



Social Sciences for Australia's Future

Acknowledgment of Country

The Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the Traditional Custodians of the lands throughout Australia where the Academy's staff and Fellows live and work each day.

The Academy recognises Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' continuing connection to land, waters, and culture. We learn from Indigenous knowledge and the cultural authority of Elders past and present.



The Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia (the Academy) is an elected Fellowship of experts that leads national conversations, provides research support and grants and promotes and supports excellence in the social sciences. We connect policy makers and the public with relevant findings and expertise, act on reconciliation and empower the next generation of research leaders.

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The Academy's bespoke artwork was developed by Indigenous design and digital agency ingeous studios, whose stylised design represents the work of the Academy and its Fellows. The design tells a story about the work of the Academy in improving the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities through inclusion, knowledge sharing and understanding.

“Social science is not just a discipline. It’s a way of seeing the world — of asking the questions that matter, of understanding the forces that shape health, wellbeing and justice. **Without it, science risks becoming detached from society. With it, we have a chance to build systems that work for people, not just in theory but in practice.**”

— Former Prime Minister The Hon. Julia Gillard AC¹

President's Introduction

The Academy of the *Social Sciences in Australia* presents the *Social Sciences for Australia's Future* at a time of monumental reform in Australia's education and research sector and growing uncertainty about our future. Social science expertise, insights and skills are essential to help government, industry, communities and individuals understand, navigate and respond to these challenges.



As this Report makes clear, the social sciences make a tangible contribution to the lives of all Australians. They shape our laws and public policies, inform urban and regional development, strengthen the prosperity and democratic resilience of our communities and deepen our understanding of Australia's place in the world.

Social scientists work across every sector of the economy. One-third of the Australian workforce has a social science qualification, including in key professions and occupations of current and projected need. The social sciences dominate Australia's post-secondary education and training system, accounting for around half of all university and vocational education and training enrolments. These graduates have strong employment outcomes and provide Australians and adaptable capabilities across careers and industries.

The scale of this contribution underpins how we lift educational attainment. The Australian Government has set a national target of 80 per cent of working-age Australians holding tertiary qualifications by 2050. The social sciences will be central to shaping the equitable systems transformation required, including important pathways for both First Nations students and equity cohorts who are strongly represented across social science areas of study.

Despite their presence, the role of the social sciences is not always recognised—they are too often hidden in plain sight. This Report amplifies the impact of social science research and education through detailed case studies. We must tell these stories to strengthen the visibility and public confidence in the value of social science expertise to the community.

It's never been more urgent.

The social sciences are always evolving. New approaches are emerging, including the centrality of First Nations knowledges. Social scientists are adapting to technological and societal trends and working across disciplinary boundaries to address complex problems. But there are significant pressure points. Some disciplines are declining, student demand is fluctuating and there are strains on the future research workforce.

As Australia moves towards more challenge-oriented research, the social sciences must have a seat on the National Resilience and Science Council and other governance bodies. We need to build stronger connections to government and industry so that social science insights can have greater impact on informed decision-making and future-focused planning.

This Report expands upon the Academy's State of the Social Sciences 2021 Report. Published

in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, that report highlighted a lesson that remains just as relevant today: our ability to respond to major challenges depends on multidisciplinary responses. Five years later, and the world has shifted. Geopolitical instability, economic pressures and increasing social fragmentation are creating fresh anxieties and overturning long-held certainties.

Social Sciences for Australia's Future responds to today's context. Its Findings and Priorities for Action draw on evidence, data analysis and wide consultation with experts and stakeholders. I am grateful to everyone who participated in the consultation and contributed to the development of this report.

Australia's future will be shaped not only by what we can build and what technologies we can develop, but by how well we understand ourselves, our communities and our society.

That is why the social sciences matter.

And that is why their future is central to Australia's future.

**Professor Kate Darian-Smith, FASSA
President, Academy of the Australian
Sciences in Australia**



Social Sciences for Australia’s Future

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Executive Summary

The social sciences are critical to Australia's ability to respond to a changing world. The *Social Sciences for Australia's Future* report explains why the social sciences matter to Australia, now and in the future. It shows how social science expertise leads to innovative solutions and practical outcomes that address complex national and global challenges, and support Australia's social wellbeing and economic prosperity.

It identifies priorities for action to strengthen national social science capability and ensure it is positioned to deliver the knowledge, evidence and expertise now and for future generations. The Report is divided into two parts:

Part 1: The Social Sciences Shape Australia

sets out the scale and impact of the social sciences across all aspects of Australian life.

Part 2: Social Science Sector Snapshots

examine the contribution of the social sciences in education and research, across the school, vocational education and training, higher education and research sectors.

Key findings

1. **Australia has strong foundations in social science education and research excellence, and these capabilities are of national importance.** Yet the value of the social sciences, and the opportunities they create through education and employment, are often understated. For Australia to be globally competitive, the profile of the social sciences must be elevated in ways which encourage greater participation and impact in social science research, education, and work.
2. **Social science strengthens Australia's democratic resilience, social cohesion and wellbeing for an equitable and prosperous future.** Critical inquiry and applied social science research provide analysis of social and economic division, racism and discrimination, and how these can be tackled over time. Investment in stronger educational scaffolding from school to tertiary study will equip young people with the capacities to assess information, participate in respectful dialogue across differences and engage with the responsibilities of democratic citizenship.
3. **The social sciences are essential for Australia's current and projected workforce.** Nearly a third of the Australian workforce hold a social science qualification, including in the professions. 51% of higher education and 43% of vocational education and training enrolments are in the social sciences. Graduates have strong employment outcomes, broad occupational flexibility and destinations, and make a significant contribution to priority areas including education, care, psychology and community services.
4. **Indigenous Knowledges are transforming the social sciences, with First Nations leadership crucial to effective education and research outcomes.** Recognition and support of Indigenous ways of knowing and being and of self-determination is essential for the contemporary social sciences. Across education and research systems, First Nations-led, culturally responsive and place-based approaches deliver stronger outcomes for Indigenous students and communities. Indigenous leadership, governance, evidence and accountability must be embedded across policy design and implementation.
5. **National and global challenges have important social dimensions and solutions require disciplinary and multidisciplinary insights.** Social science knowledges underpin Australia's capacity to anticipate, understand and respond to the complexities of unprecedented economic, social, geopolitical and environmental change. Australia's move towards challenge-led research depends on multidisciplinary insights, with social scientists leading and working alongside other experts from the humanities, health, and the technological and physical sciences across academia, industry, government, and the community.
6. **Social science places people and social systems at the heart of technological transformation.** Social scientists are actively researching how AI is affecting learning, work and wellbeing, while identifying opportunities and ways to manage risks through governance, legislation, work design and ethical frameworks. As technological change accelerates, curriculum reform across education sectors, and careful workforce planning will need to be in place to support safe and effective adoption.
7. **Australia's social science capability is uneven, with some disciplines experiencing pressure.** Reforms across education, research and skills systems, combined with funding policies, institutional priorities, and changing patterns of student demand, are reshaping the social sciences and the health of disciplines. Some are thriving, while others – including those needed to secure Australia's immediate and long-term sovereign capability – require further support.
8. **The future impact of the social sciences will depend on their ability to continue to evolve.** Advances in AI, along with growing engagement with Indigenous Knowledges, Open Science and challenge-led research are reshaping how knowledge is created, shared and applied. Responding to these changes will require investment in research capability and training to equip the next generation of social science researchers with the skills, expertise and collaborative capabilities needed to work in new and evolving research environments.
9. **Stronger connections between expertise and public policy are needed to support better outcomes for Australians.** While the Report highlights examples of social science research informing policy development and evaluation, Australia's research-to-policy ecosystem remains largely fragmented. New strategies are urgently required to create greater opportunities and incentives for government and social scientists to collaborate more actively to drive social innovation and better policy outcomes and deepen the use of evidence in policymaking.
10. **Australia lacks the data infrastructure needed for effective planning and policy.** Existing data provide limited visibility of the social science workforce, education pathways, research capacity or discipline-level trends. The importance of comprehensive, consistent and connected data to effectively assess and plan for Australia's future is evident throughout the Report.
11. **Coordinated national action across research, education and engagement is needed to raise the profile of the social sciences and realise their full potential for Australia's future.** This includes promoting the value of the social sciences, support for educators and researchers, stronger links between research and policy, investment in capability development, and greater recognition and representation of social science expertise within national skills, innovation and research governance and systems.

List of priorities for action

The Report identifies 31 priority actions to strengthen Australia's social science capability and ensure that the social sciences continue to build the knowledge, skills and evidence needed to support a more prosperous, resilient and secure future.

First Nations Peoples and the Social Sciences

1. Transform Australia's education and research systems by recognising First Nations peoples as leaders, knowledge holders and decision-makers, and embedding Indigenous Knowledge Systems, genuine partnership and culturally safe practices across teaching, learning, research and governance.

Social Science Research and Public Policy Impact

2. Strengthen research-to-policy connections by mapping the social science research translation ecosystem and expanding the use of proven approaches, including knowledge brokering, policy fellowships, embedded researcher and co-production models.

Making the Value of the Social Sciences Visible

3. Launch a coordinated national campaign to demonstrate the value and impact of the social sciences. The campaign should build understanding among students, employers, governments and the community of the essential role of the social sciences as a national capability.
4. Promote and support Social Sciences Week to highlight how social sciences are addressing Australia's current and future challenges.

School Education Snapshot

5. The Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority strengthen Civics and Citizenship Education (CCE) across all levels of schooling and embed the Intercultural Understanding general capability in consistent teaching and assessment across subjects. This requires sustained investment in teacher capability through Initial Teacher Education in CCE, ongoing professional development and high-quality classroom resources on democratic institutions, engaging with intercultural contexts and respectful dialogue on contested issues.
6. Implement the recommendations of the House Standing Committee report on Building Asia Capability in Australia, including the development of a 10-year national Asia capability strategy. This will require a focus on language literacy development across education sectors from primary to university.
7. Commonwealth, state and territory governments to establish an expert working group to examine the availability and resourcing of social science disciplines at risk in the senior secondary years, and develop strategies to ensure these are supported. These efforts should complement work by the Australian Tertiary Education Commission to investigate critical disciplines which are at risk at tertiary level.

8. Adopt a long-term, whole-of-system approach to First Nations education reform, with governance arrangements that support implementation and accountability, and embed Indigenous-led evidence, community knowledge and local context throughout policy design and implementation.
9. Establish a multi-disciplinary, multi-sector expert group to explore how education inequalities are produced and the various evidence and datasets needed to understand and address educational inequity in the long-term.
10. Conduct a review of the funding, social and market factors shaping schooling and school systems and outcomes, and the long-term systems change needed to address educational inequity.
11. Support research and education sector engagement with the recommendations of the Decadal Plan for Australian Education Research.

Vocational Education and Training Snapshot

12. Strengthen social science and educator expertise in national skills governance by ensuring vocational education and training educators are represented in the work of Jobs and Skills Councils and embedding social science expertise in the design of transferable, foundational and human capability skills across industries.
13. Consider establishing an Education and Training Jobs and Skills Council to provide dedicated stewardship of Education training packages.
14. Establish a social science-led TAFE and Community Centre of Excellence for Foundation Skills to translate evidence into practice, strengthen collaboration across TAFE, industry and community providers, and build educator capability through research-informed approaches to foundation skills development.
15. Prioritise First Nations vocational education and training workforce development by investing in the recruitment, retention and career progression of First Nations educators and recognising their critical role in improving learner participation and completion outcomes.
16. Accelerate the development of a comprehensive national evidence base for the vocational education and training workforce by collecting and publishing consistent, high-quality workforce data to support workforce planning, tertiary harmonisation and National Skills Agreement reforms.

Higher Education Snapshot

17. The Australian Government establish a clear timeline and principles for replacing the Job-ready Graduates Package with a funding system for Commonwealth supported students that is equitable and sustainable.
18. Governments and higher education institutions monitor the impact of international student place caps on student demand and the long-term sustainability of the higher education sector, while recognising the important contribution of international education to Australia's trade relationships, global engagement and alumni networks.
19. Support greater integration across disciplines in higher education curricula by identifying opportunities to reduce institutional barriers, including internal structures and funding arrangements that limit multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches aligned with future societal and workforce needs.
20. Establish a coordinated approach through the Australian Tertiary Education Commission to identify at-risk disciplines of national importance and support responses through university compacts, curriculum development and stronger links with schools.
21. Prioritise support for First Nations student participation, noting that many experience intersectional disadvantage, to support Closing the Gap targets.
22. Improve visibility of student diversity by publishing data at the Field of Education level to enable institutions to identify areas of disadvantage and target appropriate support. Explore options to extend cost of living support for students undertaking work integrated learning and internships, consistent with the principles underpinning the Commonwealth Prac Payment.
23. Improve higher education workforce planning by collecting and publishing workforce data by Field of Education, including employment classifications.

Research Snapshot

24. Ensure social science expertise is represented on the *Ambitious Australia* National Resilience and Science Council and any supporting challenge-led governance structures.
25. Establish social cohesion and democratic resilience as a core national capability under the National Resilience and Science Council to coordinate effort and align investment in this field with Australia's broader social and economic objectives.
26. Increase Australia's overall investment in research and development as a share of gross domestic product towards globally competitive levels, including appropriate indexation, to strengthen Australia's research capability, including in the social sciences, while reforming governance and administration to maximise the impact of public investment.
27. Provide funding certainty for the National Collaborative Research Infrastructure Strategy beyond 2029, by committing to a sustainable, long-term funding model.
28. Identify responsibility for national leadership on Open Science to drive a coordinated approach and ensure that Australia is well-placed to maximise the impact of its social science research, and support participation in globally competitive funding schemes.
29. Develop a National Research Workforce Strategy in partnership with governments, universities, industry, and the research sector. Support its implementation with a comprehensive national profile of Australia's research workforce and ongoing national workforce data collection through the Australian Research Council Research Insights Capability program or the Australian Tertiary Education Commission *State of the Sector* reporting.
30. Secure Australia's future research capability in the social sciences by implementing the recommendations of *Ambitious Australia* to strengthen the domestic Higher Degree by Research pipeline and improve researcher career pathways.
31. Sustain and strengthen Indigenous-led research by supporting First Nations research leadership and career pathways, embedding culturally safe research practices, recognising Indigenous Knowledge systems, and advancing Indigenous Data Sovereignty and Indigenous Data Governance across the research system.

Part 1:

The Social Sciences Shape Australia

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What is Social Science?

The defining feature of all social science disciplines is a focus on the *social*.

Social science is the study of human society, its peoples, cultures, structures, and institutions and the relationships, meanings and practices that emerge when humans interact in groups.

Social science explains and analyses the patterns of behaviour that emerge beyond individual actions, placing them within biological, historical, political, economic, environmental and cultural contexts.

Social scientists draw on systematic and verifiable methods to examine how individuals, groups, and institutions interact and use this knowledge to educate, predict and shape the social world. Social science disciplines employ both common and distinct theoretical models and a range of quantitative and qualitative approaches.

The social science disciplines include:



Some disciplines such as history, linguistics, communications, and philosophy intersect with the humanities in their historical, interpretative, empirical and theoretical approaches. Others, such as demography, geography, psychology, public health and statistics employ methodologies that intersect with the natural, technological, health and medical sciences. Social science disciplines such as accounting, education, law, management, psychology, public policy and social work incorporate a professional orientation. Social scientists are also increasingly cross-disciplinary in the ways that they work.

Social science classifications

In Australia, there is no consistent definition of social sciences within the administrative and institutional structures of disciplines and organisational units. The term “social science” may be used to refer to a combination of disciplines or, more generically, to describe forms of teaching and research. Social sciences are also part of the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences (HASS) categorisation, which is widely used.

This Report uses data from government sources to analyse social science research and education. The national classifications of social science Fields of Research (FoR) and Fields of Education (FoE) include some disciplines

that also fall within the humanities, the arts and the health sciences. The Report acknowledges this overlap where possible.

The Australian and New Zealand Standard Research Classification (ANZSRC) refers to social science research and development in following FoR codes: 33 Built environment and design; 35 Commerce, management, tourism, and services; 38 Economics; 39 Education; 42 Health sciences; 43 History, heritage and archaeology; 44 Human society; 45 Indigenous studies; 47 Language, communications and culture; 48 Law and legal studies; 50 Philosophy and religious studies; and 52 Psychology.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) classifies social science tertiary education and training in the as following FoE codes: 07 Education; 08 Management and commerce; 09 Society and culture.

The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) classifies social science primary and secondary education by the following learning areas: Society and its environment and Languages other than English. The HASS categorisation is used to refer to integrated social science and humanities subjects within the Australian Curriculum.

Social Science is Everywhere

The social sciences influence every aspect of our lives, from the early years to old age, wherever we study, work and play.

Millions of Australian graduates of vocational, higher education and professional qualifications in the social sciences are employed across all sectors of the economy: in business and management, in public health, in all levels of government, and in professions such as law, teaching, accountancy and psychology.

Social science expertise shapes our laws and public policy, the development of our cities and regions, the prosperity and democratic resilience of our communities and Australia's engagement on the world stage.

Yet the contributions of social science to Australia's society and economy are not always recognised — they are too often hidden in plain sight.

This Report amplifies why and how social science matters to Australia, providing examples of how social science expertise leads to innovative solutions and practical outcomes to address the complex national challenges that Australia faces now and in the future.

The social science education and research ecosystem

Social science is taught, learnt and used across a diverse and interconnected education and research ecosystem. The main sector and institutional components, as examined in this Report:



Schools

Schools, where through the Australian Curriculum, teachers equip all students with social science knowledge in areas such as society and culture and through core capabilities, with greater specialisation in social sciences disciplines offered in the senior secondary years.



Vocational education and training

Vocational education and training (VET) provide job-ready training for roles in, for example, the care economy, business and early childhood education, and incorporating social science approaches to program development, delivery, and evaluation. Nearly half of all VET program enrolments are in social science related fields.



Universities and higher-education

Universities and higher-education providers offer discrete social science courses; professionally oriented qualifications; multidisciplinary courses that include components of social science, and social science concepts and skills, such as research methods or ethics, that are integrated into other courses in the sciences, technology, humanities and the arts. Just over half of all higher-education enrolments are in social science related fields.



Research

Research institutions, such as universities and research centres, think tanks and non-government organisations (NGOs), where social scientists may work within a disciplinary framework, or as part of a multidisciplinary team.

Australian Social Sciences in Numbers

The social sciences are deeply connected and embedded in our social systems and structures, and in the everyday lives of all Australians



Social sciences in numbers



Foundational Education and Training

More than **4.1 million** primary and secondary students study social sciences as part of the Australian Curriculum.

In 2024, **54%** of Year 12 students (more than **133,000** students) were enrolled in a Society and its Environment subject.¹



Vocational Education and Training

In 2025, **43%** of VET enrolments (or nearly **1.2 million** enrolments) were in social science programs in critical sectors such as community service, legal administration, aged care and early childhood education.²

In 2025, **19%** of VET students from low-SES backgrounds (more than **228,600** students) were enrolled in a social science program.³

In 2025, **39%** of First Nations VET students were enrolled in a social science program (more than **59,000** students).⁴



Government, Business, Industry and Community

31% of the total Australian workforce (more than **3.7 million** people) have a post-secondary social science qualification.⁵

Thousands of social scientists also work in specialist research and advisory centres across the public and private sectors, including in education and research institutions, business and industry, non-profit organisations, and stand-alone think tanks.

Professional workforce: More than **1.2 million** social science graduates work as accredited psychologists (more than **50,400**), finance and insurance professionals (more than **546,000**), lawyers (more than **106,100**) management and human resource professionals (more than **230,600**), urban and regional planners (more than **18,000**), social workers (more than **47,400**) and primary, secondary and special education teachers (more than **362,300**).⁶

13% of the Commonwealth Australian Public Service (APS) (more than **25,000** employees) are social science graduates.⁸ Public servants around Australia regularly draw on the expertise of social scientists in developing, implementing and evaluating policy and public service delivery.

Care and support economy: More than **608,000** social science graduates fill critical skills and workforce gaps as early childhood education and care workers (more than **184,600**), and aged and disability support workers (more than **376,300**).⁷

65% of Australia's elected Senators and Members of the Federal Parliament (**147** parliamentarians) have at least one social science qualification.

More than **50** discipline, teaching and professional social science organisations and associations support professional development and networks across Australia.



Higher Education

In 2024, **51%** of all university enrolments at undergraduate and postgraduate levels (more than **851,700** students) were in a social science program.⁹

More than **2,900** bachelor, 1,700 master's by coursework, and **600** higher degree by research (HDR) social science programs are delivered by **42** universities and more than **88** other higher education providers in Australia.¹⁰

In 2024, **30%** of all HDR enrolments and 28% of all HDR completions were in social science programs.¹¹

Social science university graduates have excellent employment outcomes, with **92%** of undergraduate, **95%** of postgraduate coursework, and **92%** of HDR students in full-time employment three years after graduation.¹² In 2024, **54%** of all First Nations university enrolments (more than **24,500** students) were in a social science program.¹³



Research

Between 2021–2025, **\$958.9 million** in Australian Research Council (ARC) competitive research grants (Discovery and Linkage) were awarded to social science researchers (**24%** of all funding).¹⁴

Between 2021–2025, **\$79.3 million** was awarded to **23** social science ARC Australian Laureate Fellowship recipients (**28%** of funding, **23%** of fellowships).¹⁵

Between 2023-2026, **\$104.8 million** was awarded to three social science ARC Centres of Excellence (**21.5%** of funding).¹⁶

In 2025, Australia's social science research is ranked sixth in terms of its proportion of global scholarly citations. Law and legal studies (ranked first globally, citation mean **11.80**), Education (ranked fourth globally, citation mean **20.36**), Human society (ranked fourth globally, citation mean **19.07**), and History, heritage and archaeology (ranked fifth globally, citation mean **10.28**).¹⁷

Social Sciences are Relevant and Future-focused

The social sciences are constantly evolving to meet the demands of a future Australia



Social sciences and Australia's future

Social science disciplines such as economics, sociology, political sciences and education are increasingly **collaborating with global research partners and networks** to address the social, technological and environmental challenges confronting humanity and our planet.

Social scientists are also **forging new relationships with industry, government and the community** to ensure that their **research delivers benefits for all Australians**.

Traditional social science knowledge and methods are being reshaped – for instance, **through the recognition of Indigenous Knowledges and co-design with research end-users in industry, government and the community**. These developments are reflected in the case studies and stories in this Report.

Social sciences are central to addressing future challenges, and social scientists are playing vital roles in leading and contributing to interdisciplinary futures agendas.

The National Science and Research Priorities, the directions set in *Ambitious Australia* and the challenges for Australia identified through consultation for this Report have technical, scientific and human dimensions. They all require the behavioural, economic, institutional and cultural expertise offered through the social sciences alongside insights from other fields. **The social sciences are leading the shift to multidisciplinary approaches in research methodologies, team composition and project design.**¹

The future of Australian social sciences depends on maintaining resilient and viable disciplines. Investment in both investigator-led and applied social science research is needed to support breakthrough discoveries and innovation, and to ensure Australia remains globally competitive.

As the rapid **integration of AI into existing social research and education unfolds**, social scientists are at the forefront of exploring the ethical, legal and pedagogical frameworks for the safe use of new and emerging technologies now and in the future.

Futures research in the social sciences

Australia and the world are facing new and unprecedented technological, scientific and social challenges, and we can no longer rely on historical trends or business-as-usual futures thinking. Australian social scientists are at the forefront of research which delivers the new foresight and futures scenarios needed to navigate and design long-term policies and strategies for a resilient and sustainable future.

The **Geneva Science and Diplomacy Anticipator (GESDA)** advances science, diplomacy, and societal impact at the global scale. Australia’s social scientists are helping to build this anticipatory focus through contributions to GESDA’s Science Breakthrough Radar, which maps science and technology advances from human, societal and planetary perspectives over the next 5, 10 and 25 years. Social scientists are crucial to delivery of anticipatory insights as they are translated to multinational actions by government and the private sector.²

In Australia, the **Emerging Technologies Research Lab** at Monash University led by design and futures anthropologist ARC Laureate and Distinguished Professor Sarah Pink FASSA, has a broad future-focused agenda. One multidisciplinary ARC-funded project (led by Professors Yolande Strengers and Pink) collaborated with industry on energy transition. By conducting ethnographic research in residential homes, the research delivered new foresight and modelled world-first qualitative scenarios about future digital energy technology use and household consumption. These insights have helped the energy sector forecast needs and make evidence-informed decisions about infrastructure investments for affordable, reliable electricity provision.³

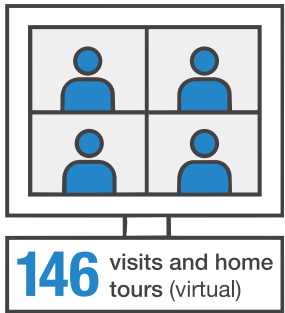
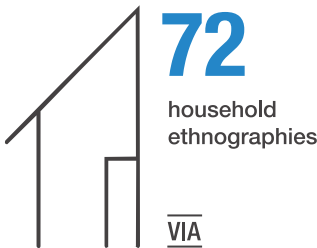
Image courtesy of Distinguished Professor Sarah Pink, appears in Pink S, Korsmeyer H, Dahlgren K, Strengers Y, Martin R, Kaviani F and Nicholls L (2022) *Digital energy futures: Foresights for future living*, Emerging Technologies Research Lab, Monash University, Melbourne.

DIGITAL ENERGY FUTURES: PROJECT MATERIALS AND DATA

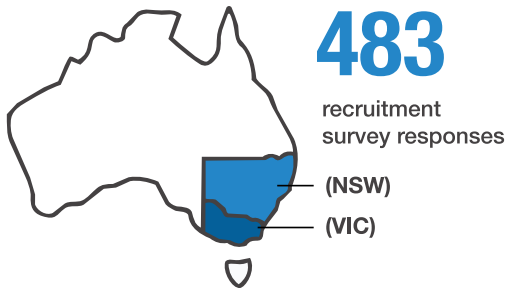
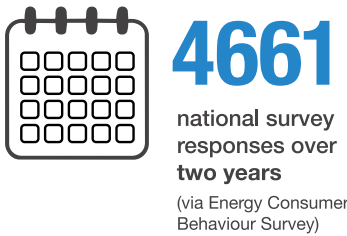
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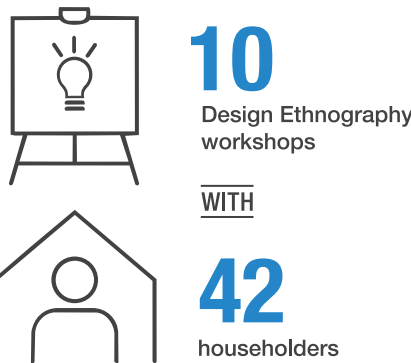
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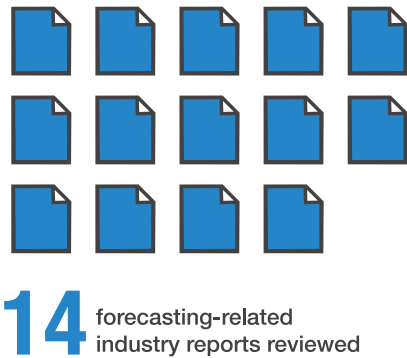
STAGE THREE



STAGE FOUR



STAGE FIVE



First Nations Peoples and the Social Sciences

Truth-telling is the foundation to addressing past and ongoing harms



Australian education and research are embedded in institutions, such as universities, that are the product of the colonisation of Australia. Western systems and structures of knowledge have dominated mainstream teaching and inquiry, constructing hierarchies of race and perpetuating injustices. The historical impact of the academic study of Australia's many First Nations cultures and peoples by those in the social sciences, humanities and sciences has been damaging. The past and ongoing harms of colonisation and systemic racism include:

Contributing to the marginalisation of First Nations peoples by disproportionately framing research around deficits rather than strengths and capabilities.

Separating First Nations peoples from the collection and stewardship of their data and cultural heritage.

Creating barriers to First Nations involvement in mainstream education and research, resulting in inappropriate recognition, understanding and incorporation of traditional and contemporary Indigenous Knowledges.

Placing an enormous weight of expectation on the few Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers, educators and teachers in leadership positions in social science across the tertiary and research sector.

