

Humanities in the Regions

Response to the Australian Universities Accord Discussion Paper

Introduction

Humanities in the Regions is a Community of Practice initiative of the ACHRC Australasian Consortium of Humanities Researchers and Centres. The ACHRC was established in 2010, launching its Humanities the Regions member initiative in 2014.

Initially seeking to promote Humanities-based research in regional areas across Australia, rapid intensification in cuts to higher education humanities, arts, and social sciences (HASS) programs across regional Australia over the past five years has catalysed the member initiative into providing advocacy and information-sharing for a broader base of regionally-located HASS academics loosely affiliated with the ACHRC.

Humanities in the Regions has since grown in scope to focus on HASS higher education research andteaching in regional Australia. This represents a recognition of the powerfully intertwined nature of research and teaching activities at regional institutions and an understanding of our unique place-based missions. We recognise that the important and unique ecology of regional arts, humanities, and social sciences education needs to be protected because it is informed by and connects with issues that matter to the lives of our regional students and their communities. The ACHRC Humanities in the Regions portfolio has been unique in its decade-long focus on arts, humanities, and social sciences higher education provision in regional Australia.

Over years of discussion with our constituents and several research projects related to this focus, we have acquired a unique viewpoint on regional higher education in Australia in the areas of humanities, arts, and social sciences.

The renewed focus on regional higher education in the Accord Discussion Paper, and in the reports that have informed it, is a positive direction after HASS higher education in the regions has been eroded over the course of the last decade. We welcome the opportunity to put forward feedback, ideas, and insights to help the Review of Australia’s Higher Education System develop further reports and recommendations in accord with the Review’s Terms of Reference.

Our submission represents a collective voice of HASS teaching and research academics and our students across regional Australia. Our message is clear and consistent: humanities, arts, and social science higher education provision in regional Australia is in crisis. The time is now to redress educational system inequities to restore the capacity for regional Australia and regional Australians to offer authentic innovation and fair access to education.

Q1. How should an Accord by structured and focused to meet the challenges facing Australia’s higher education system? What is needed to overcome limitations in the current approach to Australian higher education?

Higher education plays a fundamental role in ‘the creation of human capital, social capital and the realisation of employment, investment and income generating economic development priorities’ (Garlick 2000, p. 4); regional universities have a particular role to play in providing the quality of education required to ensure regions benefit from this capital creation (Shinners 2022, p. 517).

More broadly, regional higher education institutions provide a unique mission to their regional communities. Research-informed higher education in arts, social sciences, and humanities in regional Australia offers under-recognised value as an engine to the regional community and its students, as well as to the broader national good.

Economically, it is well documented that a HASS undergraduate degree is a solid investment for students. The 2022 Graduate Outcomes Report shows a median full-time beginning salary of $75,000 for undergraduates in the areas of society and culture (versus the $52,000 median undergraduate starting salary). Moreover, labour force participation rates of 90% have been reported for workers with HASS undergraduate degrees, with some of the highest salaries in regional areas. In terms of GDP, the arts and culture sector in Australia has showed steady growth in the last two decades in terms of its contribution to gross domestic product (Zawadzki 2016).

Humanities, arts, and social science graduates acquire a broad base of skills that are increasingly valued in our changing and increasingly globalised economy. The transformation of society will be powered in large part by creativity, critical thinking, high-level communication skills, intercultural literacy, and nuanced understandings of peoples and places to support society through social change (Kreager 2013, Harvey and Shahjahan 2013, DASSH 2018). Regional Australia has an important role to play.

The discussion of the future of higher education in Australia is at risk of being dominated by the better-resourced campaigns of metropolitan universities and by the often-valued STEM and health sectors in an environment where STEM skills are routinely emphasised over and above the increasing value and flexibility of a Bachelor of Arts degree.

It is crucial to ensure that the regional voice is amplified in discussions about the future of higher education in Australia and that HASS academics in the regions have a say.

We propose firstly that the Accord be structured in a way that preserves the unique voice of regional schools, academics, providers, students, alumni, communities, and economies, including representatives of HASS fields, through a regional higher education advisory board providing direct and representative reporting to the new regional education commissioner.

Q2 How can the diverse missions of Australian higher education providers be supported, taking into account their different operating contexts and communities they serve (for example regional universities)?

Society’s next Eddie Koiki Mabo lives in regional Australia. In the current environment, if he chooses to go to uni at all, it is likely that he is being seduced off country by rich offerings and scholarships and given a generic university education at a larger metropolitan university. This rich metropolitan university might offer more fields of study and subjects than a regional university, but it may struggle to engage and support him, and will rarely connect him back into his community in ways that inform his current studies, his future career, or that benefit his region of origin.

