Australian Academy of the Humanities

Universities Accord Interim Report, September 2023

The Australian Academy of the Humanities is the national body for the humanities in Australia. Our Fellowship comprises over 700 humanities leaders whose significant expertise and experience, nationally and internationally, we draw on to provide independent advice to government.

We thank the Accord Panel for the opportunity to respond to the Interim Report. This submission focuses on **seven priorities** to feed directly into the Panel's next stage of deliberations and the working groups convened to support Accord work streams: **Governance, Research Policy,** and **Indigenous Knowledges**.

1. The importance of the humanities

The humanities are central to the success of the Accord agenda.

- Together, the humanities, arts, and social sciences (SHAPE)[1] teach 60% of the system. **More university students choose SHAPE disciplines than STEM.**
- In 2021, **60% of the total enrolments by Indigenous students** were in SHAPE subjects. One field of education in SHAPE alone, Society and Culture, taught 32% of the total enrolment of First Nations students in higher education.
- **SHAPE will play a pivotal role in achieving higher equity and participation** for regional students, students in outer metropolitan areas, First Nations students, and students from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- The humanities provide the **employability attributes** of critical thinking, communicating in complex situations, and maximising the benefits of diversity.
- Yet, there is evidence of **declining humanities capability, patchy provision in our regions, no coordination of national needs, and under investment in infrastructure**.
- We are increasingly concerned about **humanities students carrying disproportionate and inequitable levels of debt**, since the introduction of Jobs Ready Graduates (JRG).
- **SHAPE disciplines have no established access to the national advisory bodies for science and research**, including the National Science and Technology Council.
- A vision for the humanities, then, starts with governance and advisory settings to **ensure independent expert humanities representation can inform national policy and planning, to national benefit**.

[1] https://shapefutures.com.au

2. Tertiary Education Commission

We strongly support the Panel's proposal for a Tertiary Education Commission (TEC), and the vision of the Accord as a structured, continuing process between higher education stakeholders.

The current lack of a permanent mechanism for expert academic input into higher education policy, independent of universities, has damaged Australia's sovereign capabilities. Our report on *Australia's China Knowledge Capability* illustrates the case. The decline in national capability[2] on Asia has been iterative, largely unnoticed, and is impacting our sovereign ability to know and understand our neighbours in the region.

We convened the Learned Academies to develop a joint position on the role of a TEC reflected in each of our submissions as follows:

> *The Learned Academies welcome the Universities Accord Panel's consideration of an Australian Tertiary Education Commission, based on the principles of independence and expertise, which would take a national view of how teaching and research programs are advancing Australia's interests.*
>
> *Australia's Learned Academies would be well placed to contribute to such a body to inform national coordination and planning. As expert voices on a range of higher education and research matters, including the important intersection with national policy development, our unique expertise within and across disciplines is independent of universities and governments.*

The mandate of the TEC should be to **drive collaborative approaches to integrated education and research** and, in time, training. It would have **oversight where a national perspective is needed**, including:

- national capability gaps, including research training;
- patterns of course offerings, including how teaching programs are providing for broader economic and societal needs;
- advice on the state of disciplines;
- pathways between vocational education and training and higher education;
- monitoring student participation and attainment, providing overviews of workforce needs, and seeding new models of industry engagement; and
- a strategic perspective on research, in liaison with the Australian Research Council, and with a view to the teaching-research nexus.
- In addition, the TEC could auspice a program of work, with universities, to improve the capacity of universities to report on expenditure, so that inter-disciplinary and teaching/research cross-subsidisation within the sector, can be reported and assessed, transparently (picking up, where previous funding reviews have stagnated).

[2] https://humanities.org.au/our-work/projects/australias-china-knowledge-capability/

We recommend that the TEC Board include:

- **Learned Academies in Australia representation** on the basis that independent, disciplinary, and multidisciplinary advice is essential to guiding the development of national training, education, and research capabilities.
- **Humanities, arts, and social sciences (SHAPE) representation** for informed decision-making, given the size of the sector, its role in educating the nation, and its stake in delivering on the objectives of the Accord.
- **Public good research representation** on the basis that universities are in the business of delivering research for a wide range of social, economic, environmental, and cultural benefits.

3. Research capability delivering benefits for the Australian community.

- The humanities together with the arts and social sciences have a major stake in this agenda, representing 41% of Australia's university-based research workforce.
- Having caucused with the other Learned Academies we recommend:
    - **a national uplift in R&D investment, with a focus on the foundational importance of university research** in boosting and enabling state and territory, philanthropic, and private sector R&D;
    - **a target for Australian R&D investment** that would move Australia into the top 20 OECD nations, including **a commitment to developing a national R&D roadmap – inclusive of both SHAPE and STEM**.
- **Australia's research uplift needs to deliver for society.** We worked with the Chief Scientist's office in December 2022 and April 2023 to inform the development of national science and research priorities. Her consultations showed that Australians want our nation's spend on research to deliver a cohesive, healthy and resilient society, transformation-ready, and in tune with our environment.[3]
- We have **welcomed the outcomes of the Review of the Australian Research Council** (ARC) especially the provisions to limit the unrestricted use of ministerial discretion to veto projects, and the establishment of an independent Board.
- We think there is **merit, in place of Excellence in Research for Australia, in a 'State of the Research Sector' approach,** to inform the Minister, the sector, and the public.
- We encourage a **review of the component parts of the National Competitive Grant Program (NCGP)** re-framing the one-size-fits-all approach. Specifically, we are calling for: **the introduction of discipline or cluster programs and lower**

[3] For case studies in the humanities, see https://humanities.org.au/newsroom/discovering-humanities/

funding limits, and incentivising more multi-disciplinary research between STEM and SHAPE.

