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The Australasian Council of Deans of Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities

Australasian Council of Deans of Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities

SUBMISSION

Building a system that puts people and skills first

Jobs and Skills Australia

December 2025

About DASSH:

The Australasian Council of Deans of Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities (DASSH) is a network of 350 of Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand's most senior leaders in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities at 45 universities. Our members have direct links to students, executive decision-makers within universities, professional staff, and university leaders within Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand. They play a key role in curriculum design, skill development and knowledge creation which are essential for securing Australia's sovereign capabilities as a healthy democracy.

Executive Summary

DASSH members support Jobs and Skills Australia's leadership in redefining how Australia understands and values skills, including Deputy Commissioner Megan Lilly's recent call to recognise human capabilities often de-valued as "soft skills"[1]. We support recognition and visibility of the full range of skills including emotional intelligence and cultural capabilities.

As we said in our initial 2024 submission on the National Skills Taxonomy (NST)[2], DASSH is broadly supportive of a NST to harmonise education and training pathways for Australia's workforce and recognise skills, knowledge and capabilities. Members were pleased to see recommendations reflected in the most recent Jobs and Skills Australia (JSA) discussion paper, particularly the human-centered approach, support for recognition of prior learning (RPL) and commitment to lifelong learning.

This submission is the product of multiple consultations over 2024 and 2025 with senior leaders from a diverse range of institutions including:

- The Group of Eight

[1] **Stop calling them soft skills,** Deputy Commissioner of Jobs and Skills Australia Megan Lilly, https://www.jobsandskills.gov.au/insights/stop-calling-them-soft-skills-australias-economy-cant-afford-mistake

[2] **Submission on National Skills Taxonomy,** DASSH, https://dassh.edu.au/national-skills-taxonomy/

- Regional University Network
- Australian Technology Network
- Innovative Research Universities

Our members see the NST as an opportunity to identify the full suite of skills needed to ensure Australia's sovereign capabilities and equip students and workers with the appropriate skills for employability. This involves acknowledging the complexity of identifying and valuing the complex skills attained through the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities (HASS).

Key Points

HASS disciplines deliver graduates with complex skills and knowledge. They are central to building Australia's sovereign capabilities and producing "work-ready" graduates. HASS skills are critical for all industries and fundamental for leadership, adaptability, innovation, civic and regional stability.

JSA Commissioner Barney Glover told *The Australian* there is a "gap between skills of graduates and requirements of employers". Employer concerns over the extent of work-integrated learning included lack of "cognitive skills around communication, problem solving and teamwork"[3] which are core HASS capabilities.

Any skills taxonomy must take a broad perspective, acknowledging the importance of HASS capabilities which can be broadly categorised as (see appendix 1):

- Analytical and cognitive skills
- Cultural and interpersonal skills
- Communication and research skills
- Civic and democratic capabilities
- Ethical understanding and values-based judgement

JSA's discussion paper[4] recognises the human dimension of skill but further work is required to ensure cognitive, socio-emotional, and comprehension-based capabilities are fully embedded and not subordinated to technical skills. Our key messages include:

- DASSH supports the skills-first approach if it genuinely values cognitive, socio-emotional, communication and comprehension-based skills as central to building Australia's sovereign capabilities and work-integrated learning.

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[3] **Jobs and Skills Australia demands 'blended' degrees to get graduates fit for work,** The Australian, https://www.theaustralian.com.au/subscribe/news/1/?sourceCode=TAWEB_WRE170_a_BIN&dest=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.theaustralian.com.au%2Fhigher-education%2Fjobs-and-skills-australia-demands-blended-degrees-to-get-graduates-fit-for-work%2Fnews-story%2F8aa039c251d8dc3cf73319bbf93af881&memtype=anonymous&mode=premium&v21=ULTRALOW-Segment-2-SCORE&V21spcbehaviour=append

[4] **Building a system that puts people and skills first**, Jobs and Skills Australia, https://www.jobsandskills.gov.au/consultations/have-your-say-building-system-puts-people-and-skills-first

- A NST must be future-oriented and focus on building long-term skills capabilities. It needs to be regularly revised to remain relevant to a rapidly changing economy and workforce, not just responding to immediate workforce shortages.
- A skills-first approach needs to distinguish between levels of skill competencies and attainment and include a commitment to defining and measuring a range of skills.

Our members welcome the opportunity to be part of the planning and implementation process and the opportunity to take part in any further consultation on these issues.

1. What mechanisms can be put in place to balance the needs and perspectives of different sectors and regions within a national framework?

Tertiary harmonisation

JSA's discussion paper articulates tertiary harmonisation as a key strategic priority aligning the higher education and vocational education (VET) sectors.