Overwhelmingly, the current system allows for rich metropolitan universities to accumulate resources that increasingly attract students away from the regions while humbler regional universities facing resource scarcity are forced into doubling down on budget cuts that translate to fewer subjects, study areas, services, facilities, and scholarships, and ultimately fewer students. Relatedly, STEM and health programs at regional unis reap the system’s greatest rewards, while HASS programs suffer. In addition, regional universities are particularly vulnerable to recession (Orphan 2020). Moreover, the post-pandemic shift to online teaching means metropolitan universities are now enrolling regional students while rarely connecting them into a local cohort or their regional community.

This creates a system characterised by so-called ‘virtuous circles’—favouring sector accumulation where rich institutions and sectors get richer—and vicious cycles—where the resource-poor institutions and sectors serving Australia’s valuable and often-overlooked regional areas get poorer. These cycles have compounding effects on humanities, arts, and social science educational capacity in regional Australia, which enrol (or increasingly fail to enrol) some of the nation’s largest equity groups.

The current demand-driven funding system underserves the HASS fields and regional HASS programs and their students and communities in regional Australia, in particular. The ATAR system perversely incentivises students to apply to the most in-demand programs because of their prestige factor, making them even more appealing, and thus compounding these cycles.

In their 2014 report to the Australian Academy of Humanities and Social Sciences, Graeme Turner and Kylie Brass warned that the contingencies of managing institutions in a system subject to the demands of school-leavers have led to choices that have reduced the number of HASS offerings within the sector, and significantly reduced the presence of HASS offerings within regional campuses and regional institutions. “There is a risk that, if these trends were to continue,” they predicted, “HASS teaching, over time, would contract to the metropolitan universities, and perhaps even only to the Go8.”

Ten years later, regional higher education managers have cut HASS programs to cut costs, leaving these institutions as rationalised shells of their former vibrant lives in the 1970s, 80s, and 90s when 100s of 1000s of students rushed to the new Innovative Research Universities in ways that allowed them to live up to their description: as engines of national as well as regional innovation. Regional academics, students, and alumni are aware of the way these drastic cuts have affected the capacity of regional universities to offer robust degrees and research. We note that the conversation about the future of higher education in Australia needs to be informed by a better understanding of these structural inequities that have adversely affected regional communities and the universities that serve them.

Cuts to programs and limitations of offerings in HASS areas in the regions mean that the unique regional perspectives and offerings are at significant risk. These programs provide particular value because they allow students to come to understand, articulate, and pursue what matters to them; to recognise and contribute to the developing story of their people and places; and because regionally based teaching academics and researchers are well-situated to find solutions to their particular problems.

QILT analytics clearly show that students are more engaged and happier with the level of support they receive at regional universities than at Go8 institutions. Regional academics understand the educational and cultural backgrounds of their students. They are members of these same communities. Their areas of research inquiry tend to align with the communities that these students live in. They are best positioned to meet students where they are at. In the resource-scarce environments in which they are operating, however, arts and social science research and practice at regional universities require more support.

Funding for regional universities, and HASS higher education in the regions needs to be radically re-imagined to more equitably support students who wish to stay in regional Australia. This is not just so they can be assured equality of access, where they may benefit from an education that is not only on par with programs at metropolitan universities. It is also to support the regional mission to ensure equality of service, providing an education that is uniquely responsive to the lives of regional students and which serves them and their communities.

The limitations of the current system call for structural changes at the level of funding regional universities and regional students, more actively redistributing resources between and across programs, breaking down internal barriers within degree structures, and encouraging cross-sector and cross-disciplinary innovation and collaboration.

We need a reset to overcome the way in which higher education in Australia is characterised by resource-hoarding by wealthy universities and programs on the one hand, and a race-to-the bottom, on the other, factors that are compounded by and reciprocally affect regionality as well as fields of research and fields of education.

Demand-driven funding must be reconsidered with these factors in mind, to ensure adequate resource distribution between fields of education, and between regional and metropolitan universities.

Funding should not, or should *not only*, follow regional students out of the regions to metropolitan universities. Moreover, ATAR scores should not drive students toward certain fields or institutions over others. More transparent funding of university teaching and research is needed, with regional and sector equity being one of the highest priorities.

Q3 What should the long-term target/s be for Australia’s higher education attainment by 2030 and 2040, and how should these be set and adjusted over time?

While, by national standards, the target of 40% higher education attainment has been met, new targets need to be set for regional Australia and regional Australians. As the National Regional, Rural, and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy Final Report (2019) noted, individuals who grow up in regional, rural, and remote (RRR) areas are 40 percent less likely to gain a tertiary level education qualification and less than half as likely to gain a bachelor degree or above by the time they are 35 years old, compared to individuals from metropolitan areas.

It is encouraging to see that regionality is a current focus of the Commonwealth’s higher education policy agenda, as it seeks to address the long-standing issue of under-representation of regional students in higher education participation and completion rates, linked to some significant economic and social challenges facing regional Australia.

