Jobs and Skills Australia Discussion Paper
February 2023

The Australian Academy of the Humanities appreciates the opportunity to respond to the Jobs and Skills Australia (JSA) Discussion Paper on how JSA will work in the future. As one of the nation's five Learned Academies, we draw on our Fellowship of over 700 humanities leaders, and extensive networks, to provide independent advice to government.

We support the proposal that JSA should consider "higher education as well as the vocational education and training sector when considering skills and workforce issues." The explicit inclusion at the table of higher education (alongside the VET sector) in JSA's structure and governance is welcome. This shouldn't be an and/or as currently framed in the paper: "skills and training or tertiary education".

In our brief response we focus on Question 2 – principles to guide JSA priorities. In making this submission we draw from two forthcoming reports: Australia's China Knowledge Capability, and the Future Humanities Workforce, and our submission to Treasury's Employment White Paper consultation.

What principles could be used to guide Jobs and Skills Australia's priorities?

We're cognisant that JSA's focus is on "urgent needs of industries, cohorts and regions in distress". Our suggestions are designed to ensure that the role of the higher education sector – and humanities training within it - informs JSA's agenda in both the short and longer term.

A recent Productivity Commission report concludes that "almost all new jobs over the next 5 years will require tertiary education" and that "non-routine cognitive skills are increasingly demanded".[1] In 2020, the humanities, together with the arts and social sciences – the SHAPE disciplines – trained and graduated 143,752 of Australia's university students, representing 63% of the system.[2]

We have distilled three principles from our future workforce project, which involved consultations across our networks and interviews with leaders in business, technology, consultancy, architecture, education, public service, and other sectors.

All Australians deserve access to skills that increase in value throughout a career

Typically, the new skills of today are obsolete tomorrow. Other skills increase in value. Absorbing new information, analysing and reconciling different points of view, and being able to present a credible way forward – these grow in value throughout a career. The industry leaders we spoke to associate these skills with humanities training.

[1] Productivity Commission (2022) 5-year Productivity Inquiry: From Learning to Growth. Interim Report. https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/current/productivity/interim5-learning/productivity-interim5-learning.pdf

[2] Based on 2020 student data from the Department of Education's Higher Education Statistics Collection – where SHAPE fields are: Architecture, Education, Management and Commerce, Society and Culture, Creative Arts.

Mix skills to equip Australians for jobs and careers

Skills mixing – the combining of technical and non-technical skills – is well established as a key to human resource management to promote innovation.[3] It is also relevant to the provision of skills training to maximise equity, resilience, and adaptability. Lifelong learning should include ongoing opportunities to further develop higher-order thinking and communication skills.

Thinking and communication skills are best developed through intrinsic interest

High-level thinking is best encouraged by enquiry in topics of intrinsic interest, in contact with highly capable thinkers and communicators. Disciplines such as history, literature, philosophy, and languages provide lifelong learning and connection, while deepening thinking skills. Giving more Australians more access to that advantage, and supporting high-quality teaching, is an investment that would deliver compounding yields.

Australians should be encouraged to pursue educational and training interests in which they will thrive, and at the same time encouraged to build skills in areas of demand. This is why the Jobs Ready Graduate Package was a public policy failure (the subject of the upcoming review through the Universities Accord process).

A fourth principle concerns Australia's regional context.

The future of Australian jobs depends on our Asia and China capability

To achieve the Government's goal of full employment in a sustainable economy, while remaining a high-wage economy, we must diversify but also deepen our integration in regional and global markets.

In the lead-up to the Skills Summit, the Assistant Minister for Foreign Affairs Tim Watts MP hosted an Asia Literacy roundtable. This is a welcome high-level commitment which speaks to the importance of the cross-portfolio agenda needed to achieve step-change across education and training, industry, and government sectors. The Academy is finalising a major report, Australia's China Knowledge Capability, funded by the National Foundation for Australia-China Relations, focused on the role of the higher education sector in building a sovereign China knowledge capability of the kind required for our national interests now and as they evolve into the future.

We encourage JSA to tell Australia's jobs and skills story in a way that does justice to the full spectrum of skills our nation needs.

The Academy of the Humanities would welcome the opportunity to be engaged in further consultation on any of the challenges and opportunities identified in this submission.

[3] Skills and Capabilities for Australian Enterprise Innovation (ACOLA 2016), https://acola.org.au/wp/PDF/SAF10/Full%20report.pdf