

# Academic Fellows Program

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# Using the past to inform the future: improving public policymaking using evidence from the arts and humanities

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## What is the issue?

How do public servants balance questions of fairness, responsibility, accountability and public value? Humanities disciplines such as history, philosophy, ethics, and classics provide frameworks for thinking through competing values and difficult trade-offs. The arts and humanities engage with social, political and cultural expression fundamental to modern societies, policy making and governance; yet their value for public administration is not always clearly understood or appreciated. A recent article in the *Australian Journal of Public Administration* argues that humanities disciplines provide perspectives that are often missing from contemporary public administration, particularly where the field becomes overly focused on measurement, efficiency and quantification.

The arts and humanities also inform major policy challenges including cultural policy, media and communication, technology, education, heritage, climate change, urban planning and public health. There are excellent examples of arts and humanities evidence informing and influencing public policy in the UK and I have been involved in a number of projects looking at how humanities researchers are engaging on policy issues (see Holmes-Henderson 2026a, Holmes-Henderson 2026b, Holmes-Henderson and Sewell 2024). Given the renewed need for human connection in confronting an epidemic of loneliness, unease about AI, and navigating our global future, the next 20 years beckon with opportunities for creativity and innovation which humanities research helps to illuminate.

As an ANZSOG Academic Fellow I am interested to understand:

- How can research evidence from the arts and humanities contribute to policy making and administration in Australia and New Zealand?
- To what extent are Humanities academics in universities trained or incentivised to share their research with policy colleagues, and what are the established avenues for doing this?
- How might we diversify the types of evidence used by public policy officials, at all career stages?

## Why does this matter?

This fellowship is particularly urgent given the crisis facing humanities departments in Australian universities. Finding and exemplifying models of good practice from Australia and New Zealand will bring benefits not only to ANZSOG but to Humanities scholars, university senior leaders and policymakers internationally. Many senior civil servants and politicians have studied arts and humanities subjects at university; how do we empower them to embrace this disciplinary expertise and make decisions based on testimony rather than (or in addition to) statistics and graphs? In the age of AI, how might we leverage

the ‘human infrastructure’ provided by humanities subjects to seek the ‘why’, rather than narrowly answering the ‘how’?

## The approach

During my Fellowship I will be giving a public lecture, masterclass and seminars on effective policy communication as well as engaging with the public sector through interviews and a roundtable workshop. The insights will be shared via an article and report.

## Impact into practice

My aim is to understand better the mechanisms in use for evidence supply in Australia and New Zealand and the benchmarks for ‘good’ evidence. I would also like to explore how policy engagement activities fit into the academic workload allocation, progression and promotion structures for academics in Australian and New Zealand universities. Finding and exemplifying models of good practice from Australia and New Zealand will bring benefits not only to ANZSOG but to humanities scholars, university senior leaders and policymakers internationally.

## References

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