Confronting these harms, and addressing their consequences, requires the comprehensive transformation of all aspects of Australia's research and education systems. This paradigm shift necessitates **discipline-level renewals of knowledge and methodologies** to enable the resetting of existing and future relationships between First Nations peoples and non-Indigenous researchers and educators.

Truth-telling about the role of Australia's institutions and academics in perpetuating injustices against First Nations peoples lays the foundations for this process. The Dhoonbak Goobgoowana initiative, where the University of Melbourne has acknowledged its complicated and troubled engagement with First Nations peoples since the nineteenth century, is one example of truth-telling at the institutional level.¹

Acknowledging Indigenous Knowledges and collaborating with Indigenous Knowledges holders will transform the social sciences

The rich traditional knowledge of Australia's First Nations peoples originated over 65,000 years ago and is embedded in holistic understandings of deep time and history, culture and creativity, law and governance, forms of society and relationships with Country. **The protection of Indigenous Knowledges and Indigenous Knowledge Systems is essential for the maintenance of cultural authority and its transmission to subsequent generations.**

Indigenous Knowledges are generally tied to a specific place and localised ways of knowing and being. They are also global, and the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* underlines the rights of Indigenous peoples to cultural and intellectual autonomy.²

In Australia, a growing number of researchers across the social sciences and in other fields collaborate with First Nations Elders and communities to recognise and learn from Indigenous Knowledges. This involves **non-Indigenous scholars recognising First Nations knowledge-holders as research peers and the custodians of intellectual traditions and expertise.**

Indigenous Knowledges offer perspectives that enrich, expand and challenge Western-based social science approaches, research and evidence. There are multiple examples where this sharing of knowledge is unfolding: in environmental management and disaster resilience research; in strategies for understanding and supporting multilingual cultural relations in First Nation communities; or in developing pedagogies of learning on Country that will benefit First Nations peoples and non-Indigenous Australians.

Genuinely collaborative approaches will transform the research and educational practices of the social sciences in disciplines including anthropology, history, linguistics, education, public health and law. This work “requires responsive research methodologies that prioritise Indigenous self-determination and leadership, and tangible outcomes that directly benefit local Indigenous communities.”³

Indigenous Data Sovereignty (IDS) and Indigenous Data Governance (IDG) enable self-determination

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are among the most counted populations in the world, and among the least heard. Information from or about First Nations peoples that relates to or impacts their lives, both at the individual and collective level, includes:

- Demographic, legal, health, language and service-use data
- Indigenous Knowledges and Indigenous Knowledge Systems, including about lifeways, cultures and practices
- Data about lands and land history, biodiversity, water and other resources.⁴

Data is an important asset for First Nations peoples. Data enables self-determination, supports communities to make better informed decisions about policies and programs, preserves storytelling and cultural knowledge reproduction for economic benefit, and protects intellectual property. Indigenous data is also important to non-Indigenous Australians and governments by informing policy and funding decisions in key areas such as health, education and employment to improve outcomes for First Nations peoples.⁵

Much Indigenous data has been and continues to be collected, used and stored by non-Indigenous researchers and practitioners in the social sciences, humanities and sciences, with little consideration of data information rights. This risks reproducing biases and dominant

cultural norms, and perpetuating understandings that position First Nations peoples as objects of study rather than sovereign individuals.

Grounded in the *UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, Indigenous Data Sovereignty (IDS) is the right of Indigenous peoples, communities and organisations to exercise ownership over their data.

In 2015, the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia funded the first workshop on IDS, bringing together First Nations scholars from Australia, Aotearoa New Zealand, Canada and the United States. This was a catalyst for the formation of the *Maiam nayri Wingara* Data Sovereignty Collective in 2017. At the inaugural IDS Summit in 2018, the Collective agreed on key IDS definitions and rights-based principles.⁶

IDS is practiced through Indigenous Data Governance (IDG), and these are interdependent.

Governance of data: The right of Indigenous peoples to decide what, how and why data is collected, accessed, used and managed throughout the data lifecycle.

Data for governance within Indigenous communities: Indigenous peoples have access to the data they need to shape, govern and evaluate policies and programs in ways that are relevant to their needs and aspirations.⁷

Applying FAIR and CARE principles

In 2018, the Global Indigenous Data Alliance developed the CARE principles to sit alongside the FAIR (Findable, Accessible, Interoperable and Reusable) principles and address unique issues associated with Indigenous data. The CARE principles provide guidance to ensure:

- **Collective benefit** to Indigenous peoples
- **Authority to control**, recognising data rights, interests and governance
- **Responsibility** to the providers for expanding Indigenous capability and fostering positive relationships
- **Ethics**, ensuring processes and data use minimises harm, maximises wellbeing and ensures justice.

Australia has made significant progress in building the infrastructure and protocols needed to support IDS and IDG. National investment includes the Australian Research Data Commons (ARDC), which is developing tools to embed the CARE and FAIR principles in research practice. The ARDC-led HASS and Indigenous Research Data Commons is creating the foundations for a national Indigenous data asset through shared standards, metadata, training and Indigenous-led capability development.⁸

In 2024, the Australian Government further strengthened this agenda through the *Framework for Governance of Indigenous Data*, embedding IDS principles across the public sector and supporting the Closing the Gap Priority Reforms.⁹ Complementing these initiatives, the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies *Yumi Sabe* Indigenous Research Exchange improves access to research data and knowledge for the benefit of First Nations peoples.¹⁰

First Nations leadership is essential

Australia's National Science and Research Priorities include **Priority 3: Elevating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge systems**. Achieving this goal requires a profound shift in Australia's national science and research sectors, with comprehensive institutional change and broader public awareness of the contributions of First Nations peoples as inventors and innovators, and Australia's first scientists and social scientists.

It will require the development of national frameworks for protecting Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property led by First Nations scholars and researchers, alongside research investment that recognises Indigenous Knowledge and non-traditional research outputs. Workforce development and capacity for First Nations researchers will be critical.

Leadership by First Nations scholars and governance and decision-making in collaboration with Indigenous Knowledges holders are crucial for social sciences research and education.

When Indigenous authority is introduced early, this results in challenges to deficit framings of issues, data and contexts. Local priorities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities need to reshape agendas so that solutions become culturally and contextually grounded.

Short-term programs and changing one element in isolation will not drive sustained cultural and systems-level transformation. Research has shown that outcomes for First Nations peoples improve when multiple parts of the system move together – leadership, curriculum, pedagogy, workforce capability, community engagement and accountability.

Participants at a 2026 Academy policy roundtable on First Nations education policy made clear that every stage of the education and research system, from early years through to post-secondary qualifications and advanced research training, must be reformed. Critically, this must be grounded in a rights-based approach and in genuine partnership with First Nations researchers, leaders, and communities.¹¹

Education providers, research organisations, government agencies and other organisations must move beyond generic inclusion efforts toward mandatory and systematically recognising and supporting First Nations leadership, Indigenous Knowledges and a more holistic approach to ensuring expanded First Nations participation in education, employment, and the economy.

Priority for action

1. Transform Australia's opportunity to transform its education and research systems by recognising First Nations peoples as leaders, knowledge holders and decision-makers, and embedding Indigenous Knowledge Systems, genuine partnership and culturally safe practices across teaching, learning, research and governance.

Case study

From Truth-telling to Treaty: The Yoorrook Justice Commission

“Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander academics strengthened the Commission’s evidence base by blending their social science scholarship with Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing.”

– Commissioner Maggie Walter FASSA, Distinguished Professor Emerita, University of Tasmania

Justice and self-determination for First Nations peoples

Good policy and decision-making

Strengthen social connection and dialogue

Equitable educational and economic participation

Anticipate the future and make sense of the past

The Yoorrook Justice Commission was Victoria’s and Australia’s first formal truth-telling process led by First Peoples. As the Commission has pointed out, truth-telling is necessary for healing and policy reforms which address historic and systemic injustice and provide an opportunity for all Australians to understand the full history of colonisation and its impacts.

Yoorrook’s impact has been immediate and far-reaching. Between 2021 and 2025, the Commission gathered thousands of truths through public hearings, written, verbal and visual submissions, community engagement, and extensive use of records and archives. Much of this evidence can be accessed online, inviting collective sense-making and supporting healing as an ongoing process.

The 146 recommendations contained in the final report, along with a series of interim and subject-specific reports, focus government decision-making on the tangible actions needed for lasting justice and self-determination, with an evidence-based foundation for monitoring implementation over time. In November 2025, Victoria became the first Australian jurisdiction to sign a Treaty with First Nations people, negotiated between the Victorian Government and the First Peoples’ Assembly of Victoria. A new entity, Gellung Warl, has been established with an elected structure to support First Nations participation in Government decision making.

The Commission treated oral testimony, documents, and institutional records as formal evidence. The final report represents a First Nations approach to knowledge creation and storytelling which challenges long-held notions about how different kinds of evidence are valued, in particular the evidence of lived experience.

Yoorrook was also the first inquiry in Australia to embed Indigenous Data Sovereignty principles. First Peoples who provided evidence maintain ownership and control of how their data is collected, stored, and used. This approach was central to building trust and provides a model for other institutions to consider who benefits from evidence making, who decides how information is stored and shared, and how harm can be avoided when knowledge is used in public policy.

Challenges for Australia's Future

The biggest challenges facing Australia and the world are fundamentally social, affecting the daily lives and experiences of individuals and groups, whether as small as a family or as large as a nation.

Understanding social systems allows us to act deliberately to improve the lives of current and future generations.



Social systems

The complex challenges identified here are interconnected and **require multidisciplinary and future-focused approaches**. While global in scope, they have local impacts and must be addressed through **local knowledges and applications** that are relevant for Australia.

To support system-wide solutions, Australian social science expertise works with other disciplines – technology and engineering, the physical, natural and medical sciences, humanities and the arts — and engages and collaborates with government, industry and communities.

Investment in social science **lifelong education and training and research and development**, and ensuring **access to independent and verifiable information** are critical for Australia's future.



Challenges



Justice and self-determination for First Nations peoples

The legacies of Australia's dispossession and exclusion of First Nations peoples shape present-day systemic inequalities, institutional racism and discrimination, and the overlooking of Indigenous knowledges. In comparison with non-Indigenous Australians, First Nations peoples experience lower life expectancies and health outcomes, over-representation in the criminal justice and child protection systems, and significant disparities in economic and educational participation. Progress against the targets of the Closing the Gap National Agreement is slow, static or going backwards. Social justice and self-determination for First Nations peoples requires diverse expertise and genuine co-design with communities in research and policy. Truth-telling and a shared historical understanding are crucial to reconciliation between First Nations and non-Indigenous Australians now and in the future.



Democracy, trust and diversity

Australia's democratic resilience is under threat, with trust declining in expertise, institutions and governmental processes. Economic insecurity, rising political and cultural polarisation, and the prevalence of online misinformation and disinformation, including from global sources, are among factors contributing to social fragmentation and insularity. How do we restore the cooperation and a sense of belonging and shared purpose fundamental to a safe and well-functioning democratic society? How do we balance individual freedoms with societal wellbeing? Understanding the factors that build trust and support social connection will strengthen civic engagement and respectful dialogue, and enable diverse Australian communities to flourish now and in the future.



The future of work

Australia's workforce is undergoing unprecedented disruption. The uneven integration of AI into everyday life is replacing some roles and augmenting and creating others. Industrial transformation and shifts in demand have national impacts, including the workforce needs of the expanding care economy, and a raft of new 'green' jobs in response to climate change. Planning for a sustainable and skilled workforce must be evidence-based, and the human dimension is crucial. Career adaptability through life-long learning and transferable skills development will be key to employability, with occupation and workplace design supporting both productivity and individual and workplace wellbeing. An integrated, accessible and fit-for-purpose education and training system, and social supports to optimise workforce participation for all Australians is essential.



People at the centre of technological transformation

The rapid development and uptake of new technologies, especially generative AI, have the potential to boost national productivity and greatly improve people's lives. Yet there are risks that the pace of technological change will outstrip our ability to manage it. The challenge is human: how do we ensure that we have the knowledge and capability to grasp opportunities and mitigate the instability arising from this transformation? Planning for and addressing the regulatory, educational, ethical, wellbeing and workforce needs in this evolving environment are essential so all Australians can benefit in meaningful and equitable ways from today's technological revolution.



Adapting to environmental change

Australians are now living with the impacts of climate change. While scientific and technological research is underpinning adaptation to our changing environments, the complexity and scale of the issue is squarely social. The resilience and health of communities are battered by the frequency of extreme weather events like bushfires, floods and drought. Transition to reliable, renewable energy is transforming national industries, local economies and how Australians are powering their homes and using transport. Farmers are responding through the diversification of crops, water management, carbon crediting and other strategies. Developing climate change resilience involves multidisciplinary knowledge and strategies to address the issues at the societal level so as to implement sustainable and adaptive solutions.



Safe and liveable cities and regions

Australia's population exceeds 28 million, concentrated in capital cities. Access to transport, digital connectivity and health and education infrastructure varies within these urban centres — with an ever-sharper divide between cities and regional and remote communities. The affordability and availability of housing is under severe strain everywhere. Demographic trends, including an ageing population and a declining birthrate, require the responsive provision of services, while climate change has reshaped urban planning and energy use. Understanding the interlinked dynamics of factors such as migration to and within Australia, employment vulnerabilities, rising cost of living and environmental impacts is fundamental for the future of sustainable, liveable cities and regions.



Resilient health systems

Australia's health systems are world leading in delivering strong health outcomes and life expectancies. They are now under significant stress resulting from rising costs, workforce shortages, an ageing population and the burden of chronic disease. Demand is outstripping the supply of mental health services, especially for young Australians. The National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) which supports individuals and their families is under financial strain. Ensuring that all Australians, particularly vulnerable sections of the population, have access to health and wellbeing services from birth into old age requires continuous improvement and workforce planning. Current and future decision makers must be armed with robust evidence on the economics of health systems, current and future community needs, and the quality and accessibility of services.



Australia in the world

At a time of geopolitical instability, economic uncertainties and shifting international alliances, Australia faces increasing pressures. In pursuing the national interest through diplomatic channels, cooperative security and investment in defence, Australia has maintained established international relationships but is now deepening engagement with the Indo-Pacific region. This requires developing the knowledge and skills capacity to negotiate with Asian and Pacific countries on global issues that are affecting us all: national security, climate change impacts, population mobility, and economic development. Australia will need to adapt to and grasp opportunities amid changing international conditions, as it seeks a future in the world, and its region, that is stable, peaceful and prosperous.

Social sciences are tackling these challenges across every part of Australia's society and economy

Social scientists use a wide range of research methods to build evidence, explain complex problems and identify practical solutions. They work within and across disciplines, locally and globally and collaborate with governments, businesses and communities.



Some of the ways that social sciences are addressing national challenges:



Social sciences improve lives through good policy and decision making

Social science research provides the evidence needed to design, deliver and evaluate just and effective public policy. It helps governments, businesses and community organisations understand what works, why it works and how to improve outcomes for all Australians.



Social sciences are essential for equitable educational and economic participation

Social science research examines the causes of educational and economic inequality and identifies what works to address these and improve participation. It shapes critical inquiry and informs policies and programs that strengthen pathways into education, skills and employment, particularly for disadvantaged and underrepresented groups.



Social sciences strengthen social connection and dialogue

The social sciences deepen understanding of our shared world and how people, communities and institutions interact. They help build trust, strengthen social connection, support respectful public dialogue and enable Australians from all backgrounds to participate in civic and community life.



Social sciences enable innovation and collaboration

Innovation depends on understanding people as well as technology. Social scientists help identify emerging challenges, understand user needs, shape policy and service design, and work with researchers, industry and communities to ensure new ideas can be successfully embraced, implemented and scaled.



Social sciences drive economic growth and workforce productivity

The social sciences improve how people, organisations and markets perform. They strengthen leadership, management and organisational effectiveness, support innovation and adoption of new practices and technologies, and help businesses and governments respond to economic, technological and workplace change.



Social sciences anticipate the future and make sense of the past

By understanding how people, communities and institutions have changed over time, the social sciences help explain the past and prepare for a viable future. They identify emerging demographic, social, economic and cultural trends, enabling governments, businesses and communities to anticipate challenges, manage risks and make better long-term decisions.

The following case studies show the social sciences at work on national and global challenges

Case studies



Thriving at work: Employee wellbeing in the mining industry



Shaping our cities and regions



Pathways to Politics for Women: Strengthening representation and democratic participation



Tackling youth vaping through co-design



Democratising knowledge and combating misinformation: The Conversation



Better work design for healthcare



Multidisciplinary approaches to protecting Australia's Great Barrier Reef



Human behaviour insights deliver driver safety

“It feels like the opportunity to make industry-wide change by working with like-minded professionals who are equally passionate about workplace health and wellbeing.” — Participant

Case studies

Thriving at work: Strengthening employee wellbeing in the mining industry

The future of work

Drive economic growth and workforce productivity

Strengthen social connection and dialogue

Enable innovation and collaboration

Since 2021, social scientists at Curtin University's Future of Work Institute (FOWI) have collaborated with the Western Australian Government to deliver the Thrive at Work in Mining Masterclass series and a suite of evidence informed resources supporting

psychosocial health, safety and wellbeing in the high pressure, high-risk mining sector.

Delivered across three cohorts between 2022 and 2024, the program engaged senior leaders in Human Resources, Organisational Development, Wellbeing, and Workplace Health and Safety across 36 companies, included giants such as Alcoa, BHP, Iluka, Wesfarmers, Toll and Rio Tinto.

This resulted in a deliberate shift in company operations from fragmented, compliance-driven responses toward deliberate, prevention-oriented strategies. For the first time in the mining sector, FOWI created six co-designed, evidence-based toolkits to support implementation of the Thrive at Work Framework and case studies documenting real-world application of the Framework across organisations of varying sizes and maturity.

The impact is ongoing, and well beyond the original reach. Toolkits have been adapted for in-house executive development, psychosocial audits, and insurance reviews. A reflective planning guide is assisting mining companies translate the research findings into strategies and action plans tailored to their own context. Evaluation data collected from pre-program interviews through to long-term follow-up has provided the WA Government's MARS (Mental Awareness, Respect and Safety) Program with rigorous, sector-specific evidence on what enables and constrains employee well-being and safety in high-risk, dispersed workforces, and how targeted investment in mentally healthy workplaces can be implemented across mining and other industries.



Case study

Shaping our cities and regions

Adapting to environmental change

Safe and liveable cities and regions

Good policy and decision-making

Enable innovation and collaboration

Anticipate the future and make sense of the past

Social science researchers are helping to shape cities and regions for future resilience and quality of life, combining social science insights and data to model future scenarios and support robust planning.

An example is the development of urban digital twins: detailed, interactive 3D and 4D digital replicas of real-world environments. By integrating spatial data, internet of things sensors and analytical tools, these dynamic models help government agencies and councils monitor assets, simulate scenarios and make data-driven decisions.

The UNSW Sydney Liveable City Digital Twin project has used built-form data to test scenarios about transport, heat comfort and the use of public space. Using Liverpool CBD as its test area, the project integrated datasets from NSW Spatial

Services, Geoscience Australia and Liverpool Council and the Australian Urban Research Infrastructure Network (AURIN) to examine issues such as urban heat islands, street shading, safety and walkability. Solutions will support climate resilience, development of communal space and efficient public infrastructure.

AURIN is an example of important national research infrastructure and represents a network of collaborators and partners including thirteen universities, governments (local, state and federal), CSIRO and industry. Through projects such as this, AURIN is helping governments at every level plan for some of the biggest challenges confronting Australia including climate, housing needs, transport infrastructure and pandemic response.

“Pathways to Politics is an amazing program! It has been a privilege directing its NSW program for the last 6 years, especially working with women from across NSW and colleagues from universities around Australia. I have been proud to connect the program to the strengths of colleagues in public law research and teaching and thereby connect constitutional democratic theory and practice.” — Professor Rosalind Dixon FASSA

Case study

Pathways to Politics for Women: Strengthening representation and democratic participation

Democracy, trust and diversity

Justice and self-determination for First Nations peoples

Good policy and decision-making

Strengthen social connection and dialogue

Australian democracy is strongest when it reflects the communities it serves. Yet women remain underrepresented in political leadership, particularly women from First Nations and culturally diverse backgrounds. Addressing this challenge requires more than identifying barriers – it requires practical interventions that create pathways to participation.

Pathways to Politics for Women reflects how academic insight, practitioner expertise and lived experience can be combined to strengthen democratic participation, expand representation and

build leadership capacity for Australia's future challenges. Established in 2016 through a partnership between the Trawalla Foundation, Women's Leadership Institute Australia and the University of Melbourne, Pathways to Politics was designed to increase the number and diversity of women in Australian politics by equipping them with the skills, confidence and networks to pursue political leadership.

The program's unique university partnership model combines academic expertise with practical application.¹ Delivered through eight university partners across Australia, Pathways to Politics draws on expertise from across institutions and social sciences disciplines. Insights and lessons generated across this national network are continually shared, strengthening curriculum design, publicly available resources, and policy contributions on democratic participation and parliamentary culture.

Over the past decade the program has supported more than 700 women to pursue political leadership, contributing to 97 electoral successes across the political spectrum and

at all levels of government. Alumni now serve as Members of Parliament, mayors and councillors across Australia. Through outreach, partnerships and culturally responsive program design, Pathways to Politics has expanded participation among First Nations women and culturally diverse women, building a pipeline to help address longstanding barriers to political representation. More than 40 First Nations women have participated in the program during its first decade.

At a time of increasing political polarisation, Pathways to Politics places constructive dialogue and respectful engagement at the centre of its approach. Participants learn from and alongside women from diverse political perspectives, building relationships that support collaboration across ideological divides. Alumni serving in parliaments and councils have highlighted the value of these connections in fostering respectful debate, productive policymaking and stronger democratic institutions.

A photograph of four young people walking away from the camera down a path lined with brick walls. On the left is a man in a blue quilted jacket carrying a black bag. Next to him is a person with curly hair wearing a black backpack. Then a person with long blonde hair in a light-colored jacket with a white backpack. On the right is a person with dark hair in a black jacket with a blue backpack. The path leads towards green trees in the distance.

Case study

Tackling youth vaping through co-design

Resilient health systems

Good policy and decision-making

Enable innovation and collaboration

Drive economic growth and workforce productivity

The rapid uptake of vaping among young people has made it a major public health challenge in Australia, where vaping among 15–24-year-olds rose from 4.5% to 17.9% between 2019 and 2022.² Prevention campaigns can raise risk awareness and reduce intentions to vape, but generic warnings do not cut across the different motivations, cultures, or social settings of young people.

Researchers at the National Centre for Youth Substance Use Research, University of Queensland are making a difference by examining how co-design can tailor anti-vaping public health materials. Collaboration with young people on the design of vaping prevention materials has resulted in targeted resources.

A randomised control trial found the co-designed materials were more effective than existing advertisements from official health agencies on a range of key measures, including attracting and informing a young adult audience.³

This example of co-design has wider implications. Collaboration with citizens, community and businesses is increasingly becoming embedded in the work of government, as outlined in the Australian Public Service framework for engagement and participation.⁴ Social science methodologies in behavioural insights, stakeholder consultation and iterative design are essential to delivering effective and credible policies and programs.

“The founding vision for *The Conversation* was to bring social science voices into media, and so provide an informed commentary on the issues of our times. It has succeeded far beyond expectations.” — Professor Glyn Davis AC, FASSA

Case study

Democratising knowledge and combating misinformation: *The Conversation*

Democracy, trust and diversity

Australia in the world

People at the centre of technological transformation

Strengthen social connection and dialogue

Enable innovation and collaboration

Readers across the world are often surprised to learn that *The Conversation*, an online news platform published and cited globally, began in Melbourne, Australia, in 2011.

It is an example of Australian innovation underpinned and informed by social sciences expertise: a non-profit source of evidence-based news, commentary and analysis written by academic experts, edited by journalists and delivered to the public in accessible and engaging language. Its unique model – online delivery, with open access under a Creative Commons licence – means that anyone can reproduce or republish content for free, anywhere, anytime. It's been embraced internationally: The UK edition launched in 2013, followed by editions in the USA (2014), South Africa and France (2015), Canada, Indonesia and New Zealand (2017), Spain (2018), and Brazil (2023).

With over 28 million on-site reads a month (47 million when republication is included), it is the most-read nonprofit news outlet in the world. Fact-based articles appear in thousands of publications, from The Washington Post to Mamamia to dozens of newspapers, radio and online media platforms. As such, it plays a powerful role in combating misinformation and promoting informed debate.

It also amplifies the impact of academic research. Everyday research and commentary about national and global politics, the economy, science, health, technology and social issues is published. Last year *The Conversation's* Australian editors worked with over 4,000 leading academics across a huge range of disciplines. More than 60% were followed up by other media for interviews and engagement. The vast majority (88%) of readers are not academics – reflecting the success of the original vision of sharing academic expertise with people from all walks of life and so supporting the democratisation of knowledge. In 2026, it is set to reach one billion reads.

The Conversation now employs more than 150 journalists across five continents and has partnerships with 400 universities. Funding comes from the university and research sector, philanthropic foundations and thousands of individual donors.

“We see this as not really the end of the project but really the beginning of our workplace wellbeing journey. We know that we’ve got more work to do, and we’ve learnt a number of things along the way by working with Design for Care.” — Participating CEO

Case study

Better work design for healthcare

The future of work

Resilient health systems

Drive economic growth and workforce productivity

Good policy and decision-making

Equitable educational and economic participation

Aged care and disability support workers are crucial to Australia’s needs, but they are at significant risk of psychosocial injury in the workplace. In 2021, psychological injury claims in the NSW Healthcare and Social Assistance (HSA) industry were more than twice the rate of other industries. In response, Icare NSW, the agency that operates the state’s insurance and care schemes, partnered with social scientists from Curtin University, University of Sydney and Monash University to develop a program to strengthen primary prevention by changing work practices and systems.

Led by the Centre for Transformative Work Design at Curtin University, researchers worked with frontline staff to co-design practical changes to address psychosocial hazards in their workplaces. Over four years, the Design for Care project

achieved significant reach and impact. The pilot across seven organisations delivered statistically significant improvements in psychological safety, peer support, manager feedback, employee agency, management of time pressure, role conflict and burnout disengagement, with sustained outcomes in evidence 16 months after intervention.

Beyond the pilots, the project reached nearly 500 participants through industry events and community of practice meetings. The project also produced the Design for Care Platform, which hosts validated tools, case studies and facilitator guides, offering an evidence-based and scalable blueprint for the prevention of psychological injury across the HSA workforce and beyond.

“This long-term program illustrates the vital contribution made by the social sciences in designing dynamic project plans that have impacts on environmental management and direct social and economic outcomes for Australia’s regional populations.”

Case study

Multidisciplinary approaches to protecting Australia’s Great Barrier Reef

Adapting to environmental change

Safe and liveable cities and regions

Good policy and decision-making

Anticipate the future and make sense of the past

Strengthen social connection and dialogue

The Great Barrier Reef (GBR) is crucial to Australia’s environment, economy and communities. Protecting and managing this World Heritage site requires not only scientific understanding of the impacts of climate change on its ecosystem but also strong and adaptive decision-making systems that recognise the GBR’s

human dimensions, and the complex relationships between people and place.

For 60,000 years, more than 70 First Nations groups with Sea Country connections to the Reef have shared its stewardship. Today, around 1.2 million residents across 32 municipal government areas live along coastline adjacent to the GBR. Over 2 million international and domestic visitors each year contribute significantly to local jobs and economies.

The Reef 2050 Plan is the Australian and Queensland Government’s overarching strategic framework for the protection and management of the GBR. It is founded on partnerships with Traditional Owners, communities, and researchers.

The Reef 2050 Plan’s Independent Expert Panel provides multidisciplinary expert advice on research priorities and policy implementation and evaluation. Panel member Professor Tiffany Morrison FASSA (University of Melbourne), for example, brings her

knowledge in human geography, political science and ecology. Recommendations arising from her path-breaking empirical analysis of robust marine governance to address global change were adopted in the 2017 Great Barrier Reef Governance Review.

Other social scientists on the Panel include experts in resource economics and urban and environmental planning such as Professor Karen Vella (QUT), Professor John Rolfe FASSA (CQU) and Dr Melissa Walsh (Ocean Risk and Resilience Action Alliance) and interdisciplinary Indigenous knowledge experts Dr Cass Hunter (North Australian Indigenous Land and Sea Management Alliance) and Dr Mitchell Gibbs (University of Sydney).

