Australian Universities Accord Panel

Department of Education

19 December 2022

To the Accord Panel,

**Re: Consultation on the Australian Universities Accord**

The National Association for the Visual Arts (NAVA) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this review to inform the development of the Accord and establish priorities for the future of Australian higher education.

NAVA is an independent membership organisation which brings together the many voices of the visual arts, craft and design sector to improve the fundamental conditions of work and practice. We do this through advocacy, education and the Code of Practice for the Visual Arts, Craft and Design.

Established in 1983 as the national peak body for the visual arts, our community today is made up of over 50,000 Members, subscribers, friends and followers, consisting of artists, students, academics, arts workers, galleries, arts organisations, and art schools.

In response to the key priorities outlined in the review terms of reference, NAVA advises the following:

MEETING AUSTRALIA’S KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS NEEDS, NOW AND IN THE FUTURE

Too often in the Australian tertiary sector, arts degrees lose federal funding to allow for what are, misguidedly, determined to be more ‘job relevant’ degrees. Yet the arts and creative sectors are key contributors to the national economy and Australia’s rich cultural life.

In 2019, the Australian Government’s Bureau of Communications and Arts Research launched Creative Skills for the Future Economy. The research report analysed the skills and qualifications of people working in creative fields and how these may be used in the future and shows that businesses relied on $87 billion worth of creative industry input for success, a figure that is growing rapidly. Creative skills, requiring original thought and innovation, are particularly resistant and are likely to face relatively higher demand in the future. This paper contributes to the evidence base on the importance of creative skills for future economic outcomes.[[1]](#endnote-1)

Reinforcing this argument is the wealth of global research from the World Economic Forum, PWC, Deloitte, McKinsey, NESTA, Harvard, and even the Australian Government’s Bureau of Communications and Arts Research, which all stipulate that creativity and creative skills are imperative for the workforce and economy of the future.

ACCESS AND OPPORTUNITY

Universities Australia recognise that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and knowledge are assets to universities and the nation. Their genuine inclusion in teaching and research broadens, deepens and improves what Australian universities do in a unique way on the world stage.[[2]](#endnote-2)

The visual arts, craft and design sector face challenges in appointing and maintaining a First Nations workforce. Most art centres struggle to recruit suitably qualified First Nations managers and other art workers from their local community. Meanwhile, there is a total of just 25.1 FTE First Nations staff across 434 small-to-medium (S2M) public galleries in Australia.[[3]](#endnote-3) The reasons include:

* Lack of career pathways into the sector for First Nations people.
* Lack of formal mentoring and professional development opportunities for First Nations staff while in these roles.
* Inability to secure long-term funding for First Nations jobs. Often these roles are funded for 12 months, making it difficult for galleries and organisations to recruit and retain First Nations staff.
* Remuneration is below that offered in allied industries and not commensurate with the expertise that First Nations people bring to the sector.
* Cultural burden of often being the only First Nations member of staff at the gallery or within an organisation.[[4]](#endnote-4)

As identified by the Productivity Commission in their recent report on the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander visual arts and crafts, full-time, salaried jobs, such as curators and gallerists, are highly competitive and usually require university qualifications. Professional development and training delivered through the Vocational Education and Training (VET) system are often not aligned with what the industry requires. For example, visual arts VET courses are predominantly focused on art production, with limited time spent on the business and technology skills required for arts workers and artists operating their own businesses. Moreover, many artists and arts workers learn valuable skills and practices from Elders, but this learning is often not formally recognised, limiting access to positions that may lead to senior management and leadership roles.[[5]](#endnote-5)

The agency of the First Nations visual arts, craft and design sector requires strong investment in First Nations mid-career and leadership roles. We need a national strategic approach to build the pipeline of First Nations visual arts and crafts workers - and leaders - in remote, regional and urban areas.

INVESTMENT AND AFFORDABILITY

There was a time when art schools were regarded as thrilling sites of experimentation and thriving innovation. Then in the 1990s, the Dawkins reforms saw them moved under the umbrella of the universities and required to be more business-like and set ‘performance targets’.

Many universities benefitted from excellence in their arts faculties, earning international reputations for cultural sophistication and investment in experimentation and innovation. They have enjoyed a strong recognition amongst peers, seen to be providing specialist and multi-disciplinary approaches to research-based visual arts, craft and design education that reflects the diversity of professional art practice.

However, successive funding cuts have bitten into the universities' ability to maintain their levels of research commitment, range of course options, numbers of staff and therefore staff student ratios, induction of fresh academic talent, career pathways for staff, tutorial provision, academic entry requirements and standards.

The pandemic left universities without access to any of the Federal Government’s income support, including JobKeeper and in October 2020, the Job-Ready Graduates Bill passed through the Senate which meant a 113% increase in fees from 2021 for arts and humanities degrees.

