

# CHASS

## Federal Election Statement

CHASS  
what makes us human



### Priorities for Supporting World Leading Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences in Australia

**The Council for the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences (CHASS)** is a peak body with 46 institutional members that brings together humanities, arts, and social sciences (HASS) disciplines inside and outside of the higher education system<sup>1</sup>.

Our aim is to communicate the value of HASS and its crucial role in building a thriving, prosperous, sustainable, and equitable Australia.

In the context of the upcoming Federal election, we make three broad recommendations to support a sector that has been badly affected over the current term of government<sup>2</sup>:

1. Increasing support for HASS students as part of the workforce of the future
2. Investing in and facilitating cutting edge HASS research
3. Growing better links between HASS researchers employed by universities and industry

This report puts forward a number of priorities for an incoming government to help realise the potential of the HASS sector, and support the creation of a better society in the wake of the continuing pandemic.

### Building a Better Economic and Social Future through HASS

Over the past two and a half years, Australia and the world has faced a unique public health challenge. However, the pandemic has been more than just a health challenge. It has highlighted the rich web of human connections that underpins the world from global trade to everyday life. It has brought into sharp relief the divisions and inequalities that run through society. The medical and health sciences play a crucial role in managing the pandemic. The social sciences and humanities help us make sense of the sacrifices we have made, understand the social aspects of disease transmission, and communicate the systematic effects of the decisions taken. Our cultural life has also changed, shifting further into the virtual realm, and revealing how the arts bring insight, hope and joy, during both good times and bad.

**Right now, Australia is reflecting on the vital need for social cohesion**, on ways to come together and to successfully manage differences on the issues of what makes our lives valuable and the type of world we want to live in. Thinking through these questions is the task and promise of HASS.

The major local and global problems Australia faces include unstable political systems, human rights abuses, the rise of populism, issues of health and wellbeing, entrenched inequalities, and difficult questions about how best to regulate financial markets and build a fairer economic system. These challenges all require HASS expertise. Environmental issues such as drought mitigation, flood, and water



management, and our changing climate are as much social challenges as they are technical ones.

In Australia's current policy and funding framework, HASS students, researchers and practitioners are constantly being asked to justify their worth in narrow terms. Yet the value of HASS disciplines lies in their creation of a complex and rich ecology of knowledge, in fostering and maintaining a variety of analytical traditions that respond to pressing questions that are inherently unpredictable. HASS knowledge undergirds all matters of public importance. A democracy is unable to flourish without this knowledge.

## Supporting Students in HASS

HASS is core to the role of Australian universities as socially engaged institutions. The publics our universities serve face rapid technological, environmental, economic, demographic, and cultural changes. HASS study is essential to understanding and supporting the communities our universities serve. This is particularly true for universities with a strong place-based mission, for example in regional areas or growing outer suburbs of our major cities. To reduce access to the study of history and society, for example, in these universities undermines the stated aim of building skills and knowledge relevant to these regions.

One of the key changes to higher education legislation from the current Parliament was the Job-Ready Graduates Bill. For many humanities and social sciences offerings, the level of funding per full time student place per year dropped to only \$1,100, with students' personal contribution rising to the highest band (\$14,500). Students studying HASS were left to pay their own way<sup>3</sup>. The principle and message underpinning the changes is mistaken. The bill overlooks the role of HASS education in producing job ready graduates and ignores the burden the changes will place on the next generation of Australians, with women and minority groups particularly burdened with debt. The changes are unlikely to improve pathways to employment for graduates, but appear likely to exacerbate the gender wealth gap, and impact career and family choices<sup>4</sup>. They also make it more difficult for low SES students to engage with and contribute to HASS.

**There is no good reason to actively dissuade students from taking subjects like criminology, history, or philosophy.** Doing so runs counter to an emerging consensus that current changes in the labour market make the skills learned in HASS more valuable<sup>5</sup>. Some of the fastest growing jobs for university graduates are new. Creative content specialists, customer officers, data scientists, and sustainability analysts are in high demand. Many of these jobs did not exist a decade ago. Well-funded HASS degrees provide a foundation for working in these emergent fields. Our global position as an English speaking, cosmopolitan society in the Asia Pacific, with a world leading higher education sector, means that our competitive advantage lies in areas closely aligned to HASS study.

**There is a clear case for increasing support for HASS students as part of the workforce of the future. We recommend the following are prioritised:**

- Reducing the debt load on HASS students by higher funding for each student place
- Expanding the number of funded places for HASS students to enrich Australia's knowledge base and skilled workforce
- Establishing an Australian HASS scholarship fund for students from lower SES backgrounds to drive innovation and social transformation.

