

InASA: International Australian Studies Association

President: Professor Anna Johnston, University of Queensland
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ABN: 18 096 245 445

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We write on behalf of the International Australian Studies Association (InASA), a multidisciplinary organisation of scholars with 40 years' commitment to fostering a better understanding of Australia's complex history, culture and society, and sharing this with the world. Our members work across many areas but are primarily clustered in humanities and social science (HASS) disciplines.

We warmly welcome the opportunity to contribute to the ambitious Universities Accord with the Federal Government. We have focussed our response on several key areas of the consultation document that pertain to our significant expertise and experience in research and teaching in Australian-related fields in the HASS disciplines.

Excellence in Australian-focussed research (Q24 What reforms will enable Australian research institutions to achieve excellence, scale and impact in particular fields; Q25 How should Australia leverage its research capacity overall and use it more effectively to develop new capabilities and solve wicked problems; Q41 How should research quality be prioritised and supported most effectively over the next decade)

InASA supports the current, extensive review of the ERA, and has made detailed submissions to that review. In particular, assuming Australia maintains a research evaluations process, **InASA strongly recommends the peer review methodology for evaluating the quality of the particular fields that constitute HASS research.** Efforts at ranking journals in the HASS disciplines have consistently proven problematic. This is especially the case in an interdisciplinary field like Australian Studies because often the work is best suited to journals focused on Australia (even though international in reach) or Australian academic publishers. Those publishers and journals will rarely be seen as the top in the world, but the quality of the work is outstanding and can be judged as such through peer review.

We express caution about the trend towards further metric-driven approaches to research evaluation, that disadvantage HASS research. Dashboards, league charts, and global rankings dog the Australian university system in ways that bemuse many academics and many of our international collaborators and industry partners. HASS discipline-specific approaches to research quality are vital because they reflect what are genuinely different practices and norms for conducting, translating, and communicating research in HASS and STEM. While having different approaches does create some complexities for comparable evaluation across all disciplines, this specificity is well-understood internationally; indeed, the rigorous maintenance of long-standing and well-regarded global best practices in HASS, such as peer review, is essential in maintaining the international standing and credibility of Australian research. As "citation creep" in some metric-oriented disciplines reveals, by contrast the peer review process forensically examines the quality of specific outputs, rather than applying generalised metrics that can be manipulated through sophisticated data management. Peer review is in fact highly robust, as the stubbornly consistent HASS quality processes demonstrate.

Australian HASS Research currently struggles to compete at scale under the current systems, as evidenced by the comparatively low success rates in large ARC schemes such as Centres of Excellence, despite some notable exceptions. This is despite deep and broad excellence in Australian HASS research, as evidenced by long term ERA results. **We recommend the Australian Government and the ARC consider cognate research funding schemes that have produced excellent, large-scale Humanities research internationally.** We draw attention to European Union schemes whose

criteria are agnostic to discipline and open to research excellence across the spectrum, such as [Horizon Europe](#). We also urge the Australian Government to note how EU Research Priorities are not narrowly instrumental / applied, but rather remain open to the full contribution of researchers and disciplines, in contrast to the narrowing of research priorities to industry-oriented research funding that intensified under the Morrison Government. While InASA supports collaboration with industry, broadly defined, **we urge ongoing and increased attention to and investment in “blue sky”, curiosity-driven research that captures the vast potential that HASS research can contribute to future complex problems, specifically because HASS research produces the nuanced understandings of Australian society, history, culture, and the arts that must underpin ambitious and considered visions for the future.**

Innovative Australian research and industry (Q26 How can Australia stimulate greater industry investment in research and more effective collaboration)

InASA researchers are assiduous collaborators with a wide variety of industries, partners, community organisations, and international peers; they often have long-term and mutually beneficial relationships with end-users of Australian-focussed research.

We again caution against instrumentalist assumptions that can obscure the value of HASS-specific “industry investment”, often reduced to deriving funds from businesses to sponsor specific industry-oriented outcomes. For InASA researchers, our most obvious industry partners are often the galleries, libraries, archives, and museum sector (GLAM) sector, which have limited cash and often little spare staffing capacity after years of efficiency dividends. **ARC Linkage grants remain important for these kinds of collaborations, and we urge their continuance and their understanding that HASS research may often have limited cash, but significant in-kind contributions to make to research collaborations: this is a distinctive strength of the current ARC grant schemes.** Government departments and agencies are another key area of InASA member collaborations: such as former InASA President [Prof Noah Riseman](#)’s research on Indigenous and LGBTQIA+ histories of the Australian Defence Force, with partners ranging from the Department of Defence, Department of Veterans' Affairs, National Archives of Australia, Australian War Memorial.

