

DASSH Response to the Australian Government's *Driving Innovation, Fairness and Excellence in Australian Higher Education*

The Australasian Council of Deans of Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities (DASSH) welcomes this opportunity to respond to the potential reforms to higher education outlined in this consultation paper and appreciates the Government's commitment to working closely with all stakeholders.

The Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities (ASSH) disciplines account for 65% of all Australian higher education enrolments, and have major roles to play in driving innovation, fairness and excellence. DASSH's response to this consultation paper is informed by our recognition that sustaining a high quality education in our disciplines is important for an economy in transition and for enabling our nation to successfully navigate an uncertain and exciting future. Graduate capabilities in arts, social sciences and humanities are among the hardest to automate and are critical to creative and complex problem solving – the twenty-first century skills that nations need for an inclusive and sustainable future. We are concerned that, to date, there has been little recognition in the national debate about innovation and universities' engagement with end-users of the roles that the arts, social sciences and humanities can and should play.

Opportunity and choice

The best options for students

Matters for finalisation regarding the expansion of the demand-driven system beyond bachelor courses at public universities

Taking into account the private and public benefits of higher education, budget pressures and the significant issues which have arisen in relation to VET FEE-HELP, the continuing under-representation of people from disadvantaged groups, and evidence that sub-bachelor courses can be a better introduction to university study for some students, DASSH supports expansion of the demand-driven system to include sub-bachelor load at public universities. DASSH recommends the monitoring of the outcomes of this change, including the subsequent education and employment trajectories of these students.

Postgraduate places to support innovation

Reforms to the allocation of and support for subsidised postgraduate places

DASSH agrees that the current model for subsidised postgraduate places is problematic and creates perverse outcomes, and therefore supports reform in this domain. However, we caution against reforms that adopt narrow definitions of 'economic, societal and academic need' and that underestimate the role of ASSH (and other) disciplines in enabling innovation and creating community benefit.

Fairness and equity

Improving support for disadvantaged students (HEPP focused)

DASSH welcomes the Government's continuing commitment to improving support for disadvantaged students, including aspiration raising and reducing barriers for regional and remote students.

Excellence and quality

Flexibility to innovate

Flagship courses

While the proposal for flagship courses with uncapped fees offers the benefit of increased resources to support those courses, DASSH questions whether it would realise sufficient benefits to make up for unintended and undesirable consequences. For example, the combination of universities accepting any additional funds and the modest nature of the flagship course approach may encourage a two-tiered system in which the focus on excellence and innovative approaches is applied so narrowly that it results in a decrease in the quality of non-flagship courses and undermines Australia's innovation agenda. Unless there is a very 'light touch' assessment, the proposal also risks creating a further regulatory burden which is likely to increase over time; for example, processes to determine whether flagship programs continue to meet any required criteria and what happens if they do not meet those criteria.

More information for students

Proposed enhancements to the QILT surveys and website

As we stated in response to the Higher Education Standards Panel's Consultation on the *Transparency of Higher Education Admissions Processes*, DASSH endorses a student-centred approach to transparency that minimises increases in compliance costs and streamlines access to information for prospective students. Within that framework, inclusion of a longitudinal survey of graduate outcomes extending to five years beyond graduation would be of particular interest to the ASSH disciplines and potentially offers more meaningful information than the Graduate Destination Survey with its focus on outcomes four months after graduation.

Affordability

A fair share from taxpayers and graduates

Subsidy and student contribution rates

DASSH acknowledges the budget challenges confronting this and future Commonwealth governments, but, given the public as well as the private benefits of higher education, the Government's declared commitment to an innovation agenda, and the current balance of cost-sharing between taxpayers and graduates (who are or become taxpayers), DASSH views with alarm the proposal to reduce the Government's contribution to higher education.

In the context of budget challenges and a positive future for Australia and Australians, we note the evidence that higher educational attainment is directly related to better health outcomes, greater security, increased employment, social engagement and economic growth, and consequently reduces demand on government funding to support health, policing and security, unemployment benefits and social welfare provision.¹

¹ OECD (2013), *Education at a Glance 2013: OECD Indicators*, OECD Publishing, http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/education-at-a-glance-2013_eag-2013-en

More specifically in relation to the ASSH disciplines, relativities between disciplines of funding clusters and cross-subsidisation, we note the current complex and variable systems of cross-subsidisation within our universities. Those systems include ASSH disciplines cross-subsidising STEM areas and, within ASSH Faculties, the Social Sciences subsidising low revenue Humanities, low enrolment Languages and high cost Creative Arts disciplines. DASSH is concerned that one consequence of the proposed cuts to CGS funding will be pressure on our disciplines to provide even greater support for STEM disciplines, with attendant negative effects on strategically important disciplines with low student demand (including strategically important languages) and ASSH research capability.

Finally, the apparently narrow definitions surrounding which disciplines are deemed relevant to the national innovation agenda and Australia's future remain of concern.

An affordable loans scheme

Enhancing the long term sustainability, viability and affordability of HELP student loans

DASSH agrees that maintaining an affordable student loan scheme is a key element of our Higher Education system, including its role in contributing to equitable access to higher education. Recovering a higher proportion of HELP debt and identifying and ceasing elements of the scheme which have not produced desired outcomes (for example, the repayment reductions for professionals in certain occupations) are appropriate.

Changes to the loans scheme need to recognise and mitigate risks of unintended consequences and the differential impact of changes on different cohorts of graduates. For example, ASSH graduates initially have lower salaries than some other graduates and are more likely to be employed part-time.² Further because more ASSH students are women (63% compared with 55% of all students³), they are more likely to have career interruptions in the period when they have lower incomes, leading to a higher average debt burden for ASSH students than for their STEM peers.

Professor Susan Dodds

President

Australasian Council of Deans of Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities (DASSH)

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About DASSH

The Australasian Council of Deans of Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities (DASSH) is the authoritative agency on research, teaching and learning for the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities (ASSH) in Australian and New Zealand universities.

DASSH supports those within these institutions who have responsibility for the governance and management of research and teaching and learning in their universities. DASSH also supports those who aspire to these positions through a Network of Associate Deans (Learning and Teaching) and a Network of Associate Deans (Research).

² Graduate Careers Australia (2015). *Grad Stats: Employment and salary outcomes of recent higher education graduates*. December 2015, pp. 6, 8-9.

³ 2014 Department of Education uCube data.