

Conclusion



This report provides the most comprehensive account of the humanities, arts and social sciences (HASS) sector to date. It tells us what the sector is currently delivering to the nation, how well it is positioned to respond to the changing needs of the nation in the future, and where we might look to further capitalise upon its potential.

This report demonstrates that Australia has a strong and resilient HASS sector which makes a major contribution to the national higher education system, to the national research and innovation system, and to preparing our citizens for participation in the workforce. It also demonstrates the significant capacity of the HASS sector to contribute to Australia's education, research and innovation system. It is critical that this capacity is fully recognised and utilised. That said, this report also points to some concerning trends, which, if left unaddressed, would severely test the sector's resilience.

The following are the key conclusions drawn from the data collated and research undertaken for this report.

1. The Australian HASS sector produces world-class research and teaching in many fields

- 1.1 The best performers in HASS research in Australia are producing work that has been assessed through the Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) process as well above world standard, and equivalent to the outstanding quality levels attained by the best research in the science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) sector.
- 1.2 In terms of its academic quality, the Australian HASS academic workforce is in very good health, with high levels of international visibility, recognition and respect.
- 1.3 According to the ERA's Discipline Growth Index, of the 62 disciplines across the system recording growth rates above the average (12%), 32 are HASS disciplines.
- 1.4 There has been significant development, modernisation, and internationalisation across the HASS sector, and the levels of productivity within both teaching and research have risen dramatically over the last two decades.

2. The HASS disciplines are major contributors to the Australian economy, education sector, and society

- 2.1 In a world where young people are continually told to expect to pursue several careers over the course of their working lives, the long-term value of generalist degrees in the humanities, arts and social sciences, as well as in the sciences, is emerging as an increasingly important consideration for the planning of their future.

- 2.2 The HASS disciplines teach the majority of students in the Australian higher education system with 65% of all students in Australian universities enrolled in HASS degrees.
- 2.3 Around 60% of the Australian population aged 20–69 with a Bachelor degree are HASS-trained.
- 2.4 Increasing levels of internationalisation within the HASS sector make it a major contributor to the higher education industry, which is Australia's fourth largest Australian export industry.
- 2.5 The strategic value of HASS research in addressing complex national and global problems that require multidisciplinary solutions has been explicitly acknowledged by federal politicians, by leading members of the science community and by such authoritative figures as Australia's Chief Scientist.

3. The HASS academic workforce faces risks and challenges, including casualisation, the ageing workforce and workloads

- 3.1 Between 2002–12 the teaching workforce across the higher education sector grew by 27%, and growth of HASS FTE staff was 22%. During this period, student load increased by 44%. Significantly increased teaching workloads, including the added burden of managing students' online access to teaching staff, put pressure not only on teaching but also on the capacity for research.
- 3.2 Over half the staff in many HASS disciplines are aged 50 or more, and there is evidence that the number of FTE staff aged 50 or more is increasing. At the same time, there is also an over-reliance on Level A and Level B academics in some HASS disciplines and, between 2002–12, a 43% increase in the proportion of casual academic staff, as compared to full-time (13%) and fractional full-time staff (35%).
- 3.3 The prevalence of the casualisation of teaching, together with unbalanced staff profiles and an ageing cohort of senior staff, all carry risks and challenges for succession planning, future leadership and the renewal of the academic workforce.

4. Some systemic impediments act as barriers to the full contribution of the HASS sector

- 4.1 The level of infrastructure investment in the HASS sector through such programmes as the National Collaborative Research Infrastructure Strategy has been minimal.
- 4.2 While the report notes some improvement in this area, the continuing pattern of exclusions that restrict the HASS sector's participation in the full range of nationally funded research grants schemes seems unnecessarily counterproductive.

5. The demand-driven system has led to some market failures with implications for the national interest

- 5.1 Fluctuations in student demand have put pressure on areas of low enrolment, risking the loss of expertise in areas of national, strategic, or academic importance.
- 5.2 As a result of the higher education sector's response to trends in demand, there is an increasing concentration of HASS offerings in the metropolitan universities, thus limiting the opportunities of those students wishing to study HASS subjects in regional Australia.
- 5.3 Shifts in the current shape of the HASS sector demonstrates that changes in policy settings—such as those determining discipline cluster funding—can have significant ramifications on course offerings and research expertise in the medium to long term that are not necessarily evident in the short term.
- 5.4 A strong capacity in HASS education and research is clearly in the national interest, but the maintenance of that capacity may, from time to time, require the prioritisation of certain areas within these fields of education and research as a means of protecting them from the consequences of short-term fluctuations in demand.
- 5.5 Expertise in regional cultures and languages is the most often cited example where this should occur, and indeed the positive efforts this report cites in this area provide useful models of strategies for others to adopt. Additional examples of market failure and the need for intervention are provided in this report.

6. Institutional investments are critical to the future of the HASS sector

- 6.1 Government and the universities themselves are the custodians of significant national capabilities. However there are few mechanisms currently available to be used by government to intervene in key areas of market failure in the HASS sector as well as in higher education in general, and few incentives for the universities to act (individually and in general) in order to accept their national responsibility for these capabilities.

- 6.2 The evidence in this report suggests that institutional investments are critical to the future of the HASS sector and universities need to think strategically and maintain their capabilities in fields that are in the national interest. There is reason, therefore, to look more closely at how the universities themselves have allocated their funding to the HASS disciplines, and the degree to which it can be claimed there has been a pattern of gradual institutional disinvestment by at least some universities. The current absence of comparative institutional data makes it difficult for those advocating on behalf of the HASS sector to take up this issue in appropriate fora.

7. Further work

It is unsurprising, with a teaching and research sector as large as HASS, and an environment as complex as the research and innovation system, that this study has identified the need for further work in certain areas, including:

- 7.1 The assessment of the scale, focus, and impact of the growing number of interdisciplinary centres and institutes in the HASS sector.
- 7.2 The role played by intra-institutional policy decisions, not just those responding to strategic shifts in government and student funding, and the effects upon the national capacity in the HASS fields.
- 7.3 More detailed analysis of collaboration within the HASS fields, including outcomes of the collaborative activities proposed through the various National Competitive Grants Schemes.
- 7.4 Closer attention to the issue of casualisation at the level of the individual institution, faculty or school.

A detailed list of areas highlighted for future work is provided in Appendix 4.

Finally, we have become accustomed to hearing accounts from the United Kingdom and the United States which consistently describe a 'crisis' in the HASS disciplines, and especially in the humanities. It is true that there are significant funding concerns for these disciplines in Australia, and they have proven vulnerable to some of the more negative consequences of an increasingly market-oriented system. The evidence in this report suggests that, notwithstanding such difficulties, the HASS fields continue to deliver high quality research; to make major contributions to the Australian economy, education sector, and society; to attract high levels of demand from students; and to generate positive educational and employment outcomes for those students.