Humanities Academics in Regional Australian Universities: Challenges and Insights at the Equity Coalface

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> Despite the political commitment expressed through numerous international and national policies to widen educational access and participation, we are living in a time of increased, and widening, social and economic inequalities. (11)
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> The cost of HE teaching is now expected to be almost entirely covered by students and their families, especially those studying subjects within the disciplines of arts, humanities and social sciences. (12)
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> Penny Jane Burke, *The Right to Higher Education: Beyond Widening Participation*

IF THESE STATEMENTS ABOUT INCREASED EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITY MAY HAVE BEEN generalisable to some extent into international contexts back in 2012, when Penny Jane Burke wrote about the widening participation agenda in the United Kingdom, they now seem tragically prescient at the time and place of writing in 2024. Burke foretold that austerity-driven policy decisions being introduced then in the UK would pass on the highest burden of debt and adverse impact to Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences (HASS) students and regional

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universities. After the passage of the so-called 'Job-ready Graduates' (JRG) legislation in Australia, students in most HASS disciplines now shoulder the cost burden of 97 percent of their $54,000 degree. The very students and institutions that represent the most concentrated intersections of inequity are most affected by these changes. These are the students which the widening participation agenda—including its latest iteration, the Australian Universities Accord—has sought to include but has increasingly struggled to support.

Related concerns about humanities enrolments in regional Australia were raised by Graeme Turner and Kylie Brass in their report to the Australian Academy of Humanities back in 2014, as the removal of caps on government-funded places and the introduction of demand-driven education were observed to have 'significantly reduced the presence of HASS offerings within regional campuses and regional institutions' (37). Ten years on, in a post Universities Accord environment in which the government has thus far failed to reverse most of the damaging effects of the JRG, the concerns of Turner and Brass seem as prescient as Burke's. These issues are particularly timely to address since, in 2019, the Commonwealth Government expressed concern that students from regional Australia are 'less than half as likely' (Commonwealth of Australia 5) to obtain a university degree than their metropolitan counterparts. They are especially timely to raise since the 2024 Universities Accord has taken up the mantle of advocacy for educational inclusion, with an emphasis on regional Australians.

Beginning in the pandemic and extending through the consultation period that informed the Australian Universities Accord, the Humanities in the Regions Community of Practice of the Australasian Consortium of Humanities Researchers and Centres (ACHRC) hosted a series of conversations with regional humanities academics that sought to capture concerns about rising inequality. What follows is a thematic analysis of follow-up interviews that drew on a story-capture method with nine academics from eight regional universities across Australia in 2024. Acknowledging F. Michael Connelly and D. Jean Clandinin's insistence on the richness of narrative inquiry in education studies, these interviews attempt to draw strength from what Rita Felski has identified in narrative as its capacity to reveal 'density and distinctiveness of particular life-worlds' (51). This responds in part to Clifton Conrad's plea to his fellow researchers of higher education to push beyond 'data-gathering for narrow descriptive purposes' (205) and utilitarian functions, to ask questions about what it means to be educated and to participate in the educating process. Our conversations uncovered the nuanced experiences of HASS academics—whose research is often focused on structural inequality—increasingly observing, experiencing, and attempting to mitigate widening inequalities in their own student cohorts and academic careers.

Collectively, these interviews bear witness to the microphysics of educational power, from within regional higher education institutions. Many of these interviews revealed contours of educational disadvantage that the Accord and other policy statements do not yet seem fully aware of, not least able to redress. They also prompted reflections about the need to dismantle harmful and insidious deficit imaginaries, and to move beyond flat, one-dimensional models of education, research, regionality, and disadvantage to embrace the transformational capacity of regional humanities more fully.

Perhaps most powerfully, they suggested an urgent need to broker models of working together, not just as a collective of regional humanities scholars, but at a national level. Immanuel Wallerstein's world-systems theory applies here—a model in which the world is seen as a geography of repeating centres and peripheries, with regions often targeted for resource extraction by more powerful core states and actors. Postcolonial theory and Paulo Freire's work in the field of education also apply their force of scrutiny to the relations between centres and peripheries. Regional Australia has frequently been exploited for resource extraction for the benefit of metropolitan Australia, yet local communities rarely see an equal scale of resource re-investment, especially in education. The inequities exposed in these themed interviews foreground the need to bridge an increasingly inequitable divide between urban and regional Australia that threatens not only the civic wellbeing of our national and local communities, but also the heterogeneity, diversity, and wellbeing of our academic communities and research cultures. The regional humanities are under existential threat in Australia, and what is at stake is the loss of a powerful and distinct engine of social and educational transformation.

