

Situating Narratives of Decline: Surveying the Literature of Crisis from a Regional Humanities Student Perspective

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AS FIRST-IN-FAMILY UNIVERSITY GRADUATES FROM REGIONAL NORTHERN AND FAR-northern Queensland, both of us have found the work of this essay to be a challenging—and upsetting—exercise. We care deeply for the regional university which has provided us with educations in the humanities, but the feelings of anger, disappointment, and despondency we endure when considering the future of our disciplines at regional institutions such as the one we attended are difficult to translate into clear-headed academic prose. Our stories are different, but our lived experiences demonstrate what will be—and has already been—lost when regional Bachelor of Arts programs are repeatedly restructured, reoriented, refocused, refreshed, or cut entirely.

Jade was born in Cairns, in the far-north of Queensland, but was raised in the smaller, regional town of Innisfail. Her father had left high school after Year 10 to pursue employment and Jade's mother had been unable to continue schooling at the age of fourteen. Despite the interruption, Jade's mother had taken a less-conventional pathway to completing her high school education later in life and subsequently worked her way up into professional roles. Straight out of school, Jade moved south to Townsville to start a double degree in arts and science. She struggled to adjust to university studies and found herself failing subjects for the first time in her life. Away from home and dealing with difficult personal

circumstances in addition to the challenges of university, Jade returned home to Innisfail. In 2021 she decided to follow her passion for literature and transitioned into a Bachelor of Arts with a major in English, remaining enrolled at the same regional university but now studying externally. Settling into her work, Jade gained momentum. Maintaining good grades and finally having an opportunity to network with like-minded people, she even had the chance to co-author a paper with a lecturer and fellow classmates as an undergraduate. Earlier this year at her graduation, she was recognised for achieving the highest aggregate result for first-year English literature.

By contrast, I had the benefit of completing my Bachelor of Arts, also majoring in English, at the same regional university in the first decade of the twenty-first century. My father had received six years of formal education. My mother had received eight. When I—at my father's instruction—enrolled in a law degree at seventeen, I had no idea what a bachelor's degree was, let alone a doctorate. After two years of being a substandard law student, I was shocked to receive my first high distinction in 'Critical Reading' in my third year of university after switching to a Bachelor of Education. I was even more shocked to receive a prize for the highest aggregate marks in first-year English at the end of that year, the same prize later awarded to Jade. I switched degrees once more, to a Bachelor of Arts, where—in the heart of regional northern Queensland—I had a chance to study Australian literature, American literature, modernist literature, postmodern literature, medieval literature, Anglo-Saxon, the Romantic poets and critical theory. I was taught by an English department consisting of more than ten academics, including significant scholars such as Peter Pierce, Tony Hassall and Don Gallagher. Of the subjects I took, only Australian Literature continues to be taught at the university where I discovered my love for books. In the intervening years, while I completed a master's degree and a PhD, the English staff dwindled to four, teaching across literary criticism and creative writing. The subject offerings for literature and creative writing have been cut from fifteen to seven. In that time, we have lost a theatre program and the entirety of the creative arts. I found a haven—and rewarding career—working in an academic library, but I watch on with intense frustration as the arts programs that enriched my life continue to be downsized.

Neither of us would have completed our degrees if not for the existence of regional humanities programs. Regional universities still provide the only real opportunity for disadvantaged and first-in-family students to receive the kind of cultural education that middle-class and metropolitan students often take for granted. Our stories are far from unique and, similarly, the conditions experienced at our institution can be witnessed across the wider regional university landscape.

