

# Emerging

# Future Studies



A proposed methodology for future studies emerging from the BA scoping project

AUSTRALIAN  
LEARNING  
& TEACHING  
COUNCIL

**DASSII**  
DEANS OF ARTS, SOCIAL SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES

## SUMMARY REPORT 6

This summary report presents an outcome of the BA scoping project: the identification of areas requiring further investigation and the development of interventions to enhance the experience of Bachelor of Arts students

## About the Project

The BA scoping project commenced in March 2007. Materials and resources developed as a result of the project launched on 30 July, 2008 on the DASSH website <http://www.dassh.edu.au/basp>

## Materials Developed

The summary reports of the scoping study are particularly intended for decision makers for the Bachelor of Arts programs: those responsible for coordinating and managing Arts programs. The summary reports can be read independently or as a set of information. The set consists of:

- 1 The Bachelor of Arts scoping project:  
Executive summary
- 2 What is the Australian BA?  
Defining and describing the nature and role of the Arts in contemporary Australia
- 3 Mapping the terrain:  
Trends and shared features in BA programs across Australia 2001–2008
- 4 Who is enrolled in the Australian BA?  
Student uptake of the Australian BA 2001–2006
- 5 Who is delivering the Australian BA?  
Trends in staff profiles in the BA 2001–2006
- 6 Future studies emerging from the BA scoping project

These summary reports are supported by resources developed as part of the project. These resources are available from the DASSH website and include:

- Case studies
- Data sets
- Institutional program profiles



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# 1. Future studies emerging from the BA scoping project

An outcome of the BA scoping project was the identification of areas that required further investigation.

It is recommended that a series of further investigative projects be conducted to:

- 1 **Examine the long term impact of the BA**
- 2 **Extend the findings identified through this project as requiring further investigation**  
The areas identified by the sector as in need of further examination were established through the BA scoping project's steering committee and through the round table meetings held in each state.

**The project team recommends that future areas of research identified by the sector be lead and researched by institutions working in collaboration, and that they be conducted sector-wide, facilitated through DASSH.**

The role of DASSH within the proposed approach is to:

- Coordinate and orchestrate projects to ensure minimal duplication of activities within the same group of stakeholders
- Facilitate collaboration and communication across the different projects
- Develop and maintain databases accessible by the sector, based on the prototypes developed in this scoping project
- Disseminate findings and outcomes through strategies that facilitate ongoing collaboration and collegiality, such as Arts related round tables, master classes and road shows
- Conduct external evaluation of all BA related projects

## 1.1 Determining the long term impact of the BA

### 1.1.1 Value of the BA program

A common theme of discussion at all round table meetings and a concern for approximately 60% of the individuals interviewed was the need to express to the wider community what the value of the BA program is. A common discussion was the opinion that there is a broad social perception that the Arts degree is 'a waste of time', a degree that results in no particular outcome or clear direction. Despite these generalisations, BA graduates and graduates from programs within the field of Arts appear to make up an impressive proportion of the Australian "Who's Who" and appear to take up influential positions, including membership of the current Federal parliament. There is also a commonly held perception amongst the project participants that BA graduates take a longer time to establish their career paths than their peers who graduate from professional degrees. This claim needs validation.

Overwhelmingly, participants in this project have indicated that they want to know graduates value their degree once in the workplace, and at what point does that valuing takes place (if at all). Equally, it is important to establish whether the changes that have occurred to the BA program over the years are in fact meeting the needs of the graduates.

At present, the only sector-wide instrument that gathers data about graduates provides information gathered from graduates within the first 6 months of graduation. There are a number of institutional projects that have tracked alumni and their experiences, for a range of different reasons, but there is no national scale data available. It remains to be seen whether the ACER funded "Graduate Pathways" project offers any meaningful data for the programs that fall within the field of Arts or Bachelor of Arts programs in particular.

The project team have devised the following questions that may guide future research into graduate experiences:

- What is the value-added of a BA degree? What does it actually contribute?
- Who are BA Alumni and what are they doing?
- Where are they 3, 5, 10, 20 years out of their degrees?

