Foreword: Regional Humanities

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Back in 2014, when Kylie Brass and I published *Mapping the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences in Australia*, it was already clear that the state of the humanities in regional universities in Australia was heading for a crisis (Turner and Brass). At the time, there were certain areas which were already so depleted as to be no longer viable without corrective intervention—teaching in foreign languages, for instance, and in the creative arts. Even disciplines one might have thought were more or less indispensable to any modern university—history is one such discipline—were on a similar trajectory. The Regional Universities Network (RUN) responded to the warnings we raised by setting up consortia which enabled students in one university to take courses for internal credit at another university, and this did assist in plugging some of the gaps in provision and opportunity that were opening up around the country. Nonetheless, we had argued, it was only a matter of time before the representation of many of the humanities disciplines across the sector would have diminished to such an extent that they would only be found in the metropolitan universities or, worse, just in the Group of Eight.

Over the decade since the publication of *Mapping HASS*, Australia has continued to make its way towards that outcome. Sector-wide, the shrinkage of traditional humanities disciplines such as history has continued, and indeed has accelerated to the point where even their survival across the Group of Eight can't be

guaranteed any longer. But the situation in the regional universities is even more critical. The teaching of foreign languages has more or less disappeared, and programs that required creative arts performance or production training—theatre, say, or film and video—are almost all gone. In some regional universities now, the BA is under threat of cancellation or has been put on 'pause' (presumably, as a means of softening the impact of the long-term intention to close it down for good).

As the essays in this special issue demonstrate, however, this situation appears to have exerted little influence over the range of concerns which have dominated the contemporary discussion of higher education policy. It is true that the *Australian Universities Accord Final Report* (Department of Education), published in 2024, devoted its seventh chapter to the regional universities, but its recommendations—given that they would require new money—are never likely to be taken up. There was a brief burst of optimism that accompanied the release of the Accord's final report in some quarters, and there has been a longstanding bipartisan (if largely rhetorical) acknowledgement of the social and economic importance of regional universities. Nonetheless, the need to urgently address the particular difficulties they face and the 'compounded disadvantage' structured into current policy settings—or indeed to develop the opportunities presented by a proper recognition of their potentially transformative social and economic value—has played no significant role in any of the current proposals for future higher education policy.

While disappointing, this is not at all surprising. Regional universities were never at the front of mind when government lifted the caps on enrolments as they introduced the demand-driven system, or when they centralised research funding into competitive programs that effectively advantaged institutions with well-established research infrastructure and support facilities. Neither was it surprising that the repurposing of the sector from education to training also impacted regional enrolments where there were limited opportunities for employment and where the personal opportunity cost for undertaking higher education was high. The greater tendency for regional students to enroll in generalist degrees such as the BA also meant that they were more likely to be collateral damage when the HECS debt incurred for such degrees was dramatically increased under the Morrison government.

At the same time, it has been the regional universities who have been doing most of the heavy lifting on increasing the numbers of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds currently enrolling in the sector. As noted in one of the essays in this issue, some are reporting up to 25 percent of their students fitting that profile (the national rate is around 15 percent). Furthermore, running against the grain of a system which structurally privileges well-off urban students from

educated backgrounds—such as those who can, for instance, afford to access the discount provided for up-front payment of fees rather than incurring a HECS debt—the regional universities are overwhelmingly populated by first-in-family undergraduates. What education minister Jason Clare has cynically described as Australian universities' compromised 'social license', in order to frame them as among the culprits responsible for our national housing crisis, is actually most directly addressed by the manner in which these universities approach the task of providing support and opportunity to their communities.

Over time, it has to be said, our national tertiary education system has evolved in ways that offer few favours to the universities, their staff or their students. What favours there are, however, go to the research-intensive metropolitan universities, to medical research, to commercialisation strategies, to incentives for collaboration between universities and industry, and latterly, if sporadically, to the STEM disciplines. Ensuring the equitable provision of high-quality undergraduate education across the whole of the nation has not been a priority. There seems to be an assumption that this is already sufficiently in place or in train, even though the Accord submissions delivered pages and pages of evidence that such an assumption is without foundation.

Within the broad context of institutional disadvantage, where regional universities cannot realistically expect to achieve the same range of outcomes as a metropolitan university, the humanities disciplines are especially disadvantaged. These disciplines now are subject to multiple challenges: falling enrolments, intra-institutional neglect, fragmentation and isolation through school mergers and amalgamations, plummeting success rates for national competitive grants, the Job-ready Graduates' program attack on their market viability, and a long-running narrative that dismisses an education in the humanities as an institutional luxury, a personal indulgence, or just a roundabout route towards a job in McDonalds. The repurposing of education around skills and training that has transformed the policy environment for the future has exacerbated the difficulty of the task that many humanities disciplines have long faced in affirming their fundamental centrality to an educated civil society. As the essays in this special issue demonstrate, fighting back on all these fronts is hugely frustrating and debilitating for even the most dedicated and resilient of our teachers and scholars in the humanities. Victories are rare, and the battle is now constitutive rather than contingent, permanent rather than occasional.