The causes for the decline of humanities programs across regional Australia are both long- and short-term, varied, complex and multifaceted. It is reductionist to place the blame solely on any one cause or stakeholder, although it might be observed that demand-driven funding certainly made it difficult for humanities programs to thrive as they once did. The regional humanities stand at the intersection of a multitude of simultaneous crises. There is the decades-long decline of the humanities disciplines in the English-speaking world. There is the economic rationalisation of Australia's higher-education sector in the decades following the Dawkins Reforms of 1987. There is the acute humanities crisis being experienced in Australia over the course of the last decade. There is the increased cost of many humanities degrees as the result of the Job Ready Graduates program. There is the ongoing legacy of the global pandemic on university enrolments and hybrid online teaching practices. There is also the acute funding and enrolments crisis being experienced by regional universities across a wide variety of disciplines. These crises—and there are certainly others which might be added to this list—have dealt regional humanities programs a series of cumulative blows.

The Long Decline of the Humanities in the English-Speaking World

Mikhail Epstein's 'manifesto' for the future of the humanities, *The Transformative Humanities*, first published in 2012, documented a historical crisis for the liberal arts in the United States. In his introduction, Epstein observed that 'in the last 40 years, the number of students majoring in the humanities has declined by more than half, according to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences' (1). Over a decade later, conditions facing humanities programs in the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand have worsened to such an extent that the historical 'crisis' Epstein described in 2012 resembles a relative golden age across the Anglosphere.

In 2023, Andrew Norton, Professor of Higher Education Policy at the Australian National University, suggested that '[i]n the late 2000s and early 2010s the humanities shared in general enrolment growth, but after that went into decline' (np). In New Zealand, Roger Smyth observed in the same year that 'there is a shift within the BA away from the humanities and towards the social sciences', and noted that '[t]he decline in the humanities *is* acute' (np). A report commissioned by the Australian Historical Association in October 2023 indicated that '[s]ince 2016, there has been a dramatic decline in [history] student load (EFTSL): 22.9 per cent reduction in Australia and 10.1 per cent reduction in New Zealand' (Crotty 2). The consensus from analysts is that enrolments in languages, literature, history, and philosophy continue to steadily decline irrespective of broader trends in the higher education sector. As in the case of anthropogenic climate change, the wider community remains largely unconcerned about a slow-moving disaster

which does not directly affect day-to-day life, and which has now been unfolding for more than half a century.

One major shortcoming in our capacity to confront the crisis in the humanities is that we tend to treat each period of acute crisis or shift in enrolment patterns as distinct, rather than as the temporary acceleration of a prolonged and systemic decline. Our failure to contextualise the current crisis as the latest development of a decline that spans decades opens the way for claims that each crisis is—at least in part—a rhetorical one. Matthew Sini criticised what he saw as overstated claims at the height of the last crisis in 2011 when he asked: ‘How many more “the humanities are in crisis” articles must we see before we realise that the humanities have always been in crisis?’ (Sini np). Though pithy, the barb carries something of the same ring as climate-change deniers suggesting that the weather has always been changing. Matthew and I both studied English at the same regional university—taking the same Arthurian Literature, Anglo-Saxon and Contemporary British Literature classes together—and I’m sure he would acknowledge that the degree we received is now a shadow of its former self. Some of the degree change is simply that—change. But a large portion of the associated loss in capacity has been demanded by declining student numbers.

The humanities have experienced waves of proportional decline since the early 1970s, with weaker rebounds from each successive drop in enrolments. In 2023, Nathan Heller observed that in the United States ‘[d]uring the past decade, the study of English and history at the collegiate level has fallen by a full third’ (np), and this was in addition to the reduction by half that Epstein described as occurring between 1972 and 2012. In Australia, the decline in enrolments in the humanities has led to universities restructuring, cutting, or even attempting to disestablish the Bachelor of Arts, as Federation University Australia attempted in 2022 (Davis np). It remains to be seen what English, languages, and history programs at regional universities will look like after the ‘next’ crisis in the humanities.

