



April 11, 2023

Australian Universities Accord Discussion Paper Submission: Council for the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences (CHASS)

About CHASS: we are a peak body with a membership of over 50 humanities, arts and social sciences (HASS) organisations, including academic discipline associations, universities and members from HASS associated industries. Our aim is to communicate the value of HASS and its crucial role in building a thriving, prosperous, sustainable, and equitable Australia.

This submission focuses on HASS disciplines and on four main themes from the terms of reference. This submission is on behalf of the CHASS Board.¹ Many member organisations contributed to a discussion that informed this document, but the submission does not necessarily represent the views of these groups.

Meeting Australia's knowledge and skills needs, now and in the future

Recent policy (Jobs Ready Graduates [JRG]) has aimed to actively dissuade students from taking humanities, arts and social sciences offerings. There is no good reason to discourage students from taking subjects like criminology, history, or philosophy. Doing so runs counter to an emerging consensus that current changes in the labour market make the skills learned in HASS more valuable and fails to recognise the broader purpose of education and the unpredictability of future societal needs.² Some of the fastest growing jobs for university graduates are in new fields and many of these emerging roles have HASS related skills and knowledge at their core. HASS degrees, or other study pathways incorporating a HASS component, provide a foundation for working in a changing economy and provide a solid foundation for lifelong learning that will address changing individual and collective needs over time.

Students should be well informed about options and outcomes, but it will be very difficult to convince students to pursue areas outside their interests.³ There is also evidence that students pursuing their interests are more likely to succeed.

- Increasing student contributions in particular areas (i.e., JRG) should not be used as a mechanism to redirect student preferences.
- The opportunity to develop skills that will prepare people for life in a changing world should be available to those taking all courses of study.

While interests are relatively stable, they do change,⁴ and new interests and opportunities will arise over time for students, particularly in the context of changing labour markets and a changing society:

- Students should have the opportunity to leave courses or change direction within their study without heavy penalty and with minimal fuss.
- Earlier exit points with a recognised qualification (such as a certificate) should be available wherever possible.
- Lifelong learning will need to be resourced, recognising the needs that emerge at different points of the life course and the equity considerations that attend them.

Further, our global position as an English speaking, cosmopolitan society in the Asia Pacific, and as a country that is the home of the longest continuing culture in the world, means that many of our areas of strength (and global competitive advantage) are aligned to HASS study. Australia will be well served by encouraging as many students as possible, local and international, to add an understanding of the social world in which they are living to their areas of expertise.

- We recommend settings and incentives that give students the capacity to combine areas of interest, including HASS study, wherever possible.

Governance, accountability and community

HASS is core to the role of Australian universities as socially engaged institutions. The publics our universities serve face rapid technological, environmental, economic, demographic, and cultural changes. HASS research is essential to understanding and supporting the communities our universities serve. Many universities rightly have a strong place-based mission, for example in regional areas or growing outer suburbs of our major cities. In this context, we note that the discussion paper asks whether there is currently sufficient support for specialisation across different institutions. While there may be value to greater specialisation, there are also substantial risks that some types of specialisation will mean that universities can no longer properly serve their communities.

- It is crucial that students in all parts of Australia can study history, society, language, Indigenous studies and all HASS offerings.
- It is crucial that HASS research takes place in all communities within Australia.

The social license for universities and for public funding of research and education is underpinned by the relationship between universities, the broader higher education and knowledge sectors, public institutions, and the communities they serve. In both research and teaching university scholarship is often drawn into culture wars. For example, as evidenced over the previous term of government, there is significant scope for confusion between academic and political judgement in the assessment of research (i.e., the use of Ministerial veto over Australian Research Council [ARC] Discovery grants). This has caused substantial damage to Australia's research reputation in recent years and there are better ways to make sure that the broader community's interests help to shape research and teaching, including making sure that the community in its diversity is represented within universities and the ARC.

- Universities, the ARC, and other relevant bodies should be governed under legislation and policy that enshrines Indigenous expertise, disciplinary breadth (across HASS and STEM), and diversity of representation, alongside independence with appropriate oversight.

While the value of university research is enhanced by responding to community needs, it is also essential to communicate the value of what universities do to the public. This need is not currently well met. The ARC currently oversees and put significant resourcing into National Interest Test statements for research projects, but these are clearly not providing the kind of rich and detailed accounts of why research matters to a flourishing society. Some similar international bodies have a mission to advocate for research in a way that the ARC does not. The UK Research and Innovation for example, through its disciplinary councils, has a mission to champion the vibrancy of research across disciplines to the broader public and other partners, as well as directly funding research projects.