A tough diagnosis, perhaps, but I would argue that it is easily supportable on the evidence available. This is the product of bad policy and bad politics from successive Australian governments who have overseen what is now beginning to look like the gradual dismantling of our higher education system. Some of this is deliberate. As noted, the Job-Ready Graduates scheme was explicitly aimed at

restricting the demand for humanities degrees. Much of it, though, is the consequence of intra-institutional neglect, political disinterest, poorly informed policy, or just plain ignorance. The sector has been plagued by inadequate attention from policy makers, and in particular by a lack of interest in what academic staff and their students have to say about the state of their institutions. It has become routine for politicians (and, indeed, in some cases for university administrations) to disregard whatever academic staff have to say as special pleading, and what students have to say as uninformed or naïve. It is notable that the Accord review, even though it was set up to provide a comprehensive account of the state of our universities, says almost nothing about how these institutions look from the coalface. There is little which reflects an interest in what academic staff and their students might have told us.

This excellent collection of essays is particularly useful as these are precisely the constituencies to whom it gives voice. They are voices we should heed.

Victoria Kuttainen's essay presents us with the results of her online conversations with humanities academics at a number of regional universities. They reveal the frustrations these academic staff members have to negotiate in a context of institutional disinterest or disrespect as their numbers fall and the policy context mutates into an ever more hostile formation. They also demonstrate the extent of the pro-social, indeed humanist, commitment that motivates these academics to persist nonetheless. Erika Kerruish and Mandy Hughes demonstrate the transformative potential of the HASS disciplines for their students, as well as the social importance of the maintenance of disciplines that are 'preoccupied with issues of equity, social justice and truth-telling'. They, too, highlight the compounded disadvantage that many of their students must overcome as they deal with the barriers presented by their personal social or economic disadvantage as well as the structural disadvantage faced by their institution. Jessica White and Amanda Tink address the particular obstacles faced by disabled students in regional universities where limited understandings of disability expose them to discrimination, before arguing for the potential of a HASS education to redress the impact of these 'cultural barriers'.

These 'coalface' studies are partnered with a series of pieces that focus on the broader policy environment which determines the possibilities for universities within regional and rural communities in Australia. The essays from Kylie Message-Jones, Robert Phiddiam and Tully Barnett, Jade Croft and Wayne Bradshaw, and Alister Noble, build a highly nuanced account of the plight of the humanities, first, and then that of the humanities within the regional university, which lays out some of the data and evidence required to argue for a better policy environment than we inhabit at present. In an attempt to deal with the more pragmatic defenses of the humanities—those which eschew claims for their

intrinsic value in order to argue for their economic contribution—Riccardo Welters tackles the problem of finding ways of recognising values that are difficult to quantify or monetise.

The fact that a special issue such as this should be necessary speaks not only to the failures of government policy, but also to the manner in which the marketisation and corporatisation of the university sector has encouraged self-interest among and within the institutions themselves. It is almost inevitable, in such a context, that individual institutions would take positions which put their own corporate interests before those of the sector as a whole, or indeed those of the nation. Consequently, it is almost impossible for a marketised sector to adopt a unified position in response to government policy that affects each institution in different ways. We are currently seeing this in the sector's response to the proposed caps in international student enrolments. Potentially, the proposals run against the interests of some of the larger metropolitan universities, but they tend to be supported by the regionals.

In terms of how that has played out in advocacy for the humanities, it needs to be acknowledged that the loudest voices have tended to reflect the interests of metropolitan universities with a high research profile. Our peak body, the Australian Academy of the Humanities, has been diligent and effective in pressing for the interests of the humanities in general but its focus of attention almost inevitably reflects the fact that its fellowship is dominated by academics from the Group of Eight. There are hierarchical strata within the humanities in Australia, with the elite and research intensive universities at the top, and most of the regional universities gathered towards the bottom. This results in the concerns of the latter being given a lower priority even among those advocating for greater recognition and respect for the humanities disciplines. There is an understandable preference for leading with the most prestigious, and the most internationalised, of our institutions as providing the most compelling case to government. I can recall having made that kind of choice myself, in some of the consultations in which I have been involved in the past when I was President of the Australian Academy of the Humanities, so I understand how easy it is to adopt that posture. This, notwithstanding the fact that my personal experience of regional institutions should have told me how important it is to resist that temptation.

The consequences of this stratification of the sector are on display in these essays. Among the desired readership are not only those in government or policy portfolios but also those who have undertaken the task of representing the case for the humanities nationally and who are arguing for the kind of root and branch review of higher education we had hoped the Accord would provide. A commitment to equity and social justice does not sit well with a preferred focus on what is understood as the high end of the sector. The Australian formation of

the humanities must do more to nuance its view of the kinds of intervention required to support a more diverse set of objectives for the system in general as well as for their own disciplines and institutions in particular. Unfortunately, while necessary, that's the easy part. Getting government to listen, first, and then to act, remains the most stubborn barrier to a better future for the humanities in the regions.

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