The Regional Context

The conditions facing humanities programs in regional Australia are radically different from those faced at metropolitan universities. Ken Gelder’s 2022 assertions about shifting enrolment patterns within the humanities provides an example of the way that metropolitan-focused discussions of the humanities crisis elide the conditions being faced in the regions. In his response to Simon During’s emotive essay on the ‘demoralisation’ of the humanities in *The Conversation* that same year, Gelder argued that we misinterpret as decline what is actually a shift in enrolment patterns away from old-fashioned disciplines towards more innovative parts of the humanities. As he puts it:

It doesn't help that During talks almost exclusively about the 'old humanities': meaning English, History, Philosophy, Classics. He doesn't have any time for the languages, for Archaeology, Anthropology, Theatre and Performance, Screen Studies, and a whole number of what he calls 'post-disciplinary' humanities disciplines like Cultural Studies (which is odd, given his own work here), Indigenous Studies, Gender Studies, and so on. (Gelder np)

Gelder's position may hold some weight in the metropolitan context, where students are able to major in a diverse range of fields including gender studies and screen studies, but it is an argument which does not easily translate to a regional context where there are narrower options for majors. At my own alma mater one can no longer study cinema or theatre—let alone performance. One might pick up a semester of French, but certainly not a major. Japanese has been cut and, at many regional universities, cultural studies is a term better used to describe the way in which what is left of the 'old humanities' has been cobbled together into something resembling a major.

Gelder's suggestion that the humanities are shifting rather than declining is perhaps as elitist as During's claims that traditional disciplines of English, history, philosophy, and the classics have been demoralised. Gelder suggests that 'During knows that the humanities, at Group of Eight universities like Melbourne or Sydney which take many of their domestic students from the private schools, are home mostly to an "educated elite"' (np). What then of students from public schools in the regions who have an interest in literature or history but have not had the benefits of an elite private school education? Gelder's narrow vision of the humanities as something which is taught at the Group of Eight is reiterated when he observes that 'face-to-face teaching is returning to campus life' (np). While universities in Sydney and Melbourne are indeed beginning to reassess the usefulness of trimesters and online subject delivery, underfunded regional institutions, by force of declining numbers, are moving further towards hybrid classrooms, condensed teaching years, and streamlined majors to survive on increasingly meagre enrolments.

Southern Cross University, for example, is promoting a model of six-week terms at the same time that the University of Sydney is considering returning to two semesters (Southern Cross University np). As Victoria Kuttainen suggests, '[e]ven as regional universities are regarded as engines of their community, regional university arts and humanities programs have been gutted by decades of underfunding, by a revolving door of institutional restructures and degree makeovers, by the internal funnelling of resources toward STEM and medicine, and by the broader government diversion of funding and resources to larger

metropolitan institutions' (np). The conditions facing regional universities do not necessarily reflect Gelder's portrayal of the humanities in a small sample of the Group of Eight, and at regional universities diminishing English and history enrolments cannot be offset by the sheer scale of enrolments in other disciplines.

Since the pandemic, total enrolments at many regional universities have experienced a sharp decline. The aggregate student load for universities in the Regional Universities Network (RUN) was the equivalent of 104,318 full time students in 2019 but dropped to 84,483 in 2022. This amounted to a 19 per cent drop in overall student load since the start of the pandemic. It is well within reason that figures for 2023 and 2024 will show further decline. By comparison, aggregate student load at the Group of 8 universities dropped a mere 2.2 per cent over the same period, from 331,051 to 323,715 EFTSL. More recently, there is evidence that humanities enrolments at the Group of Eight have returned to pre-pandemic levels, and '[a]t the University of Melbourne, demand for its Bachelor of Arts degree is higher in 2024 than any time in the past five years' (Cassidy np). Society and Culture load also declined at RUN universities following the pandemic, although this decline was outpaced by the regional decline more broadly. In 2019 there were 21,558 students enrolled in Society and Culture degrees at RUN universities, and this dropped by 9.8 per cent to 19,437 in 2022. There are, however, several caveats that suggest circumstances may be worse for regional English and history departments. The broad subject category of Society and Culture includes many subjects not within the scope of the humanities, including law, economics and social work, and the same government data indicates that national student load in Language and Literature fell by 20.3 per cent between 2019 and 2022 from 22,699 to 18,070. Studies in Human Society similarly fell by 16 per cent over the same period, from 38,492 to 32,300.

