



13 June 2008

Ms Maria Vamvakinou MP  
Chair  
Standing Committee on Industry, Science and Innovation  
House of Representatives  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Ms Vamvakinou,

Please find attached the submission of the Australian Academy of the Humanities to the Committee's inquiry into research training and research workforce issues in Australian universities.

The Academy welcomes the opportunity to contribute its ideas to this inquiry. We would be very pleased to elaborate further on any of the recommendations or observations contained in this submission.

Please refer any enquiries in the first instance to the Executive Director, Dr. John Byron.

With kind regards,

Professor Ian Donaldson FAHA FBA FRSE  
President



**AUSTRALIAN ACADEMY OF THE HUMANITIES**

**Submission to the**

**INQUIRY INTO RESEARCH TRAINING AND RESEARCH WORKFORCE ISSUES  
IN AUSTRALIA**

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Confidentiality: No part of this submission is confidential

Declaration of Interest: The Academy

*The Australian Academy of the Humanities* was established by Royal Charter in 1969 to advance scholarship and public interest in the humanities in Australia. It comprises over 400 of the most influential and internationally celebrated humanists in Australia. The Academy is an independent, not-for-profit organisation partly funded by the Australian Government under provisions of the *Higher Education Support Act 2003*. The Academy is a registered tax-deductible gift recipient.

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Declarations of Interest:       The Authors

*Professor Ian Donaldson* is the President of the Academy. He is Honorary Professorial Fellow in the School of Culture and Communication at the University of Melbourne. He was founding Director of the ANU's Humanities Research Centre from 1974 to 1990, and directed the Centre again from 2004 to 2007. He was founding Director of Cambridge University's Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences, and Humanities (CRASSH) from 2001 to 2003.

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*Dr John Byron* is the Academy's Executive Director. He is an Adjunct Research Fellow in the Humanities Research Centre at the Australian National University, the Secretary of the Association for Medical Humanities (Australia and New Zealand), and a Board member of the Council for the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences.

*Dr Ian Maclean* is Associate Director of the Academy. He is President of the Association for Learning Mandarin in Australia.

*Ms Christina Parolin* holds the position of Policy Analyst at the Academy. She is a Higher Degree Research student in the Humanities Research Centre at the Australian National University.

## **INTRODUCTION**

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The Australian Academy of the Humanities is one of the nation's four learned academies. It comprises the pre-eminent scholars and researchers in the humanities in Australia. The Academy aims to advance knowledge of, and the pursuit of excellence in, the humanities in Australia. Further information on the Academy may be obtained from its website, at [www.humanities.org.au](http://www.humanities.org.au).

The Australian Academy of the Humanities has a strong interest in the research training needs and research workforce issues of humanities scholars in Australian universities and therefore welcomes this timely and important inquiry.

Our detailed submission takes each area of inquiry in turn, working through the items of particular interest noted in the Terms of Reference, mainly from the perspective of the humanities. Most of these remarks apply aptly to the creative arts and the qualitative social sciences.

## **KEY FINDING**

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The research and research training funding system as it is currently structured produces an inadvertent discipline-specific effect that severely handicaps the humanities. We elaborate on this in some detail below, but the gist of the argument is that the funding of the humanities is statistically regressive as the system currently operates, with the result that the humanities can only ever tread water and never improve their situation through their own initiative.

The Academy does not believe that this is an intended outcome, as the humanities enjoy the broad support of the community and very substantial student interest as expressed in enrolments. They embrace disciplines that serve both long-term social needs and short- and medium-term national interests.

Nevertheless, regardless of intent, the effect is the same: the research effort in the humanities is so marginalised by the current system that Australia is experiencing the decline, to the point of extinction, of key elements of our humanities research capability. This has produced serious shortfalls in providing for the next generation of researchers. Without other measures being introduced, we will not only fail to revive these fields, but will also witness the serious erosion of our capabilities in even the supposedly core humanities disciplines.

## **1. RESEARCH TRAINING**

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The Committee's interest in the contribution that Australian universities make to research training in Australia is especially relevant to the humanities, where almost all research training takes place inside the universities. The humanities are conspicuously (but by no means uniquely) sensitive to research training practices and arrangements in Australian universities, simply because very few research training opportunities are available in this country outside the university system. Therefore what we have to say about the existing arrangements for research training in universities applies more thoroughly to research students in the humanities than to some in other disciplines, who may also have the option of research training within the Publicly Funded Research Agencies, the Medical Research Institutes or Cooperative Research Centres.

### **THE CONTRIBUTION OF RESEARCH TRAINING PROGRAMS TO AUSTRALIA'S COMPETITIVENESS IN THE AREAS OF SCIENCE, RESEARCH AND INNOVATION**

Domestic research training is absolutely essential to international competitiveness, as Australia's current and emerging research capacity needs are far too large to rely to any significant degree on internationally-trained researchers. For reasons elaborated below, Australia is not particularly well placed to attract significant numbers of high quality researchers from abroad, so our needs must be met chiefly by attracting talented Australians into research careers, and by providing research training opportunities to international research students in the hope that many of them will establish themselves in Australia. Research training programs, therefore, are utterly central to our prospects of competing in the global research marketplace.