Theme 1. Vulnerability and Precarity: 'Regional universities seem more vulnerable, easier to squash. People don't seem to know how important the humanities are in these places'.

In all but one of the interviews with nine humanities academics from across regional Australia,[1] when I asked interviewees to describe the lay of the land for the humanities in their regional university at the present time, participants foregrounded a sense of disenfranchisement within their own institution. Most shared the sentiment of one historian who expressed that the humanities are 'very low on the priority list of our university. Our own university doesn't understand

[1] The exceptions tend to align with situations where the regional university is also the state university, and consequently appears to have suffered less by the open market model—for example, Charles Darwin University in the Northern Territory, and the University of Tasmania. I did not include an interview with an academic at UTAS because its status as a sandstone that is also the only university in its state *and* a regional university tends to position it as a wild card; however, at the time of publication, by anecdotal accounts, the University of Tasmania is now also experiencing the same kinds of pressures.

what the Bachelor of Arts is'. In the words of a literary scholar at another regional university, 'Management can't seem to make any money out of the humanities, so the university doesn't value the humanities. But the students seem to enjoy them, the students who find their way into them'. As yet another put it, 'our university is industry-facing; it feels like management doesn't know what to do with us'. The sense of a gulf between university management and the academy is by no means unique to humanities academics located in regional Australia; the picture that emerged in these conversations, however, was a knowing understanding of the structural pressures that amplify these issues as a distinct feature of the regional landscape, endangering the very existence of humanities programs in regional Australia universities.

Small units of scale leading to a small number of course offerings anchored by a handful of academics were a major and recurring pattern in the stories these academics told about their regionally-located humanities programs. As one academic put it:

> Metropolitan universities are dealing with huge units of scale; contrastingly regional universities like ours are relatively small in terms of student population. That does impact curriculum decisions, number of programs, number of staff, subjects we can offer. In the current environment, we've been dealing with at least a decade of consistent cuts. There's not much more that can be cut.

It is in part because of the smallness of this scale that another said, '[r]egional universities seem more vulnerable, easier to squash' and expressed worry about the broader implications of downturns and cuts: 'People do not seem to know how important humanities are in these places'.

The academics I interviewed were passionate in their shared advocacy for the importance of humanities programs in regional universities, especially for the students who are most adversely impacted by increasing fees, shrinking course offerings, and the possible loss of local provision by academics who tailor their teaching and research to these local cohorts.

Theme 2. Regional Humanities Students: 'If they make it to uni in this region, they have overcome barriers. To stay at uni, that requires even more overcoming'.

Discussions with these academics revealed their recognition of the fact that the majority of regional HASS students are not just part of one equity group—regional and remote students. They describe a cohort positioned within what equity researchers identify as the 'intersecting social inequities that students experience

in relation to RRR [Regional, Rural, and Remote] status' (Cook et al. 633). Regional HASS students comprise what Hughes and Kerruish, citing Lambrechts' 2020 work on refugee students, call in their essay in this issue 'super-disadvantage'.

Many discussed in detail a nuanced appreciation of the way regionality, especially in the humanities, means these students come from complex backgrounds: 'Seventy-five percent of our BA students are the first in their family to university', one noted, before rattling off further statistics:

> And 13.9 percent of the BA students in our regional university register with a disability. As well, 15.9 percent of our students declare their background as Indigenous, as opposed to the national average at more like 2 or 3 percent, well below parity. These are not merely additive numbers in equity categories: they represent complex lives.

These academics often elucidated 'the complex and intersecting issues in the way that inequalities occur and are experienced in everyday life' for their students, and impact a 'sense of self, belonging and place' (Cook et al. 633). Interviews conveyed academics' understanding of the often invisible and complex intersections of disadvantage in their students' lives because of their insights into the context of their backgrounds.