There are also indications of uneven decline at different regional universities. Broadening the period under consideration to the last decade highlights the extent of the disparities between regional institutions. Federation University Australia has fared particularly badly. In 2012, the university reported that 1,386 of its total 9,219 EFTSL was enrolled in Society and Culture degrees. In 2022, this figure fell to 1,148 out of a total EFTSL of 8,677. With a 17.1 per cent drop in load over the decade from 2012, Society and Culture enrolments represented just 13.2 per cent of Federation University's total student load in 2022. It is easy to see the economic logic behind the managerial attempt to cut the Bachelor of Arts at the university in the latter year. In 2024, Federation University—like many others across the nation—is once again considering the need for cuts, announcing that it 'plans to make 12 per cent of its workforce redundant by September' (Kirkham np). While post-2022 data is not available at the time of writing, James Cook University appears to be in earlier stages of a similar path. There, total EFTSL has fallen 12

per cent from 15,230 to 13,395 over the decade from 2012 to 2022, and Society and Culture EFTSL has fallen by 23.3 per cent in that period from 3,212 to 2,463.

At Charles Sturt University, Society and Culture enrolments broadly defined have served as a bulwark against falling enrolments. There, total EFTSL fell by 12.2 per cent over the decade from 2012 to 2022—from 21,804 to 19,123—but Society and Culture load only fell by 6.1 per cent, from 6,287 to 5,902. At a few regional institutions, Society and Culture student load has benefited from wider growth. At both Central Queensland University and the University of the Sunshine Coast, total student load has increased and so has the share of Society and Culture. In the case of Central Queensland University, the growth has been modest, with Society and Culture EFTSL growing from 1,509 to 1,693 between 2012 and 2022. At the University of the Sunshine Coast, however, Society and Culture load has more than doubled from 1,039 to 2,480. Once again, however, these positive numbers do not indicate how much of this success can be attributed to humanities subjects as opposed to other fields contained within the category of Society and Culture, a wide statistical catchall that includes Political Science and Policy Studies; Studies in Human Society; Human Welfare Studies and Services; Behavioural Science; Law, Justice and Law Enforcement; Librarianship, Information Management and Curatorial Studies; Language and Literature; Philosophy and Religious Studies; Economics and Econometrics; Sport and Recreation; and Other Society and Culture (Australian Bureau of Statistics np).

And then there is the greatest outlier in the regional university context, the University of New England. In the face of cuts to subjects across the humanities in the English-speaking world, the University of New England has maintained a comparably large list of thirty arts majors. At the time of writing, the university offers majors including Ancient History, Australian Studies, Chinese, French, German, Indonesian, Italian, Japanese, Spanish, Classical Languages, Linguistics, Cultural Heritage, Gender Studies, Medieval and Modern Europe, Music, Peace Studies, Philosophy, Screen and Media Studies, Studies in Religion, Studies in Settler Colonialism, and Theatre and Performance. At the University of New England, Society and Culture load has dropped by 9.4 per cent over this decade from 4,493 to 4,072, but still represents a significant 37.9 per cent of total student load at the university. If there is hope for the humanities maintaining a regional presence in the coming decades, it surely requires the continued success of the University of New England. Ironically, however, the performance of the university's external program—which has been honed since the era of receiving taped lectures in the mail—may also undercut other regional humanities programs in a narrow market which is increasingly driven by a shift from face-to-face teaching to hybrid subject delivery. It is quite possible that regional students will feel better served by diverse majors provided externally at the University of New England than by their local university delivering limited majors in hybrid

format. It remains to be seen how many providers can survive in a saturated regional university market.