Australian researchers would often love to work more with these partners, but both sides of the collaborating institutions (Universities esp. HASS and GLAM sector) have been limited in recent years by severely reduced staffing and restricted research budgets. **We applaud the Federal Government’s recent investment in the National Library of Australia’s TROVE platform, which underpins an immense amount of Australian historical, social, literary, artistic, archival, and creative research. The certainty provided by this pre-budget announcement, and the assurance that the national cultural institutions will be provided with additional funding to maintain their critical storage and display capabilities, has been the good news for which the HASS and GLAM sector has long been hoping,** and it opens up an exciting new set of opportunities for collaboration. Stable and predictable staffing, funding, and research infrastructure are essential to a culture set for innovation. **We recommend the Australian Government consider national bodies for Humanities research excellence and funding that can take full advantage of the contribution this particular part of the university sector can make, such as the [National Endowment of the Humanities](#) (US).**

We urge the Australian Government and the ARC to benchmark international schemes that either incentivise, or mandate, the inclusion of HASS researchers in any large, publicly funded research investment schemes. If Australia wants to be internationally competitive, it must be bold and set policy and funding instruments astutely for new kinds of thinking and new kinds of collaborations. Only in this way will we be positioned for future economies, workforces, populations, and careers.

Universities have only recently developed mechanisms to record and measure how researchers are translating research into impact. It has also been uneven across disciplines, with HASS areas finding it particularly challenging. For instance, **HASS research impact often is about contributing to public awareness and debates that can take longer to measure. There is a lot of confusion around the difference between Engagement and Impact.** The artificial separation of Engagement and Impact–

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which really are two sides of the same coin—does not adequately tell a story about the application of research beyond academia.

Teaching and supporting Australian students (Q9 How should Australia ensure enough students are studying courses that align with the changing needs of the economy and society; Q49 Which aspects of the JRG package should be altered, and which should be retained)

As the peak professional body representing Australian Studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences, InASA shares with successive Ministers for Education a belief that studying Australian history, culture and society is integral to our national wellbeing, our enviable economic and social stability, and our sense of civic pride and knowledge. We made submissions to JRG package proposals and to the Senate Inquiry into the JRG, in addition to direct meetings with Labor members such as Mr Graham Perret, MP, and Greens Senator Dr Mehreen Faruqi. Our points here summarise and update our concerns with the JRG package, with the benefit of several years' experience of its implementation as “coal face” university teachers.

InASA lecturers teach those students who will be part of major step-changes, including the teachers of our grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Australian-focussed lecturers and researchers such as InASA members are ready for these challenges, and we welcome future conversations that are inclusive and focussed on the future. **The legislation for the Job-ready Graduates Package sent a message from Government that explicitly discouraged students from enrolling in the Humanities-based degrees that fuel the students, courses, and industry-linked initiatives that underpin research into Australian topics. We strongly recommend the reversal of this policy.** These changes to Humanities funding did not appear to be based on reliable research about graduate employment, including that commissioned by the Federal Government. Policy research shows that more than 90% of Humanities graduates are successfully employed post-graduation. Indeed, they earn more than graduates of sciences and maths ([‘Humanities graduates earn more than those who study sciences and maths’](#), *The Conversation* 19 June 2020). Nor were they consistent across HASS disciplines, with cognate areas such as History and Literature being allocated into different funding bands.

Industry and employer feedback is pellucid and consistent: they consider critical thinking, research capacity, and clear communication to be the key, flexible skills that prepare students for job-readiness and employability. According to Deloitte Economics, Humanities graduates offer: a broad range of technical skills; transferable skills that are in high demand from employers; the capacity to solve the ‘wicked’ problems that the contemporary world manifests (2018 Report). Chief Executive of the Business Council of Australia, Jennifer Westacott, indicated the same in 2016, when she noted that successful business leaders in the twenty-first century would require ‘some form of humanities perspective and education’.

Increased costs for different Humanities majors introduced a profound equity problem. Humanities, Law and Commerce students accrued significantly increased debt. This dissuades first-in-family students from entering these broad professional spaces. This also exacerbates inequities between universities, with elite institutions more likely to attract higher SES students who can afford the exorbitant costs. Women have been particularly impacted by fee changes, with life-long effects

contributing to already inequitable earning potential and economic stability (The Conversation "[Why degree cost increases will hit women hardest](#)", *The Conversation* 7 August, 2020).

Indigenous, low SES, and / or CALD students—for whom the Bachelor of Arts was often the “entry point” to higher education—have been disproportionately disadvantaged by these ill-informed interventions into university funding. Worse, some universities have been encouraged to cynically manipulate the JRG funding principles to encourage enrolments in high student contribution courses to cross-subsidise more expensive and more exclusive degrees. This is a perverse outcome.

InASA strongly recommends the Australian Government review and refine the costings that underpin the JRG package, if not simply reverse its implementation.

We believe reduced fees for students should be across the board of subject areas and degrees for the broad benefit of Australian society. We urge consideration of HECS-debt relief, either through taxation or limiting indexation. We also would like to see substantially increased university places to support anticipated growth in domestic demand. COVID-19 hit youth unemployment and mental health especially hard, and universities will be crucial to equip our future workers, carers, and community leaders with skills that they can deploy across their lives. HASS has a major role to play here in informing and leading the Australian community by training just, equitable, and well-informed citizens.

What we call—and hope—for is a deep and careful rethinking of how we fund the University sector as a whole in the post-COVID landscape, and into the second quarter of the twenty-first century. **InASA welcomes ongoing and productive conversations with the Federal Government to build that future: our lecturers, researchers, and students are highly engaged in how HASS can make a difference to the world and we seek to work together with Government to produce a more equitable and more innovative higher education sector.**

Thank you for considering our submission—we welcome opportunities to continue this conversation.

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