Another academic explained that one of the campuses at their regional, multi-campus institution is 'in the top 10 percentile of most disadvantaged across all measures' in Australia. This academic's description of the region from which these students arrive in the BA classroom suggest that an academic's embeddedness in a region affords a depth of understanding of the lived experiences of inequity of their students' lives. They describe their students' backgrounds within the place-based context of 'a mining town' which industry 'abandoned, with the mine closing down in the last decade. Power stations have closed down'. The region is described as 'going through a messy renewal phase' which translates in this interview to a depth of understanding about the often-invisible contours of disadvantage in these student lives:

> Social service has invested in the area with housing support, but metropolitan people are moving here on top of that. A lot of families are dislocated. Lots of people are hurting. Lots of wrap around support is needed for these families. Many students have no family to rely on, or they are carers. Many are in DV situations, escaping from bad domestic situations.

In an environment in which there is a culture of young people leaving the region and going to the cities for employment or higher education, one academic

explained how vital the local provision of humanities is to these students who choose or feel compelled to stay behind for local support:

> The students we have here are often passionate about the region, passionate about staying. They're connected with various groups or community, or they have particular issues—but they're very clever people—that have prevented them from doing well. I've just had a student, for example, in a subject who is remarkably astute. He's thoughtful, contributed work as strong as anything I saw when I was teaching at the University of Sydney, but because of mental health issues, could not have gone straight out of school and into a city university. He's studying to become an English and Maths teacher and it's almost the end of his degree. But the regional university has been vital because it offered a connection with his place where he can keep those supports and keep in contact with the community in which he's grown up.

As Gibson et al. point out, 'Educational inequalities are … more subtly manifest in compound forms of disadvantage' where they intersect with regionality and other issues (1106). Many academics, like this one, told stories that convey appreciation of how

> [y]oung people's deep connection to their rural home … provides an important sense of identity, social connection, and commitment to a locality of a kind that is widely ignored or simply not valued [Howley, 2006; Gibson 2016] in […] generalised policy. (Gibson et al. 1105)

Penny Jane Burke has contended that the inequitable distribution of resources and misrecognition of the potential capacity and value of the personhood of these kinds of students perpetuates enduring inequalities in higher education. Because of their embeddedness within the regions where these students come from, the academics I spoke to not only recognised their students' capacities but were also clear sighted about systemic failures compromising their education:

> The government has identified this cohort of non-traditional learners as being an important cohort to bring into higher education. A number of reviews have set aims to increase non-traditional learner participation in higher education. But all the literature shows that [nationally] we are way off that mark in meeting those aims and targets. We are way off that mark because traditional and metro universities are not enrolling low SES and equity groups the way regional universities are. 25 percent or more of our students in our BA are low SES or other equity groups. In this, regional universities—and

> especially BA programs in them—are doing what the government has asked us to do, but not being provided the extra resources to do it; there is no recognition that our costs are higher.

The cost of providing support often falls on these academics who have relationships with their students. Concerns about the invisible impact of these policies on student decisions not to even attend university, or to leave, were also expressed:

> Our students in the BA at our regional university are overwhelmingly the first people in their family to go to university. They often find their way into our program slowly. I do think that one of the challenges when students are paying so much to go to uni is that they do want some sort of sense of guarantee about the job that they will get afterwards. We [as academics] understand, you know, that humanities graduates do get good jobs and are often earning more than graduates in other faculty areas, and that often in those accredited courses students will shift their careers, you know, in those first sort of four or five years. But it's a hard sell for young people from the region, especially now it costs so much; they don't understand how it leads to a career.

As Neil Harrison has argued, students who are unequally located in relation to employment and education, such as these students who are first-in-family to university and from low socio-economic backgrounds, often feel compelled to make choices they feel will minimise risks, prioritising short-term and low paid employment, or family responsibilities, over long-term costly investments in education that does not have obviously immediate or clear gains. A number of academics I spoke to highlighted similar issues:

> When students are paying so much to going to uni they want some sort of guarantee about job getting afterward. We understand that our humanities students get jobs and better pay, but this is hard to demonstrate to the first-in-family student. But when they are just starting off on a course of study, it's really difficult. This whole cloud of privilege that involves networking and the ability to actually have somebody in your life that's had an education before, and you saw the pathway they took, and you know how to dress for interviews, for example. Our students don't have any of that.

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> 75 percent of our students are part-time. The median age of our students is late 20s—many a lot older. Low SES. Three quarters of them

> are online. Many online students live locally. They don't think of themselves firstly as students. They are someone who works at a café or is a carer, for example. This is their identity firstly.
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> If they make it to uni in this region, they have overcome barriers. To stay at uni that requires even more overcoming. The fact that young people and older people, if they make it to uni in a regional area, often they've overcome so many barriers to even get to uni and then to stay at uni. They're overcoming barriers constantly and it breaks my heart.