The Queensland Reef Water Quality Program is one powerful example of work guided by the Independent Expert Panel. It comprises projects delivered by government with industry and agricultural producers, with progress tracked through the Reef Water Quality Report Card.

“This deep understanding of human behaviour is what powers our highly sophisticated and intelligent machines that can see, understand, assist and ultimately protect the people who are using them, even in the most complex of situations.”

– Seeing Machines Human Factors team⁵

Case study

Human behaviour insights deliver driver safety

Drive economic growth and workforce productivity

People at the centre of technological transformation

Enable innovation and collaboration

Globally, nearly 1.2 million people are killed on roads annually, and tens of millions more are injured in transport accidents. These are largely caused by human error, negligence, and unsafe or unpredictable conditions, factors which are easily avoided.

Launched in 2000 as a spin-out from the Australian National University with the goal of harnessing technology to reduce transport fatalities to zero, Seeing Machines designs and manufactures

driver and occupant monitoring system (DMS/OMS) technology. DMS/OMS use in-vehicle cameras, sensors, and software to continuously observe driver behaviour for distraction and fatigue. When a risk is detected, the system issues an alert to support safer driver decisions and reduce the likelihood of accidents.

While the immediate solution to road fatalities and serious injury is a technological one, the effectiveness of DMS/OMS relies on how people perceive, think and behave and the ability to interpret this data in real time.

Recognising the importance of human-centred design for the commercial success of their products, the company formed an interdisciplinary Human Factors team in 2014. This is led by Dr Mike Lenné, Seeing Machine's Chief Safety Officer and Adjunct Professor in the Centre for Human Factors and Sociotechnical Systems, University of the Sunshine Coast. They apply psychological insights to better understand technology

acceptance and use and have collected billions of kilometres of naturalistic driving data through numerous joint studies with global universities and directly from their aftermarket solution, Guardian system, which is installed in over 65,000 commercial vehicles worldwide.

With their global headquarters in Canberra, Australia, and offices in the United States, Japan, and Europe, an annual revenue of US\$62.3 million in 2025, and their technology in millions of personal and commercial vehicles globally, the company's vision for safer roads has stood the test of time.

At Seeing Machines, and many other Australian technology companies, social science insights play a central role in driving innovation and helping businesses design and refine products that are more intuitive, more accurate, and safer to use.

Milestones and Innovations

Australian social science has a proud history of supporting social and economic innovation that has improved the lives of Australians and attracted the attention of the world



Examples of milestones and innovations over the last 50 years include:



Now common international practice, Australia **pioneered vehicle and road safety legislation** informed by behavioural psychology and social and public health research. Laws mandating the compulsory wearing of seatbelts were introduced nationwide in 1972, and the random breath testing of drivers for alcohol consumption in 1976. Collectively, these have resulted in a significant reduction in road deaths and severe injuries, and alcohol-related road accidents.



Australia introduced the **world's first national income-contingent loan scheme** in 1989 with the Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS), translating economic theory into practical public policy and providing an international model. The scheme extends an interest-free loan to students to cover a contribution to the cost of their education, repayable through the taxation system when earnings reach a specified level.



The 1996 National Firearms Agreement marked an **international first in gun control**. In the decade following its introduction, gun deaths including suicides dramatically reduced. Social scientists continue to monitor the ongoing impact and effectiveness of regulation.



In 2012, Australia **led the world in plain packaging of tobacco products**, informed by research in marketing, behavioural science and public health. Within three years of implementation, 100,000 fewer Australians smoked. Plain packaging for tobacco has been adopted by more than 25 countries.



Australia's **world-first ban on social media for those under 16 years** in 2025 was shaped by multidisciplinary social science research on online harms to young people. Other countries are following with age-restrictive legislation, including the UK, Brazil, UAE, France, Malaysia, Vietnam and Indonesia. As governments implement these policies, the ongoing evaluation of their impact and effectiveness by social scientists continues to be critical.

Social science has shaped today's Australia

Case studies



Australian social scientists pioneer regional economic cooperation in the Asia-Pacific



Medicare and research-informed policy for better access and health



Using data to understand life in Australia:
The Household, Income and Labour
Dynamics in Australia Survey (HILDA)

Case study

Australian social scientists pioneer regional economic cooperation in the Asia-Pacific

In November 1989, Australia hosted the first Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum, a meeting of foreign and trade ministers from 12 nations marking a new era in regional economic cooperation. This initiative built on decades of pioneering work by Australian social scientists in expert exchange with government.

In 1934, the Minister for External Affairs John Latham's 'Eastern Mission' was Australia's first coordinated diplomatic venture into East and South-Asia. Trade opportunities with Japan were Latham's particular focus, but the following year research economist John Crawford began developing a case for the more comprehensive

pursuit of economic complementarity between Australia and its region. In a determined and carefully coordinated drive over the next four decades, Crawford exemplified the fusion of research intensity, policy design and relationship advocacy now evident in Australia's standing in trade negotiation generally and Asia-Pacific engagement in particular.

Drawing social science expertise into government, and governments to academic advice, Crawford and those he encouraged at the Australian National University (ANU), such as Peter Drysdale FASSA, Ross Garnaut FASSA and Nancy Viviani, greatly enhanced the authority with which Australia can speak on

questions linking national interests and wider responsibilities. As with Crawford's own early insistence that Australia shift its economic focus from Britain and Europe towards Asia, that advice has not been without controversy. It has, however, been influential.

In 1980, the ANU's Pacific Community Seminar evolved into the Pacific Economic Cooperation Council (PECC). Bringing together leading thinkers in government, universities and business, PECC encouraged fresh approaches to regional trade policy. Against this backdrop, Japan's Ministry of International Trade and Industry approached Australia with a proposal to establish a new Asia-Pacific ministerial forum.

The years of trusted scholarship and diplomacy by Australian social scientists helped lay the foundations for Australian leadership in the creation of APEC.

APEC has grown exponentially. Now with 21 members, including China and the United States, it is a premier forum for weighing economic and political challenges. Given increasing geopolitical tension, shifting patterns of trade and investment, and the effects of climate crisis on populations and industries, APEC plays a pivotal role in cooperative problem-solving for an open, secure and resilient Asia-Pacific region.

“In 1984, Medicare was simply game changing and now it's the foundation of Australia's health system. Before Medicare, one in seven Australians didn't have health insurance and medical bills were the leading cause of personal bankruptcy ... We know Medicare must evolve so that it can meet the needs of Australians for generations to come ... Researchers are integral to better policy making and to improving health and wellbeing.”

– The Hon. Mark Butler, Minister for Health and Ageing and Minister for Disability and the National Disability Insurance Scheme¹

Case study

Medicare and research-informed policy for better access and health

The introduction of universal health insurance – first as Medibank in 1975 and later as Medicare in 1984 – was one of the most significant social and economic reforms of the Australian post-war period. The original blueprint for Medicare drew on groundbreaking research on health insurance and out-of-pocket costs by health economists Dr John Deeble and Dr Dick Scotton. Medicare continues to stand as an example of global best practice in reducing the financial and health burden of prohibitively expensive hospital and medical services.

Today, Medicare faces new pressures and challenges, including rapidly advancing technologies (generally at increased cost), an ageing population, and the growing burden of chronic disease. Social science research and technical expertise continues to be essential in the design and delivery of health care policy that is accessible, sustainable and human-centred. Medicare has provided peace of mind for generations of Australians and as the care economy expands, so does the need for robust social science.

“In creating Medicare, Australia didn't beg or borrow from elsewhere. We built for the best, by building for ourselves. That thread runs through our national story.”

– The Hon. Anthony Albanese MP, Prime Minister of Australia²



Case study

Using data to understand life in Australia: The Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia Survey

The Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey is an in-depth annual survey of the same 14,000 to 18,000 people. It was commissioned in 2000 by the Australian Government to provide rich information on the social and economic pathways people are taking, and to understand how and why these may change.

Understanding the shifting dynamics of individuals and households requires data that follows the same units over time. Longitudinal data enables the identification and analysis

of the causes and consequences of important life events: birth of a child, partnering, buying a home, marital separation, the death of a spouse, job loss, or retirement. The key strength of HILDA's research is tracking the lives of the same respondents every year, with core areas of investigation including education, employment, income, wealth, health, relationships, and fertility.

The impact and use of this data is significant. The 1,200 registered users of the HILDA Survey are from academia, government,

non-government organisations and industry. Over 2,800 reports and research papers use HILDA data to understand and forecast social and economic realities and trends.

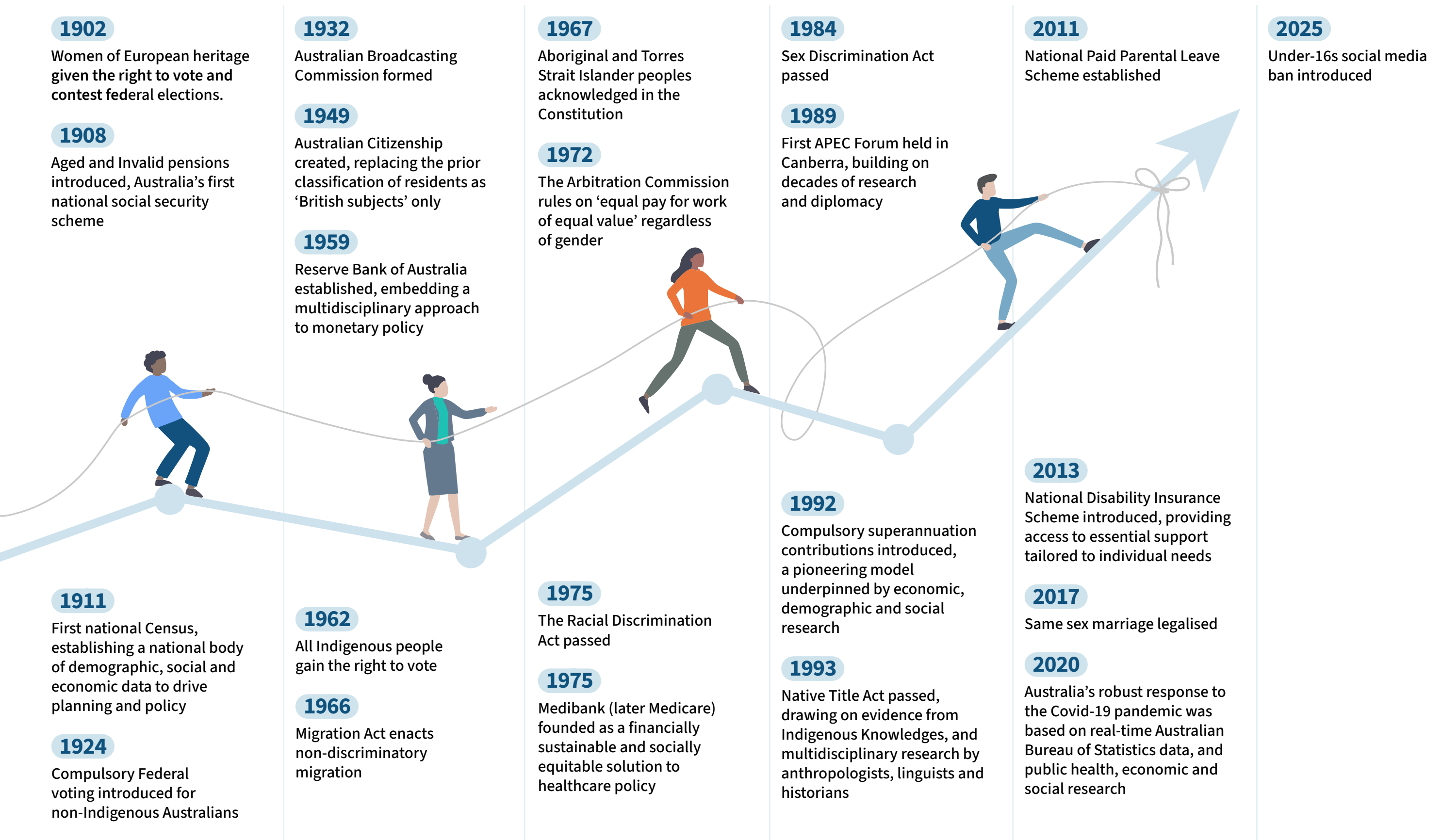
For Australian Government agencies, HILDA provides an evidence-base for policy development, economic analysis, and service planning. For example, Treasury's National Housing Supply and Affordability Council uses HILDA findings to model and project housing needs, whereas the Productivity Commission draws on the data for major reports examining

wealth, inequality, and economic mobility. HILDA informs Fair Work Commission wage reviews and pay equity analysis, and the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare research on mental illness, disability, social isolation, and loneliness.

Internationally, HILDA is widely recognised among the top four household panel surveys along with those in the USA, UK and Germany, and used by researchers to compare the lives of Australians to their international counterparts.

Milestones in Australian social policy and legislation

Since Federation, social scientists working in industry, Government, universities, research and professional practice have shaped policies and laws that have made Australia a fairer and more equitable nation. All Australians have benefited.



A large, diverse crowd of people walking on a city street, overlaid with a teal banner containing the title. The crowd is composed of individuals of various ages, ethnicities, and professions, some looking at their phones, others talking, and some walking briskly. The background shows a city street with buildings and a traffic light.

Social Science Research and Public Policy Impact

Social Science research and public policy

“All of us, public and private, State and Commonwealth, research institutions and civil society, the physical sciences and the social sciences must lift together and pull our weight.”

– The Hon Tim Ayres MP, Minister for Industry and Innovation and Minister for Science¹

Social science research is of immense societal value. While research contributes to the development and adoption of products, technologies, and services, its greatest social impact is through informing public policy, improving public services, strengthening institutions, driving social innovation and helping communities respond to complex social, economic and environmental challenges.²

The societal value and impact of research are not fixed. One indicator of research impact is tracking the connections between knowledge and evidence to improvements in policy and practice, including in public services. This may result in systemic changes and enhanced decision-maker capacity to deliver evidence-informed programs, as can be seen in applied fields like public administration and public health.

Research-to-policy impact, however, is difficult to measure in precise metrics. As many of the case studies in this Report highlight, **policy impact and innovation is also often the result of years, or decades, of incremental research, collaboration, and institutional learning rather than the outcomes of any single project.**³

Evidence-informed policymaking is rarely a linear process or purely technocratic exercise. Research influences policy through the complex interplay of technical, institutional, relational and political conditions. While social science research sometimes informs policy directly through commissioned studies, program evaluations or expert advice, it more often shapes decision-making gradually through opportune moments and ongoing collaboration between researchers, policymakers and knowledge brokers.⁴

Effective research translation depends on organisations that support knowledge exchange and on policymakers having access to the expertise needed to interpret and apply evidence as priorities, circumstances and understanding evolve. Decision-makers in government may need access to specialised infrastructure and to the technical and interpretative capabilities of research experts.⁵

More broadly, the co-location of knowledge assets and opportunities that connect researchers and industry provide environments where innovation and enterprise can flourish – including

social innovation. This approach has underpinned significant investment by Australian universities over the past decade in infrastructure such as innovation precincts that foster multidisciplinary and multisector collaboration and invention. There is a case for government and universities to explore how a dedicated public policy precinct, with physical and virtual nodes, could operate to support the research-to-policy ecosystem.

Mechanisms to facilitate relationship building and mutual trust between researchers and government include:

- **Co-production approaches** that involve researchers, policymakers, practitioners and communities in the design, conduct and implementation of research and its findings.⁶
- **Knowledge brokers** who help create the conditions to develop relationships and synthesise and translate research for practice, such as the What Works Network of evidence centres.⁷
- **Mutual secondments and embedded fellowship programs** to facilitate mobility between universities and policy

organisations and support researchers and practitioners to collaborate on projects and gain a greater mutual understanding of their respective operating environments.

- **Expert advisory groups, directories and clearinghouses** to quickly identify and directly access research expertise. Examples include the Australian Government's Behavioural Economics Team, which maintains an academic directory to support engagement between policymakers and experts, and the Queensland Government Social Sciences Reference Group which harnesses research insights for comprehensive, innovative policy.⁸
- **Policy innovation labs and precincts** bring together multidisciplinary and multisector perspectives and seek to move complex policy problems into experimental environments. Design thinking, behavioural insights and other methods are used to rapidly test and refine ideas, generating new spaces for research-practice collaboration and shared learning in the process.⁹

Australia already has established mechanisms through which social science expertise informs public policy – including independent advisory bodies, research organisations, parliamentary inquiries, and in-house research and evaluation capabilities – **but it is a fragmented and poorly understood system.** We can learn from international models, like the United Kingdom Government's mapping of scientific advisory bodies.¹⁰ Mapping Australia's research-to-policy ecosystem would provide greater visibility of how expertise flows into decision-making, and help to identify gaps in capability, and strengthen connections between researchers and policy institutions.

Without a better understanding of Australia's research-to-policy ecosystem, its scale and how it operates, challenges and missed opportunities will persist at the research-policy nexus. For example, at a 2026 Academy policy roundtable on First Nations education, participants highlighted that governments often fail to mobilise the long-standing government funded Indigenous-led research base. There was strong support for two-way conversations between policymakers and researchers via formalised mechanisms to ensure policy priorities inform research agendas and research informs policy design, implementation, and evaluation.¹¹

Similarly, a 2026 Academy workshop on challenge-led research found that technical mechanisms – such as robust infrastructure for data collection, sharing and use, flexible procurement processes, and the creation of brokerage and convening roles within universities and government – are essential for effectively translating research into policy. Yet these mechanisms are not consistently funded and implemented, and will not always occur naturally, especially as research-policy collaboration is not always recognised as an avenue for career progression in academia.¹²

Sustained improvements in research translation require more than technical mechanisms, they also depend on organisational cultures and incentives that value collaboration between universities and government. While peer-reviewed publications are one pathway for informing policy, policy engagement is not consistently recognised in academic career progression. Embedding cross-sector collaboration in promotion and reward frameworks, alongside more flexible intellectual property and publication rights in government procurement contracts, would strengthen incentives for policy-oriented research and increase its impact.¹³

Australia invests substantially in generating research, but comparatively little in the people, relationship and institutional mechanisms needed to ensure that knowledge is routinely translated into better policy and practice.

Because policy impact depends on trusted relationships, **greater mobility between universities and policy organisations offers significant opportunities.**¹⁴

For instance, the long-running United Kingdom Research and Innovation (UKRI) Policy Fellows program sees researchers seconded into government departments to co-design research projects linked to government priorities.¹⁵ In Australia, the Sir Roland Wilson Foundation PhD scholarship program, a partnership with the Australian Public Service, enables senior public servants to undertake a research topic of strategic importance.¹⁶ These and other collaborative programs work to strengthen evidence-informed policymaking and practice by building mutual understanding and creating enduring networks for knowledge exchange.

Priority for action

2. Strengthen research-to-policy connections by mapping the social science research translation ecosystem and expanding the use of proven approaches, including knowledge brokering, policy fellowships, embedded researcher and co-production models.

In Summary: Social Science Research and Public Policy Impact

Key observations

- **Social science research is a driver of social and policy innovation. It helps governments make better decisions, shaping policy, improving public services and strengthening institutions.** Research influences policy through complex systems of relationships, institutional engagement and expertise, often over long-time horizons.
- **Australia has many pathways for research to inform policy, but the research-to-policy ecosystem is poorly understood, fragmented and underdeveloped.** Identifying capability gaps and strengthening translation pathways would significantly increase the impact and societal value of social science research.

Priority for action

2. Strengthen research-to-policy connections by mapping the social science research translation ecosystem and expanding the use of proven approaches, including knowledge brokering, policy fellowships, embedded researcher and coproduction models.



Case study

Addressing disadvantage, building a better society: Early childhood education reform

Social science research can be a long game, but it supports public policy to change lives for the better.

The past 20 years has seen significant reforms in early childhood education. Victoria's 10-year Early Childhood Reform Plan, for example, includes progressively rolling out free universal access to three-year-old kindergarten.¹⁷ Nationally, the Australian Government's decadal Early Years Strategy aims to reduce social disadvantage and increase opportunity by strengthening education and social support interventions through the first five years of every child's life.¹⁸

This significant investment is grounded in strong social science research in Australia and overseas. US Nobel Prize economist James Heckman famously demonstrated that investment in the first five years of life delivered significant economic and social returns.

In Australia, the late Professor Collette Tayler's E4Kids longitudinal study (2010-2016) demonstrated the difference that quality early education makes to children as they move through primary school.¹⁹ *Lifting our Game: A Report of the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools through Early Childhood*

Interventions prepared for the States and Territories by Professor Deborah Brennan FASSA and Susan Pascoe, presented evidence to inform a national policy approach.²⁰

In Victoria, Professor Tricia Eadie is leading the Educational and Developmental Gains in Early Childhood (EDGE) study, a partnership between the University of Melbourne, the Department of Education and the not-for-profit the Front Project. The EDGE study represents a \$6.5 million investment over five-years from the Paul Ramsay and Ian Potter Foundations. The study will include a cost-benefit analysis and complete evaluation

of the state-wide rollout of three-year-old kindergarten in Victoria, and is directly informing its development and delivery.²¹

There are many similar examples that could be cited here; the point being that social scientists are quietly engaging with Australian Federal and State Governments in the development, delivery and evaluation of public policy. While the work may be largely invisible to the public, its outcomes make a huge difference in people's lives, and their futures.

Case study

Developing resilient communities to tackle misinformation and disinformation

Democracy, trust and diversity

People at the centre of technological transformation

Good policy and decision-making

Strengthen social connection and dialogue

One of the major challenges facing Australia is an increasingly complex information landscape where misinformation and disinformation can erode trust, reinforce social divisions and have devastating consequences for individuals and for communities. Interventions that build community resilience and counter misinformation and disinformation are a pressing issue for the Australian Government.

The social sciences are making a difference by equipping decision-makers with the evidence to better understand the effects of misinformation and disinformation and develop, evaluate and refine policy responses.

Australia's Chief Scientist commissioned the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia to bring together a multidisciplinary panel of experts to explore misinformation and disinformation and proactive responses to the threats posed. The report was one of a series of four to inform National Science and Technology Council advice to government on different aspects of misinformation and disinformation.

The report, *Information resilience: The role of cultural and community institutions*, brought together evidence from history, politics, Indigenous studies, media and communication, and psychology on the role played by cultural and community institutions – including sporting groups, galleries, libraries, archives and museums – in building the conditions for

community wellbeing and resilience to misinformation and disinformation.²² It found that these institutions and the processes they uphold are critical social infrastructure and the sites of civic engagement. Through participatory models and outreach programs, these institutions remind us of our civic responsibilities and encourage connection across differences. They also enjoy high levels of trust and so have the social capital to support media literacy and help communities and individuals to navigate misinformation and disinformation with confidence.

These multidisciplinary insights will be invaluable in shaping the Australian Government's thinking as it develops, implements and evaluates interventions to support civic engagement, enhance media literacy and keep people safe online. Social science has a foundational role to play supporting the development, implementation and evaluation of interventions that are effective, fit-for-purpose, equitable and sustainable.

Social Sciences, AI and Australia's Future Workforce

Social sciences, AI and Australia's future workforce

“The adoption of AI is among the most consequential shifts in a generation for Australia's businesses and their employees. Implemented well, it has the potential to unlock significant gains in productivity, innovation and service delivery, while improving employee safety, supporting better customer outcomes, and advancing sectors such as health and care. Realising these opportunities will require thoughtful implementation, organisational transformation, careful analysis, and strong partnerships between employers, employees and government. It will also involve deploying AI in ways that employees, regulators and policymakers can trust.”

– Business Council of Australia¹

Education and training in the social sciences are foundational to Australia's current and future workforce needs and national productivity: 44% of all enrolments in VET and 51% of all enrolments in higher education provide social sciences qualifications ranging from vocational certificates to general and specialist degrees to professional accreditation. **As AI is poised to transform Australia's future workforce, social science graduates bring the balance of professional and discipline specific knowledges, capabilities and transversal skills that will enable critical, informed and appropriate responses to these changes.**

Social sciences research is also crucial to understanding, evaluating and anticipating the social and economic dimensions of AI on all sectors of the workforce, and the implications of these for education, workforce participation and growth, living standards and wages and global competitiveness.²

The risks and benefits of AI for the future of work are yet unknown, but like all technological transformations, they will be unevenly distributed across sectors and places. Much of the evidence suggests that AI is more likely to augment than replace

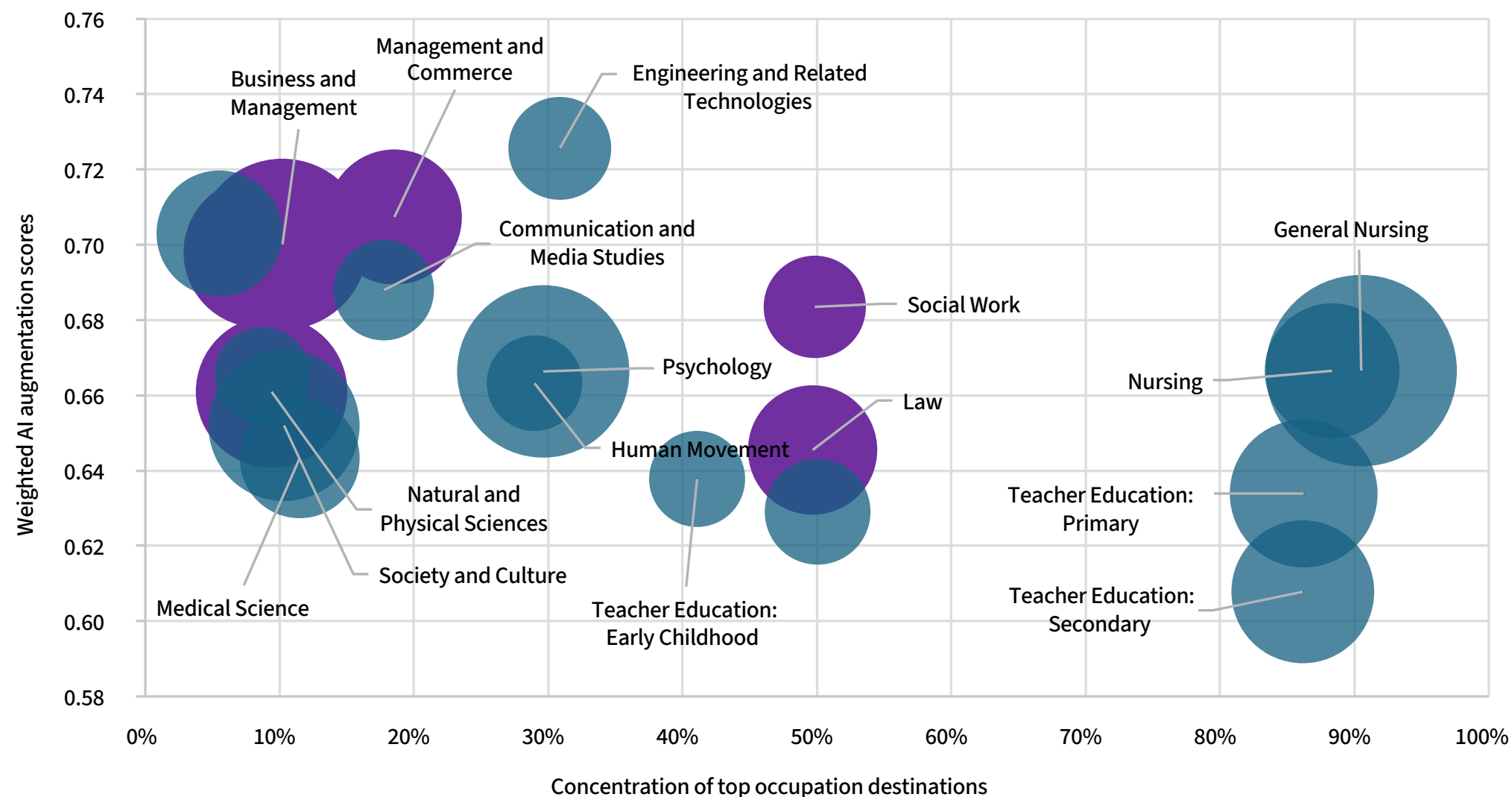
human work, although some occupations will be reshaped and new roles created.³ People in more routine and entry-level roles are more likely to be exposed to workforce displacement through AI. Workers who are female, younger, First Nations or live in regional and remote locations already experience less access to digital technologies, placing them at risk.⁴ Proactive research and planning is needed to prepare, educate and train Australia's current and future workers with the digital skills and knowledge that enable AI adoption, protect against digital exclusion, and support long-term career adaptability.⁵

A data-driven framework for Australia's future education, training and workforce needs, developed across relevant agencies, is required. This would enable social scientists, government, employers and educational institutions to collaborate in collecting, sharing and applying evidence to respond to the impacts of AI on working futures in Australia.