The relationship between a high quality research culture and successful innovation is well documented. Artistic, social and cultural domains are increasingly being integrated into innovative processes, alongside more established scientific, technological and engineering inputs. The innovation literature is placing increasing emphasis on the importance of leadership, management, marketing, creativity, organisation, design and social and cultural factors. These factors may lead to innovation in their own right, and frequently contribute to successful innovation outcomes in conjunction with research contributions from across the disciplines.

However, while there is now broad acceptance of the role of non-technical factors in positive innovation outcomes, that acceptance is not reflected adequately in the operations and procedures of the institutions and mechanisms through which Australia supports innovation, including its research training arrangements. For reasons we will outline, Australia's present research training mechanisms compromise our international competitiveness across the range of research fields, and inadequately prepare research students for participation in the national and global innovation system.

## **THE EFFECTIVENESS OF CURRENT COMMONWEALTH RESEARCH TRAINING SCHEMES**

Commonwealth support for research at the institutional level is determined through a suite of funding programs:

- the Research Training Scheme (RTS);
- the Infrastructure Grants Scheme (IGS); and
- the Research Infrastructure Block Grants (RIBG) Scheme.

While the Scheme of principal interest to the Committee's inquiry is the Research Training Scheme, the Academy submits that it is also necessary to consider the interactions between these funding mechanisms. Moreover, as the schemes have operated over many years, the iterative effects of these schemes need also to be considered.

The Academy's general view is that these funding mechanisms are fairly crude structures that were probably wanting from the start in their ability to deliver the stated objectives, and that are certainly not fit for purpose today. They are in need of significant reform, to take into account unanticipated negative effects, unforeseen gaps and weaknesses in their operation, and their decreasing ability to meet the needs of a rapidly changing research enterprise.

More specifically, it is the Academy's considered view that these mechanisms have contributed to a precipitate decline in humanities research in Australian universities. This has occurred through the action of structural biases which operate to discriminate against the humanities and other research disciplines deemed to be 'low-cost'. These structural biases have their origin in poor program design, in that the procedures and processes used to determine funding under the schemes have regard to factors which are extraneous to the stated objectives of the schemes.

The declared objectives of the Research Training Scheme are to:

1. enhance the quality of research training provision in Australia;
2. improve the responsiveness of higher education providers to the needs of their research students;
3. encourage higher education providers to develop their own research training profiles;
4. ensure the relevance of research degree programs to labour market requirements; and
5. improve the efficiency and effectiveness of research training.<sup>1</sup>

Whatever the merits of the RTS at the institutional level, it has been problematic at the national level: some disciplines or discipline clusters cannot compete effectively, and some have been significantly disadvantaged by it. The humanities disciplines have suffered due to knock-on, iterative and proxy effects of the RTS funding formulae. As disciplinary winnowing is not one of the objectives of the Scheme, the RTS has proved to be poorly suited to its objectives to the extent that it has disadvantaged particular research fields.

(We would add that the RTS's effects on women, older candidates and people from disadvantaged backgrounds – also not consonant with the objectives of the Scheme –

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[http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/research\\_sector/programmes\\_funding/programme\\_categories/professional\\_skills/research\\_training\\_scheme.htm](http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/research_sector/programmes_funding/programme_categories/professional_skills/research_training_scheme.htm)

constitute a similar significant failure of the mechanism to produce the stated policy outcomes.)

The RTS provides funding for institutions for research education based on their performance according to a formula comprising three elements:

- numbers of research students completing their degrees (50%);
- research income (40%); and
- publications (10%).

Within the RTS, funding for higher degree research (HDR) students is a function not of load (the student enrolment numbers, used for funding undergraduates or postgraduate coursework students) but of completions. The value – which is to say, in institutional funding terms, the virtue – of HDR completions is weighted according to a formula meant to address the nominal cost of provision of research training. This formula is calculated on two variables: one for level of achievement (arguably linked to length of candidature, and perhaps to intensity), and one for disciplinary location. This means that:

1. completing doctorates are funded at twice the rate of the corresponding masters level completions; and
2. completions within designated ‘high-cost’ disciplines are funded at 2.35 times the rate of those from designated ‘low-cost’ disciplines.

There are many problems with these elements of the formula.

In the case of the doctoral/masters differential, it is not at all clear that the cost of supporting a doctoral student to completion is as much as twice that of supporting a masters student. One problem is that the immense variation between project demands, departmental practices, faculty requirements, and institutional cultures vastly overwhelm this uniform distinction and render it nonsensical when applied across the national university system. One university’s masters may be another’s doctorate, to the former’s disadvantage under this formula. This is particularly unfortunate if the first institution is holding its policy line for reasons of rigour and international comparability. The RTS provides a positive incentive for erosion of HDR standards to produce a PhD where once stood a Masters graduate.

