COVID-19 Response Inquiry, December 2023

The Australian Academy of the Humanities (AAH) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the COVID-19 Response Inquiry. The Academy is the national body for the humanities in Australia, championing the contribution humanities, arts and culture make to national life. Our work aims to ensure ethical, historical, and cultural perspectives inform discussions regarding Australia's future challenges and opportunities.

We are pleased that this Inquiry is taking a 'whole-of-government' focus, which is appropriate to the pandemic's 'whole-of-society' impacts. Pandemics are as much social and economic problems as medical and health ones although at the time COVID-19 was largely framed as a "public health crisis" and it is only subsequently that Australia has been able to reflect on and make sense of its long-term societal impacts. Our submission is, therefore, principally focused on:

1. **Mechanisms to better target future responses to the needs of Australia's multicultural and multilingual populations.**

2. **Governance and decision-making**, specifically evidence and research mobilised by government to inform decision-making during COVID-19 and in recovery.

3. **"Non-health responses"** i.e. what we can learn from other sectoral responses to COVID. We focus on two sectors and workforces of ongoing and direct concern to the humanities:

    a. **Higher education and research,** specifically the enduring impacts on early and mid-career cohorts, gender-specific impacts and, in our view, missed opportunities to mobilise multidisciplinary research at scale.

    b. **Cultural and creative sector,** which saw the closure of Arts and Recreation businesses at the highest rates across the economy.

1.   Multilingual and multicultural communications

COVID-19 required governments to communicate potentially life-saving information to a broad range of communities, each with their own needs and challenges.[1]

Distinguished Professor Ingrid Piller FAHA, one of Australia's foremost experts in intercultural communication, who contributed critical policy advice to the national response has stated "one of the many lessons we need to learn from this crisis is to include the reality of Australia's language diversity into our normal procedures and processes, including disaster preparation and response."[2]

Disaster preparedness must include readiness to communicate effectively to:

- the 1 million Australians who do not speak English or do not speak it well,

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[1] See the research undertaken by Language on the Move, https://www.languageonthemove.com/covid-19/ and specifically the co-edited volume on Linguistic Diversity in Times of Crisis, https://www.degruyter.com/journal/key/mult/39/5/html
[2] Australian Academy of the Humanities (2020), Fighting COVID-19: It's time to break down the language barriers, https://humanities.org.au/power-of-the-humanities/fighting-covid-19-its-time-to-break-down-the-language-barriers/

- the 15% of Australians whose literacy is at primary school level, and

- those with low digital literacy or limited access to computers and mobile devices.

To effectively reach these Australians, disaster preparedness must include a national language and communication strategy that takes into consideration linguistic and communicative needs (e.g., which language provision is needed by whom), human resources (e.g., training of multilingual talent), and communication technologies, including through platforms that are accessible to target audiences.

2. Research-informed governance and decision-making

A successful COVID-19 innovation was the Rapid Research Information Forum (RRIF), which provided Ministers with trusted, evidence-based rapid research advice. Inaugurated by former Chief Scientist, Dr Alan Finkel AO FTSE FAA FAHMS, the reports were led by Australia's five Learned Academies and our convening body the Australian Council of Learned Academies (ACOLA). The principal recipient was the Health Minister, but reports also advised the Minister for Industry, and the National COVID-19 Co-ordination Commission (Mr Neville Power, Chair and Mr David Thodey AO, Deputy Chair).

Initially focused on medical and therapeutic responses, RRIF broadened to focus on social and cultural challenges. Five of the 13 publicly available Rapid Research Reports were 'non-health' focused, including:

- Motivators for use of the COVIDSafe App (testing efficacy after implementation);

- Changes in public sentiment in relation to data privacy during COVID-19;

- The impact of COVID-19 on women in the STEM workforce;

- Impact of the pandemic on Australia's research workforce; and

- Learning outcomes for online vs in-class education.

The value of these reports was their unique combination of academic rigour, speed, and relevance. Research was synthesised by leaders in the field and peer reviewed in 'real time' for Ministers, and addressed pressing questions about Australia's response to COVID-19, as they emerged. The advice was multidisciplinary, bringing together humanities, social sciences, sciences, medical and health sciences, and technological and engineering sciences.

The RRIR was a step forward, but we can do even better during the next crisis if we plan for a more direct advice mechanism. To that end, we agree with the recommendation of the independent review into COVID-19, led by Professor Peter Shergold AO, that to "improve government decision-making through broader advice and greater transparency" the Government should "establish a panel of multidisciplinary experts and representatives to advise governments and the National Cabinet during health crises."[3]

We also think that Australia needs better linked infrastructure to share expertise so that all relevant parties (Learned Academies, CSIRO, universities) can access and populate quickly. During COVID,

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[3] Peter Shergold, Jillian Broadbent, Isobel Marshall and Peter Varghese (2022), *Fault Lines: An Independent Review into Australia's response to COVID-19.* https://assets-global.website-files.com/62b998c0c9af9f65bba26051/6350438b7df8c77439846e97_FAULT-LINES-1.pdf

the Academy of Science, in partnership with the other four Learned Academies, stood up an expert database, which filled a gap but was not designed to be ongoing.[4]

Australia has not conducted a review of the broader social impacts of COVID. We recommend the Panel consider this, with input from Australia's five Learned Academies.

