

Comment on the Discussion Paper for the Australian Universities Accord

April 2023

Who we are & what we do

The Art Association of Australia and New Zealand (AAANZ), is the peak advocacy body for visual art academics, artists, curators, writers, arts professionals and arts students from Australasia. We represent over 420 members and have representatives on our Executive Committee from each Australian state and territory together with Indigenous, Maori, Pakeha, artist, student and international representatives.

AAANZ delivers an annual program of Art Writing Awards, research grants, two issues of the refereed journal, *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art*, an annual conference and other initiatives such as the Early Career Publishing Program. Other professional development opportunities focus on Early Career Researchers and First Nations art academics and professionals.

AAANZ is highly invested not only in the future of art education and research in the region, but also in the overall health and ecology of the galleries, libraries, archives and museum (GLAM) sector. Arts graduates fill important positions in the GLAM sector and inform the future development of the industry, making important contributions to the liveability, health, wellbeing and economic prosperity of our cities, suburbs and regions.

Comments on the Discussion Paper

AAANZ welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Discussion Paper on the future of higher education.

The creative industries are thriving in Australia which pre-COVID injected over \$111.7 billion to the national economy annually,¹ making a significant contribution to Australia's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of 6.4% and Gross Value Added of 5.6%, as well as employing 5.5% of the total workforce.²

The creative arts play a vital role in building resilient communities with direct links to health and wellbeing.³ Numerous studies have identified the role the creative arts play in building community, belonging, and trust, enhancing empathy and inclusion, helping to reduce

loneliness and isolation, assisting individuals and communities recover from disasters and trauma, and making places more liveable.⁴ OECD research shows that a more cohesive society often has a stronger and faster-growing economy.⁵ Our galleries and museums play a key role by creating opportunities for engagement with the creative arts for their communities and as cultural tourist destinations they contribute to the economic prosperity of cities and regional towns.

Human capital is at the core of the achievements of these institutions and the current success of public galleries and museums across Australia is directly related to the tertiary education of directors, curators, artists and other gallery and museum professionals. This education was affordable and proportionate and enabled students from a broad range of socio-economic backgrounds to participate thereby ensuring a wide pool of talented and capable professionals who have subsequently built the prosperity of the sector.

This is at risk through recent changes to funding structures for humanities degrees introduced under the Job-Ready Graduate reforms. The rise in university fees for humanities degrees threatens the success of the sector because it directly impacts on the diversity of voices represented in institutions by discouraging future artists and arts workers from lower socio-economic backgrounds, first-in-family, migrant and First Nations backgrounds from undertaking a career path in the arts. The doubling of humanities fees has increased inequity. Many humanities students will take longer to repay their HELP debt, a situation made worse by the relatively low incomes many humanities graduates earn in comparison to other disciplines. This has a compounding effect throughout their life making it more difficult for many to save for a home. Furthermore the changed fee structure disproportionately disadvantages women who account for the majority of students enrolled in humanities degrees. This is untenable and will contribute to more long-term financial insecurity for women and a further widening of the gender gap.

With the forecast obsolescence of many jobs through the exponential growth of artificial intelligence, it is the skills taught in humanities subjects, particularly the arts, that will prove the most resistant to automation in the future.⁶ Creativity, originality and initiative, together with analytical thinking and innovation, are at the top of a list of competencies most frequently identified by Australian companies as the skills that will be in demand in the future. These are the skills the humanities subjects excel in developing. It therefore makes no sense to 'send a price signal' that discourages students from undertaking humanities degrees on the false assumption that these degrees are not expected to prepare students for employment growth areas.

Education offerings have been eroded over recent years particularly in the areas of the creative arts and art history. A number of schools and departments have closed down around Australia through restructures and the range of subjects offered reduced by cost-based decision making. This has taken place despite demonstrated records of accomplishment and outstanding rankings. In one instance the internationally acclaimed SymbioticA Centre in the School at the University of Western Australia closed down last year despite public outcry. At the forefront of the art-science interface, the award-winning Centre's pioneering relationship between art and science was highly respected around the world.

Universities rightly argue that they are creators of 'public good' with aims to 'underpin and contribute to the intellectual, cultural, community and economic development of the nation.'⁷ However this must be borne out in decisions that ensure diversity in the offerings of subjects and courses and through the support of visual art schools and departments. We recognise the increased challenges of financial sustainability in these difficult economic times, however financial efficiencies should not come at the cost of creative arts and art history courses which are too often seen as soft targets.

To ensure the GLAM sector continues to be impactful and builds healthy resilient communities into the future, it is imperative that higher education offerings in the creative arts and art history are supported. AAANZ calls upon the Universities Accord to reverse the decision to unfairly penalise humanities students through higher fees and asks that creative and visual arts departments, schools and subject offerings are strengthened and diversified.



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¹ Australian Government, Department of Communications and the Arts, Bureau of Communications and Arts Research (BCAR), "Cultural and creative activity in Australia 2008-09 to 2016-17." Working Paper, 2018, p. 1.

² A New Approach, 'Report Two: Transformative: Impacts of Culture and Creativity'. (Australian Academy of the Humanities, 2019) p. 6

³ VicHealth, "Audience access standards", 2006, p. 4.

⁴ A New Approach 'Report 2', p. 6.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Australian Government, 'Australia's current, emerging and future workforce skills need', November 2022, p. 81.

⁷ Australian Universities Accord, 'Discussion Paper, 2023, p. 6.