



Social Sciences for Australia's Future

Executive Summary



Scan and read the
full report

www.socialsciences.org.au/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.

The Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia is a Company Limited by Guarantee, registered with the Australian Charities and Not-for-Profits Commission.

ABN: 59 957 839 703 ACN: 678 459 464

Citation: Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia (2026) *Social Sciences for Australia's Future*, Canberra, Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia, <https://socialsciences.org.au/future>.

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**

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.



Social Sciences for Australia's Future

Executive Summary



Scan and read the
full report

www.socialsciences.org.au/future