## Funding HASS Research

In the 2021 Australian Research Council (ARC) Discovery Scheme round, acting Minister for Education, Stuart Roberts vetoed six expert review panel-recommended research projects. These six vetoes followed vetoes of five applications in 2020 by Minister Dan Tehan and 11 grants vetoed by Minister Simon Birmingham in 2018. Apart from a small number of grants vetoed on the grounds of national security, all the vetoed grants have been in the humanities and social sciences, with the argument made that funding them was not in the national interest.

This is an unacceptable use of ministerial power, detrimental both to the individual research projects involved, and to Australia's reputation as a centre for

serious research. The vetoed applications had been blind peer-reviewed according to standard academic and ARC procedures and recommended for support by the relevant ARC College of Experts. That the veto was applied to HASS almost exclusively is all the more problematic, given that far fewer projects are funded in HASS relative to STEM.

Government has an important role in setting the rules for research funding and maintaining fair and transparent processes. Veto powers, allowing non-expert Ministers to deny funding based on application titles and 100-word national interest statements, undermines academic freedom, removes the incentive for academics to undertake the unpaid work of reviewing applications, damages Australia's research agenda, and undermines its international reputation.

The consequences of such actions are serious. The veto damages the careers and lives of investigators and collaborators, as well as students whose research is funded through these grants, and exacerbates an already untenable level of precarious employment in universities. It potentially forces people out of their academic careers or compels them to leave Australia to pursue their research, leading to the loss of some of our most talented minds.

Withheld funding is not reallocated to other grants, and these vetoes represent a major financial loss to the higher education sector. This should be viewed in the context of broader challenges facing this sector, including significant job and revenue losses (1 in 6 of all employees and \$1.8 billion in revenue in 2020), insecure employment, and cuts to the university and TAFE sectors overall<sup>6</sup>.

The direct interference in the ARC's expert review processes negatively affects Australia's entire higher education sector, reducing research capacity, research innovation, and international standing. It tarnishes our reputation in the global academic community, and works as a disincentive for leading overseas researchers and institutions to partner with Australian universities to pursue new research collaborations.

Article 15.3 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights states that "The States Parties to the present covenant undertake to respect the freedom indispensable for scientific research and creative activity."<sup>7</sup> Australia is a party to this covenant. If the next government wishes to

uphold the principle, it should halt the practice of ministers arbitrarily making their own judgement of project value.

**There will be significant economic and social returns from investing in and facilitating cutting edge HASS research. We therefore recommend the following are prioritised:**

- Increasing funding for HASS research projects
- Including the appropriate HASS expertise in all research review and advisory groups guiding ARC activity in the coming years
- Establishing a task group of government, industry and universities to consider how to foster independent research funding organisations of the kind that exist more widely overseas (such as the Leverhulme Trust, Wellcome for Medical Humanities, the VolkswagenStiftung and Fritz Thyssen Stiftung)
- Curtailing Ministerial powers of veto over ARC-recommended research grants.

## Commercialisation and Industry Engagement

In 2005 CHASS released a document outlining several interconnected challenges facing the commercialisation of research in the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences<sup>8</sup>. We identified the following problems:

1. Industry and government lack understanding of the value of HASS research
2. There are no standard practices for industry engagement in HASS research
3. Our universities are better equipped to support STEM than HASS research commercialisation
4. Commercial work is not incentivised for HASS researchers in our universities
5. Research and Development spending on HASS is extremely limited relative to STEM (and relative to the possibilities that HASS research represents). Our publication was used to frame the recent Aspect Initiative<sup>9</sup> in the UK, with the specific aim of developing avenues to support

commercialisation in the Social Sciences. It was launched in 2018 with 5 million pounds funding from Research England. Aspect adds two new items to our list<sup>10</sup>:

6. Much of the value of HASS research to industry is in the direct expertise of researchers, much more than in product development. This is not well captured in current commercialisation schemes and legal frameworks (for example, patents are less appropriate, copyright laws have limitations).
7. Operational definitions of research and development are often far too narrow to capture substantial areas of HASS expertise, such as data collection and analysis and curation.

These problems are still current. This year the Prime Minister announced the University Research Commercialisation Action Plan. We support the plan's emphasis on at-scale investment and engaged research institutions. However, it focuses on a narrow set of priorities that overlook much of STEM expertise as well as ignoring HASS research<sup>11</sup>.

The publics that Australian universities serve face significant challenges and opportunities involving technological, environmental, economic, demographic and cultural change. In HASS disciplines (as with the natural sciences) there is a commitment to research beyond its direct commercial applicability. The broader value of HASS and other research endeavours should not be undermined in any push for commercialisation.