- What does the BA contribute to their career path? To themselves?
- What has their career path been?
- What do they value from their degree program through their experiences?
- Is the flexibility the strength of the BA?
- What is the outcome of the BA?
- Given the choices, would a BA graduate recommend a BA program? What are the reasons for the answer?

A key outcome of this project would be the development of curricula guidelines and an evidence-based nationally accepted understanding of the values and purposes of the programs within the field of Arts and the Bachelor of Arts in a modern Australia.

### 1.1.2 Internationalisation

Across the sector, internationalisation and the preparation of students to work in a global economy was identified as an educational imperative. The BA scoping project identified some instances of strategies and programs designed to optimise the international experience. The effectiveness of these programs needs to be examined and further of successful programs identified. The perception is that the BA is not the program of choice for international students nor for students planning a career that will take them into the global job market. This perception requires investigation as to its validity and if the case proves true, the implications for the future curriculum and teaching and learning considered.

Guiding questions could include:

- What has the impact of internationalisation been on the BA program?
- Where has successful internationalisation of the curriculum occurred and what does it look like?
- What program developments to enhance the global experience exist?
- What are the curriculum implications for students going abroad for a semester or is the impact simply personal growth?
- To what extent have increasing numbers of those studying overseas influenced the curriculum?
- What is an Australian BA in comparison to international programs?

### 1.1.3 Employability

There appear to be many studies undertaken to establish and identify the key graduate skills considered essential to various future employers of graduates. Such studies often result in the development of graduate attributes. While it might be possible to establish a core curriculum that develops these attributes in a professions-based degree, it is difficult to do so in a program that often relies on students' self-selection of units. The relationship between the employers' articulated needs and the program outcomes in terms of student experiences is not clear.



These questions highlight areas in need of further consideration:

- How do curriculum intentions, practicum experiences, graduate attributes map to prospective employer expectations?
- How do institutional outcomes map to industry/ community expectations?
- How are graduate attributes implemented, evaluated and assessed across the sector?
- How are these communicated to industry?
- What are the implications for the work integrated learning programs and what are the implications for program managers in coordinating placements?
- How does work integrated learning in the BA provide training or skills for future workplaces?

### 1.1.4 Curriculum

The BA scoping project identified a range of challenges for curriculum. It is common for curriculum design to happen at a discipline level. However, when used in the context of the BA the term 'curriculum' seldom elicited discussion beyond an account of the number of units that comprise a major. In the interviews and discussions facilitated by this project, no participants were drawn to describe the particular purpose or outcomes of the BA program. Few participants provided a clear description of the purpose of the BA. Most referred to the key outcomes of the BA in terms of 'communication skills, critical thinking and the ability to adapt'. Assessment

was seen to be the training ground for communication skills and critical thinking, but the ability to adapt was perceived to be an outcome of the flexible nature of the program. Participants viewed the fact that students could choose to study anything they desired (within timetable and availability constraints) and the consequent gain in student ability to adapt, as a feature of the program. It is not clear whether these were simply the opinions of the informants or whether these features are intentional outcomes of the program.

Follow up projects might be guided in further research by the areas identified through this study as key questions:

- What are the key graduate attributes of the BA?
- Do we really teach critical thinking or opinion thinking? How does it differ in different contexts? Do students value it?
- Are the subjects offered because of academic expertise and interest or because they form part of a curriculum outcome?
- What are the essentials in each discipline?
- To what extent is there coherence within the disciplines across the BA?
- Is there a minimum number and range of disciplines the BA should encompass?
- What is the relationship between the program and the units that make up the program? What's inside the disciplines that make up the degree program? Is it a way of thinking? Is it content?
- What is the outcome of the BA?
- What drives curriculum change in the BA?

## 1.2 Further examination and investigation

The following areas were identified (through the round table meetings) as issues requiring further investigation.

