

30 June 2020

Australian Council of Learned Academies (ACOLA) statement in response to the Australian Government Higher Education reforms

Securing Australia's pipeline for interdisciplinary expertise and research

Research and innovation are key drivers of economic growth and improved quality of life. Major societal challenges such as natural disasters, climate change, and health issues are multifaceted, and solutions require interdisciplinary perspectives.

Development of new technologies designed to make our lives easier and more efficient also requires insight into human behaviour, gender and cultural issues, and legal, ethical, and philosophical frameworks. ACOLA's 2019 report on artificial intelligence (AI) found that successful development and implementation of AI will require a broad range of new skills and enhanced capabilities that span the humanities, arts and social sciences (HASS) and science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) disciplines.

Australia is currently facing great social, economic and environmental challenges – including health (COVID-19, our ageing population and growing burden of chronic disease), economic contraction, changing climate and the disruption of industries as a result of emerging technologies.

We must continue to educate, research and develop new knowledge across disciplines to inform our responses to these challenges, reshaping and preparing our workforce to meet them domestically and to remain competitive in a globalised world.

ACOLA welcomes the Australian Government's new investments to support students from remote and regional areas and Indigenous students through regional universities study hubs and grants, and a focus on improving research linkages with industry, both of which align with analysis undertaken by ACOLA.

ACOLA is concerned, however, that the proposed fee restructure risks limiting the pipeline of workers and researchers who can help us tackle real-world problems and drive innovation. ACOLA's recent reports have shown that enabling skills learned in both HASS and STEM courses are critical to ensuring those working in industry and research sectors are equipped to solve real-world problems.

Investing more in universities, students, and research will be critical to Australia's recovery from COVID-19 and its impacts. A new research funding model that adequately supports the full costs of research – basic and applied – across the disciplines is urgently needed to support Australia's social and economic recovery and to ensure retention of up to 7,000 researchers whose jobs are at risk as a result of COVID-19.

We would welcome the opportunity to work with Government to develop a richer and more nuanced understanding of the nature of jobs of the future, how the education sector could be supported to better deliver the necessary competencies to Australia's drive economic growth, and how to ensure the National Priorities and Industry Linkage Fund best responds to current and future workforce needs.