

Executive Summary

The evidence presented in this report demonstrates that Australia has a strong and resilient humanities, arts and social sciences (HASS) sector that 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. For the nation to continue to benefit from the HASS sector, it needs to consider how it might make more substantial commitments to its ongoing support.

The aim of higher education research, in all fields, is to understand our world and our place in it. The aim of higher education teaching, in all fields, is to pass on those modes of understanding and what they tell us. Sometimes such understanding is an end in itself—it generates knowledge which is a public good. Sometimes it is used to change something, from the structure of a cell to the social habits of a culture. The contribution of the humanities, arts and social sciences (HASS) to that enterprise—of generating and disseminating knowledge, as well as understanding change—is as important as the contribution of the physical and natural sciences.

The HASS disciplines are fundamental components of every comprehensive national university system around the globe. The knowledge and modes of understanding they generate, while intrinsically valuable in themselves, are especially valuable in the complex environments we face today. Responding to today's global, social, cultural and economic challenges requires specialist knowledge of the peoples, societies and cultures that underpin, fuel or react to these challenges. The HASS disciplines are integral to achieving this fine-tuned understanding.

Australia's approach to generating and maintaining our national capacity in the HASS disciplines has been highly contingent upon short-term strategic policy settings, relatively autonomous institutional and sector-level funding decisions, and fluctuations in student study preferences. A nation of this size must be strategic in how it invests its resources. Decision-makers need a clear idea of the state of our current capacity and its trajectory. Until now, there has been a lack of authoritative sector-wide information.

We have not really known with any precision how, or how well, the HASS sector is making its contribution to the nation at present, nor have we had a means of assessing the sector's capacities and capabilities for the future. This report is a major step towards providing that information and will lead to a more informed understanding of the current health of the sector.

The evidence presented in this report demonstrates that Australia has a strong and resilient HASS sector that 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. The vast majority of tertiary enrolments are in HASS programmes. The majority of members of the tertiary-educated workforce in Australia have HASS degrees. The HASS fields of research include many that have been ranked by the Australian Research Council's Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA)

process as outstanding against world standards, and the scale and quantity of their research outputs have grown significantly over the last decade.

This high quality performance has been maintained in the face of significant challenges generated by the increasingly market-oriented system, by federal government policy settings, and by universities' strategies for the allocation of funding. Over the period under analysis, 2002 to 2012, staff–student ratios have risen, and fluctuations in demand have adversely affected course provision in particular fields of teaching, as well as research capacity in particular fields of research. The HASS sector is not alone in facing such challenges, of course, but this report highlights particular dimensions of this situation for HASS disciplines and the conditions under which they operate, many of which could be addressed within current funding frameworks by reviewing areas of policy, and by universities exploring new avenues for enhancing their investment in these fields.

Universities, policymakers and HASS practitioners will all benefit from accessing the information provided in this report, much of which has not previously been gathered or collated in such a comprehensive way. The report is intended to assist all stakeholders interested in the current health and capacity of the sector as a whole, as well as in particular fields or disciplines.

The message that emerges from the data collected and analysed in this report is the need for better access to authoritative information about our current capabilities as well as more strategic coordination across the sector that would enable Australia to manage shifts in the scale and focus of what is, after all, a fundamental national resource—our national capacity in teaching and research in the HASS disciplines. For the nation to continue to benefit from the HASS sector, it needs to consider how it might make more substantial commitments to its ongoing support.

There is a great deal of important detail in this report which has implications for the future of the Australian higher education sector. This summary provides a general and brief overview of our findings.

Teaching and Learning

Over the last decade, the HASS sector has maintained its position as the largest component of the Australian higher education teaching and learning system, in which there is strong evidence of high levels of student satisfaction and positive employment outcomes. There are some areas of concern for the future, however, with slight downward

trends in demand, significant shrinkage in the provision of programmes in certain subject areas and in regional locations, and the more complex issue of the long-term effects of a demand-driven system on maintaining the national capacity for generating and disseminating knowledge in these fields.

HASS Fields of Education (FoEs) comprise 65% of all undergraduate and postgraduate course enrolments in the Australian system, and this has remained steady over the period of our research. Management and Commerce has the largest share of enrolments (26% in 2011), with Society and Culture the next largest (21% in 2011). HASS supplied 71% of the total course completions in the sector in 2011; there is rapid growth in Master's level coursework offerings; and the student body is becoming more internationalised. There has been substantial growth in disciplines ranging from the traditional humanities (Philosophy) to the more contemporary formations in the social sciences (International Relations), to new interdisciplinary programmes which span the humanities and social sciences (Media and Communications).

Over the period surveyed, there has been a slight decline in the proportion of university enrolment offers going to HASS, and student interest in the Bachelor of Arts (BA) registers a slight decline as well. Fewer majors were available through the BA in 2012 than in 2008, and fewer 'tagged' degrees (i.e. Bachelor degrees named after a particular specialisation, such as a Bachelor of Music), although this has been partially balanced by an increased interest in double degrees.

The growth in student enrolments over the last decade has been fuelled by growth in international enrolments across the whole sector, and the area of most substantial growth has been in Management and Commerce (107%). The HASS sector is playing a dominant role in the export of education.

Staff–student ratios for the HASS disciplines remain high, following increases during the 1990s, and are significantly higher than those in the science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) sector. Over 2002–12, the HASS staff–student ratio was 22.6 students per full-time equivalent (FTE) academic staff member, while the equivalent STEM ratio was 16.8 students per academic staff member. These figures are largely the result of the combination of cluster funding settings and student demand: cluster settings determine the funding levels available, while fluctuations in student preferences impact upon the range of offerings available, and their distribution.