A look at the enrolments and completions data shows that the Masters by Research has been in sharp decline in Australia over the last decade. It is clear that the RTS has played a significant part in this trend, although other factors (such as faculty hiring criteria) are also at play. Some may argue that this is not an undesirable outcome: perhaps the Masters by Research has had its day. We would respond that the humanities continue to value the qualification and that there probably remains a role in our disciplines for the Masters by Research, whether or not that need prevails elsewhere. The point is that we should review the Masters by Research properly and make the decision about its fate rationally and deliberately; we should not allow it simply to wither on the vine as an inadvertent consequence of a flawed policy instrument.

Of far greater concern to the Academy than the doctorate/masters distinction, however, is the low-cost/high-cost differential.



Dividing the entire research education enterprise in Australia into two categories – expensive and cheap – fails to have regard to the fact that there is significant variation in the actual cost of delivery (supervision, resources, infrastructure, etc.) within each of these categories. This 2.35:1 funding quotient is an exceedingly blunt instrument that has little relationship to the actual costs incurred within the research training activities it is designed to fund.

This detachment of the funding mechanism from reality has the effect of promoting perverse institutional behaviour. Institutions are furnished with a financial incentive to pursue enrolments in those disciplines with high revenue:cost-of-provision ratios. As a good portion of the cost of provision is virtually constant across disciplines – supervisors' salaries, library access, office space, research and conference travel expenses, etc. – the high revenue band is likely to offer greater opportunities for margins of revenue over cost. In reality then, the formulae encourage universities to pursue enrolments in those disciplines funded in the high revenue category, as a first principle, and then with the leanest costs of provision as a refinement.

Conversely, universities are effectively discouraged from pursuing enrolments in humanities and other 'low-cost' HDR disciplines. As they are poorly funded at completion, the opportunity for surpluses over costs is low, even in those disciplines where research training absorbs virtually no resources beyond the generic.

More fundamentally, differentiating between the cost of providing research training in this portion of the calculation of the funding regime lacks rationality. Extra funding for the more expensive research programs in which 'high-cost' HDR students are embedded – such as team-operated technology-dependent laboratories – is explicitly provided through the IGS, and is supported by the cost-related funding of the research activity through the RIBG and initial establishment project grants. To the extent that 'high-cost' HDR students actually do burden the research enterprise with significant extra costs over and above those required to operate the underlying research project, the IGS provides.

The additional payment for 'high-cost' disciplines in the RTS formula, then, is not based on any specific cost factors, is illogical and skews the playing field in favour of enrolments in 'high-cost' disciplines. The Academy considers that a flat, unweighted payment for the student burden is the appropriate mechanism in this formula.

Additionally, the high *proportion* of the total formula for the funding of research education that is attached to completion – as opposed to funding directly for cost of provision – also disadvantages humanities HDR students. In 'high-cost' disciplines, completions typically represent a smaller proportion of total research funding for the department than they do in 'low-cost' disciplines. This is because a significant proportion of total research funding is usually obtained from other sources. Thus greater pressure is placed upon humanities and other low-cost discipline students to complete, despite their candidature being served in environments with fewer outside resources to lend the support needed to facilitate completion. If a greater proportion of the cost of provision were to pay for direct cost of provision of research training, humanities HDR students would reap a greater relative benefit.

Ironically, it is likely that such a change in emphasis would result in improved completion figures since departments would be better able to provide the resources to support students.

Within the IGS the 30% HDR component is funding for student load – the actual number of EFTSU enrolments, rather than the completions factor in the RTS – and so it is appropriate that cost-of-delivery differentials are factored into this calculation, in a formula that is designed to address the actual expense of provision. It would be of benefit to most students and departments, but particularly those in the humanities, were a greater proportion of HDR funding focussed on load rather than completions. As in the RTS, however, the promise that this component would be “weighted to reflect cost differentials associated with broad fields of research”<sup>2</sup> is only very crudely implemented through the simplistic and woefully inadequately refined 2.35:1 high-low ratio.

Over half (60%) of the IGS and nearly half (40%) of the RTS allocations are awarded based on simple research income, based on statistics derived from the Higher Education Research Data Collection (HERDC). Similarly, RIBG funding is based on the relative success of each institution in attracting competitive research funds. These simple measures reflect the ability to attract raw dollars, rather than more sophisticated measures of departmental research merit such as the number of grants won or the prominence or utility of outcomes. As humanities research activities are very often less expensive than those in other disciplines, the crudeness of these measures biases university research decisions away from humanities research – ironically enough, away from those very areas where research outcomes can often be obtained more economically than in other areas. A formula that fails to reward economy is undesirable as a public policy instrument.

The funding formulae thus provide an incentive for humanities researchers to develop high-cost projects because success with these projects will favour their institution’s performance under the RTS, the IGS and the RIBG. While such projects may be useful – and clearly would not be funded unless their value could be demonstrated – this incentive means that equally worthy but less expensive and hence less attractive projects may not go forward for approval. That recipients of public funds should be dissuaded from attempting to deliver outcomes at less expense is unfortunate and indicative of a poorly-designed process.