Social science graduates have the human-centred, highly transferable skills that employers value

Existing social science tertiary qualifications – both in generalist and specialist areas and professional fields – will continue to be highly relevant. Research by Jobs and Skills Australia (JSA) indicates that social science graduates are primarily employed in those sectors that are projected to experience high rates of job augmentation, rather than automation.⁶ This means that as the rise of AI serves to ‘recentre the human’, social science graduates are particularly well-positioned to enter and adapt to the labour market over the span of their working lives.

Figure 1: Top 20 fields of education by weighted average augmentation and graduate concentration in the main poststudy occupation



Concentration in top occupation represents the percentage of graduates whose post-study occupation group is known and whose pathway leads to the same occupation group. Bubble size indicates number of higher education completions in FoE, with larger bubbles representing more completions. Purple represents social science FoE, blue represents social science graduates top occupation pathways. Source: JSA analysis PLIDA and Higher Education data on social science tertiary pathways, unpublished.

‘Human-faced skills’ such as ethical and reasoned judgment, creativity and collaboration help individuals and organisations to navigate uncertainty, solve complex problems, and build and maintain trust.⁷ Employers increasingly predict the need for cross-disciplinary teams where digital competencies and domain expertise are paired with knowledges of human behaviour, regulation and risk management, and social responsibility to inform product and service development.⁸

Figure 2: Social science graduates have the human-centred, highly transferable skills that employers value



Source: Workday (2025) *Elevating human potential: The AI skills revolution*, reproduced in JSA (2025) *Our gen AI transition*.

“The sorts of transversal skills, the problem-solving skills, the interacting with human skills, which you learn through the social sciences ... become harder to replicate and more valuable in the context of the world where the technical findings get churned out through GenAI ... The ability to then reason critically and interpret them and indeed question [GenAI produced technical findings] becomes ... more valuable.” – Senior public servant

Transitioning from education and training to the workforce will increasingly require sociotechnical knowledge

JSA analysis of data on study-to-workforce transitions and career progression found that social science graduates with university qualifications entered more than 150 distinct occupational groups (81 for Management and commerce, 58 for Education, and 70 for Society and culture).⁹

Social science graduates are employed in occupations that face current and projected shortages: in the care economy, including early childhood and disability support, and in the psychology, urban and regional planning, education, and social work professions.¹⁰ These occupations rely on specialised technical and professional expertise as well as broad-based skills like project management, community and stakeholder engagement, and systems thinking. In the context of AI disruption, such qualifications will continue to be the basis for secure and adaptable career pathways.¹¹

Social sciences education is evolving in response to AI, expanding coverage of sociotechnical knowledges and systems as preparation for employment. Social sciences insights and methods are also increasingly important in scientific and technical education and training, providing frameworks to broaden perspectives from purely technical problem-solving to one of understanding human, social, and ethical consequences.

Investing in social science research on AI will ensure Australia's technological leadership and economic resilience

Realising the opportunities and protecting against the risks of AI also requires increased investment in Australia's comparative low levels of research and AI infrastructure. Australia's newly established AI Safety Institute – notably, headed by ethical philosopher Dr Kate Conroy – and Office of AI in the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet go some way towards deepening knowledge about AI and the regulatory requirements for its responsible development and application.

Robust social science research on sociotechnical systems and how AI is affecting individuals and communities is needed to support current workforce transformation and corresponding education and skills development. Social science research is also critical to design and implement effective safeguards and guardrails to manage the potential harms that come from the uncontrolled adoption of AI.

“We should not design engineering education for a stable world that no longer exists. We should design it for graduates who will encounter uncertainty, complexity and competing obligations. They will need technical knowledge, but also judgement, ethics, communication, systems thinking, risk awareness, cultural responsiveness and responsibility for long-term consequences. These capabilities should not be treated as soft additions to a technical core. They are part of responsible engineering practice.”¹²

– Professor Zora Vrcelj, Head of Built Environment and Engineering, Victoria University

A photograph of two men in an office environment. The man on the right, with a beard and grey hair, is wearing a dark sweater over a light blue shirt and is pointing his right arm towards the right side of the frame. The man on the left, with short brown hair, is wearing a grey shirt and is looking towards the right. In the background, a woman with brown hair wearing a yellow top is visible, and there are computer monitors and office equipment. A large blue rectangular box with rounded corners is overlaid on the bottom half of the image, containing white text.

Making the Value of the Social Sciences Visible



The value of the social sciences

People engage with the social sciences every day, although they may be unaware that they are doing so. They interact with social science graduates in multiple roles and professions including teachers, lawyers, accountants and psychologists. Social science expertise is core to the public policy and legislation that shapes the nation, and the ideas and evidence that drive future directions and innovation. **As this Report demonstrates, the social sciences are everywhere.**

Despite accounting for around half of all university and vocational education and training enrolments and one-fifth of national research and development investment, **the contribution of the social sciences to knowledge and education, and the capabilities of social science graduates, are often undervalued and misunderstood. They remain hidden in plain sight.**

While this is a global phenomenon, it is shaped by national circumstances. These include political, economic and cultural interests, and differing perspectives on the legitimacy and role of qualified experts. The contribution of social science is often embedded in everyday decisions, institutions and services, but remains less visible as a distinct source of knowledge and expertise. Research on public understanding of social science highlights that social sciences face particular challenges because their subject matter – people and society – is also part of everyday experience, making their expertise more easily overlooked or contested.

“How do we get employers to articulate what it is [they value] about the students who they employ, and they employ in good numbers ... We talk about the analytic skills, we talk about the capacity to view problems from a range of perspectives... [We should communicate] what employers need in their language.”

– Senior academic, Board member of Commonwealth statutory agency

Increasing the visibility of the social sciences as an essential capability already underpinning Australia's prosperity, social wellbeing and effective decision-making

Learning from investment in STEM provides a model

Long-term investment in STEM in Australia has demonstrated that sustained communication can change public understanding of a field of education and research. Over many years, governments, industry and the science sector have promoted STEM education and careers through school and 'citizen science' initiatives, public engagement programs, and coordinated communication about the national benefits of science.

The National STEM School Education Strategy 2016–2026 builds foundations in STEM and develops a pipeline to further study and employment. This important work is supported by government and industry, including through STEM-focused professional development and resources for teachers. For example, in the 2025–2026 Budget, \$1.8 million was provided for school programs in science and mathematics education.¹ Other government strategies fund public engagement with science, including National Science Week, which now features some 3 million people participating in more than 2,500 events around the country.²

Research undertaken in 2026 by the Australian Academy of Science shows that 90% of Australians believe science "is a force for good" leading to safer and healthier lives.³

There has been no comparable national effort to measure public attitudes toward the social sciences or to comprehensively communicate their social and economic value and employment outcomes.

While initiatives such as Social Sciences Week and the Academy's Seriously Social education resources are building momentum, they remain comparatively modest in scale and reach and receive no secure funding. These efforts complement a growing international movement to improve public understanding of the social sciences. The UK Academy of Social Sciences, for example, has launched a *Campaign for Social Science*, to demonstrate how social science improves lives and supports evidence-informed decision-making.⁴

An Australian campaign for the social sciences – one that makes the invisible visible by helping people appreciate the ways social sciences are improving their lives and underpinning many of the decisions, services and institutions they rely on – is needed.

The campaign should communicate and demonstrate the public good of social science research and encourage greater use of social science evidence in decision-making. It should also ensure that students, employers and the wider community are aware of the knowledge, skills and career pathways the social sciences provide across the economy and society.

Building greater recognition of the role of the social sciences will require collaboration across universities, schools, industry, professional bodies, community organisations and governments. A stronger and more visible public narrative about the social sciences would position social science knowledge and education as an essential national capability now and in the future.

Priorities for action

3. Launch a coordinated national campaign to demonstrate the value and impact of the social sciences. The campaign should build understanding among students, employers, governments and the community of the essential role of the social sciences as a national capability.
4. Promote and support Social Sciences Week to highlight how social sciences are addressing Australia's current and future challenges.

Part 2:

Social Science Sector Snapshots



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School Education Snapshot

School education

Education is a multi-disciplinary field, spanning the breadth of the social sciences. It is a major contributor to social and economic wellbeing and national prosperity, and brings long-term benefits for individuals and society.

The current national statement on the aims of school education, the 2019 *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration* expressed a commitment to building an education system in which “all young Australians become confident and creative individuals, successful lifelong learners, and active and informed members of the community.”¹

The social sciences make a crucial contribution to achieving these goals through research, curriculum resources and training and professional development of teachers.

Social sciences and the Australian Curriculum

The Australian Curriculum (Foundation to Year 10) was introduced in 2010, with version 9.0 now being implemented. It mandates an integrated approach to teaching Humanities and Social Science (HASS) throughout the primary school years. In secondary school, the core curriculum incorporates dedicated HASS subjects in history (Years 7–10) and geography, civics and citizenship education (CCE), and economics and business (Years 7–8). However, national consistency falls away as students progress through secondary school. Student access in Years 9–10 to subjects in geography, CCE and economics and business is determined by school authorities and individual schools.

The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) articulates the value of education in the social sciences, as follows:

“A broad understanding of the world we live in, and how people can participate as active and informed citizens with high-level skills needed now and in the future. They provide opportunities for students to develop their own personal and social learning, and to explore their perspectives as well as those of others” – The Australian Curriculum Version 9.0²

The role of social science is not confined to dedicated subjects. The Australian Curriculum also identifies **seven general capabilities and three cross-curriculum priorities** critical to Australia’s future that represent core knowledge and skills to be developed across all years and the whole curriculum (Foundation to Year 10). General capabilities include “critical and creative thinking”, “ethical understanding” and “intercultural understanding”, all informed by HASS education.

The cross-curriculum priorities – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures; Asia and Australia’s Engagement with Asia; and Sustainability – also draw on HASS disciplines and methodologies in history, geography, languages, political science, public policy and law.

In the **senior secondary years**, more specialist studies across the social science disciplines are offered. These may include psychology, business and legal studies, and ancient and modern history. Access to social science subjects varies significantly across state and territory jurisdictions, and is also affected by resourcing in individual schools.

Delivery of vocational education and training (VET) based social science subjects in schools has grown. Nationally, 22.6% of the school population aged 15 to 19 years participate in school-based apprenticeships and school-based training packages. Social science programs represent 38.6% of all VET in school enrolments, and social science program enrolments have grown by 22.6% since 2019.³ VET in schools subjects with social science content include workplace skills, business, early childhood and school-based education and care, community services, and legal and justice studies.

VET is an accessible entry point to further education and training, including among groups who have historically experienced disadvantage. VET in schools plays an important role in retention, helping students overcome socio-economic and geographical barriers to educational success and transition to further learning and work.⁴ **In 2025, 36.4% of all low-SES students and 31.8% of all regional and remote students undertaking VET in school were enrolled in a social science program. This includes 33.9% increase in total enrolments in social sciences for low-SES students and a 36.5% increase for regional and remote students between 2019 and 2025.**⁵

Civics and citizenship education: Strengthening democratic resilience and intercultural understanding

The role of schools in developing “active and informed citizens” has been an explicit goal of national education declarations since 1989.⁶ In 2016, the Australian Curriculum outlined content in CCE for Years 7–10. Drawing on social sciences and humanities disciplines such as political science, law and history, it “provides students with opportunities to investigate political and legal systems, and explore the nature of citizenship, diversity and identity in contemporary society.”⁷

CCE is supported by the general capabilities in the Australian Curriculum, particularly intercultural understanding and ethical understanding. However, as widely noted in education research, these capabilities are not consistently assessed or embedded across subjects.⁸ This makes their effectiveness in building the intercultural and ethical skills needed for social cohesion difficult to assess. In addition, history and geography subjects offer insights into issues such as Australian identity and values, more broadly embedding civics education across the curriculum.

Broader concerns about threats to democracy and social cohesion, rising incidents of racism, antisemitism and Islamophobia, and differing perspectives on Australian identity and national values, have placed an increasing focus on the curriculum and delivery of CCE in Australian schools.

Of particular concern is the 2024 National Assessment Program–Civics and Citizenship results, which found that **just 28% of Year 10 students and 43% of Year 6 students were proficient in civics**, the worst result since NAP–CC testing began in 2004.⁹ The results vary considerably across Australia, with states and territories with higher regional and remote populations achieving below average scores.

In 2025, the report of the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters, *From Classroom to Community Civics Education and Political Participation in Australia*, underlined the importance of formalised CCE in schools, but found considerable variation in the quality and effectiveness of its delivery across state and territory jurisdictions and individual schools.¹⁰ Evidence indicated that the content of CCE could be dry and irrelevant to students’ lives, with teachers often lacking the resources and confidence to discuss potentially controversial topics with students.

The Joint Standing Committee concluded that Australia needs a strengthened and standardised approach to citizenship education. Around half of its 23 recommendations sit within schools, aimed at a consistent national approach with an enhanced CCE curriculum at Years 9–10, and a new mandatory program for Years 11–12 to prepare students to participate in electoral processes. This would be supported by nationally aligned teaching resources and improved national professional development for all HASS teachers that included civics and debate-based education, and an emphasis on digital literacy and combatting misinformation.¹¹

Educators have suggested introducing an available civics unit in teacher education.¹² This would ensure that capacity to teach CCE would be embedded in the teaching profession from the start, rather than relying solely on professional development or in-service training once in the classroom.

A strong CCE curriculum contributes to building a healthy democracy that respects difference and diversity and promotes social cohesion. This includes school-based responses to antisemitism as developed by the recently formed Antisemitism Education Taskforce. **The Academy’s submission to the Royal Commission on Antisemitism and Social Cohesion emphasised the need for curriculum reform to strengthen intercultural and ethical capacities.**¹³

Further embedding intercultural understanding in CCE, alongside understandings of the legal and institutional frameworks of Australian democracy that are the universal rights and responsibilities of all Australians, will provide students with the knowledge and practical approaches that encourage effective and collaborative responses to prejudice in real world situations. This includes developing their abilities to navigate competing views and weight different kinds of information, skills that are directly addressed in social sciences and humanities approaches.

Community calls for strengthened CCE are mounting. In July 2026, the Constitution Education Fund Australia brought together stakeholders, including from the Academy, to work towards establishing an Australian Federal Council for Civics and Citizenship Education to develop ways forward. Social science research, education and practice is fundamental to strengthening CCE through building school-based curriculum and resources for teachers.

“We’ve got a growing catastrophe ... in a failure to understand and engage with and feel proud of the very civic underpinnings of our democracy.”

– Her Excellency the Hon. Sam Mostyn AC, Governor General of Australia¹⁴

Priority for action

5. The Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority strengthen Civics and Citizenship Education (CCE) across all levels of schooling and embed the Intercultural Understanding general capability in consistent teaching and assessment across subjects. This requires sustained investment in teacher capability through Initial Teacher Education in CCE, ongoing professional development and high-quality classroom resources on democratic institutions, engaging with intercultural contexts and respectful dialogue on contested issues.

Strong HASS education at senior secondary school is foundational for Australia’s future workforce, expertise and sovereign capabilities

The federated system of school education means that education authorities in each state and territory are responsible for curriculum, with variation of subjects at the senior secondary years. Student selection of subjects at this level has been characterised as a “marketplace”, where Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) scaling and the perceptions of students and parents on the status and relevance of disciplines all play a role.¹⁵ School-based resourcing, including timetable limitations, may also limit students’ access to subjects in social sciences and humanities. Some jurisdictions have seen growth in social science subjects such as psychology and business, while enrolment patterns in history, for example, vary considerably across states.

In 2024, 61% of students in Year 12 were enrolled in at least one HASS subject. However, in the period 2015–2024 there is a slow decline in Year 12 HASS participation overall, with a decrease of 4.1% in Society and its Environments and a decrease of 20.2% for Languages. The absence of comprehensive national data at the individual subject level limits analysis, but for some social science subjects, including history and geography,

the trend is clear and the implications concerning. Here the availability of national level data allows us to examine economics and languages as detailed examples.

Economics

In the 1990s, economics was widely available at Year 12 throughout Australia. By the early 2000s, it had been displaced by business studies subjects, with nation-wide enrolments in economics dropping by almost 70% over the past three decades.¹⁶ Each state and territory continues to offer Year 12 subjects in both business studies and economics, with similar enrolment patterns. While business studies remain popular and taught in almost all schools, economics is a relatively small subject available in a limited number of predominantly independent and metropolitan-based schools. There has also been a worrying shift in gender parity in Year 12 economics, with male students now outnumbering women by two to one.¹⁷

This profile has direct implications for the pipeline into economics in higher education, where enrolments have also shrunk. In 2023, only 7% of students who studied economics in Year 12 continued to do so at university. The small cohort of students enrolled in economics at universities is increasingly skewed towards males from advantaged backgrounds.¹⁸

The Reserve Bank of Australia (RBA) has expressed ongoing concern about this decline in numbers and student diversity, as this has longer term implications for the quality and diversity of economic advice and policy into the future. It has launched a public education program to raise awareness of the importance of studying economics at senior secondary level, and of the importance of economic literacy within the Australian population.

Asian languages

Enrolments in Languages other than English have reached a historic low in Australia. Australia now ranks among the lowest of all OECD countries in the study of foreign languages, with only 36% of Year 10 students studying a foreign language, compared to 88% among OECD peers.¹⁹

Australia is at odds with international trends. Governments worldwide, from Korea, Chile, Colombia to Ireland and the EU – with its goal of teaching two foreign languages from an early age – have expanded foreign language instruction in schools. This is not only for economic benefits, but also for the cognitive benefits of language instruction and its broader contribution to intercultural understanding and social inclusion.²⁰ Partly to give countries comparable evidence on these efforts, the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2025 cycle includes, for the first time, an optional foreign language assessment, initially of English.

Language enrolments in Australia have declined partly because of perceptions of relevance, levels of resourcing and support of specialist teachers, variable availability of language subjects across secondary school, and the ATAR scaling for studying different languages at Year 12.²¹ Robust national level data tracking the pathway for language provision in primary and secondary levels and the pipeline into universities is required to fully understand why the decrease has occurred and to develop effective responses.²²

ACARA reports that just 3.3% of Year 12 students were enrolled in Chinese, Japanese or Indonesian in 2023, down from 5.1% in 2010.²³ The implications are serious, especially as the decline in Asian languages in schools coincides with Australia's strengthening of its political and economic engagement within the Indo-Pacific region.²⁴

It is now widely recognised that Australia's Asian capability has been seriously diluted as a result of a decline in Asian language competencies, posing significant risks to the strategic skills and capabilities necessary for Australia's regional expertise in research, government and business.²⁵

The 2026 House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education report, *Security and prosperity in Asia: Building Asia capability in Australia through the education system and beyond*, **points to the connection between language fluency and disciplinary social sciences expertise in Asia's economies, societies and cultures.**²⁶ Language learning also strengthens the curriculum capability of intercultural understanding.

“When young Australians learn Asian languages, they can build the trust, relationships and capability to engage in our region more effectively.”

– Senator the Hon. Penny Wong, Minister for Foreign Affairs²⁷

The Australian Government recently announced a Fluency in Asian Languages program to provide students in Years 7–12 with teaching in 15 Asian languages as part of a broader \$25 million commitment to support Community Language Schools. These community-based organisations offer classes outside regular school hours, and while such support is important, it is no substitute for schools-based language teaching.

Priorities for action

6. Implement the recommendations of the House Standing Committee report on Building Asia Capability in Australia, including the development of a 10-year national Asia capability strategy. This will require a focus on language literacy development across education sectors from primary to university.
7. Commonwealth, state and territory governments to establish an expert working group to examine the availability and resourcing of social science disciplines at risk in the senior secondary years, and develop strategies to ensure these are supported. These efforts should complement work by the Australian Tertiary Education Commission to investigate critical disciplines which are at risk at tertiary level.

Enabling social science teachers

Following the 2021 Quality Initial Teacher Education Review, significant reform of teacher education and professional development is underway. The *National Teacher Workforce Action Plan* addresses teacher supply, initial teacher education (ITE), retention and elevation of the profession.²⁸ All ITE programs must now embed nationally mandated core content including on the brain and learning, pedagogical and teaching practices, and classroom management. The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) is undertaking a review of the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers which underpin registration, accreditation, appraisal and certification. The consolidation of AITSL with national curriculum and research bodies into a single Teaching and Learning Commission is in progress.²⁹ Stakeholders are cautiously supportive but insist on a focus on supporting teachers.³⁰

These developments mean that decisions about the core content for ITE, once made by universities, are nationally specified and enforced through accreditation, funding levers and oversight. The mandated areas have crowded the ITE curriculum, limiting time that can be given to approaches at the disciplinary level in social science subjects, and in the important broad aim of developing civics and citizenship agendas. Substantive important concerns such as teaching about controversial issues, and building effective and respectful intercultural and ethical understandings are not necessarily well-covered in the current highly mandated ITE prescriptions.

The focus on initial skills in ITE needs to be balanced by educating teachers on the broader role of schools in developing Australian citizens. Social science agendas require attention, not just in the formal curriculum framework but in the support for teachers to actively develop such understandings in their students.

Leadership and innovation by First Nations educators is essential

The story of First Nations school education is one marked by historical and ongoing damage through discrimination and as a result of colonisation, alongside the innovation and leadership of First Nations educators. This includes transformative work to develop culturally nourishing initiatives in school education, incorporating Indigenous knowledges and often in collaboration with non-Indigenous educators and researchers.³¹

In terms of First Nations students' participation and retention in schooling, outcomes are mixed. The National Agreement on Closing the Gap target of 95% preschool enrolment by 2025 is on track to be achieved, although the proportion of children starting school who are developmentally on track is worsening. The target of 96% Year 12-equivalent attainment by 2031 is improving too slowly.³² Disadvantage compounds throughout a child's schooling, with the primary to secondary transition a documented high-risk window for disengagement.³³

Geographical remoteness is the sharpest dividing line in terms of outcomes: 36.9% of commencing First Nations students in major cities have met development milestones, versus 16.5% in very remote areas.³⁴ Attendance in cities averages 75% versus 45% in remote areas.³⁵

Engagement and cultural safety are important drivers of success. First Nations students' school experiences are shaped by teacher quality and continuity, culturally inclusive practice, and family involvement. The 2025 increase in retention, attendance and NAPLAN results for First Nations students shows that educational outcomes can improve with the right levels of support.³⁶ This is a complex and slow process, but opportunities include:

- Growing and supporting the First Nations education workforce include employment-based teaching pathways, scholarships, recognition of cultural and language expertise, and culturally safe workplaces; stabilising remote teaching through retention-based incentives, housing and community induction.³⁷

- Prioritising First Nations leadership and cultural inclusion. Learning on Country programs in remote Australia, sponsored and led by First Nations elders, can incorporate 'two way' or 'both way' learning, where students learn in Indigenous languages and western curriculum and First Nations knowledge are combined. This approach is showing good results in terms of student and community engagement. It is also supported by two-way professional development for First Nations and non-Indigenous educators.³⁸
- Consolidating the growth in early childhood enrolments through Aboriginal community-controlled, integrated early years services combining early learning with child and maternal health and family support.³⁹

Developing a First Nations Education Policy is a Commonwealth commitment under the *Better and Fairer Schools Agreement – Full and Fair Funding 2025–2034* and the 2024–25 Budget. The Academy has contributed to the Policy's development by convening leading Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social scientists and government officials for the policy roundtable *From Evidence to Impact: First Nations Education Policy*.⁴⁰ The roundtable discussion emphasised that previous education policy failures are not due to a lack of evidence or examples of effective practice. Rather, it reflects a failure to mobilise the substantial Indigenous-led evidence base along with the required governance reform, appropriate funding, long-term time horizons and implementation accountability to deliver lasting change.

Priority for action

8. Adopt a long-term, whole-of-system approach to First Nations education reform, with governance arrangements that support implementation and accountability, and embed Indigenous-led evidence, community knowledge and local context throughout policy design and implementation.

Education research is crucial to understand and address Australia's growing educational inequality

“Our vision is for a world class education system that encourages and supports every student to be the very best they can be, no matter where they live or what kind of learning challenges they may face.”

– Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration⁴¹

Inequality in school education is worsening in Australia. Social sciences research analyses why and how this is happening, and what actions might address this national problem.

Australian schools are among the most socioeconomically segregated in the OECD, and the divide is widening faster than in most other countries. This can be linked to policy settings supporting a market in education, such as through a highly subsidised non-government sector, government schools specialising in selective enrolment based on academic excellence, and aspirational families choosing schools with a strong track record of maximising university entry results. These factors concentrate disadvantage in under-resourced public schools and socioeconomically disadvantaged communities, creating what the Mitchell Institute terms a “double jeopardy” of family and school disadvantage.⁴²

Workforce and household data show the same structural skew; out-of-field teaching – that is, students taught by teachers who are not trained in the area they are teaching – is nearly twice as common in disadvantaged schools, and 58% of disadvantaged families struggle to afford school essentials.⁴³

Data deficits make it difficult to identify and support the most disadvantaged students. The introduction of a Unique Student Identifier is over a decade delayed, making it impossible to follow students across schools, sectors or into further study.⁴⁴ Australia also lacks a national wellbeing measure, despite the demonstrated link between wellbeing and attendance and completion. What data is available is incomplete, with the Productivity Commission describing data gaps for priority equity cohorts as profound, especially for students with a disability whose NAPLAN outcomes are not reported.⁴⁵

Research shows that support is most effective, and costs least, when it comes early in a child's life, but this is an area of historic neglect. Moreover, the Productivity Commission has found that the children who would benefit most from early education are also the least likely to attend.⁴⁶

The Commonwealth Government is committed to extending two years of fee-free early childhood education and care (ECEC) to all children, but this is not yet fully in place. ECEC, where intervention pays off most, lacks the needs-based funding schools receive, with “childcare deserts” in disadvantaged and remote areas.⁴⁷

These issues present a challenge for Australia's future social and economic capacities and wellbeing, and social sciences expertise can play a critical role in helping to understand and address them.

Social science research is exposing structural causes of education inequity and identifying potential solutions. As well as educating and supplying the nation's teachers, the social sciences are responsible for educating graduates in psychology, social work and counselling, a significant number of whom are based in schools or work with educators.

In the long-term, investment in Australia's schooling system, teachers and education research focused on national priorities needs to grow, with a renewed approach to rigour and strengthening the research-policy interface.

The Australian Association for Research in Education (AARE) has called for “a renewed commitment to rigorous and context sensitive research, responsible use of data, and systemic support for strengthened teacher professionalism”. It warns against reliance on weak or narrow forms of evidence, and notes the importance of practitioner-led inquiry and policy makers engaging with teachers' practical insights and experience.⁴⁸

The Academy, in partnership with AARE and other education stakeholders, is developing a *Decadal Plan for Australian Education Research*. Following extensive consultation over 2024–2026, and led by a Steering Committee of sector partners, the Decadal Plan will be launched by the end of 2026. This Decadal Plan aims to strengthen, sustain and drive investment in educational research. This requires cross-sectoral collaboration and enabling research infrastructure to facilitate new ways of working that can advance progress towards shared priorities in education.⁴⁹

Priorities for action

9. Establish a multi-disciplinary, multi-sector expert group to explore how education inequalities are produced, and the various evidence and datasets needed to understand and address educational inequity in the long-term.
10. Conduct a review of the funding, social and market factors shaping schooling and school systems and outcomes, and the long-term systems change needed to address educational inequity.
11. Support research sector engagement with the recommendations of the *Decadal Plan for Australian Education Research*.

