

# Australian Universities Accord

## Discussion Paper Response

In response to Mary O’Kane’s encouragement to be bold, the Arts, Education and Law Group at Griffith University make key recommendations related to the Job-Ready Graduates Policy Package (JRG). The changes we recommend to the JRG reflect our commitment to (1) the fundamental purpose of higher education in society, (2) the strengthening of Australia’s future workforce, and (3) the values of equity and social justice that are at the heart of Griffith University’s identity.

### Recommendations: Funding Clusters

In thinking about the JRG and the future of Australian higher education and making the recommendations below, the Arts, Education and Law Group has looked closely at evidence and considered a range of important factors.

We believe it is critical to advocate for principle *and* pragmatism in relation to higher education and to resist the temptation to view the two as mutually exclusive. The focus on professional qualifications and the employment pathway – to the exclusion of other considerations – has narrowed the way we view and approach education and limited its potential. Humanities and the Social Sciences (HASS) have a key rebalancing role to play here.

We argue that a broad and deep HASS education develops graduates with the skills, capabilities and outlook that will be the ‘key to success in life and work’ over the next 10-20 years and beyond.<sup>1</sup> The Discussion Paper identifies communication, collaboration, problem solving, critical thinking and digital literacy as crucial in the workforce context; of course, these are HASS staples. The contributions of HASS to the economy have been widely documented. The creative industries keep many small and regional towns afloat across the country; the public service, both federal and state, is full of HASS graduates<sup>2</sup>; and industry – perhaps most notably, Jennifer Westacott, Chief Executive of the Business Council of Australia – is constantly calling for more, not less, HASS.<sup>3</sup> Recent data is also revealing – HASS graduates make up approximately two thirds of the Australian workforce and exceed the national average in terms of ‘employability’.<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, and critically from our perspective, the diverse experiences within a HASS education help to support the development of an informed and engaged citizenry that is equipped to respond well to the big societal challenges of our time. We believe this is – or should be – a core purpose of higher education. The Arts, Education and Law Group believes it is time to turn the page on recent ‘culture wars’ in higher education and to modify the funding structure so that Australia can realise its full potential. Accordingly, we recommend the following changes to funding clusters:

- ‘Society and Culture’ should be moved from Funding Cluster 1 into Funding Cluster 2, where English now sits. As some commentators have noted, this would reduce HASS fees to the lowest rate and increase total funding for Society and Culture by 10% – i.e., equal to English, Mathematics and Education. It is difficult to understand why, for example, a student studying History should have to pay so much more than a student studying English, as is currently the case. This proposal to

<sup>1</sup> Mary O’Kane (Panel Chair) (2023, p. 13). Australian Universities Accord Discussion Paper: February 2023. Canberra, Australian Government.

<sup>2</sup> For example, the Academy of the Social Science Australia note approximately 500,000 social science professionals (economists, accountants, lawyers, psychologists, etc.) and ~3 million social science graduates working in jobs across the economy (top employment sectors: education, health, professional services, and government). (State of the Social Sciences 2021, The Academy of the Social Sciences Australia, "State of the Social Sciences ". Retrieved 10/03/2023, 2023, from <https://stateofthesocialsciences.org.au/about-the-social-sciences>.

<sup>3</sup> Business Council of Australia (2018). "Supply Nation's Connect 2016 Keynote Speech by Jennifer Westacott: The True Value of Humanities". Newsroom. Retrieved 08/03/2023, 2023, from <https://www.bca.com.au/the-true-value-of-humanities>.

<sup>4</sup> The Social Research Centre (2022). 2021 Employer Satisfaction Survey, Australia National University.

move 'Society and Culture' to Funding Cluster 2 would restore some consistency and good sense to funding arrangements, while supporting the development of a stronger workforce and society.

- Communication and Media Studies should also be moved from Funding Cluster 1 to Funding Cluster 2 or perhaps even to Funding Cluster 3. Communication and Media Studies used to be appropriately funded before the JRG, and the JRG downgrade was indeed perplexing. These courses are typically more expensive to deliver than, say, English courses; the Communication job market is strong; and Communication programs are highly attractive to international students. The Funding Cluster in which Communication and Media Studies is placed should reflect these realities.
- Indigenous Studies should be moved from Funding Cluster 1 to Funding Cluster 3 alongside Indigenous language. The current funding structure subordinates Indigenous Studies to other areas and does not incentivise serious engagement with Indigenous culture at a key time in Australia's history.
- Visual and Performing Arts should be moved within Funding Cluster 2 to the same funding arrangement as Education, Clinical Psychology, English, Mathematics, and Statistics. This would reflect the diversity of employment pathways of Visual and Performing Arts students (such as teaching, community arts, health and wellbeing, and in research), the significant and growing contribution of Australia's creative and cultural industries to the Australian economy, and skills embedded in Visual and Performing Arts such as communication, collaboration, problem solving, critical thinking and digital literacy crucial to Australia's changing skill requirements as pointed to above.