An independent review by the British Academy commissioned by the UK Government Office for Science focused on health and wellbeing; communities, culture and belonging; knowledge, employment, and skills.[5] Several of the report's conclusions are relevant to the Australian context, with areas of long-term societal impact including:

- Increased importance of local communities
- Low and unstable levels of trust in governance
- Widening geographic inequalities
- Exacerbated structural inequalities
- Worsened health outcomes and growing health inequalities
- Greater awareness of the importance of mental health
- Pressure on revenue streams across the economy
- Rising unemployment and changing labour markets
- Renewed awareness of education and skills.

3.   "Non-health" responses

Our focus here is on two sectors: Australia's higher education and research system; and the cultural economy.

3.1   Higher education and research

The university sector's research workforce and capability planning were impacted by the downturn in international student income and stagnation of research mobility. We specifically highlight evidence of impacts on early and mid-career researchers (EMCRs) in the humanities, arts, and social sciences (SHAPE).

To that end, we have been able to draw on a survey conducted by the SHAPE Futures EMCR Network[6] to summarise SHAPE EMCRs experience of COVID-19 and its consequences. Over two thirds of respondents to the survey (103 of 153) indicated their careers had been impacted by the pandemic. The headline message is that many EMCRs lost a large portion of their "early career" status to lockdown. They were unable to network and build their academic careers. There were significant job cuts while they were just coming onto the job market. Those with caring responsibilities were unable to research and write. Those who needed to undertake fieldwork, could not. Given most university based ECRs in the humanities are teaching and research focused, many experienced significant teaching burdens as they shifted rapidly to online, which impacted research productivity.

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[4] See https://www.science.org.au/news-and-events/news-and-media-releases/academies-join-forces-launch-covid-19-expert-database

[5] British Academy (2021), *The COVID Decade: understanding the long-term societal impacts of COVID-19*, https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/publications/covid-decade-understanding-the-long-term-societal-impacts-of-covid-19/

[6] SHAPE Futures Network https://shapefutures.com.au

We urge consideration of a focused workforce strategy targeted at EMCRs. In the context of the Universities Accord, we see this being a good fit for a Tertiary Education Commission. The upcoming policy review of the ARC's National Competitive Grant Program also needs to give serious consideration to how well existing programs support researchers at early career stages. The full range of impacts on higher education and research will emerge in the data over time. In the humanities, for example, we are aware of a downturn in applications across the board to the ARC, even in the Discovery program.

During COVID-19 the ARC focused on 'business-as-usual' general programming to keep the research system ticking. But there were missed opportunities for strategic research calls akin to counterpart agencies overseas. Through the UK's Research and Innovation portfolio, research councils mobilised to provide resources, platforms, and seed priority research initiatives. The UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), for example, had an open call for research into the COVID-19 pandemic and its impacts with specific attention to: ethics, governance and regulation; media and communication; culture and history; design; and community. Australia would do well to implement a similar model.

3.2   Creative and cultural industries and institutions

The creative and cultural sector suffered some of the worst economic impacts of COVID-19. More than half (53%) of Arts and Recreation businesses, many in the SME category, ceased to operate. This crushed what had been, in the years leading up to COVID-19, one of the fastest growing parts of the economy. The next most impacted sectors were Accommodation and Food Services (35% closures) and Information Media and Telecommunications (31% forced to shut down).[7]

The Australia Council for the Arts' (now Creative Australia) analysis of impacts on the sector concludes that "COVID-19 has weakened our sector and many organisations, artists and creative workers are vulnerable to future disruptions." COVID-19's impact extends to the "future viability of our broader cultural and creative industries".[8]

Pre-COVID-19, Australia's creative economy employed more than 600,000 workers and was worth $112 billion of the nation's GDP; and the creative and cultural industries were growing at twice the rate of the general economy. We have previously made the case for the need for a national evidence-based approach to industry recovery and development. Industry revitalisation, via the long-awaited National Cultural Policy was one step in the right direction. We welcome the Government's commitment and investment in the sector but note that it is still getting back on track, and there is a long way to go. Ongoing support will be crucial to the rebuild.

Further expert advice

The Australian Academy of the Humanities would be pleased to be involved in further consultation on any of the issues raised in this submission. We will continue to collaborate with our counterpart Academies to bring the full range of expertise to bear on national challenges in the wake of COVID-19.

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[7] Australian Bureau of Statistics (2020), Business Indicators, Business Impacts of COVID-19, https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/economy/business-indicators/business-conditions-and-sentiments/mar-2020

[8] Australia Council for the Arts (2022), *Impacts of COVID-19 on the Creative and Cultural Industries*, https://creative.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/2022_COVID-19Impacts_Cultural-and-creative-industries_V2FINAL-1.pdf