Parliamentary Inquiry into Nationhood, National Identity and Democracy

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 Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences (HASS) 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. DASSH also supports those who aspire to these positions through a Network of Associate Deans (International), a Network of Associate Deans (Learning and Teaching) and a Network of Associate Deans (Research).

Introduction

We welcome the opportunity to respond to this Parliamentary Inquiry. In responding to this discussion paper, DASSH will focus on the role of HASS education in promoting, strengthening and securing the ongoing stability of democracy and democratic values in the Australian nation. Enrolments in HASS areas (comprising education, management, society and culture and creative arts) in Australia represented c. 59% of all enrolments in higher education at the end of 2016 (Dept of Education and Training, 2018). As an organisation, DASSH is currently seeking to reposition the HASS areas in relation to the strong focus on supporting and strengthening STEM education to remind Australians that many of the pressing problems of the present and future are human – including the issues of nationhood and national identity.

Nationhood and the Nation State

How could a sense of shared civic community be encouraged for all Australians?

The DASSH position is that the Australian higher education system maintains a vital role in fostering a sense of the shared civic community for all Australians inclusive of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, migrants, refugees, and Australian-born citizens. We continue to advocate for purposeful HASS education through schools, universities and the media to encourage community awareness of the diversity of the Australian experience and an appreciation of the differing experiences of sub-sections of Australian society.

The social benefits of HASS education are well documented in a variety of recent reports. For instance, the Deloitte Report, *The Value of the Humanities* (2018, see Part Three) describes the contributions of Humanities-educated individuals to the community. Specific points outline these contributions:

> 3.1 A tertiary education establishes greater levels of trust, political engagement and tolerance
> 3.2 The capabilities taught in the Humanities foster greater civic engagement
> 3.3 Humanities graduates demonstrate high levels of political engagement and volunteering.

These findings echo those of other reports on the value of the humanities and social science disciplines for our society. Research suggests that they "help create tolerance and understanding between citizens, thereby leading to social cohesion. They aid decision-making, especially on the complex ethical issues that confront society as a whole. In addition, they can benefit society by challenging established positions" (Holm, Jarrick and Scott, 2015, p.12). As noted in an opinion piece by Peter Cai of the independent Lowy Institute, "Arts degrees are not only essential to give us the broader *education foundation we need to function as informed citizens*, they are also indispensable to our modern economy" (Cai, 2014).

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There are many examples of HASS education relevant to the formulation of shared values and civic community. These include the many courses taught by universities exploring nationhood, Australian national identity over time, histories of nationalism and democracy, and sociological understandings of political behavior. Political scientists present evidence, argument and debate about Australian federal politics. A recent survey of history courses taught in Australian universities revealed that histories of Australian democracy and nationhood are among the many courses offered as part of humanities and social science degrees (see Sendziuk and Crotty, 2019). Students increasingly study media, journalism and communications degrees to aid them in interpreting the volume of information and news being produced and disseminated via new media outlets, including social media and more traditional media.

University degrees are also underpinned by a series of expectations around graduate outcomes such as specific graduate attributes. In the humanities and social science disciplines, these include such attributes as the ability to apply critical and analytical skills and methods to the identification and resolution of problems within complex changing social contexts; the ability to act as informed and critically discriminating participants within the community of scholars, as citizens and in the workforce; and the ability to communicate effectively. Depending on the degree and higher education provider, students are expected to develop cultural competencies, global awareness as citizens, and to demonstrate deep knowledge acquisition by the completion of a three-year bachelor-degree qualification.

In addition, a range of excellent University Research Centres - funded by both university and external sources of income, with some joint ventures with national cultural institutions - maintain active research programs about governance, democracy, national political debate, policy and its regulation (see Appendix). Through this Parliamentary Inquiry, we see interest in the idea of a 'shared civic community', a signal of the willingness to invest in such research. Therefore, we posit that these Centres and their respected academic leaders (with international reputations for their research) should be pivotal to this Inquiry's outcomes and its recommendations. DASSH would welcome further research investment to support the generation of new ideas and shared knowledge to provide an evidence base for policies designed to strengthen both Australia's democratic processes and the confidence of the Australian public in those processes.

A number of these research entities already consider the themes highlighted in this Parliamentary Inquiry, such as social cohesion, civic engagement, the nature of current understandings of democracy and its future, rebuilding trust, and the role of digital technology in the lives of citizens. For example, the Melbourne School of Government (based at the University of Melbourne) conducts extensive research into a range of topics pertinent to this inquiry, including democratic regression, elections and regime change, and the role of journalism in democratic society. The University of Sydney's Democracy Network promotes a broad rethinking of democracy, not only as a form of government but as a way of life committed to greater equality and the accountability of power. Current research projects being undertaken by researchers in the Democracy Network include an investigation of the threats to democracy posed by 'post-truth' phenomena (e.g. 'fake news'), and the ramifications of corporate influence on democratic politics. In 2019, Flinders University opened its Jeff Bleich Centre for the US Alliance in Digital Technology, Security, and Governance, which conducts research into the social impacts of digital technology.