Enabling mechanisms can include:

- Address the legal limitations including the Competition and Consumer ACT 2010 which prevents universities and other higher education providers collaborating with one another. This is also a barrier to RPL and credit transfers.
- Ensure that financial barriers do not prevent students moving between VET and HE.
- ASIC and ACCC can work with the Department of Education, ATEC and education providers to set the policy context enabling tertiary harmonisation and RPL. This can help ensure all stakeholders and providers within the education sector are represented.
- JSA can identify stakeholders and consult with them. This needs to be interdisciplinary to ensure no single sector or study area is privileged. Relevant stakeholders include (but are not limited to):
    - Universities
    - VET providers
    - Primary and secondary schools
    - HASS leaders
    - STEM leaders
    - Students
    - Researchers
    - Regional and remote education providers
    - First Nations organisations
    - Cultural and linguistic experts
    - Industry and employer groups
- JSA and ATEC can work with ARC to build criteria for projects which are interdisciplinary, ensuring that no study area is privileged.

RPL will play a particularly important role in achieving post-secondary harmonisation. DASSH supports a wide-ranging approach that recognises the skills developed through formal learning

(in Australia and internationally) as well as skills which may come from lived experience or work and other activities. We highlight the need for additional research and consultation to build a robust taxonomy that will promote inclusivity and life-long learning.

Incorporating urban, regional and rural perspectives

- The number of students developing HASS skills in higher education is in decline, particularly in regional and rural areas. The Jobs Ready Graduates package plays a role, discouraging students from studying HASS Degrees and signalling that cultural capabilities, critical thinking, creativity, languages, communication and interpersonal skills are less valuable to the nation.
- DASSH's submission on *Building Asia Capability*[5] highlighted that disciplinary closures and inconsistent messaging is turning students away from studying languages. This is resulting in a significant loss of knowledge, skill and cultural literacy in many regions. This creates communication skills gaps in the regions and reinforces inequality of opportunity.
- DASSH members highlight the critical need to recognise that skills and workforce gaps vary between cities and regional areas. Incorporating urban, regional and remote perspectives within the NST acknowledges that workforce and partnerships vary across areas.

2. Compared to a unilaterally designed approach, how can a multilateral approach to design to accommodate future technological advancements and changing labour market dynamics?

The NST must be open to revision to remain responsive to changing workforce dynamics and demands. This cannot be a static framework. Contemporary shifts, such as the impacts of generative artificial intelligence are rapidly evolving and changing the nature of work. This highlights the difficulty of predicting futures skills needs.

The NST can be regularly revised by:

- Maintaining accurate, up-to-date sector-wide data on VET and higher education enrolments, regional demand and workforce shifts.
- Consulting with diverse stakeholders including employers, researchers, educators, VET, STEM, HASS, AI experts and government agencies including ATEC, DoE, DEWR, JSA, ARC and Productivity Commission.
- Supporting interdisciplinary collaboration between universities, VET and government agencies to address complex societal challenges including climate-change and rapidly evolving AI.
- Promoting research into skills needs and learning opportunities
- Adopting a place-based approach that recognises in-demand skills and workforce shortages vary between urban, regional and rural areas.

[5] **Building Australia's Asia Capability,** DASSH, https://dassh.edu.au/building-australias-asia-capability/

3. **What measures can be taken to prevent a skills-first system from inadvertently creating new barriers or exclusions?**

Communicate and map skills gained in higher education

The World Economic Forum (WEF) Future of Jobs Report 2025 is a significant report that collectively represents the perspectives of more than 1,000 employers and 14 million workers across 55 economies worldwide. The top ten skills in demand by employers worldwide in 2025 are[6]:

1. **Analytical thinking**
2. **Resilience, flexibility and agility**
3. **Leadership and social influence**
4. **Creative thinking**
5. **Motivation and self-awareness**
6. Technological literacy
7. **Empathy and active listening**
8. **Curiosity and lifelong learning**
9. **Talent management**
10. Service organisation and customer service

Eight of these top ten skills are core products of a HASS education. They are also among the most difficult skills categorise and measure. DASSH members play a key role in assessing, measuring and reporting on these skills and their value for individuals, the economy and the nation. We strongly support the need for a holistic view of skills and the role of education in skill development. A NST has the potential to raise awareness of the value of HASS disciplines for individuals, industry and the nation.

As we work toward the Universities Accord proposal to lift the tertiary education attainment rate to 80% to meet the increased need for post-school qualifications in the workforce[7] it is imperative that we provide pathways for regional, low SES, First Nations and disability student cohorts to access higher education. A NST has the potential to contribute to equity in educational access, particularly if emphasis is given to recognising lived experience and work alongside formal education.