There is no question, however, that the demographics of regional universities are markedly different from metropolitan cohorts, and that supporting regional institutions is a matter of equity, as noted in other essays in this issue. The great majority of students enrolled in undergraduate humanities, culture, and social sciences courses through Australian universities are based at metropolitan campuses, with 89.4 per cent of these students studying in metropolitan locations in 2022. Regional students differ from metropolitan students in terms of the way they study, their educational background, what they study and where they are employed after graduation. In contrast to the 14 per cent of metropolitan students who come from low socio-economic backgrounds, 25 per cent of regional students have experienced financial hardship. These students are more likely to be older, with 50 per cent of regional students being 25 or older, as opposed to 21 per cent of metropolitan students. There are also clear disadvantages in terms of previous education performance and experience. The point cannot be emphasised enough—and is borne out by our own experience—that when disadvantaged Australians decide to pursue an education they should not be offered a substandard one on the basis of their circumstances.

The Australian government's recent review of the higher education system culminated with the Accord Final Report, which was released on 25 February 2024. The report put regional higher education equity in focus as a strategic priority. It recognised that 'participation in higher education has continued to be heavily influenced by a person's location and socio-economic background, not just ability' (Department of Education 111) and that people from regional, rural and remote areas, compared to the Australian population more broadly, make up a 'disproportionately low share of the higher education student population' (114). The report acknowledged the necessary cultural work performed by universities. Yet the report made little to nothing of how the challenges of humanities education in regional Australia might be addressed. Rhetorically, the Accord was a heartening recognition not only of humanities but also of the importance of regional communities, yet it contained few material reasons to hope for a brighter future. Thus far the Accord Final Report's recommendation to reverse the Jobs-Ready Graduates legislation has proven complicated and expensive, with no prospect of change in the foreseeable future.

What Stands to be Lost

The retreat of regional humanities from the cultural life of the regions they serve has forced communities to take matters into their own hands. Take for example TheatreiNQ's 'Bridge Project', which was established 'to fill the void when James

Cook University ceased its theatre course', providing 'the necessary skills to selected young people to then enable them to be competitive at audition for entry into the national tertiary institutions (NIDA, Vic College, WAPA etc)' (Townsville Community Information Centre np). One might also look at the similar roles played by organisations like JUTE Theatre Company in Cairns (<https://jute.com.au/>) and galleries such as Umbrella Studio Contemporary Arts in Townsville (<https://www.umbrella.org.au/>) in terms of attempting to fill the gaps left in regional arts education when university programs close. From regional centres to outer regional towns and small rural communities, universities have played a formative role in the lives of writers, artists, musicians, and performers. When creative arts and humanities programs narrow or close—and students leave their homes for other opportunities—regional culture withers.

Valuing the humanities in the regions relates to ongoing debates about the utility of the humanities to individuals, communities, employers, governments, and society at large. The concept of value in higher education is fraught and complex. It is fundamentally difficult to settle upon shared measures of utility and value, particularly when different institutions and groups approach the question of utility from dramatically different perspectives. Individuals may see the value of a humanities degree in learning about a subject they are interested in; others will seek to measure value only in employment outcomes that follow from completion of a qualification. Governments are inclined to value the role of education in producing competitive industries and economies, and thus to addressing national industry shortages and lowering unemployment rates. University managers tend to measure value in terms of enrolment figures and grant funding. In addition to the competing notions of utility that apply to the higher education sector mentioned above, there is also the problem of accounting for more abstract forms of value in the regional context as they relate to the humanities, such as the development of local cultural identities, promoting a broad sense of community, and providing opportunities to foster academic and creative talent outside of metropolitan areas.

Eliza Kent summarises the issue by suggesting that 'what is most valuable in what we teach in the humanities is simply not measurable, or not in a clearly standardizable way' (81). Not only is the contribution of the humanities to society considered to be more abstract than the likes of medicine, chemistry, or engineering, the forces that lead students to study the humanities are also characterised as being less amenable to standardised measurement. Richard Howells describes the Arts and Humanities as 'a sector considerably more behavioural than economic; a field in which people are demonstrably motivated by factors other than economic self interest' (235). Historically, the behavioural qualities of the arts and humanities that Howells describes have presented a

significant obstacle for advocates forced to contend with an increasingly data-driven policy landscape.