In summary: schools snapshot

Key observations

- Through research, Initial Teacher Education (ITE) and professional development, curriculum and teaching resources, the social sciences contribute to a school education system in which all students are supported to flourish.
- Social science content is embedded in the Australian Curriculum (Foundation-Year 10) through core HASS subjects, general capabilities, and cross-curriculum priorities. These provide knowledge and competencies that help young people make informed decisions and underpin workforce participation, social inclusion and lifelong learning.
- While the Australian Curriculum includes core HASS subjects, the delivery of social sciences subjects varies across jurisdictions and individual schools. There are opportunities to increase social science education across all levels of schooling.
- Strong civics and citizenship education (CCE) contribute to building a healthy democracy that respects difference and diversity and promotes social cohesion. This requires sustained investment in teacher capability and high-quality classroom resources on democratic institutions, engaging with intercultural contexts, and respectful dialogue on contested issues.
- Social science education at the senior secondary level is foundational for Australia's future workforce, expertise and sovereign capabilities. A slow decline in Year 12 social science enrolments, and in key subject areas, such as economics and Asian languages, requires urgent attention.
- The ITE curriculum must balance equipping teachers with core skills, approaches at the discipline level and an understanding of the broader role of schools in developing young people be engaged and active citizens.
- Australian schools, universities and governments must elevate the knowledge and expertise of First Nations researchers and educators and embed this in curriculum development, teaching practices and teacher training. This must be accompanied by governance arrangements that support co-design and self-determination and appropriate long-term funding.
- Developing education research is crucial, including to address the growing issues of inequity in Australian schooling.

Priorities for action

5. The Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority strengthen Civics and Citizenship Education (CCE) across all levels of schooling and embed the Intercultural Understanding general capability in consistent teaching and assessment across subjects. This requires sustained investment in teacher capability through Initial Teacher Education in CCE, ongoing professional development and high-quality classroom resources on democratic institutions, engaging with intercultural contexts and respectful dialogue on contested issues.
6. Implement the recommendations of the House Standing Committee report on Building Asia Capability in Australia, including the development of a 10-year national Asia capability strategy. This will require a focus on language literacy development across education sectors from primary to university.
7. Commonwealth, state and territory governments to establish an expert working group to examine the availability and resourcing of social science disciplines at risk in the senior secondary years, and develop strategies to ensure these are supported. These efforts should complement work by the Australian Tertiary Education Commission to investigate critical disciplines which are at risk at tertiary level.
8. Adopt a long-term, whole-of-system approach to First Nations education reform, with governance arrangements that support implementation and accountability, and embed Indigenous-led evidence, community knowledge and local context throughout policy design and implementation.
9. Establish a multi-disciplinary, multi-sector expert group to explore how education inequalities are produced, and the various evidence and datasets needed to understand and address educational inequity in the long-term.
10. Conduct a review of the funding, social and market factors shaping schooling and school systems and outcomes, and the long-term systems change needed to address educational inequity.
11. Support research sector engagement with the recommendations of the *Decadal Plan for Australian Education Research*.

Vocational Education and Training Snapshot

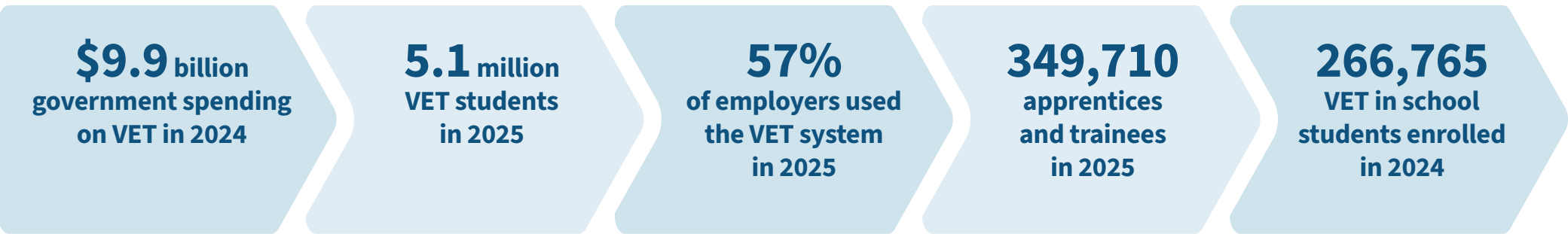
Vocational education and training

Australia’s vocational education and training (VET) system is undergoing significant reform. Driven by workforce shortages, technological change, demographic pressures and the transition to a net zero economy, governments have repositioned skills policy as a central component of Australia’s long-term economic and social development.

Recent reforms, including the National Skills Agreement, the establishment of Jobs and Skills Australia and the Australian Universities Accord, have strengthened the Commonwealth’s leadership and partnership with state jurisdictions, and promoted collaboration across the tertiary education system. Together, these reforms strengthen the purpose of VET; with a focus on quality and relevance of training, supporting lifelong learning and helping the workforce adapt to a changing economy and society.

As governments pursue productivity growth alongside greater equity and inclusion, the social sciences will play an increasingly important role. This snapshot examines the current state of the VET system, highlighting how recent reforms are reshaping skills policy and workforce capability. It identifies the strengths of Australia’s skills system, the challenges that remain, and opportunities to better harness social science expertise to build a more productive, equitable and resilient workforce.

Figure 3: Key figures VET (all fields)



Source: NCVER (2026) Latest VET Statistics.

Australia’s VET system

The Australian Government is responsible at the Commonwealth level for regulation of the national training system. **State and territory governments** oversee regulation, governance, delivery and operations at the state and territory level. Governments work together via the **Skills and Workforce Ministerial Council**, which provides a forum for cross-jurisdictional stewardship of VET.

Jobs and Skills Australia (JSA) provides independent advice to government and key partners in the national skills system on the nation’s current and emerging labour market, skills and training needs, and avenues for policy development and program delivery.

Jobs and Skills Councils (JSCs) provide industry with a stronger voice to ensure Australia’s vocational education and training (VET) sector delivers better outcomes for learners and employers. They bring together employers, unions and governments in a tripartite arrangement to find solutions to skills and workforce challenges.

Vocational education is delivered by approximately 4,000 registered training organisations (RTOs) including TAFEs, community education providers, private training providers, and some schools and universities, who use training packages to guide their curriculum and assessment design.

Social sciences are at the heart of Australia’s VET system

In 2025, Australia’s VET system provided work-relevant education and training to over 5 million Australians in both full programs and short courses.¹ The social sciences are engaged in all levels of VET offerings, ranging from foundation courses and apprenticeships through to postgraduate certificates and diplomas. Altogether, the social sciences account for 1.2 million program enrolments, or 43% of the total.

The social sciences include the two single largest fields of education (Management and Commerce and Society and Culture), and Education is now the fastest growing VET field. This reflects growing demand in the early childhood education and care (ECEC) workforce and support through fee-free TAFE, and demonstrates how government policy is reshaping the skills pipeline.

Figure 4: Program enrolments as a proportion of all VET enrolments 2020–2025

Field of Education	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	Fields of Education designated as social sciences
Natural & physical sciences	0.60%	0.70%	0.70%	0.70%	0.70%	0.70%	
Information technology	2%	2%	2%	2%	2%	2%	
Engineering & related technologies	14%	15%	16%	16%	15%	15%	
Architecture & building	8%	8%	9%	8%	8%	9%	
Agriculture, environmental & related studies	2%	2%	2%	2%	2%	2%	
Health	6%	7%	7%	7%	7%	7%	
Education	5%	6%	6%	8%	9%	8%	
Management & commerce	21%	20%	19%	19%	18%	18%	
Society & culture	18%	19%	17%	17%	17%	17%	
Creative arts	3%	2%	2%	2%	2%	2%	
Food, hospitality & personal services	8%	8%	8%	9%	9%	8%	
Mixed field programmes	7%	7%	6%	6%	6%	5%	
Not known	5%	3%	4%	4%	4%	5%	

Source: DataBuilder various datasets. NCVER (2026) Total VET students and courses 2025.

Australia's VET sector is expanding

The number of students enrolled in VET grew by approximately 20% between 2019 and 2025. However, most of this growth has come from people enrolling in individual subjects over the past five years, alongside, or instead of, full qualifications. Non-award training and stand-alone subject enrolments have increased by 34% since 2021.

Some of this growth reflects demand for compliance-based training, particularly in health (such as first aid and CPR), construction and hospitality. More broadly, however, it signals a shift towards flexible, ‘just-in-time’ learning that enables workers to quickly develop new skills throughout their careers.

Social scientists, including VET educators and educational researchers, will have an important role to play in supporting and mapping the development of ‘stackable’ qualifications and credit recognition arising from single subject delivery across the sector.

Government investment in VET has also increased significantly, with total expenditure (Commonwealth, state and territory) more than doubling to \$10 billion between 2019 and 2024. However, this increase includes temporary industry training subsidies provided during the Covid-19 pandemic. Expenditure on training delivery increased by 36% over the same period, driven by pandemic support measures plus the introduction of Fee-Free TAFE from 2023 and reforms linked to the National Skills Agreement agreed by the Commonwealth, state and territory ministers in 2024.²

National Skills Plan reforms create opportunities for social sciences

Supported by \$3.7 billion in Commonwealth investment, the National Skills Plan (NSP) establishes a stronger partnership model between governments, industry, unions, communities and education providers to improve the quality, relevance and accessibility of training. It is framed around nine key priorities (Figure 5).

Social sciences have an important role to play in this agenda. They contribute directly to priorities such as sustaining essential care services, gender equality and Closing the Gap, while also supporting the development of transferable skills needed across industries and strengthening the future VET workforce.

Figure 5: National priorities for skills reform



Source: Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (2024) National Skills Agreement.

A more connected tertiary system is essential to growth and equity

VET offers an important entry point to post-school learning. It also offers pathways to further learning and opportunities for people to develop and update work-relevant skills throughout their lives. This reflects the growing need for lifelong learning and workforce adaptation in the face of demographic shifts and rapid technological transformation.

A more connected tertiary sector will support student learning and is necessary for growth. Jobs and Skills Australia (JSA) predicts total employment growth of nearly 2 million people by 2035, with 92% of new jobs requiring post-secondary qualifications and approximately 44% utilising VET as the primary pathway, while the Universities Accord Final Report recommended lifting the proportion of working age people with a tertiary attainment (Certificate III and above) from 60% to 80% by 2050.³

Realising this ambitious target means increasing opportunities for VET participation and success among cohorts currently underrepresented in the system, such as First Nations and culturally and linguistically diverse people and those experiencing social and economic disadvantage. It will also require stronger pathways between schools, VET and higher education.

Therefore, a central plank of the national reform agenda is ensuring that the tertiary education sector is accessible with multiple access points and seamless pathways between schools, VET and higher education subjects and qualifications. Achieving this will involve funding and regulatory reforms across Commonwealth, state and territory governments, and increased collaboration between VET and higher education providers to support sector harmonisation. Providing stewardship for the tertiary sector as it works to achieve these goals is a high priority for the newly created Australian Tertiary Education Commission (ATEC).

The result should be an integrated, efficient and student-centred tertiary sector, providing students with multiple access points and seamless pathways between schools, VET and higher education subjects and qualifications.

Beyond education and training delivery, the social sciences can provide the evidence base to help inform the design and implementation of tertiary sector harmonisation. This includes building relevant evaluation capabilities and data infrastructure to support system monitoring and improve the quality, transparency and measurement of learning and teaching pathways effectiveness.

Australia lacks the workforce data needed to plan the future VET workforce

JSA analysis reveals significant gaps in workforce data, including the fact that subsets of the workforce (for example, in social sciences program delivery) are not yet mapped with a high degree of accuracy. However, JSA is now pursuing a funded program of occupational mapping and data strategy work, complemented by work to link the VET National Data Asset with the Australian Taxation Office (ATO), education and social services data. Understanding the composition and strengths of the VET workforce, including by industry sector, will be crucial to its development and effectiveness into the future. It will also enable a clearer lens on the contributions of different areas of skill and expertise, such as those developed through the social sciences, in developing a productive, relevant and resilient VET workforce.

Priority for action

12. Accelerate the development of a comprehensive national evidence base for the vocational education and training workforce by collecting and publishing consistent, high-quality workforce data to support workforce planning, tertiary harmonisation and National Skills Agreement reforms.

Social sciences deliver strong graduate outcomes and skills for a changing economy

Qualifications offered through the social sciences in VET include workforce critical areas such as community services, disability support, early childhood education and care (ECEC) and aged care.

In 2025, 48% of VET enrolments from priority cohorts were enrolled in a social science program.⁴ Proportions of Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) (low-SES), linguistically diverse and female students exceed sector averages. The concentration of women in Society and Culture and Education make these fields especially important to the achievement of national goals to improve the quality and participation of women in VET and in key industries.

Overall, social science graduates are satisfied with the quality and utility of education and training, and achieve above average completion rates.

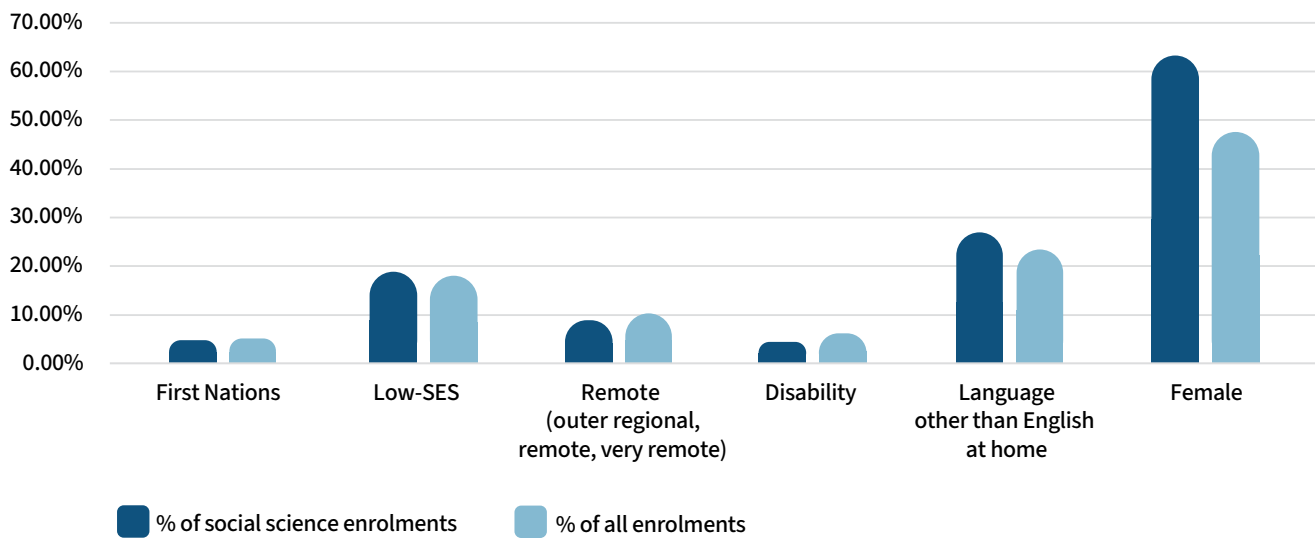
In 2024, 87% reported satisfaction with overall training and 87% reported that they achieved their main reason for enrolling in VET, consistent with the sector average. All three social science FoE recorded completion rates above the sector average.⁵ Society and Culture reached 55.4% (6.4 percentage points above the sector average), Education 56.1% (7.1 percentage points above the sector average) and Management and Commerce 51.% (2 percentage points above the sector average). It should be noted, however, that this is not the only measure of student success, given that students enrolled in single subjects are not captured in this data.⁶

Social science graduates in VET also experienced above-average positive improvements in employment status. Students completing Community Services qualifications reported an improved employment status of 70.9% in 2024, well above the all-fields average of 62.4%.⁷ Courses in Society and Culture, Health and Education recorded the highest employment change rates of any VET course, reflecting their role as entry-level credentials in the care economy and in early childhood education.

Management and Commerce qualifications sit around the sector average for entry into employment but deliver higher than average earnings and career progression; reflecting the fact that many of these students are already employed and are undertaking courses to increase their expertise and skills. Importantly, the field, by virtue of its scale, supplies administrative, supervisory and managerial capability across every sector of the economy.

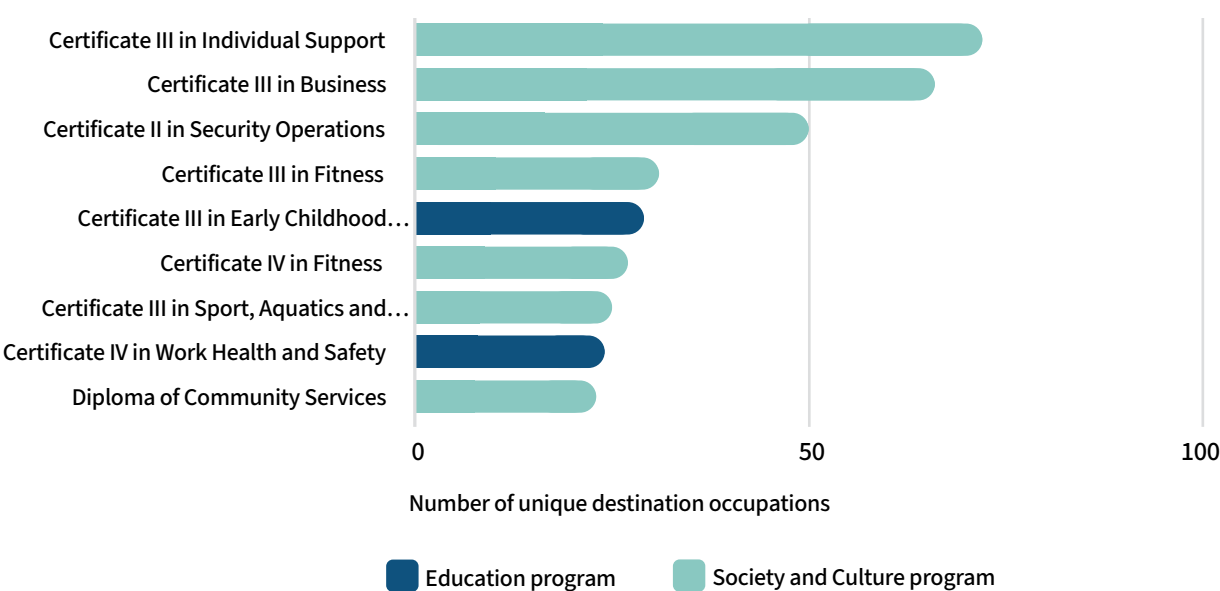
At the same time, graduates of social science qualifications entered the highest number of unique employment destinations; reflecting the alignment of these courses with a range of employment settings and the skills and adaptability of graduates (Figure 7).

Figure 6: Priority cohort VET enrolments as a proportion of social science enrolments and all enrolments, 2025



Source: DataBuilder multiple datasets. NCVER (2026) Total VET students and courses 2025.

Figure 7: Top qualifications by number of unique destination occupations



Source: JSA (2025) Analysis of VET Graduate Outcomes 2020-21. Qualification completers.

Vocational education and training quality is receiving focused attention, but capability gaps remain

Many of the concerns raised by the Academy regarding the quality and fitness for purpose of training products and assessment, providers and delivery in the *2021 State of the Social Sciences Report* are being tackled under the NSP.

Training quality is supported by the formation of Jobs and Skills Councils (JSC) involving providers, government, employers and unions to advise on development of training products and workforce requirements. The HumanAbility JSC oversees much of this work in relation to social sciences delivery in industry clusters.

While it is too early for outcomes to be evident, the JSC provide a focused and collaborative lens on key industries which should enable some of the concerns previously expressed by the Academy and other stakeholders regarding the limitations of training packages to be addressed. **However, the voice of VET educators in this process is not clear, and there remains a case for greater involvement of social sciences expertise in the development of transferable skills across industry sectors. A JSC for Education and Training – covering Foundation Studies, ECEC and VET educator training packages – should also be considered.**

VET quality is also supported by 20 TAFE Centres of Excellence, bringing together nationally networked expertise from universities and TAFE providers to ensure that learnings and research around best practice are enhanced and shared. These are located across Australia, and reflect the nine NSP priorities.⁸ However, the development of VET educators and assessors and the important area of foundation skills are not currently represented in JSC or TAFE Centres of Excellence.

A key underpinning of VET reform is ensuring that learners lacking foundation skills can access the training they need to participate effectively in employment, further education and the community. The National Foundation Skills Strategy for adults states that 3 million Australians lack foundation skills, and focuses on building language, literacy, digital and mathematical skills alongside building educational capacity in the VET workforce.⁹

This supports the case for a social science-led TAFE and Community Centre of Excellence in foundation skills development, to ensure that learnings across TAFE, industry and community sectors can be shared as relevant and informed by the best educational research and practice. This would support not only the development of foundation skills but the capacity of TAFE educators in this context.

Priorities for action

13. Strengthen social science and educator expertise in national skills governance by ensuring vocational education and training educators are represented in the work of Jobs and Skills Councils and embedding social science expertise in the design of transferable, foundational and human capability skills across industries.
14. Consider establishing an Education and Training Jobs and Skills Council to provide dedicated stewardship of Education training packages.
15. Establish a social science-led TAFE and Community Centre of Excellence for Foundation Skills to translate evidence into practice, strengthen collaboration across TAFE, industry and community providers, and build educator capability through research-informed approaches to foundation skills development.

Place-based, culturally responsive and First Nations-led education and training are required to increase First Nations participation and success

Place-based, culturally responsive and First Nations-led education and training, built on trusted relationships with community and employing and supporting First Nations staff, are essential to increasing First Nations participation and success.

A key priority of the National Skills Plan is achieving the Closing the Gap target of 70% of First Nations people aged 24–35 holding a Certificate III or above qualification by 2031. However, 2021 census data reveals that the proportion of the target population holding these qualifications stood at 47%. At this rate, the target will not be achieved.¹⁰

Social sciences will be critical to progressing this ambition, accounting for 34% of all First Nations program enrolments in 2024 and having experienced steady growth since 2021. The strongest growth in participation is in Society and Culture, where most program enrolments are women.¹¹ The social sciences are also significant for First Nations people's attainment insofar as qualifications are clustered in Certificates II-IV, with a high potential for supporting pathways into Certificates III-IV and higher education.

Social sciences' contribution will also be through research and pedagogy which identifies and addresses those factors which make a real difference to First Nations student outcomes. The leadership and scholarship of First Nations researchers and educators is critical in this respect.

VET is the first choice for First Nations people undertaking post-secondary education. They comprise 5.4% of VET enrolments, relative to a 3.8% population share.¹² The achievement of a postsecondary qualification has also been shown to be crucial to closing the gap between employment outcomes for First Nations and non-Indigenous people. It is also sometimes the *only* post-school training option available in remote Australia. However, 2021 census data showed that completion of a Certificate III or above for 25–34-year-olds ranged from 57% in major cities to 17% in remote areas.¹³ Given the location of many First Nations people in rural and remote Australia, investment and support for place-based VET will be important for future student success.

Spotlight

In South Australia, the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands Methodology and Translation Initiative aim to adapt selected content from the Certificate III in early childhood education and care into Pitjantjatjara to increase access to vocational education and strengthen workforce participation for Anangu communities. The project addresses long-standing challenges in equity, participation, and completion within early childhood training by embedding Anangu language, knowledge, and cultural perspectives into the nationally recognised qualification framework.

This initiative ensures that learning materials and assessment practices reflect the lived experiences, languages, and knowledge systems of Anangu learners, making vocational education more relevant and meaningful. By translating key ECEC concepts and developing a supporting glossary of terms, the project enhances cultural and linguistic inclusivity while supporting educators to deliver training that resonates with Anangu students.

“I tested the translated PowerPoint with a student – her face said it all. She took her time reading the Pitjantjatjara text, but when she heard it spoken – wow! That’s when it truly hit me how much this translation will help.”

– Diana Hurford, TAFE SA Coordinator and Lecturer in the Children’s Education and Care program

Source: National Skills Plan Update 2025-2026

Recent National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) commissioned research by Adelaide University social scientists demonstrates, through case study analysis of three First Nations operated Registered Training Organisations in remote Australia, factors which make a difference to student engagement and success.¹⁴ They include support for First Nations leadership in education and training, the incorporation of Indigenous knowledges, and meaningful pathways and opportunities for on Country and in community education and training.

What needs to be done to address First Nations student opportunity and success is too complex and multifaceted an issue to address adequately here.

The National Skills Plan outlines a set of meaningful priorities and action underway across a range of fronts. At the heart of recent research are findings that place-based, culturally responsive and First Nations-led education and training, built on trusted relationships with community and employing and supporting First Nations staff, deliver the best results. The evidence stresses that creating inclusive learning environments and building cultural capability must be a shared responsibility for governments, providers and employers, but continued research and evaluation led by First Nations scholars and practitioners is critical. JSA research reinforces these conclusions; finding that First Nations VET workforce participation grew by 18% between 2016 and 2021 but still comprised less than 2% of the workforce, relative to 3.8% population share.¹⁵

Therefore, development of and support for the First Nations VET workforce must be among the highest priorities for governments and providers. The role of First Nations educators and social scientists in the VET and research sector will be crucial in advancing this priority. In this context, the Academy welcomes the establishment of the Indigenous Centre of Vocational Excellence, and First Nations led centre to facilitate VET policy partnerships to progress Closing the Gap targets.

Priority for action

16. Prioritise First Nations vocational education and training workforce development by investing in the recruitment, retention and career progression of First Nations educators and recognising their critical role in improving learner participation and completion outcomes.

In summary: Vocational education and training

Key observations

- Social sciences are at the heart of Australia's VET system, and demand is growing in sectors critical to society and the economy. Social sciences account for 43% of all VET program enrolments and Education is now the fastest-growing field.
- Social science expertise is vital to the design and delivery of transferable and foundational capabilities across industries. The workforce of the future must be adaptable and capable of working across a range of occupational settings and new technologies.
- Social sciences expertise and skills will underpin and support national skills reform. The National Skills Plan relies on stronger capability in areas such as lifelong learning, cross-sector harmonisation, care services, gender equality, Closing the Gap and transferable skills – all areas where the social sciences make a major contribution.
- Social science qualifications deliver strong student outcomes. Graduates report high satisfaction, above-average improvements in employment, and qualifications that lead to diverse occupations across the economy.
- Leadership of First Nations educators and researchers is central to improving First Nations educational outcomes. Social science programs account for around 39% of First Nations VET enrolments and evidence shows that place-based, culturally responsive and First Nations-led approaches deliver the strongest outcomes.
- Foundation skills and educator capability require greater investment. The National Foundation Skills Strategy creates opportunities to better harness social science expertise in teaching, learning and workforce development, including through a TAFE Centre of Excellence.
- Despite continuing work in this area, Australia still lacks robust data on the VET workforce. Without improved workforce data it will be difficult to plan for future education and training needs, and to fully understand the current and potential contribution of social sciences across all VET programs.

Priorities for action

12. Accelerate the development of a comprehensive national evidence base for the vocational education and training workforce by collecting and publishing consistent, high-quality workforce data to support workforce planning, tertiary harmonisation and National Skills Agreement reforms.
13. Strengthen social science and educator expertise in national skills governance by ensuring vocational education and training educators are represented in the work of Jobs and Skills Councils and embedding social science expertise in the design of transferable, foundational and human capability skills across industries.
14. Consider establishing an Education and Training Jobs and Skills Council to provide dedicated stewardship of Education training packages.
15. Establish a social science-led TAFE and Community Centre of Excellence for Foundation Skills to translate evidence into practice, strengthen collaboration across TAFE, industry and community providers, and build educator capability through research-informed approaches to foundation skills development.
16. Prioritise First Nations vocational education and training workforce development by investing in the recruitment, retention and career progression of First Nations educators and recognising their critical role in improving learner participation and completion outcomes.

Higher Education Snapshot

Australia's higher education system is crucial to the nation's social, cultural and economic future

Universities are, as Productivity Commission Chair Danielle Woods reminds us, “factories for ideas”, generating and disseminating knowledge which will lift productivity, inform innovation and support improved living standards.¹

One of the most important contributions universities make is through the education of skilled graduates.

In 2024, just over 1 million Commonwealth subsidised students and nearly 700,000 international students were enrolled in Australia's higher education system.² Most were enrolled in 44 self-accrediting universities, with the remainder studying at approximately 150 registered higher education providers.³

851,756 student – 51% of all enrolled students – were enrolled in social sciences courses.

These include generalist undergraduate degrees such as Bachelor of Arts, Bachelor of Business and Bachelor of Social Science, which prepare graduates for a broad range of careers. Postgraduate coursework provides entry-level qualifications for critically important professions, such as psychology, social work, accountancy and teaching. Other postgraduate qualifications provide specialist skills development in areas vital to society such as demography, urban planning, public health and public policy.

This snapshot examines the state of social science teaching in universities at a time of rapid social and economic change and major sectoral reform.

Higher education is in a state of flux, as the sector faces further reform

Since 2019, the higher education environment has been buffeted and reshaped by the Covid-19 pandemic and its aftermath, the expansion of transformative technologies and major policy reforms.