In late 2020 and throughout 2021 and 2022, many Australian universities made numerous course and staffing cuts as well as proposals for more to come. The debilitating cuts being made at all universities are targeting the arts and studio-based learning. The months leading to these difficult decisions have been a stressful and exhausting time for many as universities considered sweeping changes as part of their Covid-19 recovery plans at the cost of the livelihoods of hundreds of staff members.

A vast majority of university staff in arts, craft and design faculties and schools across Australia endured months of job uncertainty and an unclear picture of their futures. For those ‘fortunate’ enough to keep their jobs, many of their roles have been restructured in ways that make their workloads unmanageable, and devalues what they do as teachers, researchers, and support staff.

Course cuts and studio closures are having a deleterious impact on both the number and quality of artists in Australia and may result in severe cultural deficit for Australia. We have experienced a major destabilisation of the Australian visual arts, craft and design ecology with whole modes of practice now struggling to exist in several key states and regions. We have not simply lost courses and facilities - we have been witnessing the erosion of vital sites of experimentation, creativity, critical thinking, collaboration and joy.

Over time, a few university arts programs may still be accessible, but only to those who can afford the fee increases, who can afford the increased cost of living in city centres, who can afford to not juggle part time work on top of their long studio days. The point of irony that we arrive at is that although the arts are relentlessly derided for being inaccessible and elitist, it is precisely the defunding of the industry that makes entering it so cut-throat and unsustainable for the vast majority.

QUALITY AND SUSTAINABILITY

The casualisation of staff is rampant across the whole university sector including arts faculties. Two thirds of university workers are on limited term contracts or casual appointments.[[6]](#endnote-6) Teachers have no security in terms of knowing whether they will be employed for the upcoming semester.

COVID-19 and digital classrooms have resulted in a significant increase in class sizes. With more students, teachers are forced to manage a significant increase in emails, assessment consultations and marking - while wages remain the same. Job losses through voluntary and forced redundancies, as well as the non-renewal of limited term contracts, worsens the staff-to-student ratio in classrooms.[[7]](#endnote-7)

Universities are particularly dependent on the fees of international students. International students pay much higher fees than domestic students and are not eligible for financial support either from universities or welfare mechanisms including JobKeeper. For parts of the pandemic international students were barred from entering the country to continue their studies.

During COVID-19 lockdowns, visual arts, craft and design classes were conducted online and students could not access studio and workshop facilities. Despite a significantly worsened learning experience, students still had to pay full tuition fees.

NAVA asserts that investment is needed for secure, tenured teaching positions for lecturers and tutors. Adequate remuneration of teaching staff for the labour of administration, assessment consultation, and reading and marking assignments is essential, as is adequate remuneration for teaching staff to convert course material to digital formats and to receive support/training in teaching online. Meanwhile, tuition fees should be subsidised when students are unable to access studio and workshop facilities during lockdown or similar.

NAVA recommends consultation be undertaken into the needs of international students to better understand how to support and deliver appropriate curriculum development for international students studying for a career in the visual arts in an Australian industry context.

DELIVERING NEW KNOWLEDGE, INNOVATION AND CAPABILITY

Funding through the Australian Research Council (ARC) is crucial for extensive partnership-based research between academic and arts industry bodies as the basis for exploring developments in practice, responding to local and global impacts on Australian artists and organisations, as well as informing arts infrastructure reforms.

NAVA is an industry partner on three current research projects supported by the ARC Linkage program:

* Visual Arts Work: sustainable strategies for the Australian visual arts and craft sector led by researchers from Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) University and The University of Melbourne
* Precarious Movements: Choreography and the Museum led by researchers at the University of New South Wales (UNSW) and Monash University Museum of Art (MUMA)
* Empowering Australia’s Visual Arts via Creative Blockchain Opportunities led by researchers from the University of Wollongong (UoW), University of Southern Queensland (UniSQ) and The University of Queensland (UQ).

Please do not hesitate to contact me for any further information I can provide.

Sincerely,

Penelope Benton

Executive Director

1. Australian Government Bureau of Communications and ArtsResearch,. (2019). *Creative Skills for the Future Economy* working paper <https://www.arts.gov.au/publications/creative-skills-future-economy> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Universities Australia Indigenous Strategy 2022-25 <https://www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/UA-Indigenous-Strategy-2022-25.pdf>

   [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Australian Public Galleries Snapshot 2019 <https://pgav.org.au/Australian-Public-Galleries-Snapshot-2019~7486> [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Public Galleries Association Victoria (PGAV) submission to the Australian Government’s National Cultural Policy consultation <https://pgav.org.au/PGAV-Submission-A-new-National-Cultural-Policy~8771> [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Productivity Commission Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander visual arts and crafts Study report, 2022 <https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/indigenous-arts/report/indigenous-arts.pdf> [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. # Casuals and Insecure work, NTEU <https://www.nteu.org.au/policy/workforce_issues/insecure_work>

   [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Under the Pump, Unpaid and Uncertain: Casual workers at UNSW during Covid-19, UNSW Casuals Network 2020 <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1aiXDTewJF9f1-PRKtvnpBmSAw4qW2kMR/view> [↑](#endnote-ref-7)