Capture the full suite of skills for Australia's sovereign capabilities

Barney Glover told *The Australian* in July 2025 that up to 90 per cent of qualified applicants for jobs in engineering and information technology (IT) were not deemed "suitable" by employers despite significant worker shortages[8]. He referred to JSA research indicating that competencies such as communication and teamwork are critical for ensuring that individuals are "work-ready".

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[6] **The Future of Jobs Report 2025,** The World Economic Forum, https://www.weforum.org/publications/the-future-of-jobs-report-2025/in-full/3-skills-outlook/

[7] **Australian Universities Accord Final Report**, Department of Education, https://www.education.gov.au/australian-universities-accord/resources/final-report

[8] **Jobs and Skills Australia demands 'blended' degrees to get graduates fit for work,** The Australian, https://www.theaustralian.com.au/subscribe/news/1/?sourceCode=TAWEB_WRE170_a_BIN&dest=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.theaustralian.com.au%2Fhigher-education%2Fjobs-and-skills-australia-demands-blended-degrees-to-get-graduates-fit-for-work%2Fnews-story%2F8aa039c251d8dc3cf73319bbf93af881&memtype=anonymous&mode=premium&v21=ULTRALOW-Segment-2-SCORE&V21spcbehaviour=append

In acknowledging the range of skills that are fundamental to industry, society and the nation, the importance of HASS disciplines to producing "work-ready" graduates is highlighted. DASSH members welcome Megan Lilly's contribution to recognising competencies including communication, empathy and teamwork as transferable and crucial for the contemporary workforce. It is important that these skills are appropriately captured and translated at a policy level in a NST and that they rare considered at a policy level.

DASSH members welcome the human-centric focus of JSA's definition of skill in the discussion paper. However, members also caution against too heavy a focus on VET and higher education harmonisation and labour market matching without sufficient acknowledgement of:

- Knowledge creation and research capacity
- Civic and democratic capabilities
- National security and diplomatic skills
- Cultural literacy and interpersonal skills

There is concern about implementation of a skills framework that creates a hierarchy, privileging technical competencies over cognitive, creative, and socio-emotional capacities. This risks disproportionately excluding non-traditional learners and equity groups where HASS disciplines are major pathways to access education and training.

The 2024 DASSH Skills Passport submission to the Department of Education and Department of Employment and Workplace Relations highlighted the Australian Archaeology Skills Passport which has been hugely successful[9]. More than 3,000 copies distributed to students, early career professionals and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander site officers and rangers.

The Passport is a great example of a range of skills being measured and shared between employers and employees at an industry scale. The development of a National Skills Passport would be significantly more complex, but holds the potential to be equally as positive, particularly for transferable skills including analysis, critical thinking, and reasoning.

Ensure education and training remains accessible

The Job-ready Graduates Package (JRG)[10] sees students pay up to $50,000 for Arts and Social Science degrees. This signals to students that HASS skills are not valuable from the perspective of employment which is demonstrably untrue. JRG is an active policy setting which prevents students attaining critical skills which are critical to employers, communities and the nation[11].

The JRG is affecting student demand. Between 2010 and 2024, there was an eight per cent decline in student applications to study degrees in the fields of Society and Culture[12]. This will

[9] **Australian Archaeology Skills Passport,** Australian Archaeological Association, https://australianarchaeologicalassociation.com.au/careers-resources/the-australian-archaeology-skills-passport/
[10] **Job-ready Graduates Package,** Department of Education, https://www.education.gov.au/job-ready
[11] **'We can't force people to wisdom': why no one is studying arts,** The Australian Financial Review, https://www.afr.com/work-and-careers/education/we-can-t-force-people-to-wisdom-why-no-one-is-studying-arts-20250820-p5mojr
[12] **Higher Education Statistics**, Department of Education, https://www.education.gov.au/higher-education-statistics/student-data

reduce the number of students, graduates and workers equipped with the interpersonal, communication, diplomatic and cognitive skills necessary to adapt to a rapidly changing workforce.

The NST should not reinforce this distortion by restricting or diverting funding to certain disciplines. This can further entrench material barriers to students accessing education in a time where there is high inflation and increased costs of living. This is particularly significant for regional, low SES, First Nations and disability student cohorts.

DASSH members welcome the government's commitment to review higher education fees through ATEC.

4. In designing a tool to translate and categorise skills in a framework, what additional elements should be considered?

A NST will enable greater workforce mobility and uptake of education. In line with the Australian Universities Accord, JSA anticipates over the next decade more than 90% of new jobs will require a post-school qualification[13].

The following remain considerations to implement an efficient and enduring framework:

Recognising levels of proficiency

DASSH members recognise the need to highlight specific technical skills associated with workforce shortages. However, it is critical that levels of proficiency are recognised across all skills and that different levels of attainment are captured in the NST. We recognise that non-technical skills present a particular challenge in terms of categorisation and assessment. However, for a NST to be effective it is imperative that investment in research and consultation is made to enable technical and non-technical skills to be captured equitably.