The appropriate way to channel research activity and facilitate the commercialisation of research outcomes is to support complex research projects that call on all academic disciplines. This recognises the interdisciplinary nature of the challenges faced by industry and the community today. The current plan uses a model of innovation that is only appropriate to technological innovation. Yet the important issues facing Australia now are social, economic, health, and environmental ones.

Australia's cities are regularly ranked as among the most livable in the world, as globally leading destinations for international students, and as centres of culture and literature. Our global position as an English speaking, cosmopolitan society in the Asia Pacific region, with a world-class higher education sector and vibrant cities and regions, means that our

greatest competitive advantage often lies in areas aligned with our galleries, libraries, archives, and museums (GLAM) sector. The settings in the current plan overlooks cultural advantages and represents a significant missed opportunity.

As a matter of urgency, the Commercialisation Plan needs to be updated or replaced in the coming term of government. Making the most of our national strengths and advantages requires investment and upskilling of HASS researchers. HASS academics with the interest and capacity need to be supported to pursue commercial opportunities arising out of their own core research commitments.

HASS research is diverse and offers many opportunities for different kinds of commercialisation. For example, smaller grants and tenders are available in the GLAM sector than in education, business, law and sociology. The same blanket criteria for accessing commercialisation support should not be applied across all areas of research.

For many HASS researchers, expert consulting work is a more common pathway to commercialisation than product development. It leads to strong opportunities for working with industry while bringing additional benefits to university teaching, such as improving work integrated learning. A broad and flexible understanding of commercialisation is needed. To ensure this, HASS sector involvement is critical. The people and place-focused skills that HASS researchers provide the community are central to Australia's competitive advantage and building the successful Australian society of the future.

**There is much value in growing better links between HASS researchers employed by universities and industry. We recommend the following are prioritised:**

- Impact is a much larger concept than commercialisation and resourcing and support for commercialisation must not come at the expense of other research outcomes for the Australian community
- Schemes to support commercial impacts should be broad based, recognising Australia's considerable strengths in research and impact concerning culture, society, arts and the humanities
- The government should actively support additional avenues to create better links between HASS researchers employed by universities and industry to facilitate realising the impact of Australia's considerable HASS expertise.

## Conclusion

Australia's humanities, arts and social sciences disciplines and sectors are among the best in the world. It should be a priority for the next government to increase support for HASS students as part of the workforce of the future, to facilitate cutting edge HASS research through appropriate funding and to support better links between HASS researchers employed by universities and in industry. We look forward to the opportunity to support the next government in realising the full potential of HASS in Australian Society.

## Endnotes

- 1 This statement was written by Dan Woodman, Matthew Champion, Lara McKenzie, Julian Meyrick, and Ilana Mushin on behalf of the Board of the Council for the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences. The authors are responsible for omissions and errors. More information on CHASS can be found at [www.chass.org.au](http://www.chass.org.au)
- 2 This report draws on and builds upon previous analysis, public statements, and government submissions by CHASS in three key policy areas that have affected the HASS sector over the current term of government. It does not represent a full list of all priorities of all parts of the diverse HASS sector.
- 3 <https://www.dese.gov.au/job-ready/improving-accountability-information-providers>
- 4 <https://bcec.edu.au/publications/analysis-of-costs-and-savings-of-proposed-reforms-to-higher-education/>
- 5 <https://www.humanities.org.au/issue-item/the-power-of-the-humanities/>  
<https://socialsciences.org.au/publications/the-social-sciences-shape-the-nation/>  
<https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/publications/skills-qualified-future-quantifying-demand-arts-humanities-social-science/>
- 6 <https://www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au/media-item/17000-uni-jobs-lost-to-covid-19/>
- 7 <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/cescr.aspx>
- 8 <https://www.chass.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/PAP20050501TG.pdf>
- 9 <https://aspect.ac.uk/>
- 10 <https://aspect.ac.uk/resources/now-is-the-time-to-transform-how-we-think-about-social-science-commercialisation/>
- 11 <https://www.dese.gov.au/university-research-commercialisation-package/resources/university-research-commercialisation-action-plan>. The 2021 National Research Infrastructure Roadmap that is a companion to the Commercialisation Plan does acknowledge the value of investing in datasets and digital capacity for HASS, nonetheless is driven by the same key challenges as the Commercialisation Plan, with little role for HASS - <https://www.dese.gov.au/national-research-infrastructure/resources/2021-national-research-infrastructure-roadmap>