Many of these academics shared inspiring stories about the successes of individual regional students whose lives have been transformed by their Bachelor of Arts education, and reflected on the capacity for the BA to perform this transformational work precisely because its content unlocks understanding of structural inequality:

> One student, who came into the BA after starting to do what she thought was a more practical BEd, took writing subjects and switched her course. She's finishing a memoir about living with disability and being the carer of her mother … She's got such a bright future. She's totally changed her stars and is a role model for others.

Another said:

> I have seen students come in homeless, suffering from all kinds of things. Then the transformation. I had a student who was homeless. Now that student is working in the Prime Minister's cabinet.

These academics explained the depth of commitment this kind of transformation takes, both on the part of the student and on the part of the academic. Consequently, these discussions gradually uncovered the ways that being regionally located has shaped a profoundly different approach in humanities academics to their students, their teaching, their discipline, and their research.

Theme 3. Teaching and Engagement: 'This is so different from the metropolitan university where I did my PhD and taught undergraduate humanities subjects'; 'Starting from where students are is really important'.

Sometimes teaching cohorts of students who come from these backgrounds can be put in deficit terms, highlighting the impost on time required for academics to provide unremunerated pastoral care. Yet while pastoral care became a large part

of these conversations, many of these academics understood their work as not merely conveying information but also calling on their active advocacy and role-modelling. 'This is so different', said one academic, 'from the metropolitan university where I did my PhD and taught undergraduate humanities subjects... I was surrounded by people from privilege … surrounded by role models and opportunities'. Another put it this way:

> [At the prestigious metropolitan university] where I did my PhD, there was just no question amongst my undergrads that there would be an opportunity for any of them in anything they wanted to do because there were so many different models and examples in their lives of people who'd gone before them to model how their lives would turn out if they just stuck with the program. And that's not what our regional students have. As their lecturer I'm their role model.

Many academics in the regional humanities discuss active work they have been doing to embed professional development and scaffold career preparation into a degree, and expressed how much energy it took to bring the students—as well as their colleagues and their institution—alongside this kind work:

> I'm kind of coming from, I guess, an institution where you do just study the arts for the sake of studying the arts, but that's not what our student cohort is… we have to help our students understand how a BA is practical, and how to connect it with a professional identity. So, we set up a core subject about future directions… of course, in this, I got pushback from other academics … but these academics … whinging about neoliberalism like, I mean, they're typically upper middle class white, not first in family to go to university. And to not be helping our students to find their way after they graduate: that's literally a social equity issue.

Many interviewees talked about the importance of not only connecting their students with community and future job options, but also the need to create opportunities:

> In places like Melbourne and Adelaide there are vibrant arts communities, but in my program, I need to create that community for my students because it's [latently] there, but it's not built yet like it is in, you know, urban areas and you know areas where there's established infrastructure for the arts. And that community of respect for what we do can't be assumed like it is elsewhere. I've got to teach my students how to explain to people what their value is [as an arts

> student] by role modelling that and also showing them what their value is and helping them understand how to explain it.

This academic in regional Victoria explains that she has had to help build the community infrastructure for her writing students: 'I've got eight interns this year for an internship program that I just started up last year'.

Another explains:

> Businesses [in this regional area] don't really know what a BA is—we've had to work really hard to try to build WIL and raise community awareness about the BA, about all those transferable skills. Our students don't come from a background where they know how to transfer the degree into employment. They are great, but we have to teach them how to code switch writing emails and job interview applications, how to dress for interviews, what kinds of jobs they can articulate into.

This kind of work is often unaccounted for in current university metrics systems and relies on the goodwill and passion of individual service-minded academics. As another academic explains, this work involves not only building capacity in individuals, in the university, and in the degree program, but also the community:

> We've got a very good relationship with our local council and have built that relationship over time to the extent that they now have like summer internships where our students will be given a kind of priority. And then there are businesses: one-on-one it's often an academic that builds a relationship with a local business or organisation, and then over time, through that kind of relationship, it's a slow introduction of, 'oh, well, we've got students that could also be helping you with this or could also be doing this'. Our communities don't have the industries or service sectors that recognise the value of a Bachelor of Arts degree. We know that locally-based HASS students can offer local organisations lots of value. But we've got to prove to our partners or potential partners that the BA skill set is valuable first, in order for them to then trust that our students' skill sets are valuable. Then, too, the best advocates for us are our students and graduates. If we can teach them how to explain the Bachelor of Arts while they're doing it, and then after they've finished it, we can give them the language to argue for its value.

