is also false.

To introduce policies and funding cuts designed to alienate the humanities is not just ideological shadow boxing, it has real world consequences for our national prosperity.

Now is not the time to cut the humanities. How about instead we cut the malarky and admit that this is really about the Coalition Government's antagonism to the humanities.

Dr Anne Aly is the Labor MP for the Federal seat of Cowan