Public trust in Australian higher education institutions has fallen. While a university degree delivers improved earnings over a lifetime, research indicates that fewer Australians believe that a degree is necessary for success, and many believe higher education to be less accessible than in the past.⁴

These changing perceptions are part of a broader decline in trust in public institutions, and similar trends are reflected in the public attitudes towards universities in other Western nations.⁵

Government reform in Australia in part responds to this decline in public trust. Reforms to university governance focus on increased transparency and accountability, with a review of higher education standards and stronger regulation.

Expanding access to higher education is a key priority of the Australian Government. The Australian Government has accepted the recommendation of the *Australia Universities Accord Final Report* that 80% of Australians should have a tertiary qualification (Certificate III or above) by 2050. Increasing the number of skilled graduates, especially among those currently underrepresented in the higher education sector, is central to improving national productivity and building a fairer society.

This growth will be managed through compacts negotiated between institutions and the Australian Tertiary Education Commission (ATEC). Institutions that exceed their compact student targets may face penalties, except with regards to First Nations students and other underrepresented cohorts. Growth in international students is capped, which will have a significant impact on university profiles and future revenue. ATEC will oversee these reforms as an independent steward of the higher education system and provide advice to government. Establishing this stewardship role while implementing significant reforms will require ongoing engagement with universities and other stakeholders.

Changing patterns of higher education demand are reshaping the social science profile

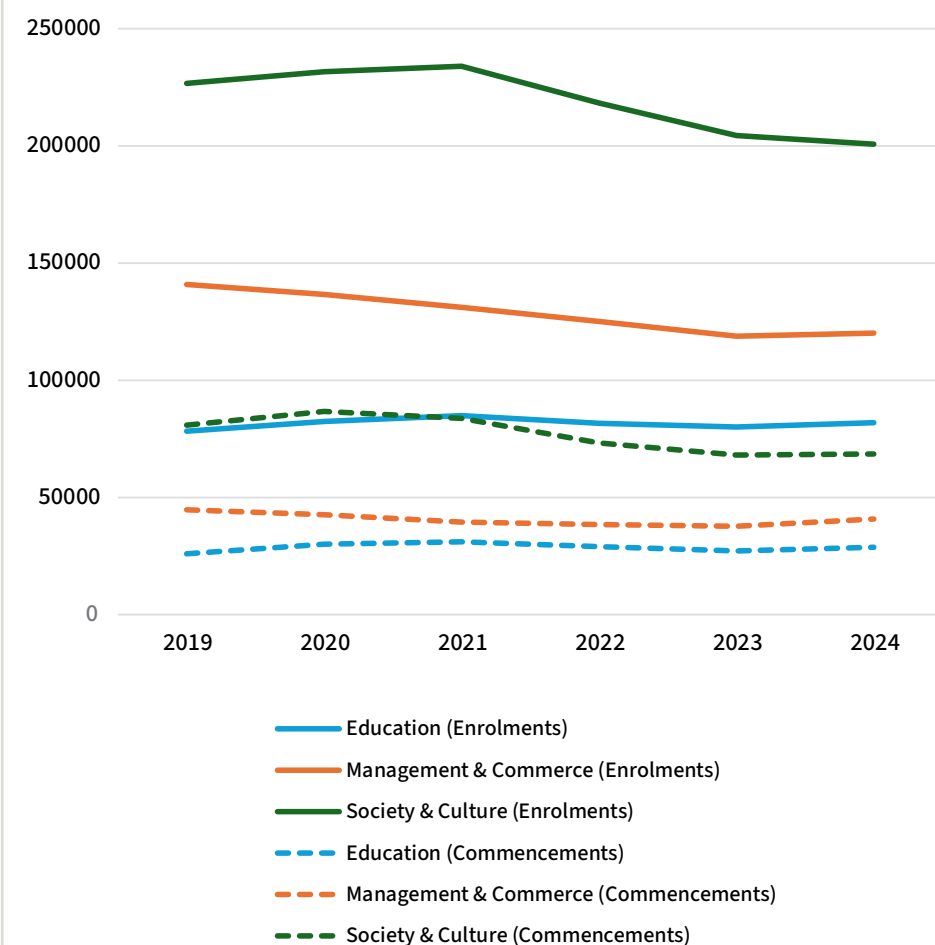
Higher education demand has fluctuated over the past decade in response to a range of factors including demographic trends, labour market changes, international mobility, economic conditions, and questions about the value proposition of higher education.

Figure 8 illustrates shifts in commencing Australian student demand between 2015 and 2024. Despite a surge in 2024, all social science fields have experienced a net decline.⁷ Over the past five years domestic undergraduate enrolments in the social sciences have not returned to pre-Covid levels in Society and Culture and Management and Commerce. Enrolments in Education have grown but this is partly offset by falls in postgraduate enrolments. Domestic postgraduate coursework overall in the social sciences shows a more positive trajectory post-pandemic but also has not returned to 2019 levels (Figure 9).

In the case of international students, enrolments have grown over the past five years except in the case of Management and Commerce undergraduates, which have flatlined since 2021 (Figure 11).

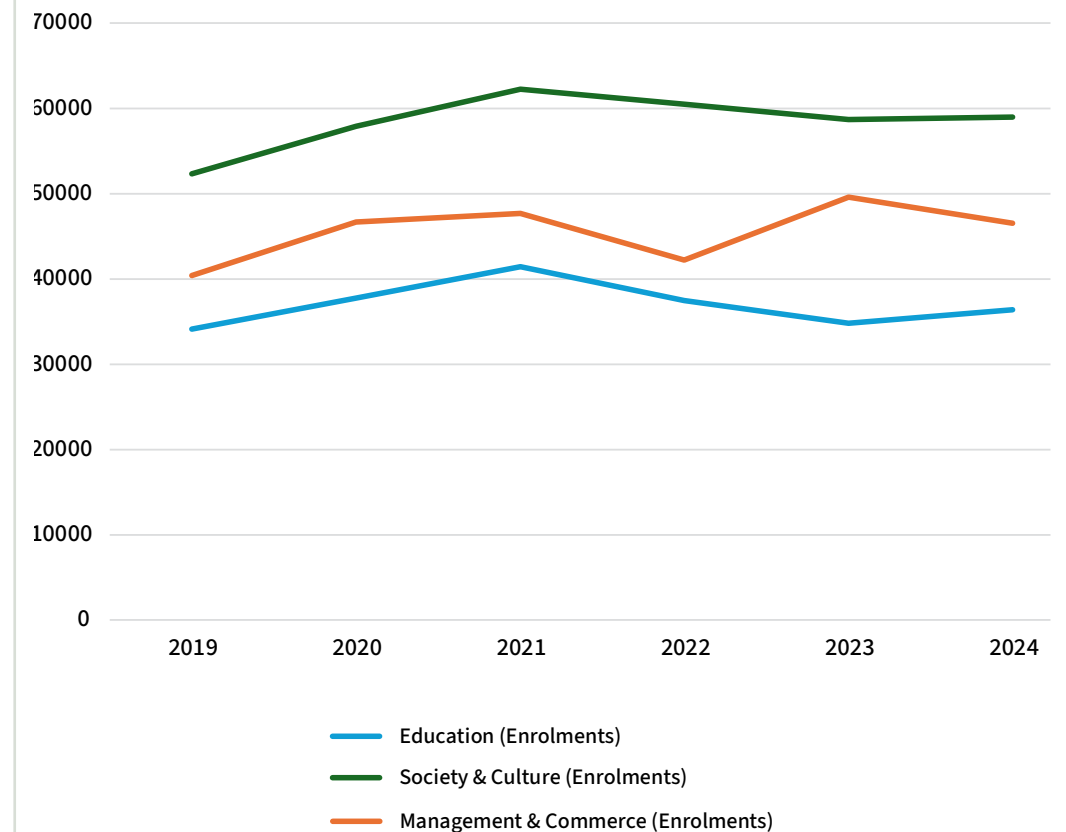
The decline in social sciences enrolment may not be cause for immediate concern. However, it requires further analysis at a disciplinary level to ensure that areas critical to Australia's future workforce are not at risk.

Figure 8: Social science domestic undergraduate enrolments and commencements 2019–2024



Source: Department of Education (2025) Selected Higher Education Statistics – 2024 Student Data.

Figure 9: Social science domestic postgraduate coursework enrolments 2019–2024



Source: Department of Education (2025) Selected Higher Education Statistics – 2024 Student Data.

The Job-ready Graduates Package is unfair and unworkable

The introduction of the Job-ready Graduates Package (JRGP) in 2021 had a disproportionate impact on students studying the social sciences and humanities. Student contributions increased substantially for courses such as business and commerce, law, arts, communications, psychology, and social work. A three-year generalist degree can now cost more than \$50,000 while a combined qualification such as Arts/Law costs \$85,000.⁸

The policy was designed to use price signals to encourage students away from areas designated “low priority” and into fields of “national priority” (e.g. teaching, engineering, science, nursing). Commonwealth contributions were also adjusted. The overall impact was a net decline in funding for universities of approximately \$813 million, or 6% of Commonwealth grants.⁹

The effectiveness of the JRGP in changing student choices is unclear. As Figure 10 shows, most areas identified as national priorities experienced growth in commencing enrolments over the past decade, while many disciplines with higher student contributions experience declines. However, these trends cannot be attributed solely to the JRGP, given the range of factors influencing demand, and declines in some social science disciplines began before the policy was introduced.¹⁰

The JRGP is unfair and unworkable and needs to be replaced with a just and sustainable funding mechanism to support higher education delivery.

Figure 10: Number of domestic commencing students for select Fields of Education, 10 year and 2023–2024

Field of Education	2015	2023	2024	% change 2023 to 2024	% change 2015 to 2024	Fields of Education designated as social sciences
Natural & physical sciences	33,639	32,363	33,125	2.4%	-1.5%	
Information technology	11,488	21,917	21,983	0.3%	91.4%	
Engineering & related technologies	20,544	21,416	23,616	10.3%	15.0%	
Architecture & building	8,738	10,652	10,787	1.3%	23.4%	
Agriculture, environmental & related studies	4,801	5,208	5,102	-2.0%	6.3%	
Health	75,170	89,396	93,979	5.1%	25.0%	
Nursing	18,950	19,817	20,347	2.7%	7.4%	
Education	46,687	42,208	46,436	10.0%	-0.5%	
Initial teacher education	29,812	23,426	25,683	9.6%	-13.9%	
Management & commerce	69,668	56,917	58,618	3.0%	-15.9%	
Society& culture	107,007	97,313	98,994	1.7%	-7.5%	
Creative arts	32,489	25,372	25,405	0.1%	-21.8%	
Food, hospitality & personal services	273	91	86	-5.5%	-68.5%	
Mixed field programmes	8,056	6,755	8,673	28.4%	7.7%	
Non-award courses	6,118	6,396	6,719	5.1%	9.8%	
All domestic commencing students	403,414	396,122	413,133	4.3%	2.4%	

Source: Department of Education (2025) Selected Higher Education Statistics – 2024 Student Data.

Anecdotal information also suggests that the impact has varied across institutions, partly because under the JRGP rules universities continued to control the supply of places at a discipline level.

Universities could make pragmatic decisions to redistribute places across disciplines to optimise the use of their funding envelope. They could also enrol students above their agreed government-funded levels and retain the student contribution. In areas such as management and commerce, where the student contribution was close to the previous government-plus-student-contribution amount, universities with high demand could afford to enrol additional students at the marginal rate. Where universities had declining demand in high-cost areas at undergraduate level, they could choose to shift funded places into postgraduate courses where a government subsidised place was a more attractive option for students who would otherwise pay full fees. This partly explains the increase in postgraduate coursework enrolments, including in the social sciences, over the past five years.¹¹

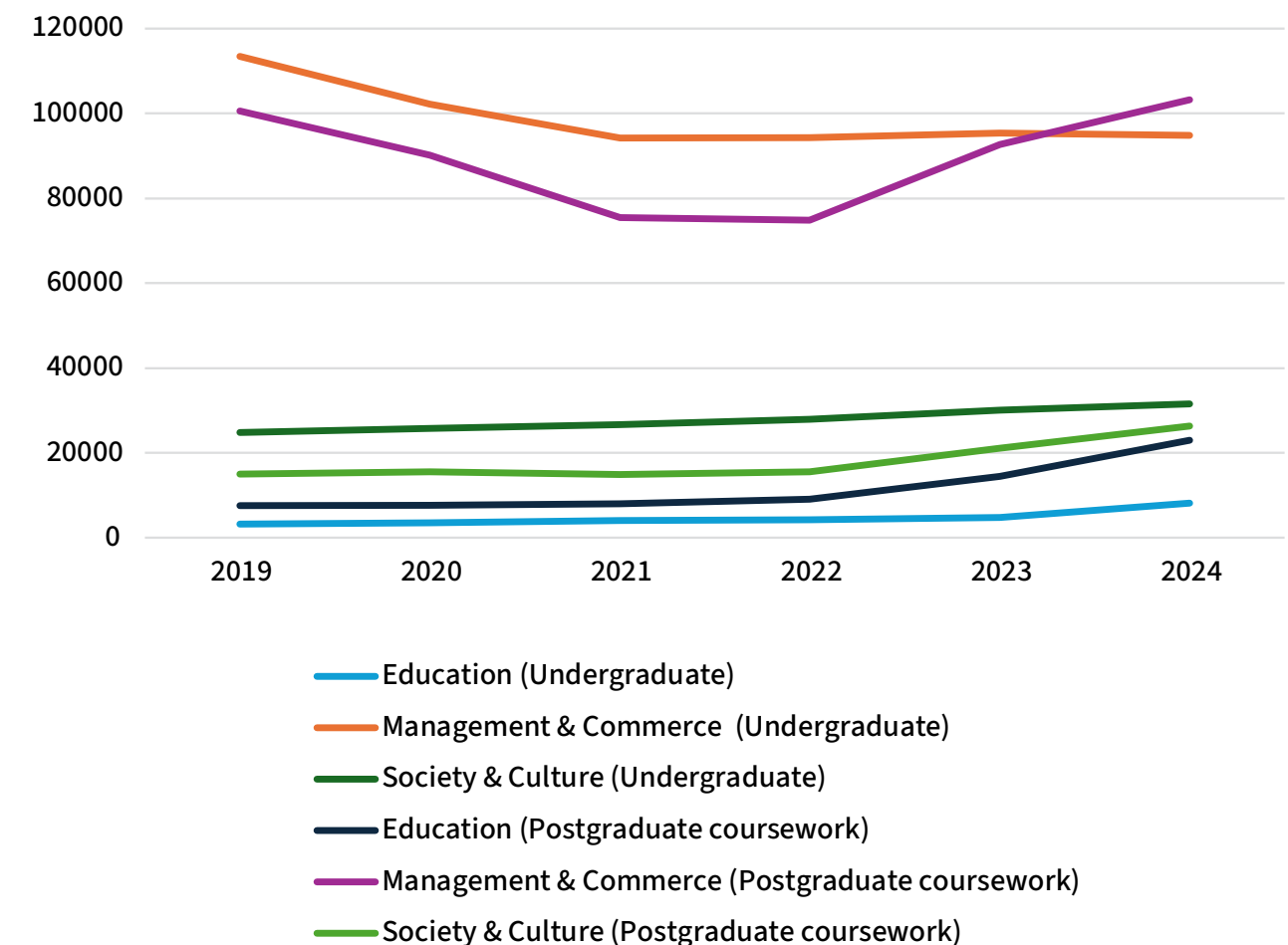
Despite this complicated picture, there are well-founded concerns about the potential impact of increased student debt, especially on low socio-economic status (low-SES) students who are more likely to be debt averse. Analysis has found that for courses in the highest charging band, low-SES commencements declined 19.7% between 2020 to 2024 (the window in which JRGP was introduced), compared with an 8.2% decline for non-low-SES. In the lowest charging bands (including Education, Nursing and Languages), low-SES commencements rose by 2.1% over the same period.¹²

Undoubtedly, JRGP is unfair to students and has had uncertain policy outcomes. The *Australian Universities Accord Final Report* recommended replacing the JRGP with a fairer and more sustainable funding model for Commonwealth supported students. Reforming the current system remains a high priority

In addition, the government must pay attention to the ongoing impact on caps to international student numbers. While Figure 11 below shows some recovery of international student numbers in social sciences following the worst of the Covid-19 pandemic, this is less marked in Management and Commerce, where the concentration of international students is highest.

Flattening of demand may be partly due to the lingering aftermath of Covid-19 lockdowns, government messaging around student caps, and increases to the cost and time taken to get a visa. Nonetheless, the decision to cap will have impacts on revenue (international student fees are one of the few funding sources which deliver a margin for reinvestment) and on Australia's continuing engagement with its region and the world.

Figure 11: Social science international undergraduate and postgraduate enrolments 2019–2024



Source: Department of Education (2025) Selected Higher Education Statistics – 2024 Student Data.

Priorities for action

17. The Australian Government establish a clear timeline and principles for replacing the Job-ready Graduates Package with a funding system for Commonwealth supported students that is equitable and sustainable.
18. international student place caps on student demand and the long-term sustainability of the higher education sector, while recognising the important contribution of international education to Australia's trade relationships, global engagement and alumni networks.

The social sciences have an important role in supporting a higher education curriculum which incorporates multidisciplinary perspectives

“In addition to discipline-specific knowledge and technical skills, graduates need the transferable generic skills sought by employers. Australian workers now need to be digitally literate, creative, collaborative, good communicators, and able to solve complex problems. Our tertiary education providers must teach these skills more effectively, together with our school system, employers and the wider community.”

– Australian Universities Accord Final Report¹³

Social science teaching and methodologies are increasingly important in new fields, such as climate adaptation, the implementation of artificial intelligence, and in the reinvigoration of more traditional disciplines.

Society and Culture, Management and Commerce and Education are the main Fields of Education (FoE) classifications in which social science subjects and qualifications are clustered. However, these are imperfect categories for understanding the range and application of social sciences – for example, social science teaching and research are also undertaken in Health (public health, population health, some social work, some psychology), in Built Environment (urban planning and building) and in Science (some psychology). Some disciplines such as history and philosophy may be categorised as both social sciences and humanities, and Society and Culture includes some humanities disciplines, such as literature, alongside social sciences.

Such categorisation, however, is meaningless to students, and increasingly counterproductive in terms of informing curriculum. Change in what is taught and how comes from changes in the way students choose to engage with higher education, as well as shifts in societal expectations and workforce demand, particularly those associated with new technologies and technologies and AI..

Rapid technological and digital transformation are creating an environment where the question of *how* technological advances are applied to learning, work, knowledge production and indeed the business of living is just as important as the *what* and the *when*.

It points to a future where disciplinary convergence will need to inform teaching as well as research: medical scientists and practitioners need to tackle questions relating to ethics and social dynamics, climate scientists will be working with industry and business development and

community resilience alongside new technologies. **This is not a one-way street. Curriculum and teaching in STEM areas such as engineering will increasingly incorporate social science knowledge and methodologies, just as traditional social science qualifications such as law will need the injection of advanced digital learning and expertise.**

All professionals, regardless of their preferred field, will need to develop digital literacy alongside skills to adapt to unknown futures, to analyse a multiplicity of data from disparate sources, and to design systems for workplaces and organisations they cannot yet imagine.

Curriculum design that is genuinely multidisciplinary needs to be planned from the outset rather than being seen as an add on. It will require a shift in thinking within universities and higher education institutions where disciplinary silos are reinforced by internal funding mechanisms.

Priority for action

19. Support greater integration across disciplines in higher education curricula by identifying opportunities to reduce institutional barriers, including internal structures and funding arrangements that limit multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches aligned with future societal and workforce needs.

Some key disciplines face alarming declines

A successful higher education system relies on maintaining a supply of graduates in key areas which will be important to the future workforce and to society. However, reduced student demand over time can render small courses nonviable. Courses quietly close and over time a discipline can shrink to the point of invisibility. The result is a shrinking pipeline into key professions and occupations, including academia and specialist teachers, and a decline in discipline-linked literacy across the broader society.

The crisis of disappearing disciplines requires a national response. This includes coordination between different levels of government, schools and the tertiary sector to ensure that a healthy pipeline is maintained in key disciplines, and incentives to encourage enrolments at secondary and tertiary level.

For example, **economics** is a core area of expertise required for a range of occupations across public and private sectors. As discussed in the School Education Sector Snapshot, Australia has a widely acknowledged structural pipeline problem resulting in a declining number of students taking economics at university level.¹⁴ This has serious implications for the future supply of economists, the quality and diversity of economic advice available to public and private sectors and hence Australia’s global competitiveness.

The problem extends to the study of Asian languages, which facilitates social science expertise, and has declined dramatically in the last 10 years (Figure 12). Southeast Asian language higher education enrolments have decreased 75%, while Southern Asian languages have fallen 72% and Eastern languages by over 40%.¹⁵

Figure 12: University language enrolments 2015–2024

EFTSL enrolments	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Southern Asian languages	39	34	26	23	19	16	17	13	12	11
Southeastern Asian languages	332	300	277	236	209	181	159	140	135	130
Eastern languages	3013	3049	3007	2944	2754	2435	2414	2057	1868	1790

Source: Department of Education (2026) Submission to House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education Inquiry on Building Asia Capability in Australia through the Education System and Beyond.

Language competency is critical to Australia's ability to understand, do business with and engage diplomatically with our nearest neighbours. Asian language proficiency is increasingly important to social science areas such as Management and Commerce, Asian Studies and International Studies.

Again, the problem is linked to diminishing numbers of students taking languages at secondary school, and while it is possible for students to enrol in languages at beginner levels in higher education institutions, it may be difficult to gain fluency and confidence without a prior grounding. Some languages are at risk of disappearing altogether from higher education: for example, Hindi, Thai and Vietnamese are only offered at two universities, and the number of institutions offering a full program in Indonesian has shrunk from 22 to 10 in the last decade.¹⁶

“Australia faces its most challenging strategic environment since the Second World War. Our security and prosperity are intertwined with our region. While Australian statecraft in Asia has never been more active than it is today, the pipeline building the capability that enables it is in crisis.”

– Hon Tim Watts MP, Assistant Minister for Foreign Affairs¹⁷

Priority for action

20. Establish a coordinated approach through the Australian Tertiary Education Commission to identify at-risk disciplines of national importance and support responses through university compacts, curriculum development and stronger links with schools

First Nations students: Addressing barriers to student success

First Nations enrolments have more than doubled since 2011, and in 2024 stood at 24,600 (2.3% of domestic students relative to 3.8% of population share). 52% of all First Nations students in higher education were enrolled in the social sciences: 31% in Society and Culture, 14% in Education and 9% in Management and Commerce.¹⁸

Since January 2024, every First Nations student who meets admission requirements is guaranteed a Commonwealth supported place at a university. However, the 2024 commencing cohort data underline why participation gains are hard-won. Among commencing First Nations students, 36.1% were also from low-SES backgrounds, 43.6% were from regional or remote areas, and 20.4% reported a disability, which is nearly double the rate of the broader student population (12.4%). Policy that treats equity groups as separate categories understates this intersectionality: many First Nations students belong to at least one other underrepresented group, which influences both access and completion prospects.

In 2025 there were 1,023 reported First Nations people holding academic positions and 1,400 holding professional staff positions in Australian universities. However, this data comes with the caveat that it is incomplete, and it is not disaggregated by FoE or Academic Organisational Units (AOU).¹⁹

Although still small, the number of First Nations academic staff has increased by nearly 50% since 2021, when it totalled 619.²⁰ First Nations staff in higher education support student success: they are role models and educators who support the transmission of Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledges within the academy. They also understand the challenges First Nations students may face when transitioning to higher education, often providing both formal and informal pastoral care. As a result, they carry a significant informal workload which needs to be recognised and effectively supported at an institutional level.

Priorities for action

21. Prioritise support for participation among First Nations students, noting that many experience intersectional disadvantage, to support Closing the Gap targets.

Financial disadvantage has impacts for student retention

There is limited data available for other equity groups disaggregated by FoE. However, a study undertaken in 2022 showed equity groups were concentrated in social work, nursing, teacher education and the Society and Culture field, which suggests they are overrepresented in the social sciences.²¹ This reinforces the potential impact of JRGP on increased student debt for the social sciences.

The impact of high course costs can be compounded by lack of access to financial support – a situation that is worsening with rising costs of living. In 2024, financial difficulty was in the top three reasons students were considering withdrawing from their program of study, at 40.5% of undergraduate and 35.8% of postgraduate students.²²

In the social sciences, students enrolled in some professional degrees have been required to complete unpaid placements, limiting their ability to undertake part-time work and earn an income. The recent extension of the Commonwealth Prac Payment to teaching and social work students is an important step in reducing the financial barriers associated with mandatory placements.

22. Improve visibility of student diversity by publishing data at the Field of Education level to enable institutions to identify areas of disadvantage and target appropriate support. Explore options to extend cost of living support for students undertaking work integrated learning and internships, consistent with the principles underpinning the Commonwealth Prac Payment.

Social science students report high levels of satisfaction with their study experience and achieve strong employment outcomes

Quality in Learning and Teaching (QILT) graduate survey results show that social science students rated their experience at or above the sector average (see Figure 13). Satisfaction across the social sciences has recovered strongly from the 2020 remote-learning trough but, in line with the rest of the sector, remains below its pre-Covid level.²³ In terms of employment outcomes, timing affects performance: employment outcomes three years after graduation far outstrip those reported after four months.

The social sciences are also strongly represented in postgraduate education. Humanities, culture and social sciences is simultaneously a top two feeder of further full-time study and its largest destination, and psychology’s accreditation ladder makes it the most study-intensive field in the country.²⁴ This also reflects the importance of the social sciences for lifelong learning, in the form of students who return to professionally relevant postgraduate study after time away.

Figure 13: Student employment outcomes 2024

Field (QILT study area)	FT emp. 2025 (%)	Overall emp. 2025 (%)	Median salary 2025	Further FT study (%)	SES 2024 (%)	FT emp. 3 yrs out (%)
Teacher education	86.2	94.8	\$82,100	13.2	78.3	95.3
Law & paralegal studies	82.5	89.7	\$80,000	20.6	81.1	95.1
Social work	79.6	89.8	\$85,300	8.7	78.1	89.8
Business & management	79.2	89.5	\$74,000	11.6	72.2	94.1
Tourism, hospitality, sport & recreation	78.6	90.1	\$70,000	20.4	80.9	90.3
Psychology	69.9	90.2	\$75,300	33.7	79.7	87.7
Humanities, culture & social sciences	68.0	86.8	\$75,100	23.9	79.8	90.0
Communications	59.2	83.6	\$66,000	12.8	77.3	85.6
All study areas	75.4	89.2	\$77,000	19.3	76.5	91.7

Source: QILT (2026) 2025 Graduate Outcomes Survey: National report.

Social science graduates are in demand and demonstrate strong employment versatility.

Jobs and Skills Australia’s (JSA) occupation shortage analysis provides direct evidence of shortages amongst social science qualified professionals in fields linked to the growing care economy. Psychologists, social workers, counsellors, welfare workers and human resources professionals are all listed as in short supply at either a national or state and territory level.²⁵ JSA predicts around 2 million additional jobs by 2035, with Professionals the fastest-growing occupation group (up 21.4%) and Health Care and Social Assistance the largest and fastest-growing industry.²⁶

Recent JSA analysis of Personal Level Integrated Data Asset (PLIDA) created profiles of higher education graduates to track study to workforce transitions and progression. JSA found that university degrees in social sciences unlock broad career pathways: Management and Commerce graduates entered 81 distinct occupational groups, while Education and Society and Culture groups entered 58 and 70 respectively.²⁷

Better data is needed to understand and plan for the academic workforce

Collection of staff-by-discipline data in higher education ended with the *Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA)* study in 2018. The Department of Education’s current staff collection uses AOU groups, with a large volatile “no information” category. Therefore, it is difficult to track and plan for shifts in the social science academic workforce, given that they work across a range of AOU groups and this will differ across institutions.