### 1.2.1 Curriculum leadership in the BA

The BA scoping project has identified that most institutions are moving towards a program management model in which an individual or a small group has oversight of the curriculum design, management and academic leadership of the program. Findings in this project revealed that the management of BA programs is a highly complex activity that requires negotiation and management across a range of disciplinary contexts, pedagogies and organisational structures such as schools and Faculties. While there are some ALTC projects that address curriculum leadership, the findings from the BA scoping project indicate that this is an area in need of further work.

Some questions particularly noteworthy include:

- What kind of curriculum leadership is required by those responsible for coordination and management of BA degree programs; does it differ from the coordination of professional courses?
- What processes and activities, dispositions and knowledge are needed by those who manage a program of this nature?
- What is required to develop the academic leadership capacity for those engaged in coordinating BA programs?

### 1.2.2 Large student choice programs

The BA scoping project identified that there are may be commonalities across similar degree programs, specifically in the areas of:

- What are the common issues in large student choice programs like the BSc, BA and BCom programs?
- How can learning from across the programs be transmitted as a matter of good practice?

### 1.2.3 Teaching in the BA

A common issue raised in interviews and round table discussions was the quality of teaching on offer in BA programs. This seems to be of particular concern in light of the aging work force and the increasing casualisation of teaching staff (due to funding cuts or the lack of available new academics). The DEST (DEEWR) data does not provide reliable data on the number casual staff, for a range of different reasons.

Some questions for further consideration include:

- Who's doing the teaching?
- What are the implications of increasing casualisation on the curriculum?

### 1.2.4 Technology in the BA

Another area of concern raised by project participants was the increasing reliance on convergent communication technologies. Participants pointed out that current funding schemes did not enable the adequate installation, update, maintenance and training for the kinds of technologies students may use in the workplace and in future careers. However, the BA scoping project could not determine the real extent to which there is a reliance or need for this technology across the BA programs.

A future project might consider the following areas:

- What modes of teaching are being used?
- How much lab teaching is done and in what areas?
- What are the issues related to staff training to ensure they upgrade their skills and pedagogical understandings of the use of convergent communication technologies?
- What are the convergent communication technology requirements/ expectations of the workplace and how do institutions meet them?
- What are the infrastructural and IT needs in a modern BA?

### 1.2.5 Learning in the BA

The BA scoping project did not investigate the kinds of learning experiences and outcomes that may be related to BA programs. Some questions worth future consideration include:

- What are the modes of learning that students undertake in the BA?
- What do students think they are learning in the BA?
- How do students perceive the value of their learning in the BA?
- To what extent do students experience all types of learning?
- Is the BA coherent for students and/or are disciplines coherent?

### 1.2.6 Student experience

Due to time and budget constraints and the sheer scale of this scoping exercise, the BA scoping project did not elicit information from the students engaged in a BA degree. This kind of data is crucial in determining whether the espoused aims of BA programs are actually achieved. A series of questions have been identified as emerging from the various data gathered through this project:

- Why do students drop out?
- What is the student experience of the BA?
- What are the difficulties they encounter?
- Why do they do it?
- Where do they get their information?
- What did they learn?
- Where did they learn it?
- How did they learn it?
- Who are Arts students? First or second generation?
- Where do they come from?
- What are their expectations of Arts and university?
- How do they identify themselves?
- What knowledge do they come with?
- What is the difference in experience for students across the different types of universities?
- What are differences and similarities in the experiences and outcomes for school leavers and mature aged students?



### 1.2.7 Honours and pathways to PhDs

Interviews and round table discussions held with project participants indicated that there is a decrease in the number of students taking an honours program. This decrease might be related to the increase in the number of masters by coursework programs and/ or double degrees. There are currently other ALTC funded projects investigating honours programs. Findings from these projects need to be re-examined in the light of implications for programs within the field of Arts and honours programs emerging from Bachelor of Arts programs. Possible questions include:

- Are honours programs still relevant?
- How does honours teaching in BA occur?
- What BA programs are more likely to result in honours students and why?
- What is the value of an honours program to an BA graduate?
- What's the impact of Masters and double degrees on honours programs?
- How do honours programs relate to advance study programs?





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