Australian Academy of the Humanities

Getting it right: Building AI infrastructure that works for Australia Consultation Paper, October 2026

The Australian Academy of the Humanities welcomes the opportunity to contribute a submission to the Australian Government's consultation on Getting it right: Building AI infrastructure that works for Australia. As the national body for the humanities and one of Australia's five Learned Academies, the Academy brings expertise in the fields that explain how people, cultures, languages and institutions shape – and are shaped by – technological change.

Our submission focuses on **Australia's sovereign AI capability**, and primarily the third section of the Consultation Paper, regarding AI training and local capability. We extend arguments we made in a related submission to the Joint Select Committee's Inquiry into Artificial Intelligence, i.e. Australia's AI future will not be decided by technical capability alone – it will be shaped by the choices we make about what AI is for, how it is designed, whose knowledge it draws on, and who benefits.[1]

Our principal argument is that **Australia needs to foster a sovereign AI capability that incorporates the independent and local capacity to understand, scrutinise, govern and shape AI and its related infrastructure to the benefit of all Australians. AI infrastructure is not simply a question of building sufficient compute; it also includes the knowledge and cultural capability to understand, interpret and shape AI.**

This year we established **a national Humanities & AI Capability Forum** to bring that expertise to bear on public policy. We would be happy to convene further expert input into this process.

There will be greater need for community engagement, consultation and alignment as communities begin to confront the increased physical presence of AI infrastructure alongside community concerns about the impacts of AI capability.

The increasing visibility of data centres through government policies to encourage investment will require careful alignment with community expectations and understandings. To date, it has been difficult for the Australian public to readily see the material infrastructure behind apparently 'intangible' AI. Research by the ARC Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision-Making and Society (ADM+S) has found that that Australians' understanding of environmental impacts changes substantially when the infrastructure is made visible.

[1] See https://humanities.org.au/power-of-the-humanities/humanities-at-the-centre-of-australias-ai-future-2/

This necessitates strengthened **public transparency, community consent, and Indigenous authority** across the operational life of data centres; and embedding public accountability, Indigenous engagement, and respect for Country in decommissioning processes.

While data centres are likely to become emblems of the AI revolution as sites of community focus and policy control, they are only one piece in a broader infrastructure for Australia to capitalise on AI. The ADM+S submission to the Senate Environment and Communications References Committee Inquiry on Artificial Intelligence and Data Centres makes this clear: the impacts on communities and environments extend beyond the data centre and across the AI system – a much wider footprint for policy makers to consider.

In the case of the environmental impacts "data centres are only one visible node in a wider infrastructure of extraction, hardware production, transport, energy supply, maintenance, and disposal, through which the environmental and social costs of AI are distributed", so "to assess only the footprint of the facility itself is to understate the wider material demands that make AI systems possible". "Data centre burdens" spread across a range of sectors and sites including "mining, manufacture, logistics, operation and end-of-life processing", and these pressures "are becoming more significant as cloud computing and AI services are taken up by companies, governments, and the public".[2]

Australia's sovereign AI capability cannot be reduced to sovereign compute.

The Paper suggests that three key components of "sovereign AI capability" include "developing AI here, partnering with leading AI firms which are developing frontier AI models, and adopting AI across sectors" (Intro). It is the Academy's position that **sovereign AI capability must be understood as more than compute: it includes the human, cultural, linguistic, intellectual property, data, governance and workforce capabilities needed to ensure AI develops in Australia's interests**.

Sovereign AI capability should encompass sovereign knowledge capability i.e. the research and expertise to understand, shape and govern the systems that Australia hosts and develops. This capability is underpinned by humanities, arts, social sciences, and Indigenous knowledges.

This broader conception of sovereignty should also inform the AI systems Australia develops. Australia should support **locally developed and purpose-built generative and agentic AI systems that reflect our languages, cultures and communities**, with cultural rights, representation and authority embedded in their design and governance. Australian cultural AI models, developed with cultural institutions, researchers, creators and Indigenous communities, could help advance these objectives. Sovereign capability

[2] Sonia Qadir and Michael Richardson, et al (2026). 'ADM+S Submission' to the Senate Environment and Communications References Committee Inquiry on Artificial Intelligence and Data Centres. See https://apo.org.au/node/334935

therefore requires investment in Australian alternatives, alongside securing appropriate terms for overseas developers' use of Australian knowledge and intellectual property.