- The Accord should **address the entrenching effect of block grants,** with fund allocations favouring large grants in the STEM and health disciplines.
- The Interim Report's **proposal for extending National Research Collaborative Infrastructure Strategy (NCRIS) on a more sustainable footing is welcome in principle**. However, over its lifespan NCRIS has under-invested in humanities, arts and social sciences infrastructure, and Indigenous research and data capability. **The ARDC's HASS Research Data Commons and Indigenous Research Capability is an important step in the right direction** and promises to be transformational subject to longer-term investment to build on outcomes to date.[4]

  We **support the humanities-led ARC Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision-making and Society (ADM+S) proposal for an Australian Social Data Observatory**.[5] In the generative AI era, we also need to develop unique Australian language models. We single out (as per the Rapid Research Information Paper our Academy co-authored) large datasets like the Bureau of Meteorology, Australian Bureau of Statistics, and the National Library of Australia's Trove.[6]

4. Indigenous Leadership

We applaud the Accord Panel's recommendation to "put First Nations at the heart of Australia's higher education system" and support the establishment of the Indigenous Higher Education Council.

The Panel's interim recommendation for a move "towards a self-determined approach to national funding and policy settings" will require universities to consider the development of Indigenous Studies, led by Indigenous scholars, as a discipline on its own terms. Previously the domain of disciplines like anthropology, where Indigenous people have been studied by mostly non-Indigenous reseachers[7], our Academy is working with leading Indigenous scholars[8], to support the growth of Indigenous Studies by Indigenous scholars within the higher education sector.

We recommend the panel includes appropriate **First Nations representation in further governance deliberations, particularly in respect to the proposed Tertiary Education Commission.**

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[4] https://ardc.edu.au/program/hass-rdc-indigenous-research-capability/
[5] https://www.admscentre.org.au/asdo/
[6] https://humanities.org.au/news/why-humanities-is-essential-in-an-ai-driven-world/
[7] See Moreton-Robinson, Aileen "UQ Talks: The past, present and future of Indigenous Studies" https://alumni.uq.edu.au/event/session/22715
[8] Indigenous Studies and Courageous Conversations Symposium, 28 and 29 September 2023 https://indigenous-engagement.uq.edu.au/events/indigenous-studies-and-courageous-conversations

5. Access and participation

The humanities have provided important first access points to higher education for many low SES, Indigenous, rural and regional, and mature-aged students. We understand the need to strengthen universities' support mechanisms for these student cohorts, and the challenges ahead if we are to double the number of students by 2050. We need new, targeted solutions to ensure that all Australians who are willing to incur reasonable HELP debts can afford full-time tertiary education.

To improve access and inclusion in tertiary education, an urgent priority is that the JRG policy be dismantled. The JRG legislation was based on discredited assumptions about employability and workforce needs;[9] disproportionately impacted women; made it far harder for many students from low SES backgrounds, including in the regions, to aspire to university in their areas of strength and interest; and made the study of Indigenous culture and history more expensive than medicine.

In revisiting funding clusters post-JRG, there needs to be a clear logic to the differentials.

6. Gender equity

One area where the Interim Report does not go far enough is to move beyond STEM-only approaches for gender equity across the system. Many challenges to the full participation of women in the humanities mirror those of their colleagues in STEM and in the broader workforce.

In SHAPE fields women outnumber men at more junior ranks, but as with STEM men dominate in senior and leadership positions. Women in the humanities are in less senior and less secure work than their male counterparts. Gender equity is variable at the discipline level and by type of employment (casual vs tenured/ teaching vs research).

There are no national programs targeting Women in SHAPE, in stark contrast to the $147m national investments in Women in STEM,[10] including Superstars of STEM program, Women in STEM Ambassador program, and ATSE's Elevate program.[11]

Gender inequality is a whole-of-sector challenge and requires a coordinated policy approach targeting systemic drivers of inequity.

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[9] See Productivity Commission analysis https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/productivity/report/productivity-volume8-education-skills.pdf See also our submissions on the introduction of the JRG in 2020 https://www.humanities.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/200817-AAH-Policy-Job-Ready-Legislation_final.pdf and https://www.humanities.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/AAH-Policy-2020-Senate-Inquiry-Job-Ready-Legislation.pdf

[10] $147 million investment to date (2022-23 Budget) in supporting women in STEM.

[11] https://www.atse.org.au/career-pathways/elevate/

7. Getting the skills balance right

The humanities are central to getting the skills balance right. As noted at the outset, **most students choose to study SHAPE disciplines at university, and for good reason. They are the main source of employability attributes that increase in value throughout a graduate's career**.

While grappling with the immensely complex problem of providing the right mix of technical skills, it is vital that the Universities Accord should give due weight to the power of enduring skills. They build resilience and adaptability into the workforce.

Our forthcoming report *Future Humanities Workforce*[12] includes interviews with leading employers in business, the public sector, management consultancy, and the creative industries who value humanities graduates for their:

- critical thinking, informed by wide consultation,
- advanced capacity to engage different audiences, to appreciate their various points of view, and to arrive at solutions by working with the differences,
- ability to assimilate large amounts of information and to resolve conflicting lines of argument,
- ethical and emotional judgement, and
- a passion for enquiry and capacity to see the big picture, grounded in humane values, which renews and safeguards our institutions and workplaces.

A Universities Accord with an excessive focus on technical skills, or single-sector skills, risks selling Australians short. To get the right mix of skills, we need the humanities at the national strategy table.

[12] https://humanities.org.au/our-work/projects/future-humanities-workforce/