This can put a huge amount of pressure on individual academics to stand in the gap, in the community, in the university, and in the classroom:

> There is a feeling that these places are being hollowed out of people who might be the next generation of artists and writers and musicians. There was a time when the uni would attract TV production students, theatre production students, but both of those degrees have been removed … then also teaching students with an interest in the humanities and the arts. And there was enough of them to form a culture. But that's not the case now. There is a feeling of decline. We had a Writers' Centre … operating for many years … where Tara June Winch wrote the novel *The Yield* and it's seen many Indigenous and non-Indigenous writers come through. It was defunded by the state government in the last funding round. It's housed on university land. The link is me, right? And there is this feeling of huge responsibility as the last Literature academic standing to try to help as much as I can. The precarious nature of these institutions and these links is foremost on our minds.

When I ask academics how being regionally located has changed their approach to how they teach humanities, many explain the need to make what they do locally meaningful:

> We know we need to provide scaffolded learning and provide material that is meaningful to the lives of our cohort. We integrate local case studies. We provide studies that have a direct relationship to the lives of the students we teach. Faculty have close working relationships with support staff such as librarians and others. And because we are small, we know the people by name who work in wellbeing, we know the people we refer our students to. We have cultivated sensitive ways of working with our support staff out of the school and the discipline. They know us and our students and we follow up with our students. We don't just hive them off to some extra services. This is a big part of the work of being a regional academic.

Another explains that the role of a regional humanities academic involves regularly engaging in the community: 'This morning I've been off doing a senior's event, and if they need a historian on local radio, they talk to me. I'm the only one. That additional work comes from being in a small place'.

When I asked how being a regionally based academic might impact the nature and content of what these humanities academics teach in the classroom, the use of relevant, regional material regularly came up:

> We try from the very beginning to introduce engaged regional aspect that is relevant to them, by asking their own questions. We get them to write biographies of themselves using primary sources. Students are engaging in real-world issues. There's a strong expectation of that in a regional university. The students feel like they own it and want to have a say. There are some really unique stories to tell of this place: festivals, flooding, blockades for the environment. Starting from where students are has been really important.

The capacity to do this kind of mission-centred community-based work is changing, however, in an environment of austerity and course-rationalisation.

Theme 4. Long-term Enrolment Downturns Exacerbated by the Pandemic and Regional Impacts: 'Strictly speaking, since Covid, it's been terrible'.

One of the reasons the ACHRC began these conversations with regional HASS academics was a shared sense that during and after the pandemic, HASS programs at regional universities across Australia had shifted into full-blown emergency because of course cutting. In just a handful of examples among many more, students at Charles Sturt University faced the loss of 116 degrees; students at the University of Western Australia were blindsided by the slashing of programs that built regional capacity to redress topics like racism, social and economic disadvantage, and climate change; Federation University reacted to the news of the closure of its Bachelor of Arts; and James Cook University closed its languages and creative arts courses.

For this reason, in our discussions, I asked academics how this situation may have worsened over time. In their responses, many mentioned downturns in enrolments over a period of years, since around 2012 when caps on publicly funded university places were removed, shifting student load to bigger, more prestigious universities and internally to fields with perceived high income yields in careers after graduation. They then highlighted further declines in enrolments during the pandemic in ways that have intensified this sense of precarity in this present moment. One faculty member in regional New South Wales was able to put this in concrete terms:

> Enrolments have dramatically declined since Covid. In 2019 we started with 104 EFTSL in the BA. We have 40 EFTSL this year. So that's, you know, that's more than halved over that period of time. We are in a very precarious situation.[2]

[2] Anecdotally, since this interview, the university where this academic is based announced closure of their BA.

