

Statement from DASSH on the COVID-19 pandemic

Australia and New Zealand have so far avoided the worst of the COVID19 pandemic, and our governments should be lauded for the measures they have taken to limit the spread of the virus and support those who have faced loss of income. As we turn cautiously to think about recovery, it will be important to think about the national benefit provided by universities, and in particular, the vital contributions of the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences (HASS) - to ensure strong support for our continued success and impact.

The Australasian Council of Deans of Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities (DASSH) represents leaders in these sectors from over 40 institutions in the region. Our members have been at the frontline as their faculties and schools have faced falling international student enrolments and transitioned hundreds of courses and subjects online in just a few weeks. They are also overseeing measures to ensure our researchers are able to continue their work, which remains as vital to our society as it was prior to the outbreak.

Throughout this time, HASS scholars in our member institutions have been contributing their expertise to public policy design and debates across areas ranging from public health to crisis communication, the histories of epidemics and pandemics, to psychological well-being. Our artists are creating works that respond to the present and unfolding moment of crisis, sustaining many physically isolated audiences. In the months and years to come, our scholars will be recording, interpreting and analysing what effects the pandemic has had on us as societies and individuals, teaching us the lessons of this event, and helping to prepare us for the future.

Now more than ever, it is imperative that our sectors are provided with the support they need to serve our communities. The pandemic has drastically reduced the ability of our universities to obtain funds through traditional means, but our work is increasingly important. Not only is our expertise necessary to ensure our nations emerge from this crisis in the best possible positions, but our knowledge and skills will be critical to the recovery measures required to revive our societies and economies.

Prior to the current crisis, the Australian government acknowledged the importance of furthering our understanding of our own society, history and culture through the creation of a \$12M Special Research Initiative; a measure that has been whole-heartedly welcomed by our members.¹ The projects that are ultimately funded will make great contributions to our nation, but with the appropriate support, we have capacity to offer even more. As we look to the future, our members need further research initiatives to boost and support the work necessary to shape and understand our post-pandemic world.

Education and training for those whose careers have been interrupted should be a priority for governments, and in turn, so should the ongoing viability of comprehensive, world-class university sectors. We are unlikely to see a rapid revival of international student enrolments, worth \$37B to the Australian economy² and \$5B to the New Zealand economy,³ so governments will need to review their teaching and research funding models to enable universities to function at a suitably high standard without international student fees. The Australian

¹ Australian Research Council (2020) *Special Research Initiative for Australian Society, History and Culture*. Accessed 29 April 2020. <https://www.arc.gov.au/grants/linkage-program/special-research-initiatives/special-research-initiative-australian-society-history-and-culture>

² Australian Bureau of Statistics (2020) *International Trade: Supplementary Information, Financial Year, 2018-19*. Accessed 29 Apr 2020. <https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/PrimaryMainFeatures/5368.0.55.003?OpenDocument>

³ Hipkins, C. (2018) *International education contributes \$5.1 billion to New Zealand economy*. Accessed 12 May 2020. <https://www.beehive.govt.nz/release/international-education-contributes-51-billion-new-zealand-economy>

Government's decisions to actively exclude universities from Australia's JobKeeper program highlight its ongoing reluctance to provide financial support to universities, despite the sector being worth an estimated \$41B and 259,100 full time jobs to the nation's economy.⁴ This attitude must change.

Meanwhile, the Arts and Recreation sector has suffered more than any other sector in Australia so far, with less than half (47%) of businesses still operating at the end of March 2020.⁵ Arts Minister Paul Fletcher foreshadowed that Australia may face 'the most devastating cultural recession in generations.'⁶ It is therefore disappointing to see piecemeal and comparatively little support to the arts sector, especially to those independent artists and creatives who do not qualify for JobKeeper payments. Given that cultural and creative activity alone contributed more than \$110B to the Australian economy (6.4% of GDP) in 2016-17 and has grown by over 30% since 2008-09,⁷ this is not a sector we can afford to sacrifice. As important as the financial contributions are, they do not include the less tangible but arguably more important contributions that the arts make to the health and wellbeing of our societies. Data from New Zealand highlights the enthusiasm we share for the arts, with around 80% of New Zealanders engaging with arts and culture initiatives each year, and more than half actively participating in arts and culture practices.⁸

On behalf of our members, their faculties, their staff, students, alumni and the communities they service in Australia and New Zealand, we call on our governments to acknowledge publicly the value of the university and HASS sectors, and to implement measures to protect these sectors for future generations.

⁴ Universities Australia (2020) *Universities contribution to the Australian economy*. Accessed 29 Apr 2020.

<https://www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/200325-Deloitte-one-pager-FINAL.pdf>

⁵ Australian Bureau of Statistics (2020) *Business Indicators, Business Impacts of COVID-19, Week Commencing 30 March 2020*. Accessed 29 Apr 2020.

<https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Latestproducts/5676.0.55.003Main%20Features2Week%20Commencing%2030%20March%202020?opendocument&tabname=Summary&prodno=5676.0.55.003&issue=Week%20Commencing%2030%20March%202020&num=&view=>

⁶ McIlroy, T. (2020) "Coronavirus will cause 'devastating' cultural recession." *Australian Financial Review*. Accessed 29 Apr 2020. <https://www.afr.com/politics/federal/coronavirus-will-cause-devastating-cultural-recession-20200317-p54awe>

⁷ Australian Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications (2020) *The economic value of cultural and creative activity*. Accessed 29 Apr 2020. <https://www.communications.gov.au/departmental-news/economic-value-cultural-and-creative-activity>

⁸ Creative New Zealand (2018) *New Zealanders and the Arts: Attitudes, attendance and participation in 2017*. Accessed 12 May 2020.

https://www.creativenz.govt.nz/assets/paperclip/publication_documents/documents/607/original/new_zealanders_and_the_arts_2017_full_report.pdf?1526981303