



Senate Education and Employment
Legislation Committee
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25 August 2023

Dear Committee,

Thank you for the invitation to respond to the Senate Education and Employment Legislation Committee's inquiry into the provisions of the Higher Education Support Amendment (Response to the Australian Universities Accord Interim Report) Bill 2023.

The Australian Academy of the Humanities (AAH) is the national body for the humanities in Australia, championing the contribution that humanities education and research makes to national life. As one of Australia's five Learned Academies we are a unique resource for government.

We are in principle supportive of the Universities Accord Interim Report's recommendations for immediate action (the subject of the Bill). We strongly support equity and increased participation for regional students, students in outer metropolitan areas, First Nations students, and students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Humanities education is central to the employability and lifelong learning agenda, building capability beyond short-term skills fixes.

As we said in our [submission to the Universities Accord Discussion Paper](#), access to higher education has historically been an important pathway out of socioeconomic disadvantage, through the access it has provided to stable well-paid employment.² We are increasingly concerned for current and future generations of students carrying higher levels of student debt, particularly humanities students who, since the introduction of Jobs Ready Graduates (JRG), will pay 113% more for their degrees.

The humanities have provided important first access points to higher education for many low SES, Indigenous, rural and regional, and mature-aged students. We understand the need to strengthen universities' support mechanisms for these student cohorts, and the challenges ahead if we are to double the number of students by 2050. We need new, targeted solutions to ensure that all Australians who are willing to incur reasonable HELP debts can afford full-time tertiary education.

It is our view that this challenge requires a national research effort – to understand the changing nature of work and housing, education and employability – so that we can ensure better social and economic conditions for Australia's students. We have advocated in the past for an education-focused ARC Industrial Transformation Research Hub. Given that education is one of Australia's largest export industries, it seems an obvious choice; and given the intense international competition in higher education, a compelling one.

¹ See Future Humanities Workforce report (forthcoming) <https://humanities.org.au/our-work/projects/future-humanities-workforce/> See also our submissions to Jobs and Skills Australia <https://humanities.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/AAH-Jobs-and-Skills-Australia.pdf> and to the Employment White Paper <https://humanities.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/AAH-Policy-Employment-White-Paper-2022.pdf>

² <https://humanities.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/AAH-Universities-Accord.pdf>



To improve access and inclusion in tertiary education, an urgent priority is that the JRG policy be dismantled. The JRG legislation was based on discredited assumptions about employability and workforce needs;³ disproportionately impacted women; made it far harder for many students from low SES backgrounds, including in the regions, to aspire to university in their areas of strength and interest; and made the study of Indigenous culture and history more expensive than medicine. In revisiting funding clusters post-JRG, there needs to be a clear logic to the differentials. The JRG fee structures for many humanities, arts, and social sciences subjects regressively impacted low-SES students, especially First Nations students, who tend to enrol in humanities and social sciences disciplines ahead of sciences and technology.

Finally, we believe there is a need to steward the proposed reforms. The Academy, therefore, welcomes the Universities Accord Panel's consideration of an Australian Tertiary Education Commission, based on the principles of independence and expertise, which would take a national view of how teaching and research programs are advancing Australia's interests. Australia's Learned Academies would be well placed to contribute to such a body to inform national coordination and planning. As expert voices on a range of higher education and research matters, including the important intersection with national policy development, our unique expertise within and across disciplines is independent of universities and governments.

We would be pleased to elaborate on areas raised in this brief response. Our Academy is in the process of finalising its response to the Interim Report.

The Committee might also be interested to know, the AAH is partnering with the University of Queensland to host an important [symposium on Indigenous Studies](#) on 28 and 29 September, which will be looking at the way the discipline is established in Australian universities, and how an Indigenous-led approach can benefit the higher education sector.⁴ These critical deliberations will hopefully have a bearing on future generations of First Nations students and academic staff, to the benefit of all Australians.

Yours sincerely,

Inga Davis
Executive Director

³ See Productivity Commission analysis <https://www.pc.gov.au/news/competed/productivity/report/productivity-voice-8-education-skills.pdf> See also our submissions on the introduction of the JRG in 2020 <https://www.humanities.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/200817-AAH-Policy-Job-Ready-Legislation-fina.pdf> and <https://www.humanities.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/AAH-Policy-2020-Senate-nquiry-Job-Ready-Legislation.pdf>

⁴ <https://humanities.org.au/news/indigenous-studies-and-brave-conversations/>