Rising student–staff ratios may affect the quality of the student experience

Figure 14: Current numbers at AOU-group level 2019–2024

AOU group	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	Δ 2021→24	Δ 2019→24
Society & culture	6,588.8	6,564.1	6,009.2	5,750.2	5,641.2	6,618.3	+10.1%	+0.4%
Education	1,821.3	1,785.4	1,689.4	1,665.9	1,776.6	1,832.9	+8.5%	+0.6%
Management & commerce	3,703.3	3,795.5	3,431.7	3,312.1	3,435.3	3,499.1	+2.0%	–5.5%
Three groups combined	12,113.4	12,145.0	11,130.3	10,728.2	10,853.1	11,950.3	+7.4%	–1.3%
No information on AOU	3,737.5	3,344.7	3,429.9	4,920.2	4,706.7	3,685.0	—	—

Teaching-function staff FTE (full-time + fractional, excluding casuals) in social science-related AOU groups.

Source: Department of Education (2026) *Selected Higher Education Statistics – Staff 2025*.

While total numbers of academic staff have increased since 2021, those AOU groups generally comprising the FoE in which the social sciences dominate have not returned to pre-Covid-19 levels. This is particularly concerning in Education, where student load has increased by over 20%.

Overall, student: staff ratios across the sector have increased from 21.3 in 2015 to 22.4 in 2024 (down from a 2021 peak of 23.2).²⁸

Sector-wide, the proportion of staff employed on casual teaching contracts fell from 15.6% in 2021 to 14% in 2024.²⁹ This reflects in part institutional efforts to convert casual teaching staff to fixed term or ongoing contracts. However, the proportion of casual teaching staff in the social sciences remains substantial with Education leading the field. While casual teaching in professional fields can include contributions from professionals working in the industry as well as from academics, the impact of casualisation on the quality of teaching needs to be kept under review.

Priority for action

23. Improve higher education workforce planning by collecting and publishing workforce data by Field of Education, including employment classifications.

Figure 15: Casualisation by Field of Education 2024

AOU group	Casual teaching FTE 2024	Casual share of teaching FTE
Education	1,316.2	41.8%
Information Technology	826.1	32.4%
Creative Arts	893.1	31.4%
Management & Commerce	1,419.1	28.9%
Health	2,171.6	25.0%
Society & Culture	1,751.0	20.9%
Natural & Physical Sciences	868.2	16.1%

Source: Department of Education (2026) Selected Higher Education Statistics – Staff 2025.

In summary: higher education snapshot

Key observations

- The social sciences remain a major segment of higher education, accounting for 51% of enrolments, but enrolments have declined over the past decade. This is despite the social sciences' critical role in preparing graduates for professions facing current and future workforce shortages.
- The decadal decline requires further analysis at a disciplinary level to ensure that areas critical to the future of the social sciences and to Australia's future workforce are not at risk.
- Decline in some key discipline areas is of particular concern and requires a coordinated approach across governments and education sectors to maintain a healthy pipeline.
- Social science graduates report high levels of satisfaction with their study experience and achieve strong employment outcomes.
- Social science expertise will be essential to developing multidisciplinary curricula that meet Australia's future needs, including through stronger integration of digital and STEM skills in social science qualifications and social science knowledge and methods in STEM education.
- The Job-ready Graduates Package is unfair and has created financial pressures for students and universities. It should be replaced, as a matter of priority, with a more sustainable and equitable funding model.
- Improved publication of student and staff data disaggregated by Field of Education is needed to support effective workforce planning, diversity initiatives and informed decision-making across the higher education sector.

Priorities for action

17. The Australian Government establish a clear timeline and principles for replacing the Job-ready Graduates Program with a funding system for Commonwealth supported students that is equitable and sustainable.
18. Governments and higher education institutions monitor the impact of international student place caps on student demand and the long-term sustainability of the higher education sector, while recognising the important contribution of international education to Australia's trade relationships, global engagement and alumni networks.
19. Support greater integration across disciplines in higher education curricula by identifying opportunities to reduce institutional barriers, including internal structures and funding arrangements that limit multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches aligned with future societal and workforce needs.
20. Establish a coordinated approach through the Australian Tertiary Education Commission to identify at-risk disciplines of national importance and support responses through university compacts, curriculum development and stronger links with schools.
21. Prioritise support for First Nations student participation, noting that many experience intersectional disadvantage, to support Closing the Gap targets.
22. Improve visibility of student diversity by publishing data at the Field of Education level to enable institutions to identify areas of disadvantage and target appropriate support. Explore options to extend cost of living support for students undertaking work integrated learning and internships, consistent with the principles underpinning the Commonwealth Prac Payment.
23. Improve higher education workforce planning by collecting and publishing workforce data by Field of Education, including employment classifications.

“The Parliamentary Research Program was one of the highlights of my degree ... My project explored the cultural significance and management of Herdsman Lake and Lake Monger, which deepened my understanding of Noongar culture, history and the importance of incorporating Indigenous perspectives into environmental management ... The experience played an important role in shaping my career interests [and] It reinforced my passion for working at the intersection of environmental science, community and culture, and continues to influence the way I approach my work today.”

– Jasmin Bentin, completed her degree in Environmental Science at UWA and commenced the Rio Tinto Graduate Program

Case study

Embedding employment-related skills and knowledge through partnerships

The Western Australian Parliamentary Research Program (PRP) is one of several initiatives across Australia developed between universities and state parliaments. Students are taken to the heart of politics and public administration and exposed to the real-world applications of social sciences skills and knowledge. This hands-on approach prepares graduates for success across diverse fields and workplaces.

The PRP is coordinated by the Parliamentary Education Office with Western Australian universities. Students act as research assistants under the guidance of a Member of Parliament, investigating topics directly relevant to policy and legislative development.

Work-integrated learning like the PRP draws on and develops core social science capabilities: understanding parliamentary processes and civic responsibilities, interpreting evidence, and synthesising

complex information for informed decision-making. Students use critical thinking, problem solving and analysis to turn a policy or governance challenge into a researchable question, locate relevant data, and produce timely, practical insights. These are transferable skills for the many graduate roles involving evidence use, strategic communications and analytical judgement.

For students, the PRP is an example of learning by doing, applying theories and concepts in a workplace setting. For parliamentarians, it expands the capacity for evidence-based policy underpinned by research and recommendations for implementation and evaluation. The impact of this partnership has been captured on the floor of the Western Australian Legislative Council, where MPs have referenced the work of social science students in contributing to key legislative and policy issues.

“The program provides students with an opportunity to undertake substantial research nominated by members of Parliament. It is research that strengthens this institution and contributes to more informed debate.”

– The Hon Anthony Spagnolo MLC³⁰

Research Snapshot

Following a decade marked by funding uncertainty, fragmentation, and intensifying global competition, the policies and rules guiding our national research endeavour are being rewritten on all fronts.

The Australian Government's *Ambitious Australia* report signals a renewed focus on improving the translation of mission-led research into real-world outcomes.¹ Australia's association with the European Union's Horizon Europe program is expanding opportunities for international collaboration, while major research funding agencies, including the Australian Research Council (ARC), are reforming grant programs, advancing open access, and exploring more flexible, data-informed approaches to research assessment.

The system continues to face structural workforce challenges and long-term capacity constraints resulting from underinvestment. At the same time, AI is being mobilised to transform how research is conducted across all disciplines, creating new opportunities alongside new capability requirements.

For Australian social science, this is a defining moment. The decisions being made now – about research investment, infrastructure, workforce, assessment, and collaboration – will determine the sector's capacity to contribute to Australia's future prosperity, resilience, and security.

This snapshot examines the current state of Australian social science research, highlighting the sector's strengths, identifying areas of emerging risk, and outlining the priorities needed to strengthen the sector's capacity to respond to change and meet the nation's evolving needs.

The social science research ecosystem

Social science research helps us understand how society works and how people respond to change. It is a critical part of Australia's research, development, and innovation system, shaping how problems are understood, informing policy and decision-making, and improving implementation, evaluation, and practice.

It begins with researchers in universities and other research organisations who generate new knowledge, provide the disciplinary and multidisciplinary expertise and leadership needed to tackle complex challenges, and train the next generation of researchers.

It is supported by investment from governments, universities, businesses, and the private not-for-profit sector, which fund research, build partnerships, and help translate evidence into policy, practice, and innovation.

It is strengthened through collaboration across disciplines, including in the sciences, technology, and humanities and with industry, governments, and communities.

It is underpinned by nationally significant research infrastructure – including longitudinal studies, data collection, secure research environments, and digital platforms – which enable researchers to generate, access, and analyse evidence.

Australian social science research is world class

Australia is a global leader in social science research. Six Australian universities are in the top 100 Social Sciences World University Rankings, and Australia's social science research ranks sixth in terms of its proportion of global scholarly citations.²

Collectively, Australia's social science research outputs have a citation mean of 1.30, above countries such as the United States (0.89), the United Kingdom (1.13), Germany (1.15) and Canada (1.06).³ Australia performs particularly well in Law and Legal Studies (ranked first globally by citation mean), Education (ranked fourth), Human Society (ranked fourth), and History, Heritage and Archaeology (ranked fifth).⁴

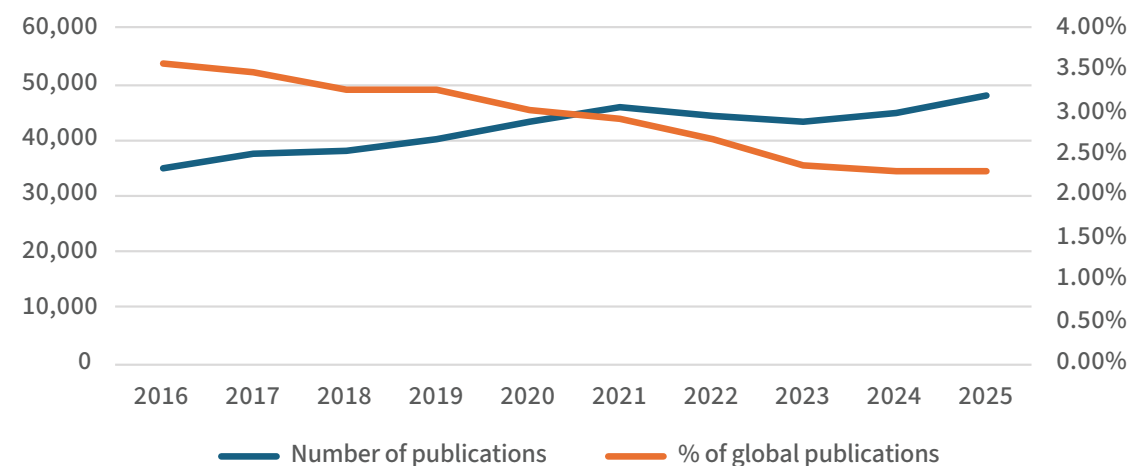
Australia's social science research is also globally connected. In 2025, the top international sources of funding originated in the United States, China, the United Kingdom, Belgium and Canada.⁵

Australian social science is growing, but losing ground in global publication share

Almost every discipline in the social sciences has lost global publication share, even where Australian publication numbers have continued to grow (Figure 16). This suggests that Australia's social science research is generally expanding in absolute terms but not keeping pace with the rapid growth of global research, indicating a gradual decline in international competitiveness across the sector.

The principal driver of this change is a significant redistribution of global research capacity. China and India have rapidly expanded their social sciences research output, increasing both publication volumes and global share. By contrast, traditional research leaders in social science such as the United States and the United Kingdom continue to grow in absolute publication volumes but account for a declining share of worldwide output as global research activity becomes more geographically dispersed (Figure 17).

Figure 16: Australia's social science research publications, total and percentage of global outputs 2016–2025

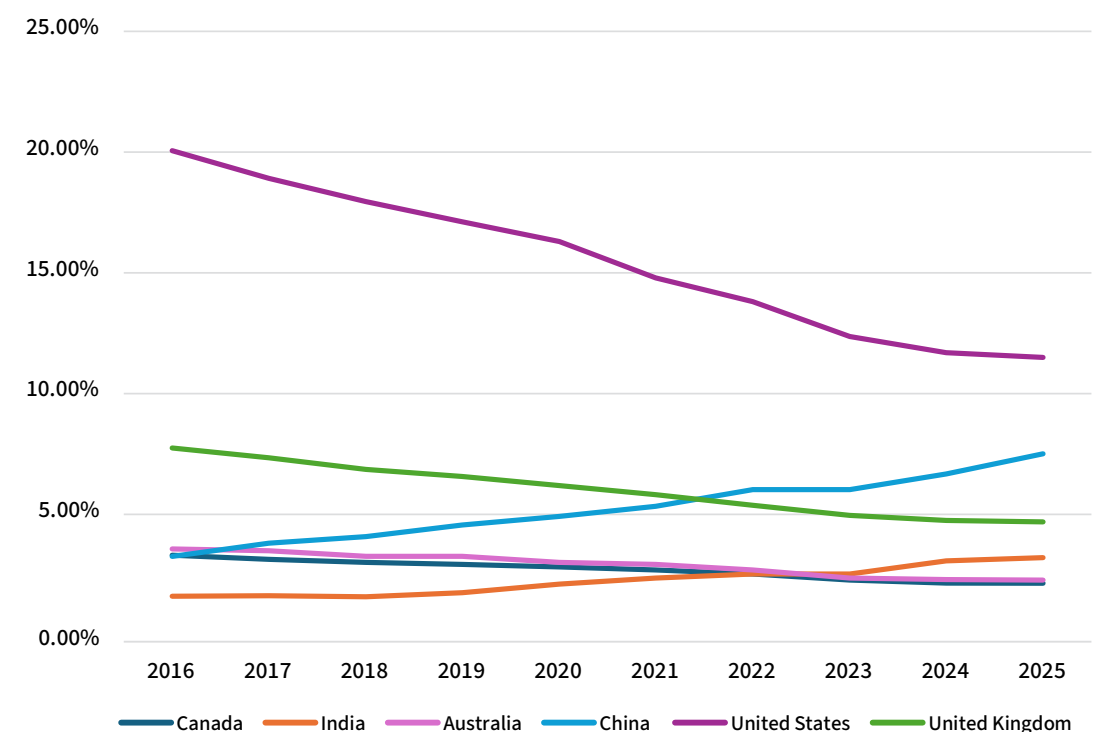


Source: Dimensions.ai database search, January 2026.

Australia's global research position matters because the competition for research talent, collaboration and investment is international.

While imperfect, publication and citation metrics remain among the few internationally comparable measures available to assess research performance at scale. They should nevertheless be interpreted with caution as publication volume reflects research scale rather than quality or impact, and citation-based indicators can be influenced by changing global publishing patterns and emerging integrity challenges such as AI-enabled research misconduct.

Figure 17: Global social science publications as a proportion of global outputs 2016–2025



Source: Dimensions.ai database search, January 2026.

Mission-driven research runs the risk of being too narrow

Australian research policy and funding schemes have continued to evolve towards a mission-driven and nationally strategic approach that seeks to align research investment with Australia's long-term objectives and national challenges.

This direction is embodied in the *National Science and Research Priorities* and the *Future Made in Australia* agenda and reinforced by the recent *Ambitious Australia* review, all of which emphasise the role of research and innovation in addressing national challenges, strengthening productivity, building sovereign capability, and delivering public benefit.

***Ambitious Australia* presents a significant opportunity for the social sciences. Many of the challenges the agenda seeks to address – from productivity and industrial transformation to net-zero transitions and resilience – are as much social and institutional challenges as they are technological ones.**

Too often in Australian research policy, innovation is framed narrowly around technology and commercialisation. However, **to realise the potential of challenge-led research in Australia, research funding, assessment and institutional settings must recognise social scientists as powerful leaders and partners in innovation and research discovery and translation.** Their role will be important in framing problems and testing technologies and technical solutions: it is not limited to post-implementation evaluation or engagement.

This is why the social sciences must be at the centre of our national innovation effort, not at its margins.

Challenge-led approaches also require the social sciences to continue to adapt and evolve. They demand a more solutions-focused approach that combines deep understanding of social issues with practical engagement to design, test, and implement effective responses. Social sciences research training has to change as well, for instance incorporating high-level skills in digital analysis.

Ensuring the social sciences are represented within the institutions and decision-making structures established by *Ambitious Australia* will be critical to delivering a research system that is effective, inclusive, and capable of delivering real-world impact.

Priority for action

24. Ensure social science expertise is appointed to the *Ambitious Australia* National Resilience and Science Council and any supporting challenge-led governance structures.

National interest research should support our social foundations

“The highest priority of the Australian Government is to keep Australians safe. Achieving this relies on the contributions of the Australian research community... (including) research that supports our inclusive national identity built around our shared values including democracy...”

– Hon Jason Clare MP, Minister for Education⁷

National resilience depends not only on technological capability, economic strength, and physical infrastructure, but also on the social foundations that enable communities and institutions to respond to change. Social cohesion and connection, trust in institutions, and democratic participation are essential national capabilities that contribute positively to people's quality of life and to macroeconomic objectives like economic growth.⁸

The conditions that produce or undermine social cohesion are not self-evident. Geopolitical conflict is increasingly translating into localised hostility and social and political polarisation, with online environments accelerating the spread and normalisation of these dynamics in ways that are unprecedented. In Australia, there is increasing government and community concern about issues of social safety and how intercultural understanding, tolerance, and inclusivity can be developed to counter rising incidents of prejudice and racism.

Social science research provides the evidence needed to understand the drivers of social cohesion and democratic resilience, identify emerging risks, evaluate what works, and translate this knowledge into effective policy and practice.

Despite the importance of these issues, Australia's national research settings do not currently send the right signals or create the right incentives to encourage research in social cohesion, democratic resilience and trust, and related fields. While there are strong individual programs of inquiry, Australia lacks a coordinated national framework with stable funding to enable a programmatic approach to these pressing social priorities.

A stronger national focus would connect existing expertise, support interdisciplinary collaboration, and further research to build the long-term evidence base needed to anticipate emerging threats, strengthen social cohesion, and enhance Australia's democratic resilience.

25. Establish social cohesion and democratic resilience as a core national capability under the National Resilience and Science Council to coordinate effort and align investment in this field with Australia's broader social and economic objectives.

Australia's funding for research and development is sliding

Australia has experienced a long-term decline in gross domestic spending on research and development (R&D) relative to the size of its economy, falling from the current OECD average of 2.7% in 2007 to just 1.7% in 2024.⁹

Sustained investment in research is an investment in Australia's capacity to understand and respond to change. If we fail to invest in R&D at internationally comparable levels Australia risks aspiring to a world-class R&D system, but struggling to maintain the people, infrastructure and capabilities needed to realise that ambition.

Both the *Australian Universities Accord* and *Ambitious Australia* reports have called for a significant increase in Australia's overall national spending on R&D as a percentage of GDP, in combination with reform to the governance architecture to ensure the investment delivers. Raising overall investment will benefit the social sciences as part of a balanced national research system.

Priority for action

26. Increase Australia's overall investment in research and development as a share of gross domestic product towards globally competitive levels, including appropriate indexation, to strengthen Australia's research capability, including in the social sciences, while reforming governance and administration to maximise the impact of public investment.

Universities underpin Australia's social science research capability

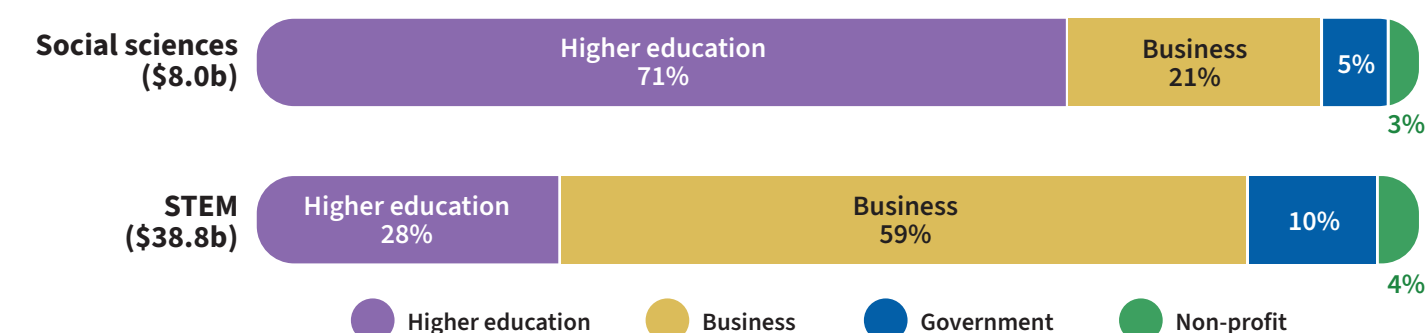
In 2024, the social sciences accounted for \$8 billion of Australia's R&D investment, representing just over 17% of total R&D expenditure. Investment has grown by 31% in nominal terms since 2020 (from \$6.1 billion), while the social sciences' share of national R&D expenditure has remained broadly stable.

Universities are, by a significant margin, the main location of social science research expenditure (Figure 18). Of the \$8 billion invested, **seven of every 10 dollars of social sciences research expenditure is performed by higher education institutions.**¹⁰

By comparison, more research in the physical and life sciences draws on a much broader base, with substantially more performed by business and government. This concentration creates a structural vulnerability. It means that the health of the social sciences research system is closely tied to the health of the university research system. Changes affecting university research capacity such as funding settings, workforce conditions, and international student revenue will have a particularly strong effect on social sciences research compared with fields where business or government perform a larger share.

This risk is especially relevant as the Australian Government considers reforms arising from *Ambitious Australia*. The review recommended aligning a proportion of research block grant funding with the National Innovation Pillars. If implemented, these reforms should not come at the expense of core research funding that underpins Australia's broader social science capability.

Figure 18: Who performs R&D spending?



Source: Various datasets. ABS (2026) *Research and Experimental Development, Government and Private Non-Profit Organisations, Business, and Higher Education Organisations, Australia*.

Social science research capacity at the discipline level is uneven

Australia is developing an increasingly uneven social science capability, with the data revealing **a two-speed social sciences sector**. Growth is concentrated in applied fields while foundational disciplines show increasing signs of vulnerability.

As highlighted in Figure 19, since 2020 only four disciplines recorded real growth: Built environment and design (+37%), Health sciences (+32%), Psychology (+25%), and Indigenous studies (+18%). Commerce, management, tourism and services, and Human society – the second and third largest social science disciplines by expenditure – remained broadly stable in real terms.

All other disciplines declined. The largest declines occurred in disciplines where the social sciences intersect with humanities including Language, communication and culture (-27%), Philosophy and religious studies (-17%), Education (-15%), Law and legal studies (-14%), and History, heritage and archaeology (-12%).

The risk profile is sharpest where three conditions coincide: real decline, a small absolute base, and where expenditure is concentrated in higher education. Many of the

disciplines in decline depend overwhelmingly on research performed by universities – 95% in Language, communication and culture, 98% in Philosophy and religious studies, 91% in History, heritage and archaeology, and 89% in Law and legal studies.

Education research stands out as a particular concern. Although its funding base is large, it is the only social science discipline contracting across every source of expenditure simultaneously: business (-25%), government (-54%), and university expenditure has failed to keep pace with inflation. At the same time, government has identified education and training expansion and reform as a key driver of national productivity. A strong research profile in Education will support the development, delivery and evaluation of important reform.

Language, communication and culture is another area of national importance where research investment is declining. This trend means only a small number of researchers have the deep linguistic, cultural, and regional expertise needed to inform Australia’s engagement with Asia. This diminishes Australia’s sovereign capability at a time when understanding our region is central to our economic prosperity, national security, and strategic interests.

Figure 19: National expenditure on social science R&D

Discipline	2020 \$m	2024 \$m	Nominal	Real (≈)	Driven by
Built environment & design	479	785	+64%	+37%	Business (\$292m → \$517m)
Health sciences	1,759	2,791	+59%	+32%	All four sectors, esp. universities
Psychology	386	577	+50%	+25%	Universities; government \$5m → \$42m
Indigenous studies	311	442	+42%	+18%	Universities (+49%)
Commerce, management, tourism & services	869	1,033	+19%	-1%	Business and universities, both ≈ inflation
Human society	673	787	+17%	-3%	Universities ≈ inflation
Economics	428	469	+10%	-8%	Universities fell; business and government grew
History, heritage & archaeology	115	121	+5%	-12%	Universities flat
Law & legal studies	200	205	+3%	-14%	Universities fell slightly
Philosophy & religious studies	85	83	-1%	-17%	Universities fell
Education	497	453	-9%	≈ -15%	Fell in every sector
Language, communication & culture	268	236	-12%	-27%	Fell in every sector

Maintaining Australia’s capability in the social sciences requires funding settings that sustain the foundational disciplines that underpin evidence-informed policy, including in education, culture, justice, and democratic institutions. Without action, capability in these fields risks being eroded over time.

Source: Various datasets. ABS (2026) Research and Experimental Development, Government and Private Non-Profit Organisations, Business, and Higher Education Organisations, Australia.

Explore the data in Appendix 1

Social sciences are gaining a stronger position in Australia's competitive grant funding system

Although the ARC National Competitive Grant Program (NCGP) represents only 7% of the Australian Government's total R&D spend, it is the primary source of competitive grant funding for the social sciences. In 2025, social science researchers received \$236 million in ARC competitive research grants, representing 27% of total ARC funding. Around 80% of this was awarded through the Discovery scheme.

Figures 20 and 21 show variation in the amount and number of ARC grants awarded across social science disciplines over the past five years. While funding levels have fluctuated, the overall share of ARC funding awarded to social sciences has increased. This is likely an underestimation as social science expertise is also engaged in multidisciplinary projects led by other disciplines, such as health and medical science, information and communications technology, and climate science.

Multidisciplinary research is now a central part of Australia's research system, and the social sciences play a particularly important role in making it work. The latest ARC data shows that roughly two-thirds of ARC Discovery and Linkage applications and approved projects identify as interdisciplinary, with success rates comparable to overall scheme averages.¹¹ Social science disciplines – particularly studies in human society and psychology – are among the leading fields contributing to a multidisciplinary approach, connecting diverse fields and helping bridge collaborations between STEM and other disciplinary domains.¹²

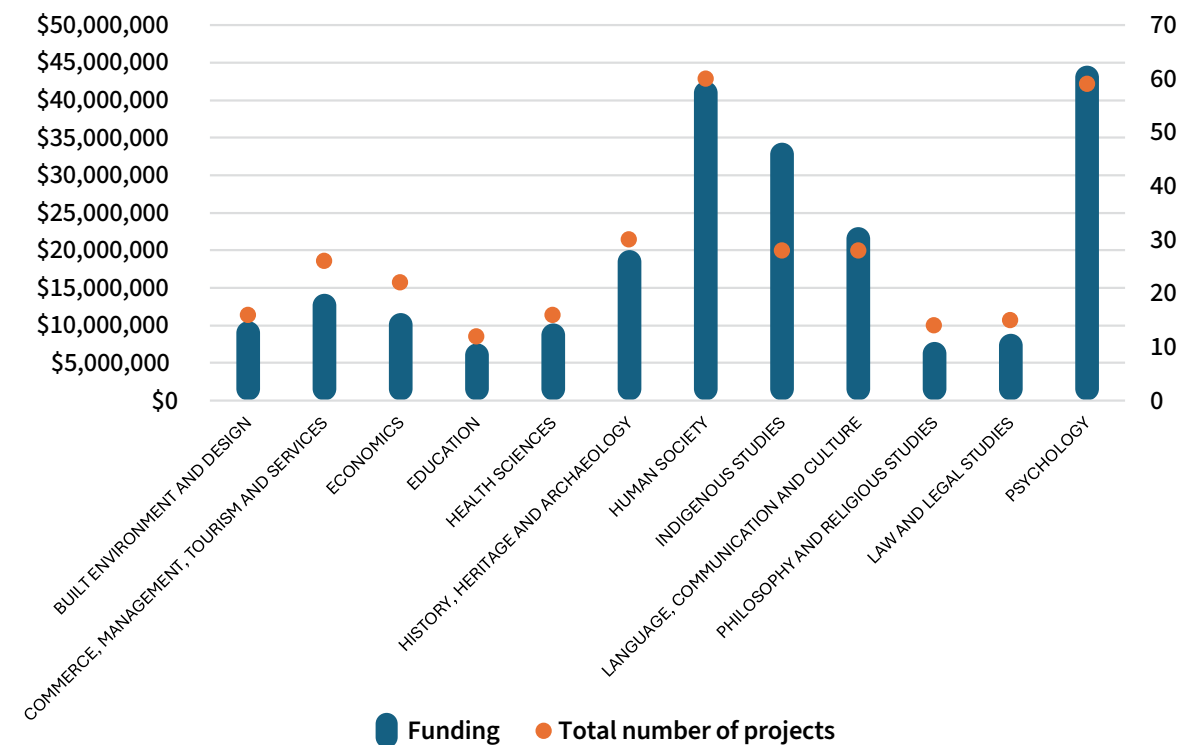
However, while national research policy increasingly calls for collaboration across disciplines to solve complex challenges, universities have been slower to change the systems that support researchers, with workloads, publishing expectations and promotion processes still favouring traditional disciplinary careers.¹³

There is also an imbalance in how disciplines engage with each other: social scientists often work across disciplinary boundaries, but some science-based researchers remain less familiar with or receptive to social science approaches.¹⁴ The challenge for the future is ensuring that interdisciplinarity is based on genuine partnership, where social science contributes ideas and expertise from the beginning, rather than being brought in only to help apply or explain solutions developed elsewhere.