'Our BA enrolments are half the size they were in 2018', an academic at another regional university explained, 'and it's really noticeable in terms of dramatic declines in commencing student numbers in the humanities'. This was a recurrent theme amongst eight out of the nine interviewees at different regional universities: 'Strictly speaking, since Covid, it's been terrible. We've lost so much. We've kept only a handful of subjects'. A creative writing academic put it this way: 'We teach the humanities, but in 2020, we went through a rationalisation process which resulted in fewer areas. They [the management] deleted things. We lost many courses and then majors within those courses. So now we have basic coverage'. Many academics described a sense of their shrinking program being trapped in a vicious economic circle, where declines in student enrolments that intensified during Covid appeared to have a compounding effect on poorer learner experience, cost-cutting, course-cutting, and poorer course reputation:

> We saw a massive drop off in enrolment during COVID that we haven't really recovered from. We saw students who were struggling to learn online. And students were also facing that kind of added stigma that's always been there in the regions and is intensifying, around enrolling in a humanities subject. Then our university declared publicly that they were getting rid of the BA without consultation.

Where the BA was retained in a reduced form, it was not unusual for a faculty member to have found themselves 'the last one standing' in a particular humanities discipline. These situations have led to an exacerbated sense of vulnerability and isolation linked to negative impacts on overall student and faculty wellbeing:

> Since 2011 we've had a declining student load. We've had multiple restructures. I'm now the last staff member in [my discipline] on my campus. So [t]here's no face-to-face in-person lecturer of [this discipline] beyond first year here. This means, basically, all the students who are based in this region have to still learn online as a cost-saving measure, even if they wanted to study on campus. It would appear that the reduction in subject offerings and the move to online-only has led to a further decline in numbers. The experience just isn't the same. It's really isolating.

This was a pattern commented on by another academic who explained how program cuts over years has led to one discipline member in each field covering the entire BA:

> The Bachelor of Arts at our uni is housed within a College of Business, Law and Arts. In 2021 we had a Bachelor of Social Sciences, Bachelor of Arts, Bachelor Arts Honours, and an Associate Degree of Creative Writing. Since Covid, however all that remains of those degrees is the BA, and faculty have been reduced from eight to four upholding the whole degree.

It was not uncommon for academics to reveal that the effects of multiple restructures over a series of years led to a dynamic of 'mergers and acquisitions' which negatively impacted the wellbeing of students and faculty. Many said they had been shuffled into other Schools or Colleges or maintained a Bachelor of Arts degree distributed across two or more divisions. Constant restructuring was a recurrent theme: 'three revisions of the BA in my first five years in my academic job; three whole new BAs'; '124 subjects reduced to 24. They realised that was too austere, and then we expanded again'. Another academic described an 'embattled environment. Change fatigue. A lot of redundancies. A revolving door of change'.

Another academic explains how being regionally located has hit regional universities particularly hard not just because of the economic and social impacts of Covid, but also due to the impacts of climate emergency:

> We've gone through a really shitty last few years. Covid yes, but regional areas are also more susceptible to climate crisis. They launched a brand-new teaching model, 6-week terms, one week before flood hit. Our students didn't come back after that. That kind of devastation that has happened.

There is sometimes an illusion that Covid did not impact the regions as heavily as it did in the cities, but despite fewer and shorter lockdowns in regions than in cities, regional academics almost all expressed sharp downturns linked in some way to Covid. One put it this way, 'City universities started hoovering up all our enrolments when they went online and as our programs began to get cut'. Another put it in these terms: 'It's vulnerable communities we are dealing with'.

In a 2020 American report on the value of regional universities to regional and economic performance and the social good, Celia Orphan noted that regional universities are particularly vulnerable to recession and must be protected from fluctuations in the economy. Covid was not just a public health crisis; it was also an economic crisis, and a public education crisis. All of this hit regional universities, regional communities, regional workers, and the regional humanities in ways that remain largely unacknowledged. Many academics expressed a desire to do research that matters in this kind of heightened-stakes community and environment, while being under-resourced to do so. This naturally led to a

discussion of how all this changes the nature of research in a regional humanities academic's career.

Theme 5. Research: 'Being a regional humanities academic changes the kind of research you think matters'

Many expressed a sense of experiencing a personal shift in values, sometimes immediately due to a local emergency, and sometimes over a period of years, from standard research set by metropolitan cultural mores and more standard notions of cultural value to working from what matters, differently, from an altered perspective derived from living in and caring for regional Australia. One academic explains how research shifted to 'more immediate needs—to understand the community'. She goes on to say that this was driven by climate emergency:

> After the flood, for example, we worked with a group of people … in the community, to provide a voice for the river. With … [a colleague] in media and a science person, we … started doing a project on the [river] … interviews with custodians, a series of things.