## Recommendations: Equity and Social Justice Considerations

Notwithstanding the declared ambition of the JRG to meet Australia's future workforce needs, the legislation has been marked by a tension between policy intent and policy outcomes.

Flawed assumptions shaped the design of the JRG. First, it was wrong to assume that 'price' would determine course preferences – student interests, along with employment and salary prospects, are typically more reliable indicators.<sup>5</sup> Second, some 'priority' courses now receive less total funding per student, hardly an incentive for universities to expand enrolments in these areas.<sup>6</sup> Third, the JRG creates financial incentive for universities to grow in 'non-priority' areas, driven by trade-offs of funding combinations, which may distort the JRG's aims (student loans remain uncapped, and around 90% of funding in HASS courses come from student loans).

At the same time, the JRG has communicated a misleading message about the contributions of HASS graduates in the economy – i.e., that they add little value – and it will inevitably burden certain groups with unfair levels of future debt. Under JRG HASS graduates – a disproportionate number of whom are female and Indigenous – will leave university with student debts of more than \$40,000 and will probably take decades to repay their loans.<sup>7</sup> The debt they carry forward will significantly exceed that of graduating doctors.

The Arts, Education and Law Group also notes that the JRG has led to an increase in student contributions for a Bachelor of Laws degree by approximately \$3000 for a standard year of study, when Law was moved into Funding Cluster 1. As with HASS, the increase in student contributions was arguably intended to deter students from studying law, notwithstanding the utility of law qualifications in preparing graduates for a range of professional careers. At Griffith University we have not seen a decrease in student demand for Law courses, but there have been some perverse consequences of the JRG. One consequence has been students remaining in 'old' versions of the Law program rather than transferring into new and improved program structures to avoid higher fees. Another consequence is

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<sup>5</sup> Andrew Norton provides some empirical evidence related to this in A. Norton, 'Jobs, interests, and course choices', *Andrew Norton: Higher education commentary from Carlton (blog)*, 20 June 2020; A. Norton, 'Financial influences on job seeking university applicants', *Andrew Norton: Higher education commentary from Carlton (blog)*, 28 June 2020.

<sup>6</sup> Overall funding decreases in priority areas including math (-17%), engineering and science (-16.4%), agriculture (-9.45), nursing (-7.9%), and education were noted by Eliza Littleton (2022, p.35) *At the Crossroads: What is the post-COVID future of Australia's Public Universities?* The Centre for Future Work at the Australia Institute.

<sup>7</sup> See the Futurity Investment Group's recent report that measures the social and financial impacts of debt acquired at university later in life. Futurity Investment Group (2023). *The Financial and Social Impact of the Cost of University Education*.

that female students who comprise approximately 65% of our students, and who we know are more likely to face career interruptions, for example, due to childcare responsibilities, and financial disadvantage, will be burdened with increased debt.

As a values-based institution, Griffith has strong commitments around equity, diversity, and inclusion. Given the student profile within HASS and other areas of our Group, such as Law, we believe that the JRG unduly penalises groups whose futures our University is strongly committed to advancing. Accordingly, we recommend that:

- a considered and comprehensive review of the JRG be undertaken to factor the impacts of the financial burden of HELP debts on student cohorts including disciplines' median debt incurrence, repayment times and earnings, and the impact of this debt over an individuals' lifetime.
- discontinuation of the low completion rate measures. These measures withdraw Commonwealth support for students who have failed more than 50 percent of their units after they have studied eight or more units. Low SES student cohorts are generally more adversely impacted than others through these measures. An increase in proactive student learning support and guidance intervention mechanisms would be more effective in enabling these student cohorts.
- the impact of higher than anticipated indexation rates embedded in the JRG be reviewed given this may reduce student places while demand for places is expected to increase (the demographic outcome of the 2004 baby bonus policy). Such an outcome would be at odds with a commitment to enhance accessibility to, and participation in, Australian higher education.

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