

STATEMENT

DASSH responds to proposed changes to the Australian Research Council

16 December 2021

The Australasian Council of Deans of Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities acknowledges the need for public interest to be considered when allocating research funding. DASSH holds a firm belief that research in the domains of the humanities, arts and social sciences is crucial to the health and welfare of Australians as well as social, manufacturing and environmental advancements, among others. We are concerned about changes to the Australian Research Council (ARC) outlined in a Letter of Expectation to the CEO by Acting Minister for Education and Youth the Hon Stuart Robert MP this week.

Among the proposed changes is a move to align grants under the ARC's linkage scheme, through which 70 per cent of funding is allocated based on the six National Manufacturing Priorities.

As noted in a previous submission, we suggest one of the stated objectives of the new National Priorities and Industry Linkage Fund (NPILF), an increase in the number of more employable STEM-skilled graduates, is deeply flawed because it fundamentally misconceives the skills challenge confronting Australia's future workforce.

There is a strong evidence base that shows future students will benefit from multidisciplinary engagement in their learning at university level, and communities can prosper with a new goal for educational outcomes. This is true also of higher degree research.

Over a longer timescale, the NPILF could be a stimulus to adopt a strategic approach to building new connections between humanities, arts and social sciences disciplines and STEM disciplines. This could reference what the business community regularly emphasises: it is the combination of diverse skills that is crucial for enterprise innovation. Research conducted for the Chief Scientist has shown Australia's most innovative enterprises value skills mixing most highly, not STEM skills in isolation. Strategies to incentivise and facilitate collaboration across the STEM and HASS sectors are critical to addressing Australia's workforce needs of the future and our needs as a nation.

DASSH would like to see the development of a funding model for social, cultural and economic research that would facilitate a post-COVID national recovery. We hope to see the total allocated funds for the NPILF divided into a range of distinct functional streams reflecting the diverse needs of Australian society.

There is no doubt that some industry collaboration is crucial when considering the allocation of research funding – this turns to student employment outcomes and the economic advancement of Australia. However, DASSH is strongly of the opinion that non-STEM disciplines are as important in pursuing these ends as their STEM counterparts.

DASSH is in strong alignment with Universities Australia in its acknowledgement of the significant role the ARC plays in Australia and with the Academy of Social Sciences of Australia and its concerns about the proposed changes.

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