As another explained:

> Coming from a metropolitan background, I started with the sense that local history is very parochial. But being a lecturer in a regional place you just have to get involved, and once you start doing that […] you have to make it research as well.

'Being a regional humanities academic changes the kind of research you think matters', another said succinctly, explaining that it not only leads to locally based work, but also to more interdisciplinarity:

> Some of the most incredible research has come out of regional universities in spite of or perhaps because of the challenges faced. This kind of environment, where you are in dialogue with other academics from other disciplines by necessity, all the time, has encouraged creative and flexible thinking. Having to work out ways around those fifty roadblocks also makes us resilient.

While some expressed that challenges of working in a resource-scarce institution under conditions of time-poverty equipped them with greater agility, at least one mentioned that a sense of institutional emergency led to the abandonment of research altogether when faced by the challenges to survive:

> I feel like I do more deep and meaningful research that is centred in community and on region now. But this kind of research takes a lot of deep thinking and time, which is incredibly pressurised in a regional setting … You can't be fighting off your own institution's change plans and try[ing] to think about particular kinds of research at the time. One is more urgent than the other when you are fighting the very existence of the arts and humanities at your institution.

The preoccupation with survival that came up in discussions about student lives thus also emerged as a feature of the lives of humanities academics who serve these cohorts of students and these resource-scarce regions. For others, the ways that research is undertaken has shifted to put the student voice at its centre. A creative writing academic explains that it is the needs of her students and empowering them to reveal their stories that get all her research energy, perhaps in ways not typically measured as research:

> There's so many stories that are not being told, even though lip service is always being offered by new publishers saying we tell diverse stories. I'm absolutely driven by that vision and getting my students into print. We need more voices of disability, more voices of mental illness. Our students learn how to tell these stories and advocate for others. That's what drives me.

Regional humanities academics I spoke to often acknowledged a sense of impassioned empathy for the communities they served. They suggested innovative ways they have undertaken to respond with new, interdisciplinary research projects linked to the felt needs of their community. They told me that these mission-centred regional passion projects were often difficult to resource or did not fit existing paradigms of disciplinary research. Consequently, the final segment of our interviews often shifted to how being a regionally based humanities scholar had affected these academics' careers.

Theme 6. Career: 'I'm very proud of the fact that I work and teach at a regional uni … But I am now stuck at this regional university and very aware of being stuck'.

As the final parts of our interview shifted to career dynamics, many expressed mixed feelings about working as a humanities academic at a regional institution: a combination of fierce pride, resentment, shifting values, and feeling under-supported and unacknowledged. One particularly candid and impassioned interviewee was 'so glad to be asked this. I feel like we can have this conversation and you and I understand each other', this person said, 'But my metropolitan colleagues, I think, would be largely clueless'. This academic explained:

> I'm very proud of the fact that I work and teach at a regional uni. Students really seem to value it. I have seen how significant a change this education can make in someone's life. But being at a regional university has killed my research career. I have been doing program coordination for seven years, partly because no one else is willing, and partly because we are under-resourced.
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> My first year as an academic at a regional was really liberating and really exciting. I was the only person in my discipline. I got lots of invites to present at things, to regional engagement things, to be the spokesperson of my discipline, to learn the ropes of all kinds of roles at the university. At [the large metropolitan university where I completed my PhD], I wouldn't have gotten those invites.
>
> But I am now stuck at this regional university and very aware of being stuck, while simultaneously very aware of all the skills I have learned by being at a regional university around student support, community engagement, curriculum design, media, work-integrated learning, program coordination, and interdisciplinary collaboration.

Another says, 'Being at a regional university has made me less anchored to my discipline. I've had to do a lot more cross-disciplinary kind of work. And that's been good—work with scientists, environmental studies people, cross-institutional work'. But this academic goes on to explain:

> I find it increasingly hard to go to my peak body national association conferences. People's knowledge there is deeper but more specific. Over the years, I have felt increasingly alienated from my association. After being at a regional uni for a while I find it harder to talk to my [metropolitan] colleagues, but I feel like my research is more meaningful and engaging because I am working across disciplines.

Another, who researches local issues and climate emergency, says that this shift to more meaningful, locally driven research seems hard to publish in Australian journals:

> There does seem to be a bias against regionally focused research here [in Australia] as parochial or something. It's sometimes easier to publish my regionally focused history research overseas. Also there seems to be a bias in this country against, perhaps, multi-disciplinary history.

