



## Australian Academy of the Humanities response

### *Sharper Incentives for Engagement: New Research Block Grant Arrangements for Universities Consultation Paper*

July 2016

The Australian Academy of the Humanities (AAH) appreciates the opportunity to respond to the consultation on new Research Block Grant (RBG) arrangements.

The AAH focuses its feedback on the overarching principles for engagement and the need to get the metrics and incentives right to avoid perverse outcomes. Specific and technical issues raised in the paper are a matter for universities.

The AAH is supportive of initiatives which seek to recognise and incentivise engagement between universities and 'industry' and other end-users insofar as industry is broadly defined (inclusive of the not-for-profit sector, public sector, cultural sector, universities themselves) and end-users include the full range of beneficiaries. In the humanities these end-users and beneficiaries will include business; policymakers; community organisations; the health sector; the galleries, libraries, archives and museums (GLAM) sector; and the wider Australian community.

While the AAH recognises the need to incentivise both researchers and industry to encourage collaboration, metrics focused on volume measures, such as research income, risk the unintended consequence of encouraging researchers to pursue the dollar without regard to the quality of the engagement. Incentives are needed to encourage researchers to form sustainable partnerships with end-users, and to collaborate with business and other partners relevant to the objective of achieving significant economic, cultural, environmental and social benefits.

The move towards privileging Category 2, 3 and 4 income in the RBG allocation (even with the proposed changes to what is counted within these categories) does not fix this problem. Concentrating on research income data alone will not sufficiently capture and reward how research delivers economic, cultural, social and environmental benefits to the nation.

In the AAH's submission to the Australian Research Council (ARC) engagement and impact assessment exercise we detailed some of the data that will be important to capture engagement effort in the humanities, much of which cannot be monetised, including event participation statistics (such as public lectures, cultural events, exhibitions); outreach activities (such as public lectures, policy engagements, media engagements, community engagements); committee membership; non-traditional academic outputs (such as research-based websites, and research and policy reports); readership data; and in-kind contributions from partner organisations.<sup>1</sup> The latter category of data is vital to building an

AUSTRALIAN ACADEMY OF THE HUMANITIES

accurate account of engagement activities, although these data are not uniformly collected by institutions. Indicative data from the ARC shows that in 2014 total pledged cash contribution from partner organisations on all funded Linkage projects was \$48,262,161, and that total in-kind contribution was 2.5 times more at \$121,511,683.<sup>2</sup> In the case of GLAM sector contributions, the in-kind proportion may be significantly higher.<sup>3</sup>

Another chief concern of the AAH is the impact of the new RBG formulae on internal distributions, and specifically how the money is distributed within the universities once publications are taken out of the picture in the new funding model (and there is a shift towards Category 2, 3 and 4 income). While publications only account for around 7% of the total RBG, that 7% is significant to the humanities due to research and publishing practice in these disciplines, and should not be underplayed. More importantly, though, the crucial difference is not going to be in how the money is allocated to the universities but in how the money is distributed within the universities without publications in the internal formulae. The AAH is concerned that this will result in a statistically regressive situation which will have consequences for discipline health and growth.

Relying so heavily on research income as the key metric for the RBG risks universities focusing their efforts on disciplines which are income intensive, either due to the cost of the research and/or the significantly higher funding pools available to them. While institutions should have the flexibility to allocate resources according to their own strategic priorities, there is a role for policy leadership here and systemic consideration and planning to ensure that Australia maintains its national knowledge base in areas of significance across the full range of disciplines.

Similarly, the research training system should build and maintain areas of research strength and critical mass. In our submission to the Australian Council of Learned Academies (ACOLA) Research Training Review (2015), the AAH expressed its concern that the RTS model incentivises universities to pursue enrolments in 'high-cost' areas, and effectively discourages universities from pursuing enrolments in humanities and other 'low-cost' disciplines.<sup>4</sup> The AAH endorses the view of the Australasian Deans of Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities (DASSH) that the introduction of a system which allows institutions to set maximum stipend rates potentially risks a lower number of funded HDR candidates in low cost disciplines.<sup>5</sup>

The Government is in a position to mitigate the risk to lower cost disciplines. In framing the requirements for institutional reporting on their RBG allocations, there is a need to ensure that this process garners sufficient information for the Government to be assured that there are no perverse outcomes across discipline areas which would ultimately risk the health of the national research system.

We would be happy to elaborate on any of the feedback in this submission. Please direct your initial enquiries to our Executive Director, Dr Christina Parolin.

Yours sincerely

Professor John Fitzgerald FAHA  
President

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Academy of the Humanities (2016) *Response to the Engagement and Impact Consultation Paper*, [http://www.humanities.org.au/Portals/0/documents/Policy/Submissions/text/POL2016\\_3.pdf](http://www.humanities.org.au/Portals/0/documents/Policy/Submissions/text/POL2016_3.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Australian Research Council (2015), 'Partner Organisations on Linkage Projects and their pledged financial contributions, by funding commencement year'. Available from <http://www.arc.gov.au/grants-dataset>

<sup>3</sup> Australian Research Council/Denise Meredyth (2015), 'Funding Collaborative Research – ARC Perspective', [http://www.arc.gov.au/sites/default/files/filedepot/Public/Media%20&%20Resources%20Centre/Presentations/2015\\_Presentations/p20150219\\_Funding\\_collaborative\\_research\\_DeniseMeredyth.pdf](http://www.arc.gov.au/sites/default/files/filedepot/Public/Media%20&%20Resources%20Centre/Presentations/2015_Presentations/p20150219_Funding_collaborative_research_DeniseMeredyth.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Australian Academy of the Humanities (2015) *Submission to the ACOLA Research Training Review* [http://www.humanities.org.au/Portals/0/documents/Policy/Submissions/text/POL2015\\_5.pdf](http://www.humanities.org.au/Portals/0/documents/Policy/Submissions/text/POL2015_5.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Australasian Deans of Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities (2016) *DASSH response to the Department of Education and Training's Consultation Paper: 'Sharper incentives for engagement: New research block grant arrangements for universities'*.