The ARC's mission could expand to properly support this type of engagement, or a research engagement block grant or other secure funding could be made directly available to major higher education institutions, peak bodies and learned academies to better engage with communities. Activities like Social Sciences Week⁵ led by the HASS sector should be supported by Government in the same way that National Sciences Week is.

- Higher education institutions, sector groups, and individual teachers and researchers should be resourced to undertake the important tasks of both partnering with communities and showcasing why the research and teaching being undertaken matters to the community.

Access and opportunity

With the JRG package, for many HASS offerings the level of funding per student dropped to less than 10 per cent of their degree costs, with students' personal contribution rising to the highest band. Students studying HASS are currently left to pay largely for their own degrees in a context when other cost of living pressures are growing.⁶ This has the greatest effect on women and minority groups, who are more likely than other groups to be studying HASS and will leave them disproportionately burdened with debt.

The JRG changes are unlikely to improve pathways to employment for graduates but appear to be likely to exacerbate the effects of the gender pay gap and other pay inequities between groups, and impact career and family choices in ways that are negative both for the individual and for Australian society.⁷ JRG also makes it more difficult for low SES students to engage with and contribute to HASS.

Student contributions should not be based on dissuading people from study pathways based on a narrow assessment of value linked to short term job outcomes and graduate salaries.

- The Jobs Ready Graduate package should be replaced.

- The current required pass rate to retain a Commonwealth supported place should be reduced.
- Student contributions should be relatively similar across offering, while allowing some upward adjustment for cost of teaching and for likely individual benefit as measured by earnings.

Delivering new knowledge, innovation and capability

HASS knowledge undergirds all matters of public importance. The challenges and questions Australia faces include environmental and health issues that are as much social challenges as they are technical ones, entrenched inequalities, the need to recognise the voice and rights of First Nations peoples, and questions about how best to regulate financial markets and build a fairer economic system. Australia is also reflecting on the fundamental need to successfully manage differences on the issues of what makes our lives valuable and the type of world we want to live in. All of these are questions requiring HASS expertise.

We also know from international evidence that basic research in HASS and STEM drives unexpected innovation across multiple spheres essential to the flourishing of social life.⁸ Australia needs a research ecology that does not set up a trade-off between applied research and leading the world in excellent and innovative pure and basic research.

- There is a need for a sustainable and diversified portfolio of research supports beyond the limited number of grants currently present in the Australian research landscape.
- There is a need for legislation to further support joint public-private research investment funds that can support Australian researchers and the community, potentially freeing ARC Linkage funding for other ARC schemes.

It is also crucial that the value of the higher education sector and universities is not reduced to a narrowly defined servicing of skills needs and applied research and commercialisation. A large part of the value of HASS disciplines is the creation of a rich ecology of knowledge, in fostering multiple analytical traditions that can adjust to an inherently unpredictable social world. The contribution of HASS to innovation is dramatically undervalued if it is measured primarily in terms of commercialisation potential. At the same time, the Australian community, and our university-based researchers both have much to gain by better connection and further support.

- Settings and resourcing should aim at strengthening the links between universities and industry, including in HASS areas.

¹ This submission builds on and draws upon recent CHASS submissions and reports, particularly our *Federal Election Statement - Priorities for Supporting World Leading Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences in Australia* from 2022.

https://www.chass.org.au/content.aspx?page_id=22&club_id=239946&module_id=464739

² <https://www.humanities.org.au/issue-item/the-power-of-the-humanities/>

<https://socialsciences.org.au/publications/the-social-sciences-shape-the-nation/>

<https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/publications/skills-qualified-future-quantifying-demand-arts-humanities-social-science/>

³ <https://andrewnorton.net.au/2020/06/21/jobs-interests-and-student-course-choices/>

⁴ <https://grattan.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/University-attribution-background.pdf>

⁵ <https://socialsciencesweek.org.au/>

⁶ <https://www.dese.gov.au/job-ready/improving-accountability-information-providers>

⁷ <https://bcec.edu.au/publications/analysis-of-costs-and-savings-of-proposed-reforms-to-higher-education/>

⁸ https://www.mpg.de/799746/W000_Viewpoint_006-009.pdf