The chief problem with the research income measure, then, is the very high proportion this measure has been accorded in the various funding formulae. Current funding regimes are tilted significantly towards the ability to earn research income which, as the Research Quality Framework (RQF) consultations repeatedly concluded, is an unsatisfactory proxy for more direct measures of quality. It emphasises an input as a proxy for quality when output indicators are not only available, but provide a more rigorous measure of quality and are less liable to produce skewed results. We would recommend that the proportions be adjusted to de-emphasise the flawed input measure of research income and promote the use of less remote proxies that use more immediately relevant output measures to estimate and reward quality.

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<sup>2</sup> Dr D.A. Kemp, *Knowledge and Innovation: A policy statement on research and research training*, December 1999. p. 16.

An additional problem is that, under the current arrangements, research income from all sources is weighted equally. Prior to these arrangements, income from national competitive grants schemes (NCGs) was weighted 2:1, to reflect the greater relevance to government research objectives of projects that have been selected for NCG funding. This change has had the effect of increasing the priority given to applied and commercial research. The disadvantage to the humanities, where a lesser proportion of research lends itself to commercial application or collaboration, has been substantial.

Only a small proportion of RTS and IGS funds (10% in each case) flow according to publications data. This is an area in which the humanities are able to score well (even in the absence of sophisticated metrics), yet it counts least among the chosen indicators of quality. In many humanities disciplines, and in some sciences such as astronomy and theoretical physics, the circulation of ideas constitutes a significant proportion of the total research output (as distinct from other outputs such as patent applications). However, the ability of the crude metrics employed to provide the data for the formula favour journal publication, a method of dissemination that is much less favoured in the humanities than in the sciences.

Using publications as a research output measure, particularly when this will soon be supported by the indicators being developed for the Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA), would be a much more accurate and direct measure of quality and therefore should be given higher weighting. If improved indicators can be developed that are better able to detect research activity across the disciplines and more accurately proxy for its quality, the measure would become much more powerful for the humanities. It is regrettable that the indicator of greatest potential value to the humanities is currently of relatively limited significance within the funding formulae.

The Academy is gratified that the government has abandoned the one-size-fits-all approach to assessing research quality embodied in the previous government's Research Quality Framework (RQF) and is developing more nuanced measures of research quality through its ERA framework. It would be appropriate for government research funding mechanisms to incorporate this approach, replacing raw dollar value and crude science-biased bibliometrics with reliable indicators of quality.

The interaction between the RTS and the Infrastructure Grants Scheme (IGS) has significant ramifications for the humanities sector at the institutional level. The objectives of the IGS are to:

- support the general fabric of institutions' research and research training activities;
- allow institutions to manage their own research activities and set their own priorities;
- assist institutions to respond flexibly to their research environment in accordance with their own strategies; and
- enhance support for areas of research strength.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> DEST, *IGS Guidelines 2003*. p. 4.

Like the RTS, however, the flexibility and autonomy for institutions that have been built into the IGS program also provide those institutions with incentives to undertake research activities in areas that are relatively well-funded. Because of the way in which the iterative funding formulae work, institutions that try to resist such pressures are effectively compelled to submit to them once their counterparts begin to play the system, or risk escalating their exclusion from funding pools.

Current research funding arrangements also encourage universities to nominate areas of research strength. These arrangements lead to an increase in the concentration of HDR places within these areas. The factors discussed above encourage universities to nominate areas of research strength that maximise research funding and margins. Universities have traditionally allocated, and in principle should allocate, HDR places on the basis of academic merit. However, the RTS provides an incentive for universities to increase the concentration of HDR students in areas of research strength that exploit bias within the funding formulae.

Similarly, the allocation by university administrations of scholarships to faculties and departments is influenced by research performance, and a desire to concentrate student places in areas of research strength. More scholarships are awarded to applicants of academic merit who wish to study in an area of research strength, preferably in a department or research centre which performs well in terms of completions, research income and publications. This is entirely appropriate in theory, but when areas of research strength are selected for their capacity to extract the greatest margin from structurally biased funding rules, this system can produce adverse consequences such as the flow of students and research funds away from more economical fields of research of equal academic merit.

These factors contribute significantly to problems associated with universities' internal research distributions. Although the Commonwealth Department repeatedly warns that the RTS/IGS formulae are not intended to be used internally, it is difficult to see how, practically, institutions could avoid applying them, or parts of them, in developing their internal research profiles. Moreover, should a university resist the funding incentives in order to maintain or develop an academically preferred research mix, the relative weighting of the system – particularly with respect to the separations pool that provides new HDR money within the RTS – means that the relative disadvantage of the university will increase over time, unless every other institution also resists the temptation to succumb to the funding incentives.

The ability to adjust the allocation of research places on the basis of completions creates a mechanism for decline in disciplines that are disadvantaged by other aspects of the funding formulae. Departments which lose HDR allocations owing to their modest return in revenue terms will see their completions diminish over time. Fewer students will then achieve fewer completions, and fewer places will be allocated in future. Without compensation for this depletion, research student places will become concentrated in certain university departments – overwhelmingly in those with lucrative RTS payouts – at the expense of others.