By extension, Australia's sovereign AI capability should include an AI-capable workforce, not simply an AI technical workforce

The Paper's conception of workforce capability leans heavily toward technical skills. In our view, the workforce challenge is two-sided: **Australia needs people who can build AI, and people who can understand what AI means for people, institutions and society.**

The quality and safety of AI systems depend on access to people who understand human behaviour, culture, language, institutions, values, history and social context. These are capabilities, not ancillary skills. That requires capabilities in computer science and engineering; data science; mathematics; cybersecurity, but also languages and linguistics, history, philosophy and ethics, law, communications and media, cultural and creative practice, Indigenous knowledge, and information and archival studies.

Australia should require AI developers to contribute to our research and innovation ecosystem

The Paper defines several aspects of Australia's AI ecosystem as "spillover benefits". The Academy sees many of these as core benefits we need to embed into planning and policy development – including those the Paper identifies: access to compute; locally based research and engineering staff; university and public research partnerships; VET; commercialisation, a compute reservation scheme; public-interest research payments; and other mechanisms for securing contributions.

We agree that access should support Australian start-ups, innovative small businesses, researchers, research institutions, VET stakeholders and not-for-profit organisations. But we urge that **access to compute should not become an infrastructure subsidy principally for AI engineering research** because the demand and benefits are much wider than that. Australian humanities, arts and social sciences researchers need compute to conduct research into misinformation and information integrity; social cohesion; human-AI interaction; ethics and governance; copyright, trade rights and IP regulation; translation and multilingual AI; and AI's effects on democratic institutions and public life.

Conditions attached to frontier AI training should support "Australian creators, media and other rightsholders"

We welcome the Paper's **explicit commitment to Australian creators**. The Paper says that facilitating AI training in Australia is part of the Government's plan to secure a better deal for the creative and media sectors, because frontier models are currently trained on content under overseas legal frameworks, with limited visibility or payment for Australians. It explicitly names writers, musicians, artists, journalists and other creators.

However, we note that there are **no specific consultation questions** on copyright and Australian creators. The Paper acknowledges: The Attorney-General has policy

responsibility for copyright and will continue to lead stakeholder consultation on options to incentivise AI training while providing strong copyright protections. Further consultation is needed from government to address this topic in detail. We would welcome opportunities via the Attorney-General to comment on how to incentivise AI training and usage while providing strong copyright protections to Australian creators and Australian content.

In general, the Paper frames usage of Australian content by AI as a copyright and creative industries issue. It states that the government wants Australian creators to be able to exercise control over the use of their work, receive payment, have AI development shaped in accordance with Australian values, and have copyright provide strong protections while also providing regulatory certainty for AI investment.

The Academy recommends **broadening the frame to cultural and intellectual rights**. There is a much larger question underneath copyright: What rights and governance arrangements should apply when AI systems are trained on Australia's cultural knowledge, research, archives, collections, languages and creative expression? This has bigger implications for Australian AI sovereign capability.

Carlson and Worrell's 'Relational Futures: Indigenous sovereignty and the governance of artificial intelligence' reinforces the importance of this broader frame.[3] Their Indigenous-led research identifies concerns about the extraction of cultural knowledge, bias and surveillance, and emphasises Indigenous governance, community authority and Indigenous Data Sovereignty. These findings underline the need for Australian AI policy to address who has authority over cultural knowledge and how its use is governed, alongside copyright protection and remuneration. **These principles should guide the development of Australian AI models, as well as the conditions governing overseas models' access to Australian content**, ensuring that cultural representation and authority shape both what systems learn and how they operate.

AI standards need to address: copyright and creators' rights; attribution and provenance; remuneration and licensing; transparency about training data; cultural authority and consent; Indigenous cultural and intellectual property; community-controlled cultural knowledge; First Nations data sovereignty; the use of GLAM collections and digitised cultural heritage; research data and scholarly publications; and mechanisms for Australian cultural institutions and researchers to participate in AI development.

The environmental impacts of AI infrastructure are significant but incompletely measured; its social and cultural impacts extend across communities and Country; and its benefits cannot be assumed to flow automatically from investment. Australia therefore needs infrastructure that enables not only the development of AI, but the independent capacity to understand, scrutinise, govern and shape it. The Academy would be happy to convene expertise to talk to the issues raised in this submission.

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[3] Bronwyn Carlson and Tamika Worrell (2026), 'Relational futures: Indigenous sovereignty and the governance of artificial intelligence (AI)', Centre for Critical Indigenous Studies, Macquarie University, https://researchers.mq.edu.au/en/publications/relational-futures-indigenous-sovereignty-and-the-governance-of-a/