Skill acquisition is often cumulative, contextual and iterative. It is not always linear nor learnt through traditional classroom education. There needs to be proficiency levels developed to recognise different forms of learning and attainment including micro-credentials, VET, undergraduate, postgraduate, PhD and non-traditional learning pathways.

This is critical for distinguishing between levels of attainment, crediting individuals with appropriate skills and knowledges for suitable employment, training and learning pathways. The skills and knowledge needed to build an adaptable workforce are complex and cannot be neatly categorised. A skills-first system must not only privilege skills that can be easily measured or quantified.

Future-oriented framework

The economy and workforce are rapidly changing and responding to major shifts including AI, climate change and net zero. Future skills cannot be forecasted solely from labour market

[13] **Jobs and Skills Report 2025,** Jobs and Skills Australia**,** https://www.jobsandskills.gov.au/publications/jobs-and-skills-report-2025

modelling. Qualitative, contextual, interdisciplinary and human-centric perspectives are necessary.

Strong safeguards need to ensure that the NST does not steer students and learners away competencies that may be strategically important. Barney Glover told the *Financial Review* Higher Education Summit in August 2025 that "the role the humanities play will be vitally important. We don't want disincentives. We need curriculum that enables more crossover fertilisation between the humanities and sciences."[14]

HASS skills are foundational for adapting to changes, disruptors and opportunities. There is a requirement for both the technical skills to drive new technologies but also cognitive and interpersonal skills to manage how technologies are implemented, used and impact the public.

5. How can potential conflicts or disagreements between stakeholders be effectively managed in a multilaterally designed framework?

DASSH members encourage independent governance and monitoring of the NST away from political influence to protect long-term national capabilities over short-term responses.

Potential conflicts can be addressed by:

- Clear, transparent communication and guidelines about the governance, management and monitoring of the NST.
- Ensuring that one sector or skills-set is not privileged above others by incorporating stakeholders across all study areas of the education sector in the development and implementation of the NST.
- Better signalling about the interdisciplinary nature of real-world and 'wicked' problems. No single skill set or disciplinary background can sufficiently solve problems alone.
- Great collaboration between JSA, Productivity Commission, ATEC, DoE, DEWR and ARC to identify, recognise and fund pipelines of students and projects across all skill sets.

6. How can the adoption of skills-first be supported to ensure inclusivity for traditionally underrepresented groups or non-traditional learning pathways?

The JRG settings need urgent reform to ensure that equity groups are not further marginalised or excluded from education and training. Inequitable pricing of Arts degrees risks excluding First Nations, first-in-family, regional, low-SES and culturally diverse students from education where HASS are often key pathways to education and employment.

Society and Culture is a preferred study area for undergraduate students from groups traditionally under-represented in Higher Education. In 2024, almost 31% of First Nations

[14] **'We can't force people to wisdom': why no one is studying arts,** The Australian Financial Review, https://www.afr.com/work-and-careers/education/we-can-t-force-people-to-wisdom-why-no-one-is-studying-arts-20250820-p5mojr

students commencing study were enrolled in Society and Culture. This is the biggest cohort across all study areas[15].

The inequitable pricing generates barriers and marginalises these groups from accessing education and attaining skills. This can create cold spots for skilled workers in specific areas.

The Universities Accord final report recommended that JRG needs "urgent remediation" and that its "intended purpose of influenced students' choice of courses through price signals has failed" (p. 155)[16].

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[15] **Impact and Outcomes: Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities in Australia**, DASSH, https://dassh.edu.au/impact-outcomes-2025/
[16] **Australian Universities Accord Final Report**, Department of Education, https://www.education.gov.au/australian-universities-accord/resources/final-report

Appendix One

Source: 2024 DASSH Submission on the National Skills Taxonomy to Jobs and Skills Australia, https://dassh.edu.au/national-skills-taxonomy/

Our 2024 Submission highlighted the complex skills and knowledges associated with HASS degrees that have repeatedly been in high demand by employers worldwide. Any skills taxonomy must reflect these skills which include but are not limited to:

- Communication
- Creative thinking and analysis
- Critical and analytical thinking
- Research Writing
- Close reading Problem solving
- Understanding processes of change
- Data collection Data analysis
- Question assumptions and applied logic
- Communication of complex research findings
- Ability to overcome bias
- Systematic attention to detail
- Cultural competence
- Online safety
- Understanding democracy, justice, fairness, equality and the rule of law
- Intercultural understanding
- Critical understanding of the self
- Critical understanding of the world
- Communication in languages other than English