The internal application of national formulae for resource-allocation entrenches this downward spiral. Less lucrative research or research education activity is less well resourced, resulting in lower outcomes, leading to funding for fewer inputs, and so on. When both the

starting position and the steepness of the descent are influenced by factors unrelated to research performance – factors to do with belonging to a discipline that is structurally disadvantaged, in part because it does not place as much of a load on the taxpayer – the university and Australian research enterprise is diminished. Given the importance of the humanities for many aspects of our national interest, this is not only a matter of academic fairness but also one of strategic significance for the nation.

Crucially – and this is our key point – the funding regime for the humanities is statistically regressive; no matter how much the sector improves its performance, the current funding structure makes it impossible for the humanities to significantly improve its allocation of research funding relative to other (better funded) areas of the university. The structural disadvantages for the humanities in the current system are so dramatic that modelling at the University of Queensland has shown that even if a humanities faculty was able to capture and concentrate all of the humanities NGC funding in Australia, it would still be unable to get ahead.

Moreover, the operation of the funding formulae is such that humanities disciplines are unable to improve their research allocations even if they improve their research performance. At best, the humanities could hold their own, and then only if other disciplines or departments in the university research system did not improve. The humanities are structurally unable to improve at a rate faster than those disciplines that enjoy advantages such as funding ratios of 2.35:1 for students, access to competitive funding in nominated research priority areas, and rewards for the conduct of high-cost research. The inevitable result in a limited-funding competitive system is a continuous decline in funding for research and research training in the humanities.

This is a funding regime which is so skewed against the particular measures of quality and performance in the humanities that it cannot reward excellent performance in any meaningful way. Over the long term, it will not provide the conditions within which the humanities can survive, let alone prosper. The current structure leans too far towards privileging income and commercialisation at the expense of more substantive indicators of research excellence. The aim might be the production of a competitive industry, but the current regime will not provide a comprehensive research base upon which such an industry might be founded.

#### **THE ADEQUACY OF CURRENT RESEARCH TRAINING SCHEMES TO SUPPORT AUSTRALIA'S ANTICIPATED FUTURE REQUIREMENTS FOR TERTIARY-QUALIFIED PROFESSIONALS IN A WIDE RANGE OF DISCIPLINES**

The foregoing should have alerted the Committee to the Academy's view that Australia's ability to support our anticipated future requirements for tertiary humanities-qualified professionals is poor and declining. Our system may be good at turning out higher-degree qualified scientists, but it is failing to support our current and anticipated needs in the humanities.

Most obviously, the research workforce in the humanities is endangered through declining staff and student numbers in universities. The decline in overall staff numbers in the

humanities also has implications for undergraduate education in that fewer courses can be offered and those that remain will lack the appropriate research base.

The grave decline in language education in Australian universities is a case in point. The Academy has serious concern with foreign language acquisition skills at the HDR level and that urgent attention is required to develop our national language capacity. Professor John Clark FAHA, a Fellow of our Academy, has comprehensively canvassed the issues concerning the current structure and funding of foreign language acquisition for humanities researchers in his submission to this Inquiry.

The implications of a declining humanities research workforce are serious outside the university sector as well. Here we pause to contest the assertions of our colleagues in the Academy of Technological Sciences and Engineering in their submission to the Committee's inquiry, regarding the impact on the wider economy of a failure to produce HDR graduates in the humanities (relative to the supposedly more essential engineering and related disciplines). While we certainly agree that the impact on the technical professions of a poorly functioning HDR system is a serious concern, we argue that the implications for the humanities are no less important socially and economically. The uses of a higher degree in the humanities are indeed much broader than their reapplication within the cloistered halls, and add significant value to the economy at large. According to Graduate Careers Australia, fully two-thirds of humanities HDR graduates proceed to destinations other than universities.<sup>4</sup> This demonstrates clearly that many employers well beyond the higher education sector would be adversely affected were the quality and number of humanities HDR graduates to suffer.

Humanities-educated professionals with HDR qualifications are increasingly valued in industry, government, the professions and management for the particular skills that are acquired through advanced project-based learning in history, criticism, philosophy and other humanities disciplines. The importance of these attributes is being recognised in private and public arena that require expertise in complex problem-solving, behaviour modification and cultural analysis. The role of humanities higher graduates in the innovation agenda is well-documented both here and abroad. Yet our capacity to provide these graduates, just when key sectors are becoming aware of their value, is at serious risk.

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<sup>4</sup> See Graduate Careers Australia, *Postgraduate Destinations 2006*: quoted in *Group of Eight Backgrounder* 'Researcher Supply and Demand,' No. 3 2007, p.3. Found at <http://www.go8.edu.au/policy/current.htm>

## **2. RESEARCH WORKFORCE ISSUES**

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As the foregoing outlines, Australian universities face critical challenges in training high quality research graduates within the humanities. Equally challenging are the issues concerning the recruitment and retention of high quality research staff within the humanities. There are serious problems concerning job opportunity, financial reward, work/life balance, job satisfaction and community perceptions of the occupation that are having adverse impacts on the humanities research workforce capacity.