It is essential that opportunities to obtain funding which is not available to their metropolitan counterparts continues to be a critical component of regional universities, and that this funding goes *to* the regions, not just to students *from* the regions.

New targets need to be set to ensure that where you grow up does not determine the kind of education you get, or what you study. To address growing inequities between metropolitan and regional Australia, address skills shortages in the regions, and ensure regional Australians are not left behind in the changing economy, new ambitious targets need to be set to ensure a significant number of regional Australians are educated at post-secondary levels, not just in general but also *in* the regions so that regions benefit from this education.

Rather than being directed at particular fields of study, these targets must take into consideration that the creativity, flexibility, global-mindedness, critical thinking and high-level communication skills needed in the future economy require HASS as well as STEM education.

Q9. How should Australia ensure enough students are studying courses that align with the changing needs of the economy and society?

Our future society needs multilingual engineers, health workers with deep understanding of the societies and cultures they serve, and city planners who also understand regional history as well as the cultural and social effects of past, present, and future migration patterns. In many universities in North America, cross-pollination between arts and sciences is encouraged by simple matters like the standard requirement that Bachelor of Arts students take an introductory science or maths subject, and Bachelor of Science students take an English and/or Arts subject in the course of their degree.

Yet, in most if not all universities in Australia, current degree structures and internal university barriers prevent students from combining multiple fields of study such as languages and engineering; HR and English; medicine and society; or planning and sociology, for example. Moreover, students who switch degrees partway are often saddled by longer pathways and more debt when structures need to be set up to recognise different kinds of prior learning in different fields, and to reward students with diverse educational pathways. Australia needs to ensure that all students have core competencies in science and arts.

In addition, the coming transformations in society need to stem, in advance, the kind of large differences between regional and metropolitan demographics that have been documented to drive polarised political cycles in the UK, for example—where the overwhelming number of people who voted to leave the EU came from regional England, where anti-immigration attitudes have also been documented to have driven voter choice (Blinder and Richards 2020). Regional universities’ provision of humanities, arts, and social science education is not only an under-recognised engine of social and economic innovation, but also an effective tool for building cultural literacies, soft power, and intercultural diplomacy (Lee and Lim 2014, 7).

HASS higher education in the regions has a crucial role to play in the creation and maintenance of competitive, innovative regional economies and a healthy democracy for Australia’s future. It is vital that the role of HASS higher education in general, and in regional Australia in particular, is valued as a significant part of the mix of courses understood to align with the changing needs of the economy and society.

In an ideal scenario, targets might be set for the creation of new, more open degree structures to ensure a robust environment of cross-disciplinary, cross-unit collaboration between arts and sciences in ways that prioritise regional Australia.

Q33 What changes to funding and regulatory settings would enable providers to support students from underrepresented groups?

In the past two years, and accelerated by the pandemic, Australia has experienced the largest net inflow of population to regional areas (ABS, 2021). In this context, regional universities have become even more critical; they make an important contribution to and are strongly linked with regional economies and communities (RUN, 2021). They attract and retain diverse cohorts – including first in-family (FIF), students from low SES backgrounds, and regional and rural students and staff. Goriss-Hunter and Burke (2015, p.112) note that there are “interconnections between the regional university, a diverse student population, and the local community.” HASS students overwhelmingly comprise the highest number of students from disadvantaged and diverse backgrounds. As a Universities Accord works to deliver equity of access, it must not lose sight of the particular needs and unique capacity offered by regional humanities, arts, and social science programs in making a contribution to local and regional development (Kempton et al. 2022). Nor must it lose sight of the capacity for HASS students to form unique contributions to regional community organisations and economies through WIL and beyond.

In addition to changes to demand-driven funding of higher education, a suite of incentivisation factors would be welcome to encourage the redevelopment of regional universities including specialised scholarships, not just for students from regional Australia, but also for students studying at regional universities.

Humanities and Arts courses are cheaper to deliver than medicine and science and these cheaper costs must be passed on to students. Nationally, 60% of the undergraduate teaching load is delivered by HASS academics who comprise only 27% of the academic workforce (Tran 2020). In regional universities these disproportionate loads are even more inequitable. Moreover, Australian Research Council (ARC) grants disproportionately favour metropolitan universities: as of 2015, only 4% of HASS research grants were awarded to regional universities.

Structural changes can address these inequities. The cheaper costs of HASS teaching delivery should be passed on to students; instead, these degrees are currently the most expensive in the sector. Further, higher levels of Commonwealth support for students who chose to study at regional institutions resulting in cheaper tuition costs at regional unis would stem the tide of students and resources into metropolitan universities and encourage more regional Australians into higher education.

Moreover, dedicated ARC grants for regional academics would create a more robust research and innovation system in regional Australia, ensuring that regional students have access to the most cutting edge, innovative research-informed teaching across all subject areas, and that research aligned with what matters to regional Australians and Australia’s regions benefits students and communities.