Social Cohesion and Cultural Identity

Are you concerned that economic and cultural anxieties in Australia and elsewhere are increasing? If so, what should be done about this?

We suggest that it is not entirely clear that economic and cultural anxieties about social cohesion and cultural identity *are* increasing in Australia, although there may be stronger cases to made elsewhere in the world, including (but not limited to) the United States, Great Britain and parts of Europe. The only evidence for this seems to be ongoing discussion about these aspects of Australian national life, which has always been the case, and shows that Australian society is healthy and able to reflect in a mature way on its concepts of shared community as well as on social difference, both markers of a robust democracy. If new anxieties do exist, we see merit in a deliberate strategy to increase the

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prominence of evidence-based commentary and informed statements from politicians and community leaders to ensure that perceived problems about social cohesion and difference do not become exaggerated in the public arena. Secondly, the implementation of evidence-based, research-informed policies to address those problems and threats that do exist in our society is necessary to reduce community anxieties and to build faith in politicians, leaders and institutions.

Are you concerned about a decline in civic engagement? If so, what might be done about this?

Our main concern lies with the diminution of the value of our degrees by leaders and media outlets at a time when we should be promoting their educative value in terms of civic engagement. From the perspective of DASSH, critical interventions include:

1. Ensure young people are educated to understand the role of civic engagement, how to identify issues that could be addressed through civic engagement, and the various ways in which civic engagement can be used to promote democratic values; and
2. Ensure that policymakers are fully informed and respectful of well-founded research and data as they formulate responses to issues facing society. As noted by Dr Ken Henry in a recent address to politicians (10 September 2019), the populist tendency to dismiss the advice of experts ultimately leads only to disengagement and disillusionment among the electorate: In Dr Henry's words, "Populism might entertain briefly but it doesn't fix anything. It doesn't fix any of the things that matter to our citizens." By heeding the advice of experts and implementing effective policies based on their research, politicians can begin to rebuild trust in the electorate as the policies enacted result in the desired improvements to society and the economy.

Public Debate

What is the role of traditional and social media in encouraging and conducting constructive public debate?

As a relatively new phenomenon, research into social media and its impacts on public debates is only in its early stages. DASSH would encourage further investment in research to better understand the ways in which social media and traditional media interact to influence the subject matter and nature of public debates. Again, our discipline researchers provide much expertise on social media behaviour, trends, risks and predictive aspects for populations. The top five Australian universities for research and teaching in media and communication studies (according to the 2019 QS Top Universities rankings) are, in order, Queensland University of Technology, the University of Sydney, the University of Melbourne, RMIT University and the University of New South Wales, but substantial expertise in these subject areas can also be found at other institutions across Australia.

Are you concerned about an apparent increased distrust of experts and their advice?

DASSH membership is concerned by the apparently growing distrust of experts and their advice, both by the public and by governments. Distrust in STEM experts is both prominent and well-documented in relation to issues such as climate change and childhood vaccinations, but distrust of HASS experts is also evident in public discourse. When the recommendations of the Uluru Statement from the Heart were dismissed, it was against the advice of constitutional and legal experts, including senior jurists Murray Gleeson CJ and Robert French CJ. Debates, both public and in parliaments, around the rights and freedoms of Australians (notably freedom of speech and freedom of religion) consistently disregard the advice of expert social scientists and lawyers. Failure to seek HASS expert advice has also been seen in State government decisions, for example in the Victorian Labor government decision to ban mobile phones in classrooms. Although the decision received some support from parents and schools, experts have questioned the practicality of the measure and its likelihood of achieving its intended outcomes (see, for example, Selwyn, 2019).

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How is satisfaction with democracy influenced by the 24-hour media cycle and the high volume of news and analysis?

The 24-hour media cycle is not a threat in itself; indeed a prominent, accessible and independent media is critical in successful democracies, but it does require audiences to have the skills necessary to assess the quality and veracity of reporting, and to understand the limitations of different types of media.

References

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Appendix

Though virtually all Australian Universities hold some expertise in the areas of democracy, nationhood and national identity, some institutions house research centres, groups or networks that specialise in such the study of these themes.

Below is a list of selected University Research Centres with particular expertise in relation to this Inquiry.
University of Canberra:
- Centre for Deliberative Democracy and Global Governance
- Democracy 2025
Flinders University:
- Jeff Bleich Centre for the US Alliance in Digital Technology, Security, and Governance
University of Melbourne:
- Melbourne School of Government
University of Sydney:
- Democracy Network

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