### **ADEQUACY OF TRAINING AND SUPPORT (INCLUDING INCOME SUPPORT) AVAILABLE FOR RESEARCH GRADUATES IN AUSTRALIA**

It follows from the argument made in the preceding section that Australia is not producing the humanities researchers it needs to support anticipated future requirements for tertiary-qualified professionals. As we stated at the beginning of the previous chapter, and explained in greater detail in our submission to the Review of the National Innovation System, the problems and issues which the nation, organisations and individuals address in the twenty-first century are inherently complex, and rarely, if ever, admit of solutions based on individual disciplines. Holistic approaches are needed, and that means incorporating humanities disciplines into the consideration of many problems that have previously been considered to be technical. As we emphasise below, humanities graduates are often in demand in areas outside research. The problems we need to address will frequently require people trained in humanities research, and we will not have enough of them for the reasons set out in this chapter.

### **FACTORS FOR GRADUATES THAT DETERMINE PURSUIT OF A CAREER IN RESEARCH**

The Academy applauds the Government's recent announcement of a doubling of the number of APA scholarships to encourage greater participation in the research enterprise. The degree of autonomy allowed in research, the flexibility of working hours and a passion for a particular field of research rate among the incentives for those considering a career in research. Nevertheless, there clearly remain more barriers than incentives for the best graduates from the humanities to entertain research as a career. These include:

- the decline of the scholarship stipend relative to cost of living, to the point where it is now below the poverty line;<sup>5</sup>
- uncertain prospects of continuing a research career after postgraduate qualifications;
- instability and uncertainty of fixed-term contracts and difficulty in securing permanent positions; and
- the high regard in which humanities graduates are held by outside employers and prospects of higher remuneration and job stability offered in fields other than research.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.capa.edu.au/media-releases/2008/apas-break-poverty-line>

The financial incentives of other public sector employment often outweigh that offered by the prospect of three and a half years (maximum) on an APA stipend of \$20,007 per annum (albeit, tax free). As a point of comparison, the graduate entry program in the Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research currently provides a salary of \$46,974 p.a. (or roughly \$37,000 net of tax) with advancement to approximately \$52,000 p.a. on completion of the ten-month program, and with the immediate opportunity to apply for promotion beyond that level. A first year out (four year trained) teacher on current NSW pay scales earns \$50,522 p.a.

At a deeper level, and particularly relevant to the humanities sector, is the issue of the esteem of the research profession. The marginalisation of the sector in federal funding schemes has had a palpable impact on the spirit of the sector; this has undoubtedly played a role in deterring our best and brightest graduates from pursuing a research career. Graduate programs in the humanities produce high-level critical thinkers and problem solvers. If Australia is to build a competitive and innovative research enterprise it is vital that these skills be harnessed by first attracting, and then retaining, our most able researchers.

Furthermore, humanities HDR graduates are well aware of the relative funding that sees resources allocated to other disciplines, often in excess of the 2.35:1 ratio which applies to completions. The prospect of labouring in a relatively impoverished research environment with outdated and inadequate infrastructure is understandably less appealing to the humanities graduate than the outlook perceived by her colleagues in the sciences.

#### **OPPORTUNITIES FOR CAREER ADVANCEMENT FOR RESEARCH GRADUATES AND STAFF**

The radical increase in reliance upon competitive grant funding models has seen an increase of casual and fixed term research staff in Australian universities with repercussions for job stability and continuity. When considered alongside the several mechanisms that allocate funding between disciplines in a skewed way, the opportunities for career advancement in certain disciplines, including the humanities sector, remain uncertain, erratic and unstable. The debilitating effect of the funding exclusions extend also to a lack of infrastructure support and development, and to increasing administrative burdens on research staff which, illogically, often fall to our most experienced and able researchers.

The shift to a competitive grant funding model has also meant that the ability to undertake research is largely determined by eligibility to apply for funding under various schemes. Over the past decade, the Academy has lobbied strongly against a variety of definitive or tacit exclusions of eligibility which have led to the systematic marginalisation of researchers from the humanities, and constrained their ability to contribute to the nation's research and innovation capability. Yet numerous publicly funded programs still exist that support career development opportunities in the sciences while excluding humanities scholars from eligibility, regardless of the quality of the researcher, or the viability and relevance of the project.

There are two ways to deal with this. One is to remove arbitrary disciplinary barriers and other structural impediments that systematically disadvantage researchers based on



disciplinary location. It is our view that this is the crucial reform over the long term. The other means is to institute targeted programs to assist humanities researchers, which would be a welcome short-term measure to ameliorate the more immediate effects of structural exclusion, and that could play a part over the long-term as well. A career mentorship scheme modelled on the very successful program currently operated by the ARC-funded Cultural Research Network could merit Commonwealth funding. Similarly, a competitive program offering humanities early career researchers (ECRs) six-week fellowships at another Australian university would be an excellent career development initiative.