The introduction of the rhetoric of ‘impact’ into higher education since the turn of the millennium has crystallised the need for succinct articulations of value, but arguably led to a greater proliferation of different value statements of the humanities rather than greater clarity. UK academic Eleonora Belfiore observes that “‘impact’ has taken both the cultural sector and academia by storm because it appears to offer a rhetorically powerful articulation of value and an attendant rationale for funding’ (101). But in turn, there has been ‘a collapse of value into impact’ which ‘lends itself to be expressed in monetary terms, and ... assumes the equivalence of the contribution to a healthy society with the contribution to the economic growth agenda’ (Belfiore 105). As Associate Professor Deborah Pike, at the University of Notre Dame in Sydney suggests, ‘[t]he arts and humanities offer economic benefits that are enormous—but which cannot be measured in the short term’ (12). The wider and longer-term economic benefits of studying literature or history are elided when concepts of value are channelled into multifarious statements about short-term economic impact.

Faced with the logic of a corporatised higher education sector, some researchers have turned their attention to the economic value of the skills gained by humanities graduates for employers and the workplace. Kent is among those who have argued that the transferrable or soft skills cultivated by ‘a broad liberal arts education that teaches writing, communication and critical thinking skills’ have ‘the most long-term value’ (276). Similarly, Heidi Ashton, Associate Professor in Cultural and Creative Ecologies at Warwick, observes that transferrable skills are ‘becoming more important to individuals in modern workplaces and dynamic labour markets’ (157). The argument runs that transferrable skills are important because they foster resilience and malleability in graduates. In the World Humanities’ Report, Iva Glisic and Kylie Brass describe the humanities as able to build ‘an agile workforce that can adjust to changing patterns of work and skill requirements’ by developing ‘skills, knowledge and modes of reasoning that are beneficial in a wide range of career options’ (56). Skills such as critical thinking, writing, and effective communication enhance the prospects of humanities graduates and allow them a sense of freedom and flexibility in navigating the uncertain landscape of the twenty-first-century job market. This is also articulated in an Australian report which identifies ‘over 30 technical skills that may be acquired in a Humanities degree’ (Deloitte Access Economics 5). From this perspective, the humanities provide a wealth of skills which are sought after in both the market sector and the public sector.

Nevertheless, there are researchers who have directly rejected the role of economic rationalism in assessing the value of the humanities. Howells argues that

the contribution of the arts and humanities needs to be expressed in the terms of the disciplines themselves:

cultural and creative texts ... are shining vehicles for our needs, dreams, fears and aspirations; our identity writ large. They are visions of ourselves; visions both of whom we are and the people we might rather be. They have a value beyond the economic and a purpose beyond the instrumental, so our mission is to discover not just their uses but—crucially—their *meaning*. The arts and humanities are uniquely qualified to do this. Of course, meaning is complex and interpretation is often very difficult indeed, but that is the challenge, the purpose and indeed the necessity of arts and humanities research. (242)

Others have couched the value of the humanities in similarly humanistic terms but come to different conclusions regarding the value of studying literature, art, history, and philosophy. Martha Nussbaum, for instance, suggests that '[i]nstruction in literature and the arts can cultivate sympathy through engagement with many different works of literature, music, fine art, and dance' (12). Echoing these sentiments, Deborah Pike insists that the humanities contribute to a diverse society, stating that '[t]hey inspire passions, ignite emotions, get us to think and write critically', and that 'the humanities foster the ability to theorise, envisage possibilities, consider data, identify patterns, and develop the imagination' (10). The latter observations from Pike highlight the crucial yet often difficult-to-measure contributions that the humanities make to society, particularly during the current period of rapid social and technological change.

