



WHAT IS THE VALUE OF HISTORY?

Historians have been extolling the value of history for centuries. Modern advocates offer different answers to questions about history's value and sometimes disagree about what should be most emphasised. Our experience in advocacy suggests that all approaches should be considered: different audiences will respond to different explanations at different times. Modern answers tend to fall under four rubrics: history's civic function; its career outcomes; its personal outcomes; and its development of analytical skills. Here are some links to further information on each rubric:

1. *History is foundational to citizenship, identity, and community*

All significant collectives – from families to nations – are forged and maintained by a shared understanding of their histories. This is especially so for groups based on a common religion, gender, sexuality, class, migration experience, or connection to Country.

- In 2019 the Australian Professional Historians Association endorsed a statement that emphasised how history was the backbone of [citizenship, identity, community, and leadership](#).
- The AHA journal, *History Australia*, recently published this article by Tamson Pietsch on the 'natural constituency' of history being [the nation-state and its citizens](#).
- [Reconciliation Australia](#) includes better historical understanding as one of the five essential pillars to a more just Australia.
- Find here a classic essay by American historian Peter Stearns on history being [foundational to identity, social morality, and good policy](#), and here a former president of the American Historical Association on how [history informs social justice](#).
- In 2021 the Australian Senate published a paper on the centrality of history to '[Nationhood, national identity and democracy](#).'
- The [EU recently declared](#) that teaching history 'equips learners with the knowledge and skills needed to contribute to a more cohesive and inclusive ... community.' In the past [the Council of Europe](#) similarly stated that history 'can, and should, make an important contribution to education ... for democratic citizenship.'

2. *History has strong career outcomes*

Individually, history graduates enjoy good employment prospects and above-average incomes. Together, they help power a significant sector of the Australian economy.

- Recent Australian research shows that [72% of humanities graduates](#) find fulltime work within six months, compared to only 70% of science grads, and 65% of communications grads (exact history data not available, but history is a core [humanities](#) subject, along with philosophy, literary study, and religious study).
- Recent Australian research also shows that three years out, humanities graduates have a [higher median income](#) than graduates of science, architecture, or communications (exact history data not available).

- Recent British research shows that [87% of history graduates](#) (p. 9) were in full employment, outperforming graduates in economics, politics, media, and computing. This same research also showed that five years out, history graduates had a [higher median income](#) (p. 10) than those of education, psychology, or general sciences. See also similar data from [Canada](#).

3. *History has strong personal outcomes*

History graduates often speak about the way history sharpened their intellect, deepened their creativity, and provided a life-enhancing perspective through which to view the world.

- An Australian survey in 2012 revealed that [90% of history graduates](#) (p. 37) had high satisfaction with their degree choice (compared to 86% in marketing and 85% in law).
- Recent British research reveals that [92% of history graduates](#) (p. 11) had a high level of satisfaction compared to the average student (85%).
- A former president of the American Historical Association writes here on the way history offers an [important outlet for creative expression](#).
- The American Historical Association offers [a series of reflections](#) by prominent historians about their passion for history (hit 'next essay' at the end of each).

4. *History develops vital analytical skills for facing the future*

With increasing levels of fake news, misinformation, unregulated AI, and unprecedented planetary disaster, the ability of history graduates to offer critical thinking, reliable research, and clear communication will become ever more necessary.

- The [AHA's 2022 report on history graduates](#) included voices of many who believe their careers depend on skills learned when studying history: public servants cite critical thinking; an auditor cites the ability to weigh evidence; a lawyer cites analysis and clear writing; a unionist cites research and critique, and so on (pp. 13-20).
- This [beautiful essay by David Ritter](#) speaks of 'the habits of humane critical inquiry,' acquired through his history degree, which 'informed my vocational choices, first to work as an Indigenous rights lawyer, then to serve the cause of Greenpeace.' He adds: 'history is a civic discourse that critically engages with change in the world, contemplates the nature of limits and challenges ahistorical self-absorption.'
- A [podcast here](#) with the late British Prof. Justin Champion discusses the essential value of the critical skills that develop from studying history
- Note this message from Microsoft President Brad Smith: 'As computers behave more like humans, the social sciences and humanities will become even more important. Languages, art, history, economics, ethics, philosophy, psychology and human development courses can teach critical, philosophical and ethics-based skills that will be instrumental in the development and management of AI solutions'—The Future Computed (2018). See also Steve Jobs, founder of Apple: 'It is in Apple's DNA that technology alone is not enough – it's technology married with liberal arts, married with the humanities, that yields us the results.'
- The American organisation, [Learning from History](#), is committed especially to this facet of the value of history and provides several useful fact sheets.