The most urgent problem (but perhaps the most amenable to action) is that the National Research Priorities (NRPs) constitute a seriously flawed framework for the Government's research funding program. The NRPs are not a bad idea as such, but they warrant urgent attention. In our submission to the Review of the National Innovation System, we argue that the current NRPs are incomplete, overly technical and narrowly defined. Importantly, we recommend that the four thematic areas be rewritten to incorporate the social and cultural issues which lie at the heart of these areas of public policy. Crucially, we propose that a fifth rubric be included in the NRP structure, formally recognising and validating the well-established importance to the nation of cultural and social research.

The incomplete NRPs have influenced other avenues of funding available for research. The reliance of the NCRIS Roadmap on the NRP framework, for instance, has seen legitimate infrastructure needs of the humanities ignored, stifling the sector's ability to engage with new technologies and research methodologies and constraining research productivity, capability and innovation.

The Academy welcomes the Government's recent announcement of the new Future Fellowships scheme for mid-career researchers. It addresses a significant discontinuity in the career progression of talented researchers. However, the Academy notes with concern that the proposed structure of the new Future Fellowships scheme refers again to the NRPs. While our views on this as it affects the Future Fellowships will be forwarded shortly to the Australian Research Council, the Academy's concern is noted here as an indication of the far-reaching consequences of the continuing marginalisation of the sector from the current NRP framework.

The establishment of the Future Fellowships program, particularly in light of the doubling of the number of APAs, also highlights the stark gap in the career continuum at the level of early career researcher. In this crucial establishing period, researchers are often under enormous pressure to publish while handling significant undergraduate teaching loads and, increasingly, HDR supervision. In the humanities, the problems are often compounded by the absence of an established team of peers and mentors to which the embedded researcher can turn for help and advice.

Opportunities for postdoctoral fellowships in the sector have fallen as a result of the NRP framework, meaning excellent researchers from successive cohorts of graduates in the humanities have been lost to the national research enterprise. The Academy considers that there is an urgent need to address the number of postdoctoral opportunities available in the humanities if we are to attract and retain our best researchers.

The effect of the current NRPs on career opportunities in our sector is further evident at the level of elite researchers. Although the Academy lauds the ideals embodied in the Federation Fellowships, the selection criteria for the Fellowships again includes an assessment of the project's potential contribution to the 'Government's National Research Priority areas and Priority Goals'.<sup>6</sup> Despite the occasional success of our scholars since the program's inception, the disciplinary gaps in the eight rounds since 2001 speak volumes. The alienation of the humanities was again reinforced this year when the award list failed to include a single name from our disciplines. The latest outcome may simply reflect the quality of the applications in that round, and if so we respect that decision, but the focus on NRPs in the guidelines continues to undergird the Federation Fellowships program with a selection criterion that discriminates against the humanities. Australia is endowed with excellent, internationally renowned researchers in the humanities who are exceptionally well-prepared to take a 'leadership role in building Australia's internationally competitive research capacity.'<sup>7</sup> The Academy believes strongly that they should be able to compete solely on their merits, in the absence of structural impediments.

Beyond disciplinary effects, the Academy also sees value in greater Commonwealth interest in the small but growing field of ancillary coursework qualifications that many universities are offering their HDR students and ECR staff. Study towards qualifications at a Graduate Certificate or Graduate Diploma level – that usually articulate into Masters by coursework programs – is being offered in educational studies, entrepreneurship, university leadership, business management and other adjunct fields. Professional skilling in these and other areas can assist HDR students and graduates immensely in their career development. These initiatives have great potential for rendering the HDR experience more job-relevant, and the graduates more industry-ready. Many universities waive fees for these courses to encourage currently enrolled HDR students and ECR staff to undertake them. While the institutions obviously see the advantages in some staff and students taking these courses, these cross-funding arrangements could not support the serious expansion of these rich but (currently) modestly subscribed programs. Most HDR students and recent graduates would benefit from the opportunity to undertake such courses, and they would take that benefit with them into industry or into their research careers. These courses ought not to be compulsory: clearly, any coursework load would need to be subordinated to research project responsibilities; also, these opportunities will not be timely or suitable for every HDR student. But Commonwealth support would greatly improve the access of HDR students and recent graduates to these programs, which would add further value to the doctoral and masters-level experience.

#### **FACTORS DETERMINING PURSUIT OF RESEARCH OPPORTUNITIES OVERSEAS**

Higher remuneration, well-funded research centres, availability of permanent contracts and an ability to interact more closely in international collaborations all contribute to pursuit of research positions overseas. This is particularly true for humanities researchers who face fewer employment opportunities and poorly resourced research environments at home due to shrinking humanities faculties and systematic exclusion from research opportunities.