To reverse the brain-drain, keep students in regions, grow regional capacity and innovation, address the regional skills shortage, and take pressure off the metropolitan housing crisis, students should be incentivised not only to stay in the regions, but also to *go to* the regions from metropolitan centres.

The enrichment of regional universities, cheaper fees for regional universities, and more widespread dual-sector cooperation in which HASS education has a crucial role to play in expanding micro-credentialing as well as bachelor’s degrees, would make regional study more attractive for students from diverse backgrounds.

Q35 Where providers make a distinctive contribution to national objectives through community, location-based or specialised economic development, how should this contribution be identified and invested in?

While a number of studies have demonstrated the importance of regional creative arts education to communities (Welters, Daniel, and Fleischmann 2018; Fleischmann, Welters, and Ryan 2017), no study has yet captured the economic return on investment to regional communities in HASS degrees.

The public and private good of higher education to regional communities is often posed by a variety of general value statements. Similarly, the public and private values of humanities, arts, and social sciences often rely on rhetorical arguments.

As yet, no score card or metric adequately captures the value of regional higher education to regional communities and broader society. Equally, the value of HASS higher education in general, and in regional communities specifically, deserves to be better documented. Identifying the role of HASS graduates in magnifying and strengthening culture and intercultural understanding, creativity, innovation, social cohesion, and other forms of contribution to national objectives through community and location-based development should be a research priority. This research must crucially involve regionally-based researchers and communities, rather than outsourced metropolitan-based consultants.

One goal of the Universities Accord should be to encourage and support further research on the value of HASS degrees to national and global economies, as well as the value of HASS higher education to regional communities. Research on regional economies often overlooks the value of HASS and this must change.

In addition, HASS research in the regions itself needs to be better funded. One simple way to begin offering more education equality across the system is to incentivise ARC applicants to find regional partners or to create a separate funding stream for regional researchers, not unlike the DECRA scheme. Specialised LIEF grants for regional universities should also stimulate the development of teaching and research infrastructure.

Q49 Which aspects of the JRG package should be altered, and which should be retained?

We call for an immediate reversal of the 115% tuition increase for Bachelor of Arts students brought in by the JRG. This unreasonable tuition hike is not supported by Graduate Outcomes Surveys that strongly correlate HASS graduates with high employment rates, attributes in demand by employers, and strong contributions made by HASS graduates to communities, economies, and regional benefit as well as national good. Since HASS programs tend to attract and support equity groups and regional HASS students, who overwhelming come from FIF, low-SES, and culturally diverse backgrounds, this tuition increase is inequitable. If differential tuition is to be retained, we call for the lower cost of HASS higher education to be passed on to students, particularly in regional universities, reversing the current status quo.

Conclusion

Our message is clear: regional higher education needs to be a priority. This priority cannot overlook the crucial, dynamic, often under-appreciated, and under-resourced role played by humanities, arts, and social science education and research. HASS education in the regions performs a series of vital functions to achieve national priorities in general, and in the regions, in the changing economy, and in transformations of work and society.

To support this mission, we have made a series of recommendations in our response, including:

1. **A regional voice**: The voices of regional academics, communities, students, and schools, and in particular the voices of HASS in the regions are in danger of being drowned out in the current conversation regarding the Accord; a regional advisory board to report to the regional higher education commissioner and to the Universities Accord would protect these diverse voices in conversations going forward.
2. **A new deal for regional higher education funding**: Higher education funding needs to become more transparent and equitable, with the needs of regional communities, regional students, and regional equity groups being the priority. Funding needs to support the regional mission of HASS higher education, not just follow regional students to metropolitan universities or into STEM or health fields.

Demand-driven funding and the ATAR system must be re-assessed as it drives and compounds structural inequities that disproportionately affect regional students and equity groups, as well as the capacity to deliver regional missions and program robustness.

Opportunities to radically re-imagine the funding of regional higher education must be explored, in ways that include HASS in dynamically solving the problems of the future. One radical reset might include creating differential, discounted tuition fees to incentivize students to study at regional universities, reverse the regional brain drain, address the deepening regional-metropolitan socio-economic and political divide, and tackle the housing and skills crisis.

1. **New regional targets** for higher education need to be set so that where you grow up does not determine the kind of education you get, or what you study. To address growing inequities between metropolitan and regional Australia, address skills shortages in the regions, and ensure regional Australians are not left behind in the changing economy, new ambitious targets need to be set to ensure a significant number of regional Australians are educated at post-secondary levels, not just in general but also *in* the regions so that regions benefit from education across all fields of study.
2. **A reversal of the JRG’s 115% percent hike in tuition fees for Bachelor of Arts degrees** must be a priority, as it compounds inequities for regional and disadvantaged students.