Regional universities are particularly vulnerable to these influences. There is some evidence that entry scores are dropping and numbers declining in HASS programmes in regional universities; there are also indications that enrolments in these fields of education are becoming increasingly concentrated in the metropolitan universities and the Group of Eight (Go8) universities, with consequent reductions in the range of opportunities available to those in regional Australia.

Research

The scale of the HASS sector's contribution to the national research and innovation system is considerable: it received 16% of the nation's research income, contributed 44% of the total number of Units of Evaluation in the 2012 ERA research assessment exercise, and produced 34% of the research outputs in the university sector. The quality of research as assessed by the ERA rankings demonstrates strong performance against world standards for most of the HASS fields of research, with many fields achieving outstanding results.

In terms of scale and quantity, the numbers of research outputs are growing across the sector and, 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. HASS researchers have generated consistently strong performances in national competitive grants schemes. This has not only been notable in the ARC's Discovery Projects scheme (from which 53% of HASS' ARC competitive grant research income is derived), but also through the HASS sector's substantial participation in the ARC's Linkage Projects scheme—which fosters collaboration with industry—which generates 22% of the sector's research income.

While the HASS sector attracts a significant share of publicly funded research and development (R&D), the level of investment from business and from universities is comparatively low. There has also been minimal investment in research infrastructure for these disciplines, either through government or individual university initiatives. The HASS sector does not have the same levels of access to government-funded strategic research initiatives as the STEM sector. This has significant consequences for the HASS sector's research income over the period surveyed, and in specific cases it seriously impacts upon the capacity to develop international collaborations of significant scale. The current industry tax concessions for R&D expenditure explicitly exclude research in HASS from core R&D activities, thereby restricting opportunities to engage in collaborative and industry-based research.

There is significant variation in the distribution of research funding between the regions and the Go8 universities over the period surveyed. While the Go8 universities were awarded 65% of ARC National Competitive Grants Programme (NCGP) funding for HASS over this period, regional universities only received 4%. This trend is also supported by ERA data which suggests some important or enabling disciplines (Language Studies, or History, for instance) are registering a declining institutional presence outside the metropolitan areas. A large proportion of quality HASS research is taking place in the metropolitan universities, especially the Go8. This raises questions about the maintenance of research capacity for the future, as well as about the distribution of opportunity in the regions.

The Academic Workforce

It is in this area of research that critical issues for the sustainability of the workforce emerged: unbalanced staffing profiles, declining career opportunities, the feminisation of casual and part-time staff cohorts, and an ageing academic workforce. Most of these issues apply across the higher education sector, but some factors appear to be more pronounced in the HASS disciplines. For instance, over the period surveyed, the size of the total academic workforce in Australia grew by 27%, while student numbers grew by 36%, and student load by 40%. In the HASS sector, the teaching workforce grew by only 22%. While the HASS sector teaches 65% of all enrolments in tertiary education, it does so with 55% of the total teaching workforce; ERA data puts the HASS research workforce at even lower levels, at 42% of the total. It is especially notable that non-research postgraduate enrolments have increased by 44% over the 2002–11 period across the university sector; in the broad Society and Culture field this growth has been in the order of 96%. Growth in Bachelor degrees across the system was 31% and in HASS fields 35%.

A series of indicators highlight issues for the future: the ageing of the workforce leading to an impending shortage of senior staff available to take on planning, administration, leadership and mentoring roles; the uncertainty of academic teaching and research careers leading to a shrinking pool of new entrants to the profession; and the tendency towards the development of a growing cohort of casual or part-time teachers, predominantly women, as a means of working within tight budgets leading to limited career opportunities and a stalling of career paths for junior academics.

While the teaching and research outcomes generated by this workforce are impressive, and bring credit to the system, it is reasonable to predict that such a level of performance will be difficult to sustain into the future as senior staff move into retirement. According to Graeme Hugo, 'Baby Boomers' constitute 42% of the national workforce but 56% of the academic workforce; in HASS, more than 50% of staff are aged over 50. While staffing profiles are highly variable across disciplines, they are often unbalanced (in some cases dominated by more junior-level appointments, Level As and Level Bs, in others with senior professorial appointments, Level Es) and this impacts upon succession planning, continuity of programmes and the reproduction of disciplines, as well as upon career development and the resources for academic leadership. Finally, some research indicates that as much as 50% of the teaching across the system is carried out by casual staff. While there is conflicting evidence on this, there is certainly evidence of an increase in the proportion of casual staff as compared to full-time and fractional full-time staff FTE over the 2002–12 period.

Conclusion

The following chapters provide detailed analysis of the current condition of HASS teaching, research, and its academic workforce. Each chapter concludes with a discussion of critical issues for the future. The data presented, and the analysis performed, within these chapters is based on a substantial body of background data that is collected in the appendices. The analysis of student enrolments draws on a commissioned study conducted by Dr Ian Dobson, *Mapping the Humanities and Social Sciences: Analysis of University Statistics 2002–2011*. Dobson's report, together with the statistics in the appendices then, are further resources for the higher education sector to enable it to better understand the current condition and future capacities of the HASS sector of the Australian higher education system.

Finally, in addition to these detailed data, the appendices contain an account of the methodology and the sources for this report, as well as an outline of areas this research has revealed as likely to repay further investigation in the future.