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<sup>6</sup> [http://www.arc.gov.au/ncgp/fedfellows/fedfellows\\_overview.htm](http://www.arc.gov.au/ncgp/fedfellows/fedfellows_overview.htm)

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*

For those researchers who choose to remain in Australia, access to international research opportunities and collaborations are vital if Australia's researchers are to remain competitive and contribute to the nation's innovation agenda. Researchers in the humanities, however, face systemic bias in terms of access to funding to facilitate these collaborations. This is particularly evident in the exclusion of the sector from research support programs such as international early- and mid-career exchanges available to colleagues in the Science, Engineering and Technology (SET) disciplines, such as those provided via the International Science Linkages (ISL) program. Under this scheme, SET researchers gain vital access to international research facilities and infrastructure and have opportunities to network with international colleagues and establish collaborations. Importantly, there is also provision in the Linkage program for conference funding to bring leading edge international research in science and technology to our shores.

Few assistance schemes exist in the humanities for similar undertakings and yet the rationale for the Linkage program – 'Australia's economic, social and environmental wellbeing'<sup>8</sup> - would be equally well served by an internationally engaged and connected research sector, regardless of disciplinary grouping. We are unable to imagine an *a priori* argument that explains why for such opportunities would benefit the science researcher more than the humanities researcher; or why Australia's interests are better served by categorically excluding humanities researchers, rather than allowing them to compete for such funding on their merits.

The Academy has attempted to address this lack of opportunity for our sector by funding Humanities Travelling Fellowships (HTF). As the Fellowships are financed from internal funds, the sums are paltry in comparison and we can never provide the number or the value required to establish parity with the ISL program. Our recipients have overwhelmingly praised the opportunities provided by the Academy's Fellowships in terms of exposure to international colleagues, awareness of international research developments, opportunities for international collaboration and, most vitally, as one recipient stated 'increased confidence as an early-career researcher'. Our scheme remains one of the few available to enable humanities researchers (outside limited departmental funding) to engage internationally and to showcase our sector's research on the world stage.

However, the HTF scheme is minutely funded (a total of \$40,000 is allocated each year), and the reform of publicly funded program remains the best hope for opening up new opportunities for humanities scholars. The removal of arbitrary disciplinary barriers to development schemes such as the ISL program, to allow humanities researchers to compete on their merits, would offer a significant boost to the capacity of humanities researchers to develop international links, to participate in global collaborations and to pursue research opportunities abroad.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://sciencegrants.dest.gov.au/isl/Pages/Home.aspx>

#### **AUSTRALIA'S ABILITY TO COMPETE INTERNATIONALLY FOR HIGH QUALITY RESEARCHERS**

The unfavourable state of the humanities research environment as outlined above also hinders the ability to attract international research luminaries to Australia. The academic salary levels and infrastructure support available in the US, for instance, clearly offer much brighter incentives for exceptional researchers from around the world. When combined with Australia's geographical distance, the famous lifestyle dividend once promoted as a key attraction for international researchers holds less sway. Moreover, with increased academic movement around the globe, and with international competitors predicting significant workforce shortages in the decade ahead, there will be greater global competition for the talented researchers. These candidates will look not only to remuneration levels, but also to well-funded institutions which can support and enhance their own research capacity and standing.

In the light of increasing global competition, the Academy considers that Australia must urgently attend to the factors outlined in this submission which constrain our sector's capacity to contribute to the national research enterprise, and which impede the recruitment and retention of our own excellent researchers. This also extends to examining the barriers facing international postgraduate students who may be enticed to establish their roots here if a vibrant and rigorous research enterprise awaited them.

#### **WHETHER AUSTRALIA'S ACADEMIC WORKFORCE IS AGEING, AND THE IMPACT THIS MAY HAVE ON AUSTRALIA'S RESEARCH CAPACITY.**

Research on the academic workforce by Professor Graeme Hugo suggests that Australia will soon face a critical shortage of academics across most disciplines due to staff retirements over the next decade.<sup>9</sup> Extensive feedback on this emerging phenomenon from our Fellows and many other concerned humanities scholars across Australia leads the Academy to concur with his estimation that, of the many challenges facing Australian universities, 'that presented by academic staffing must rank as one of the greatest'.<sup>10</sup> Combined with the estimated increase in the numbers of students entering undergraduate education over the same period, there is clearly a risk that there will be insufficient numbers in the academic workforce to sustain a high quality university sector into the future. The ability to identify, to nurture and to mentor future research leaders who will populate a rigorous and innovative national research enterprise has particular resonance for the humanities and allied fields; taken together, the humanities, arts and social sciences account for about two-thirds of the student load in the higher education system.

Our anecdotal evidence on staffing in the humanities research sector confirms Professor Hugo's projection of significant numbers of retirements over the next 5-10 years. Firmer estimates of these numbers by discipline will be available following the completion of the Academy's comprehensive ARC-funded study of the humanities workforce in Australia, that

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<sup>9</sup> Graeme Hugo, 'The Demography of Australia's Academic Workforce: Patterns, Problems and Policy Implications', Presentation to the Monash Seminars on Higher Education, Monash University, September 2004, p.22.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*

has just received funding approval. The study will map the current profile of the humanities research and teaching workforce in Australia and will provide recommendations to ensure a viable and vibrant sector into the future.

Even without the data from that project, though, it is clear to us that the issue of our ageing academic workforce must be addressed urgently if we are to ensure renewal of research capacity and enhance Australia's competitiveness in terms of research capability and innovation.