Despite the literature's often conflicting approaches to assessing the value of the arts and humanities, there should be no doubt that they foster the skills required for navigating society's present and future challenges. A decade on, the words of Graeme Turner and Kylie Brass still hold true: 'we need the knowledge of peoples, societies, and cultures to understand and respond to today's global, social, cultural and economic issues', because the humanities 'are integral to achieving this fine-tuned understanding' (1). Allowing the humanities to continue the current path of decline means increasingly relinquishing the capacity of humans to influence the future directions of technology, institutions, and communities. Allowing the humanities at regional institutions to become further hollowed out means the communities they serve have even less capacity to determine their own futures against the agendas of large metropolitan centres with a history of overlooking them.

Conclusion: Futures Without End

The Accord Final Report highlights the benefits and importance of regional tertiary education, but places little to no direct emphasis on the value of individuals educated in the humanities, arts and social sciences. Whatever changes are brought about by the Universities Accord, and whatever additional funding begins to flow into regional universities as a result, it is hard to envisage an end to the broader narrative of decline in the humanities in the foreseeable future. The forces driving the diminishing presence of literature, history, languages, and philosophy departments at universities are not confined to either Australia or regional contexts. Rapidly developing artificial intelligence, widening income inequality, increasing costs of living, and a highly specialised and precarious job market are just a few of the external forces perceived as diminishing the appeal of the humanities when they should be considered as evidence that the humanities are needed more than ever, and need to be more accessible than ever.

In most cases, the humanities have become an adjunct to the central functions of the modern research university, and they are the first source of cuts when cost-saving measures are required. The argument runs that the rationalisation of majors is required to maintain the continued existence of the discipline areas, but the resulting conditions diminish the capacity of the discipline areas they save, and often drive students toward metropolitan universities which by way of economic capacity can offer more choice. Staff cuts mean more heavy lifting on the teaching front. At a certain point, departments lose the ability to engage in the kind of research required to maintain reputation and relevance. As Kuttainen puts it, '[l]ess choice means fewer students means less choice' (np). Cuts beget further cuts.

Nevertheless, the humanities are far from disappearing from university course lists entirely. Students commencing 'society and culture' degrees in Australian universities may have dropped by 11.5 per cent between 2021 and 2022, but they still represented more than a quarter of total commencements in 2022, with 103,382 students beginning degrees in this broad category nationally (Department of Education np). There is even space for institutions like the Ramsay Centre to provide—albeit limited—opportunities for students to undertake the kind of internationally-focused and thorough humanities degrees being excised from many regional institutions. The humanities will survive for years to come, but will continue to lose a foothold in the wider cultural consciousness.

Neither university management nor government is likely to suddenly be swayed to express support for the humanities in their current state. Still, the humanities could yet become, as Epstein envisaged in 2012, a future-oriented and transformative force in society at large. Scholars might look up at the world they

find themselves in, and once again consider how literature, history, language, and philosophy operate to define the development of society in transformational ways. We might, as Epstein suggests, rediscover that the greatest value of the humanities is not, perhaps, employability, soft-skills, or even empathy, but *wisdom*:

No consideration of the future of the humanities can avoid the theme of wisdom as the ultimate goal of spiritual life and intellectual pursuits. This technological age is characterized by a disparity between knowledge and wisdom, with the accumulation of scientific knowledge taking precedence over our understanding of values and goals. (239)

Wisdom is the capacity of the humanities to transform the world, by directing other forms of knowledge down productive paths. Epstein suggests that '[i]f a passive quality of will is called patience, and an active one is called courage, then wisdom is the ability to distinguish between contexts in which these qualities can be applied, that is to distinguish between the circumstances which should be suffered and the ones that should be reformed' (243). The humanities are not over, though the current decline is far from finished. The question that confronts us is one of reform.

The humanities will survive the current crisis—and the ones which will follow in the coming decades—but what the humanities will look like in ten years, in fifty years, or in a century from now is up for debate. We face a choice between an introspective humanities confined to the minutiae of the archive, or a transformative humanities which uses all the tools at its disposal, including the archive, to expand the utmost limits of human understanding. If Australia's regional communities are to be part of the future of the humanities at large, governments, administrators, academic managers, and academics themselves must all recognise the transformative potential of the latter vision, and begin rebuilding capacity.

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