The ARC has recently announced significant changes to the NCGP, affirming its core mission to fund early-stage research, simplifying the number of schemes from 15 down to seven and renewing its focus on early-career researchers. It has also preserved the importance of investigator-led research through increased funding for the new Breakthrough scheme.

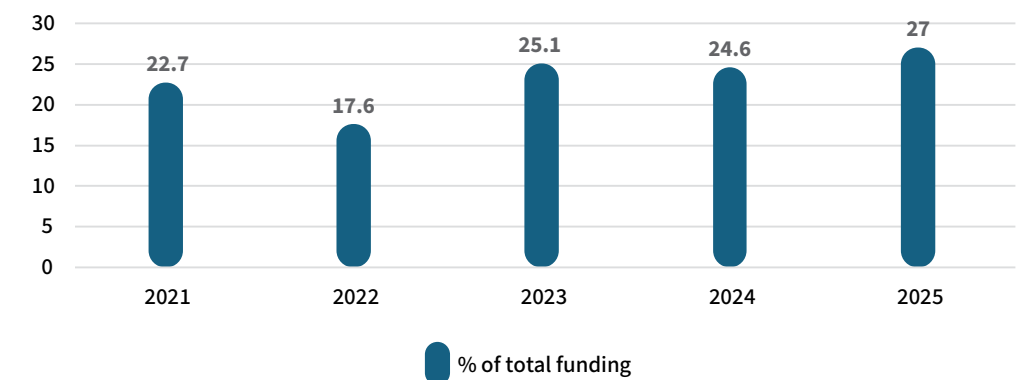
These important changes will fundamentally reshape how Australian social science research is funded and assessed from 2027 onwards.

Figure 20: ARC competitive research grants awarded to social science Fields of Research 2025



Source: ARC (2026) NCGP Trends: Areas of Research.

Figure 21: ARC competitive research grants awarded to social science Fields of Research as a percentage of total 2021–2025



Source: ARC (2026) NCGP Trends: Areas of Research.

Funding certainty is needed for nationally significant research infrastructure

National research infrastructure is just as important for the social sciences as it is for the physical and life sciences, although it often looks different. Instead of telescopes, synchrotrons or marine vessels, social science infrastructure consists of the longitudinal data, platforms, facilities, and capabilities that enable researchers to understand how society is changing.

Australia has made significant investments through the National Collaborative Research Infrastructure Strategy (NCRIS). Recent initiatives, including the Social Science Research Infrastructure Network (SSRIN) and the HASS and Indigenous Research Data Commons, are strengthening national capabilities by improving access to government data, enhancing metadata and interoperability, and developing shared tools and standards for researchers.

Despite this progress, **Australia's social science research infrastructure remains fragmented.** Researchers continue to face barriers in discovering and accessing data, linking administrative and longitudinal datasets across jurisdictions, and developing the advanced analytical skills needed to make effective use of these national assets. Addressing these gaps is essential to unlocking the full value of Australia's substantial investment in data and research infrastructure.

The Academy's *Decadal Plan for Social Science Research Infrastructure 2024–33* sets out a roadmap for building a more connected national ecosystem through the proposed Australian Research Infrastructure Ecosystem for the Social Sciences (ARIESS). A connected capability is critical as the challenges facing Australia and its scientific efforts are becoming more complex. Artificial Intelligence is being mobilised to transform discovery, data is growing in scale and complexity, and addressing national challenges requires deeper collaboration across disciplines.

Meeting these challenges into the future will require infrastructure that is more connected, more data-intensive, and more interdisciplinary than ever before. However, the future of our national research infrastructure and NCRIS is uncertain. There is no formal funding commitment to sustain NCRIS at its current levels beyond 2028–29. A clear, long-term plan is needed to secure this capability and deliver funding certainty for core national infrastructure.

Priority for action

27. Provide funding certainty for the National Collaborative Research Infrastructure Strategy beyond 2029, by committing to a sustainable, long-term funding model.

Australia is moving towards Open Science, but progress is fragmented

Open Science is a key enabler of the uptake of publicly funded research worldwide and helps fulfill the human right to share in scientific advancement and its benefits.¹⁵ Open Science refers to open access to research knowledge, open research practices, research infrastructure, research communication, open engagement with other societal actors, and open dialogue with other knowledge systems.¹⁶

Australia has made important progress in improving access to research publications, particularly through the strengthening and closer alignment of the ARC Open Access Policy and National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) Open Science Policy, alongside strengthening frameworks that recognise Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property and Indigenous Data Sovereignty. There are also new initiatives such as the APEC Open Science Alliance (APECOSA) which is developing regional guidelines to consolidate diverse national approaches of Open Science implementation.

Australian social science researchers have responded strongly to these signals: in 2025, 69% of social science journal articles were published as Open Access, up from 34% in 2020.¹⁷

However, Australia continues to lag behind many comparable research-intensive nations that have adopted more comprehensive Open Science frameworks. These approaches extend beyond publication access to encompass research data, software, methods, infrastructure, research assessment, community engagement, and mechanisms to support responsible reuse of knowledge.

As highlighted in the 2024 Academy roundtable report *An Australian Roadmap for Open Research*, realising the vision and benefits of open science relies on all parts of the system – researchers, universities and research organisations, public funders, and government – working together. While examples of leading practice exist across Australia, progress remains fragmented and has resulted in a patchwork of institutional policies, practices, and incentives. Researchers must navigate differing university approaches to intellectual property ownership, authorship, Open Access, research data management, and research engagement, creating unnecessary complexity and administrative burden.¹⁸

This presents challenges for Australian social science in terms of responding efficiently to increasing research funder expectations, its competitiveness in securing and participating in major collaborative funding schemes, including Horizon Europe, and maximising research impact.

Priority for action

28. Identify responsibility for national leadership on Open Science to drive a coordinated approach and ensure that Australia is well-placed to maximise the impact of its social science research, and support participation in globally competitive funding schemes.

Australia's social science research workforce is under pressure

“Academics, many of whom both teach and carry out research, are the backbone of Australia's research system. Without their curiosity and creativity there would be no high-quality research system.”
– Australian Universities Accord Final Report¹⁹

Australia's research workforce is a strategic national capability. *Ambitious Australia* identified developing and sustaining Australia's research workforce as a national priority. It warned that without stronger investment and clearer career pathways, Australia risks losing the capability needed to create, apply, and translate new knowledge, with consequences for productivity, innovation, and national competitiveness.

Since the end of the ARC's *Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA)* process in 2018, Australia has very limited discipline-level information on its research workforce. A comprehensive understanding of the social science research workforce is essential for effective workforce planning and investment. Consistent, long-term data at the FoR level would enable governments and the sector to monitor workforce capacity, identify emerging capability gaps, understand career pathways and researcher mobility, assess diversity and renewal, and ensure Australian expertise is maintained.

Priority for action

29. Develop a National Research Workforce Strategy in partnership with governments, universities, industry, and the research sector. Support its implementation with a comprehensive national profile of Australia's research workforce and ongoing national workforce data collection through the Australian Research Council Research Insights Capability program or the Australian Tertiary Education Commission State of the Sector reporting.

Australia's future social science research workforce is under pressure

Australia's future research capability depends on a strong pipeline from doctoral training through to early and mid-career research careers. While Australia does not directly measure researcher emigration, available evidence suggests that many early career researchers are considering leaving Australia or research altogether, with job insecurity a major factor.²⁰

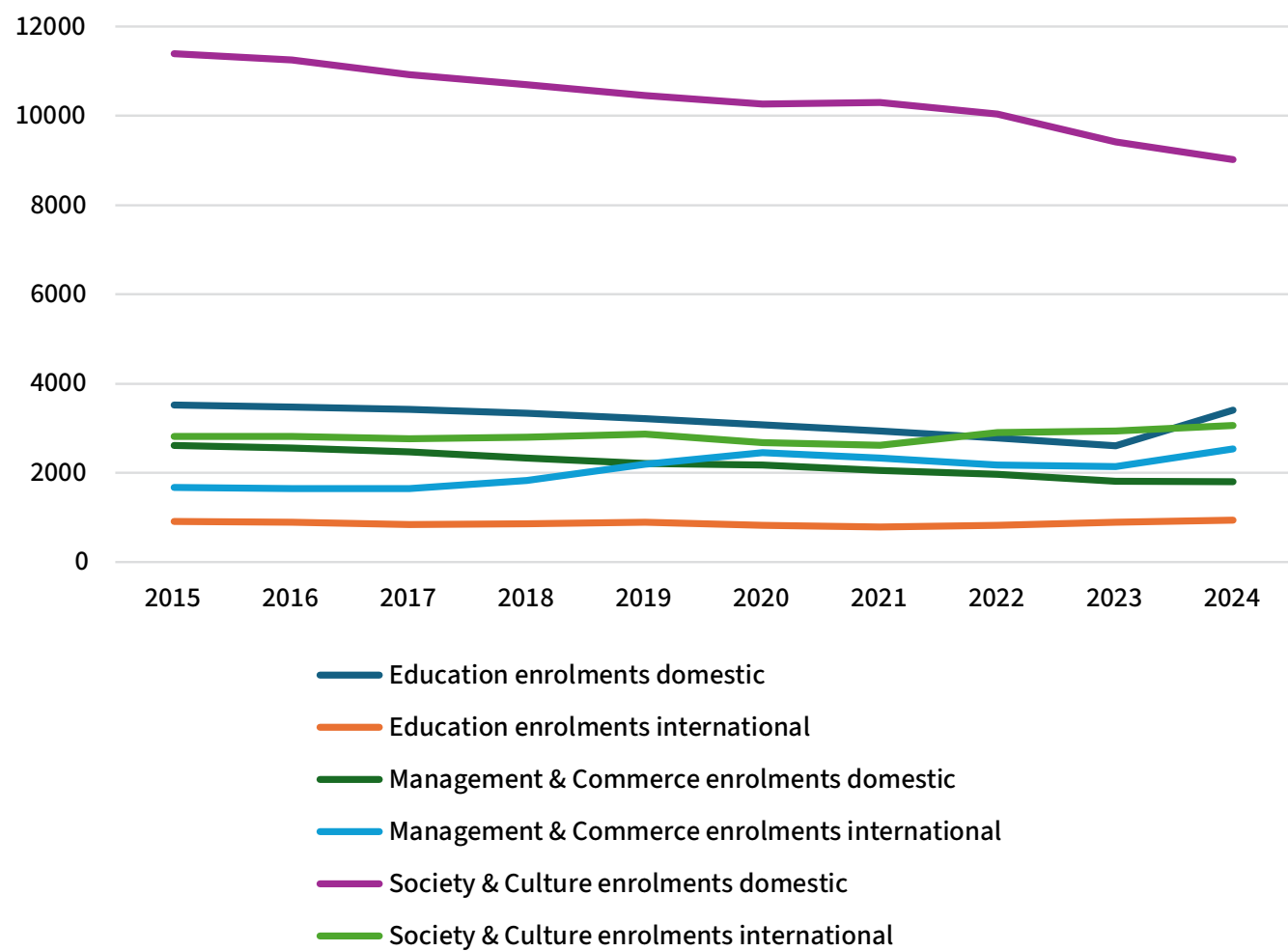
The social sciences are particularly vulnerable. Around two-thirds of social science PhD candidates seek academic careers, roughly the inverse of the pattern in STEM fields, where most aspire to work in industry.²¹ Yet secure positions are limited, with research funding concentrated in ARC schemes.²² The supply of early-career postdoctoral fellowships has remained relatively stable despite growth in doctoral completions and increasing competition. Recent reforms to ARC NCGP prioritise support for early-career researchers, and will expand access to grants and career development opportunities. Nonetheless, the longer-term effect on researcher retention remains uncertain.

Higher Degree by Research (HDR) students are the foundation of Australia's research workforce pipeline. The social sciences make a substantial contribution. In 2024, they accounted for 30% of all HDR enrolments and 28% of HDR completions. However, the supply of domestic HDR is weakening. Since 2015, domestic and international social science HDR enrolments have declined by 5%, while completions have fallen by 4.6%. The largest falls have occurred in Society and Culture, and Management and Commerce. This downward trend is largely driven by a 14% decline among domestic student enrolments (Figure 22).²³

International HDR students remain an essential part of Australia's research ecosystem, and enrolments in these fields have continued to grow.²⁴ However, they do not substitute for a strong domestic research workforce pipeline. As *Ambitious Australia* notes, Australia's reliance on international PhD students has masked underlying weaknesses in the domestic pipeline, creating a longer-term capability risk.

Strengthening Australia's future social science workforce will require a coordinated capability strategy that addresses the causes of declining domestic HDR participation while increasing support for HDR students and early- and mid-career researchers. This aligns with the recommendations of *Ambitious Australia* and the ATEC *Interim Statement of Strategic Priorities*, which identifies research training – particularly for domestic students – as an area requiring further attention.

Figure 22: Domestic and International HDR Social Science Enrolments 2015–2024



Source: Various datasets. Department of Education (2025), *Selected Higher Education Statistics – 2024 Student Data*.

Priority for action

30. Secure Australia's future research capability in the social sciences by implementing the recommendations of *Ambitious Australia* to strengthen the domestic Higher Degree by Research pipeline and improve researcher career pathways.

First Nations researchers play an essential role, but face ongoing structural barriers

Social science research has immense capacity to recognise, celebrate, and champion First Nations peoples by centring Indigenous Knowledge systems, progressing Indigenous Data Sovereignty (IDS) and (IDG) practices, and empowering communities to define their own futures. However, realising this requires sustained cultural and systems-level transformation to overcome structural barriers and institutional prejudice.

System-wide data indicate that First Nations peoples remain significantly underrepresented in the research workforce. There are 1,073 FTE First Nations peoples in academic roles (0.7% of the total academic workforce, compared with 3.8% of the total population). Although comparatively small, the proportion of First Nations people employed above senior lecturer level has increased from 0.9% to 1.5% since 2021.²⁵

There are 880 First Nations students enrolled in HDR programs (all fields). This is 1.3% of all HDR enrolments, up from 0.9% in 2021.²⁶

This small workforce bears considerable cultural load. Stakeholders commented that in university contexts First Nations social scientists risk being “pigeonholed into a narrow range of topics”. They may be frequently called on to advise on Indigenous matters, but this service is not always recognised in workload, promotion or reward systems.²⁷

There is a need for research organisations to provide culturally safe environments, recognise expertise and Indigenous knowledge, and strengthen leadership pathways for First Nations researchers. Long-term workforce strategies for First Nations researchers, including the development of Indigenous leadership in research, will lead to a capability uplift across the research sector.

IDS, IDG and the right of First Nations people to make decisions about how and why data is collected, accessed, used, and managed will play a critical role in transforming Australia's research institutions.²⁸ These considerations are particularly important in the context of AI and other technologies that are transforming research practice and how decisions about Indigenous Knowledges are used in data training process.²⁹

Research organisations have a responsibility to build capability among non-Indigenous researchers. This includes incorporating paradigms and practices that are culturally safe and responsive to the needs of First Nations peoples. This can only be achieved through genuine co-design with Indigenous Knowledge holders, and data governance practices that empower communities to make decisions about how knowledge is collected, understood, shared, and used in research.

Priority for action

31. Sustain and strengthen Indigenous-led research ting First Nations research leadership and career pathways, embedding culturally safe research practices, recognising Indigenous knowledge systems, and advancing Indigenous Data Sovereignty and Indigenous Data Governance across the research system.

In summary: research

Key observations

- Australian social science research is world class but losing global share. Australia has internationally recognised strengths across multiple social science disciplines. While publication output continues to rise, Australia's share of global social science research is declining as other nations expand their research capacity more rapidly.
- The shift to challenge-led research presents both risks and opportunities for the social sciences. Ambitious Australia, the National Science and Research Priorities and Future Made in Australia are reshaping the research landscape. Multidisciplinary research, including the social sciences, must be at the centre of our national challenge-led research effort.
- Australia's investment in research and development is declining, risking future research capability and competitiveness. National R&D expenditure has fallen well below the OECD average. Raising overall investment will benefit the social sciences as part of a balanced national research system.
- Social sciences research is heavily dependent on universities. Around seven in 10 dollars of social science research funding is spent in universities, leaving the sector particularly exposed to changes in university funding and policy settings.
- A two-speed social sciences sector is emerging. Investment is concentrated in applied and policy-facing disciplines such as health sciences, built environment, psychology, and Indigenous studies, while all other disciplines are facing declines.
- Australia lacks robust discipline-level data on its research workforce. Better workforce data is needed to understand capacity, identify emerging capability gaps, and support long-term workforce planning.
- Australia's social science research workforce pipeline is under pressure. Declining domestic enrolments in higher degree by research programs and insecure early-career pathways are raising concerns about future capability and workforce sustainability.

Priorities for action

24. Ensure social science expertise is represented on the *Ambitious Australia* National Resilience and Science Council and any supporting challenge-led governance structures.
25. Establish social cohesion and democratic resilience as a core national capability under the National Resilience and Science Council to coordinate effort and align investment in this field with Australia's broader social and economic objectives.
26. Increase Australia's overall investment in research and development as a share of gross domestic product towards globally competitive levels, including appropriate indexation, to strengthen Australia's research capability, including in the social sciences, while reforming governance and administration to maximise the impact of public investment.
27. Provide funding certainty for the National Collaborative Research Infrastructure Strategy beyond 2029, by committing to a sustainable, long-term funding model.
28. Identify responsibility for national leadership on Open Science to drive a coordinated approach and ensure that Australia is well-placed to maximise the impact of its social science research, and support participation in globally competitive funding schemes.
29. Develop a National Research Workforce Strategy in partnership with governments, universities, industry, and the research sector. Support its implementation with a comprehensive national profile of Australia's research workforce and ongoing national workforce data collection through the Australian Research Council Research Insights Capability program or the Australian Tertiary Education Commission State of the Sector reporting.
30. Secure Australia's future research capability in the social sciences by implementing the recommendations of *Ambitious Australia* to strengthen the domestic Higher Degree by Research pipeline and improve researcher career pathways.
31. Sustain and strengthen Indigenous-led research by supporting First Nations research leadership and career pathways, embedding culturally safe research practices, recognising Indigenous Knowledge systems, and advancing Indigenous Data Sovereignty and Indigenous Data Governance across the research system.

Appendix 1: Research at a Glance

Discipline profiles

Australia's sovereign research capability promises many of the innovative solutions needed to safeguard a resilient and strong economy and society. These solutions rely on sustained investment and foundational knowledge generation. The following snapshot explores how Australia's social science disciplines have been tracking over the past decade in terms of R&D expenditure and research outputs. Disciplines have been classified using the Australian and New Zealand Standard Research Classification Field of Research codes.

Discipline profiles

Built Environment and Design

R&D Expenditure 2020–2024

- Expenditure on R&D by business **increased** from \$292 million to \$517 million (77%)
- Expenditure on R&D by government **increased** from \$10 million to \$14 million (40%)
- Expenditure on R&D by higher education providers **increased** from \$177 million to \$254 million (117%)
- Data not available for private non-profit organisations

Publications 2016–2025

- Australian annual research publications **increased** from 1,316 to 2,813 (113.7%)
- As a proportion of global publications, Australian annual research publications **decreased** from 2.6% to 2.4%
- The top five international collaborations are China, the United States, Belgium, the United Kingdom and Germany

Commerce, Management, Tourism and Services

R&D Expenditure 2020–2024

- Expenditure on R&D by business **increased** from \$468 million to \$557 million (19%)
- Expenditure on R&D by government **decreased** from \$11 million to \$10 million (-9%)
- Expenditure on R&D by higher education providers **increased** from \$391 million to \$466 million (14.1%)
- Data not available for private non-profit organisations

Publications 2016–2025

- Australian annual research publications **increased** from 4,062 to 6,076 (40.6%)
- As a proportion of global publications, Australian annual research publications **decreased** from 3.3% to 1.6%
- The top five international collaborations are China, the United States, the United Kingdom, Belgium and Canada

Discipline profiles

Economics

R&D Expenditure 2020–2024

- Expenditure on R&D by business **increased** from \$82 million to \$117 million (42.7%)
- Expenditure on R&D by government **increased** from \$23 million to \$39 million (69.6%)
- Expenditure on R&D by higher education providers **decreased** from \$323 million to \$311 million (-3.7%)
- Data incomplete for private non-profit organisations but shows \$3 million in 2024

Publications 2016–2025

- Australian annual research publications **increased** from 1,696 to 1,850 (9.1%)
- As a proportion of global publications, Australian annual research publications **decreased** from 3.2% to 1.9%
- The top five international collaborations are China, the United States, the United Kingdom, Belgium and Japan

Education

R&D Expenditure 2020–2024

- Expenditure on R&D by business **decreased** from \$104 million to \$78 million (-25%)
- Expenditure on R&D by government **decreased** from \$26 million to \$12 million (-53.8%)
- Expenditure on R&D by higher education providers **increased** from \$325 million to \$363 (11.7%)
- Data not available for private non-profit organisations

Publications 2016–2025

- Australian annual research publications **increased** from 3,196 to 4,039 (26.3%)
- As a proportion of global publications, Australian annual research publications **decreased** from 4.1% to 1.6%
- The top five international collaborations are the United States, the United Kingdom, China, Belgium and Canada

Discipline profiles

Health Science

R&D Expenditure 2020–2024

- Data incomplete but shows expenditure on R&D by business **increased** from \$212 million to \$334 million (57.5%)
- Expenditure on R&D by government **increased** from \$157 million to \$168 million (7%)
- Expenditure on R&D by higher education providers **increased** from \$1,254 million to \$2,114 million (68.6%)
- Expenditure by private non-profit organisations **increased** from \$137 million to \$175 million (27.8%)

Publications 2016–2025

- Australian annual research publications **increased** from 13,535 to 20,077 (48.3%)
- As a proportion of global publications, Australian annual research publications **decreased** from 5.2% to 4.2%
- The top five international collaborations are the United States, the United Kingdom, China, Switzerland and Canada

History, Heritage and Archaeology

R&D Expenditure 2020–2024

- Data incomplete or does not exist for publication for business
- Expenditure on R&D by government **increased** from \$8 million to \$11 million (37.5%)
- Expenditure on R&D by higher education providers **increased** from \$107 million to \$110 million (2.8%)
- Nil spending for private non-profit organisations

Publications 2016–2025

- Australian annual research publications **decreased** from 1,309 to 1,176 (-10.2%)
- As a proportion of global publications, Australian annual research publications **decreased** from 2.1% to 1.3%
- The top five international collaborations are the United States, Belgium, the United Kingdom, Germany and France

Discipline profiles

Human Society

R&D Expenditure 2020–2024

- Data incomplete but shows expenditure on R&D by business **increased** from \$8 million to \$13 million (62.5%)
- Expenditure on R&D by government **increased** from \$57 million to \$69 million (21.1%)
- Expenditure on R&D by higher education providers **increased** from \$602 million to \$693 million (15.1%)
- Expenditure by private non-profit organisations **increased** from \$7 million to \$12 million (71.4%)

Publications 2016–2025

- Australian annual research publications **increased** from 5,485 to 7,003 (27.7%)
- As a proportion of global publications, Australian annual research publications **decreased** from 3.1% to 2%
- The top five international collaborations are the United States, the United Kingdom, China, Belgium and Canada

Indigenous Studies

R&D Expenditure 2020–2024

- Data incomplete but shows expenditure on R&D by business **decreased** from \$5 million to \$3 million (-40%)
- Expenditure on R&D by government **increased** from \$38 million to \$41 million (7.9%)
- Expenditure on R&D by higher education providers **increased** from \$267 million to \$398 million (49.1%)
- Data not available for private non-profit organisations

Publications 2016–2025

- Publication data not fully indexed for Indigenous Studies

Discipline profiles

Language, Communication and Culture

R&D Expenditure 2020–2024

- Expenditure on R&D by business **decreased** from \$13 million to \$10 million (-23.1%)
- Expenditure on R&D by government **decreased** from \$1 million to \$900,000 (-10%)
- Expenditure on R&D by higher education providers **decreased** from \$253 million to \$225 million (-11.1%)
- Data incomplete for private non-profit organisations but shows \$230,000 in 2024

Publications 2016–2025

- Australian annual research publications **increased** from 2114 to 2305 (9%)
- As a proportion of global publications, Australian annual research publications 2% to 1.1%
- The top five international collaborations are the United States, the United Kingdom, China, Belgium and Germany

Law and Legal Studies

R&D Expenditure 2020–2024

- Data incomplete but shows expenditure on R&D by business **increased** from \$7 million to \$14 million (50%)
- Expenditure on R&D by government **increased** from \$3 million to \$7 million (133.3%)
- Expenditure on R&D by higher education providers **decreased** from \$190 million to 184 million (-3.2%)
- Data not available for private non-profit organisations

Publications 2016–2025

- Australian annual research publications **increased** from 1189 to 1581 (33%)
- As a proportion of global publications, Australian annual research publications **decreased** from 2.3% to 1.2%
- The top five international collaborations are the United States, the United Kingdom, Belgium, China and Canada

Discipline profiles

Philosophy and Religious Studies

R&D Expenditure 2020–2024

- Data not available for business
- Expenditure on R&D by government **increased** from \$0 to \$2 million
- Expenditure on R&D by higher education providers **decreased** from \$85 million to \$82 million (-3.5%)
- Data incomplete for private non-profit organisations but shows \$64,000 in 2024

Publications 2016–2025

- Australian annual research publications **decreased** from 1419 to 1393 (-1.8%)
- As a proportion of global publications, Australian annual research publications **increased** from 0.2% to 0.9%
- The top five international collaborations are the United States, the United Kingdom, China, Canada and Germany

Psychology

R&D Expenditure 2020–2024

- Expenditure on R&D by business **was unchanged** at \$7 million
- Expenditure on R&D by government **increased** from \$5 million to \$42 million (740%)
- Expenditure on R&D by higher education providers **increased** from \$352 million to \$495 million (40.6%)
- Expenditure by private non-profit organisations **increased** from \$22 million to \$33 million (50%)

Publications 2016–2025

- Australian annual research publications **increased** 5,229 to 6,157 (17.7%)
- As a proportion of global publications, Australian annual research publications **decreased** from 4.2% to 3.5%
- The top five international collaborations are the United States, the United Kingdom, Belgium, China and Canada

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Consultation and data collection

This Report draws on evidence from a combination of publicly and privately available data and input from stakeholders through roundtables, interviews and a survey. The Academy is grateful to all Academy Fellows and external stakeholders who participated in the consultation process.

Stakeholder consultation: Undertaken in May 2026, the consultation comprised an online survey of Academy Fellows, and 11 roundtables and interviews with more than 40 senior representatives from universities, government, schools, research organisations, the VET sector, peak bodies and disciplinary associations.

Ethics: The University of Queensland Human Research Ethics Office (2025/HE002214) approved the research data collection and consultation process.

Data use and availability: Disaggregated data was often not publicly available or not collected. Supplementary data and additional qualitative evidence was sought where possible. We acknowledge inevitable limitations in the data and views presented.

Use of Dimensions.ai: The team utilised Dimensions.ai, a comprehensive, AI-powered research information platform that hosts interconnected global research data, including publications, conference proceedings, grants, clinical trials, patents, and policy documents. The suite of Dimensions.ai search functions, including Fields of Research (FoR), geographic location of research institute and funder, publication year and type enabled a structured search on the quantum and impact of Australian social science research outputs (journal articles, monographs and chapters). The number of research outputs, proportion of global outputs, mean citations, international collaborations, and Open Access status were analysed between 2016–2025. Australian social science research outputs were defined as having at least one author affiliated with an Australian organisation. Research output data for FoR 45 Indigenous studies has not been fully indexed on Dimensions.ai and was excluded from the analysis.