> And then at regional unis, we don't have university presses in our regional institutions, and this makes it hard, too, because we'd put out different kinds of stuff and different kinds of academics would have their voices heard.

'The ARC system is broken', says another, 'and as a regional humanities academic there's two strikes against you: Humanities and a Regional University'. This academic goes on to explain:

> Most of us [in the humanities at my regional uni] can see after a couple of goes at an ARC it's a waste of time, which is precious to us, a no-win situation, that we are better to focus on our minimal time to get our research out instead of applying for grants. I feel like the policy makers love the idea of regional unis. But they also don't understand them. There needs to be a way for academics who work at those unis to be rewarded. Instead of self-perpetuating systems created by the Group of Eight universities. It would be nice if there were other metrics. Other ways of talking about what success means.
>
> That you can be successful in teaching and that doesn't have to mean you are not a serious researcher as well. There needs to be recognition that it takes more to build up good stuff at a regional uni—that we are busy doing all these things, wearing all these hats, and that innovation in research can come out of our environment. We are not just second-class or derivative academics. What we do, especially in the humanities, is different than at metro universities. What we do matters. It does transform communities and lives. But maybe not in that big measurable impact way.

Despite the cost to their careers, most academics I spoke with expressed a passionate commitment to their work and a deep sense of satisfaction in participating in the project of widening participation in higher education. Penny Jane Burke's description of the paradoxical experiences of academics who work at the coalface of the widening participation agenda resonates with these regional HASS academics' descriptions of their careers. Burke explains that these 'support' academics regularly characterise their career satisfaction as deepened by working in areas that effect 'social justice, transformation and the redistribution of life chances and opportunities'; at the same time academics working with cohorts of disadvantaged students express feeling sidelined within other, dominant university systems and perceived as an 'add-on' to the core work of academia (162). This is a particularly problematic paradox for humanities academics who express feeling this way, given that the values of 'social justice, transformation and

the redistribution of life chances and opportunities' are core values of the humanities, not peripheral ones.

Conclusion: Great Value. But Whose Values?

As British higher education academic Sarah Hayes and her colleagues have observed, national education policy frameworks regularly 'silence regional voices' in ways that multiply 'territorially agnostic discourse about universities', downplay the distinctness of the regional mission, and 'risk concealing innovative practices' while 'fail[ing] to tackle entrenched inequalities'.

Like the regional students my colleagues described in interviews—whose challenges and value are often rendered invisible within the mainstream academy—the colleagues I interviewed often felt their differences and distinct approach to the humanities also struggled for visibility and understanding.

In this way, this research has mimicked, in some way, the very processes our own students in the humanities experience when they experience the transformational power of HASS education. As one academic put it:

> I think there has been great value in humanities scholars from the regions starting to talk to each other about some of the challenges and difficulties. When you are so isolated and in an environment of decline, you can be made to feel that it's very much about you, your degree, your students. The issues are much more systemic than that, and I think that it will be of great value regarding some of the challenges and where we head with it.

But just as students in equity groups stand to be dismissed instead of valued when their challenges are not fully recognised and what they bring to the academy is not understood or supported, the same can be true for regional humanities academics. These academics have a depth of experience in not only talking about social justice issues but in connecting the humanities with a regional social justice mission.

It stands to be remembered that adverse changes to higher education policy and defunding of public tertiary education have occurred under successive regimes of right-wing as well as left-wing governments in Australia. Similarly, the metropolitan academy has not always supported their regional colleagues. Indeed, some Australian universities reported record enrolments in the humanities after Covid. It can be difficult, in an environment of scarcity, not to begrudge thriving metropolitan universities their success.

But these interviews suggest that we are stronger together. They also suggest that, where the humanities may have always been the proverbial canary in the coalmine, that the regional humanities—despite their unique features—are not exceptional. Given their smallness and vulnerability, humanities programs at regional universities have suffered in acute ways. But as private funding streams that bolstered metropolitan student enrolments have dried up with the latest efforts of the Commonwealth government to blame shift—rather than fully fund public higher education—it is the humanities once again at the forefront of crisis. If higher education really is a right, as Penny Jane Burke has put it, the right to access the best higher education in whatever discipline, wherever a student lives, is a right we must fight for.

We need to work together, with government, and across peak bodies, to restore the civic mission of the humanities for a more just and equitable world.

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