What ERA tells us:
the crisis in humanities research

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Reading the ERA results

• The long tail of HASS units of evaluation
• Media’s (and the universities’) motivated and selective interpretations of results
• The incommensurability of individual panel outcomes has worked against the humanities and social sciences
• The use of ‘world standard’ hasn’t helped
• Difficult to tell two conflicting stories: highlighting the impressive achievements of HASS under the current funding regime while also pointing to the deleterious effects of that funding regime.
Funding indices=ERA outcomes

If we use average staff-student ratios as a proxy for funding indices for each cluster:

• Education, society and culture, management and commerce: average ERA of 2.2 with ratios of 22-29 students per teacher

• Engineering, agriculture and natural and physical sciences: average ERA of 3 but staff-student ratios of 13-19.
So...

• Significant achievements in certain disciplines which had a number of discipline clusters scoring multiple 4s and 5s: e.g. history (4 @ 5; 5 @ 4), philosophy, cultural studies, psychology, linguistics.

• But, the strength of the HASS, with a couple of notable exceptions, is overwhelmingly concentrated in a small, perhaps shrinking, subset of the Go8, and in a small, definitely shrinking, group of disciplines (total of 9 UoEs in language studies, for instance).

• Outside the metro and Go8 universities, however .......
The regional landscape for humanities research from ERA, 2009/10

• Mergers, multi-disciplinary schools
• Discipline identities gone
• Residual presence in service teaching
• No research culture
• No senior staff for mentoring
• Minimal career paths
• Instrumental focus, vocational and/or professional training
• Little or no research income
Some relevant long-term factors

- The specific nature of interdisciplinarity in the HASS disciplines
- The effect of the ‘new humanities’ on the disciplines
- The ongoing adaptation to a medicalised model of research and the uneven absorption of the vocationally oriented institutions from the former CAE sector
Contributing policy settings

• Some negative effects of national research policy’s quest for scale and focus:
  – Effects of scale: infrastructure funding, strategic initiatives, ‘wicked’ problem solving
  – Effects of focus: national research priorities, science targeted schemes, prioritised disciplines (rarely HASS)

• The linking of research with innovation

• The splitting of culture, heritage, and the arts from tertiary education and research portfolios
How did we get here? University policy and the humanities: 1980s-1990s

- Single unified national system
- Restructuring of university funding: end of block funded research, ARGC/ARC;
- relative funding model
- End of arm’s length policy environment
- Scholarship, criticism gives way to medicalised model of research
- Steady process of reducing government investment in universities – from c.80% of budgets; now less than 50%. Increased incentive for business, philanthropic investment, international students.
Some consequences for the sector

- Systematic and incremental skewing of base funding and research funding away from the HASS disciplines
- Commercialisation of research
- Effective disappearance of small scale research funding
- Shift towards strategic funding rather than base funding as the location for new investment in research development.
- Philanthropic and industry funding concentrated on medical, biological sciences and engineering, but requiring co-contribution from the whole university
The spiral downwards...

• Government investment declined, and so capacity did as well
• As capacity declined, universities disinvested in humanities disciplines
• As this continued, less strategic funding went our way
• Other disciplines profited from our weakness, and became even stronger
The recommended response:

• Everyone apply for ARC grants
• Everyone seek commercial partners
• Everyone communicate better, become relevant and connect with ‘the real world’
• Everyone find ways to pretend to be ‘useful’ and ‘innovative’
• Oh, and publish only in A* journals
The actual response:

• Everyone applied for ARC grants and produced Faculty brochures (websites, too, and then Facebook!) to communicate better
• Some sought commercial partners
• Some, too many, tried new ways of pretending to be the useful face of the humanities
• Some even ‘gamed’ the ERA journals list
• And, when all else failed, we just whinged.
Nonetheless, some positive signs

Supportive rhetoric from current government, backed by some actions:

• International linkage scheme
• ARC networks and CofEs
• Future fellows discipline targets for 2010
• CSIRO and other research agencies
• NCRIS/NRIC, NeCTAR acknowledging HASS
• And, yes, ERA

Reinforced by actual performance in terms of outputs and international impact of humanities research
But...

The danger is that the humanities have become so depleted, so disconnected from their own academic interests, and so acculturated into an instrumental view of the function of higher education, that they are no longer in a position to respond adequately to these encouragements.
And...

The public understanding of what the humanities can offer has diminished, swamped by the imperatives of economics, business, and the market.
Or, as Stefan Collini puts it....

• ‘Since perhaps the 1970s, certainly the 1980s, official discourse has become increasingly colonised by an economistic idiom, which is derived not strictly from economic theory proper, but rather from the language of management schools, business consultants and financial journalism. [The result] is to elevate the status of business and commerce and to make ‘contributing to economic growth’ the overriding goal of a whole swathe of social, cultural and intellectual activities which had previously been understood and valued in other terms’.
Hence....

Here is David Murray, Chairman of Australia’s Future Fund, giving advice to our future leaders:

‘Stick to wealth creation and the rest will take care of itself’ (*The Australian*, 6 August, 2011)
So, what do we do now?
We could seriously consider ways to address:

- The decline in mentoring, leadership and the reproduction of disciplines
- ECR career pathways from postdoc to T&R
- Reviving senior staff acceptance of admin and leadership roles
- Breaking current patterns of appointment (only at Level B for T&R, and Level E for RO)
- modes of local/regional inter-university cooperation to protect endangered disciplines
- nationalising the LOTE bonus
And more broadly...

- We must recognise that the battlegrounds are within each university not just with the government
- We must resist pretending to be something else just because it fits better with the prevailing policy settings
- We should operate on the assumption that high quality work will be valued and supported over time
- At a national level, we must find ways to represent our interests with one voice.
Some specific policy objectives such a voice might support

• The revision of the relative funding model with a view to significantly flattening its relativities
• A nationally coordinated but locally directed campaign to highlight the effects of strategic co-funding arrangements which tax the HASS disciplines with minimal reciprocity
• The revision of the national research priorities to include a HASS-oriented priority such as ‘Understanding Cultures and Communities’
• The development of a HASS version of the ARC networks program to assist isolated and early career researchers
• A sector-wide program for interconnected HASS-related infrastructure associated with a training and development program for e-research in our disciplines
The bottom line

If government and the universities want the humanities to survive their current state of crisis, they must:

• Adopt base funding levels that can sustain them
• Provide career pathways for humanities researchers
• Provide equal access to the strategic opportunities available to the sciences
• Recognise and publicly support the distinctiveness and the intrinsic value of the humanities disciplines.

These can all be achieved at the individual university level, right now.

After all, the current crisis is created by the sum total of decisions made independently by every university in the country.