

Archaeology and the Humanities – promoting critical thinking and informed reflection

In January 2020 Minister of Education Dan Tehan stated, “the Morrison Government ... recognise[s] the importance of research into Australian society, history and culture”. Five months later, the Morrison Government has proposed dramatic changes to university fee structures that double the cost of study in these same disciplines. This move will amplify the perceived divide between the natural sciences and HASS (humanities and social sciences). What 21st century science, business and society need is an integration of these fields of expertise; archaeology plays a vital role in this endeavour. By applying scientific techniques to social issues, including climate change and adaptive technologies, archaeology remains the only discipline able to study the full spectrum of Australia’s deep human history. The history of humanity – the story of us – is a common, binding thread that crosses barriers such as age, gender, culture and religion.

Archaeology – skills rich

Archaeology is a professional discipline with graduates in high demand across the sector, applying training that is specialised, skills-rich and transferrable. University-trained practitioners provide expert management advice and essential compliance documentation to support major infrastructure and development projects that support our economy. We also provide evidence of human ingenuity through time that is a source of national pride and social integration. Archaeology has a long and successful commitment to achieving excellence in training and job-readiness. Since 2005 we have conducted five-yearly reviews of the training needs of our industry and continue to adjust our university training and courses accordingly. We have developed National Benchmarking Guidelines which clearly articulate the knowledge and specific skills expected of graduates upon completion of a 4-year Honours degree – the industry minimum standard. In 2019, we launched the Australian Archaeology Skills Passport, a national program aimed at streamlining skills training across the discipline, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people working in the sector.

Archaeology – socially engaged

Archaeology uses both history and science to understand social issues. For example, the impact and legacy of British colonisation/invasion manifests today in a divided society and a contested heritage. In partnership with Traditional Custodians, archaeologists work to understand not only the depth of time but also the cultural richness of Australian Indigenous societies prior to British invasion. Archaeologists also work to understand more recent colonial entanglements and impacts as they explore the material culture of social, economic and environmental change since First Contact. Land-based and maritime heritage sites not only serve as a reminder of the past but also continue to contribute to the character and economy of Australia today. HASS graduates, who can think laterally, critically and creatively, make up a large proportion of people working for Indigenous organisations as teachers, social workers, anthropologists, historians, archaeologists and government officials. The proposed fee changes will not only curtail this work, but will also disadvantage women, who make up to 60% of HASS students, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and people from non-traditional education backgrounds who use HASS degrees as pathways into universities.

Archaeology – global and local

All Australian archaeology departments maintain international research and engagement collaborations with key institutions in Africa, Asia, Europe, the Middle East and the Pacific. These collaborations elevate Australia’s standing within the international research community on globally important issues. These international connections help promote greater understanding and appreciation of our own unique Indigenous cultures. We also maintain relationships locally with communities in every State.

The Australian archaeological community is united. We ask the government to rethink its proposed fee restructure to ensure the HASS sector continues to produce socially engaged and scientifically excellent graduates.



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