

# O tempora: The current presence of classics and ancient history in Australian and New Zealand public universities

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## Abstract

The study of classics has been part of Australian and New Zealand higher education from the beginnings of tertiary education in these countries, followed shortly after by the study of ancient history. This article offers an analysis of current units of study in each Australian and New Zealand public university that continues to teach classics and ancient history. Set in the context of the origins of this field in both countries and contemporary debates on the value of studying not only the humanities in general but also classics and ancient history in particular, this article offers detailed analysis of what is taught and how universities conceptualize the merit and usefulness of this field of study. Analysis reveals some decline in more traditional areas, but also identifies the evolutionary trajectories that classics and ancient history have followed, including departures from the ‘sober’ political history to offerings that have been enabled by methodologies prevalent in social and gender history.

## Keywords

Public universities, Australia, New Zealand, humanities, classics, ancient history, public value

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## **Introduction: Political and educational contexts**

In 1965, the Australian classicist Robert R. Dyer (of the Australian National University) declared of Australia and New Zealand: ‘Classical studies appear to have a bright future in these two countries’ (Dyer, 1965: 554). The context for his prediction was a survey of (by 1965) the more than a century of classical education in both countries since the 1850s and the likely future prospects for the field. He was writing when many optimistic aspects of post-war higher education expansion remained manifest in both countries (Forsyth, 2015: 367). In the decades since Dyer’s study, the teaching of classics and ancient history has continued in Australia and New Zealand. However, the current and future state of the field and threats to it have only attracted occasional scholarly interest. The bright optimism for the future captured in Dyer’s observation is a useful starting point for a survey of the current state of the field interpreted in its historical context, with this historical context spanning from the foundation of the first universities in Australia and New Zealand up to the present day, and the data analysis being focused on the two most recent years of units in our broader subject area. With this in mind, it is important to establish a clear framework for what this study will examine as classics and ancient history.

The definition of the field put forward by the Australasian Society for Classical Studies (ASCS, n.d.) the peak body for the study of classics and ancient history in Australia and New Zealand, shows that the study of the languages was a starting point for a field now characterized by diversity. The ASCS envisages the discipline as “the study of ancient Greece and Rome and related fields”. The stated ASCS areas of inquiry did not include a temporal limit; however, based on the generally understood contours of the discipline, our ambit has been defined as “the study of ancient Greece and Rome and related fields”. For us, this includes the “languages, literature, history, thought and archaeology of the ancient [Mediterranean and Near Eastern] world” from the Sumerian civilization in the third millennium BCE up until the rise of Islam in the early 7th century CE, although much of the taught content pertains to what is broadly defined as the ‘classical’ period, with this being centred on ancient Greece and Rome. This definition guides the data collection and precludes the study of topics that fall more appropriately into the fields of divinity or theology, or where study of the aforementioned cultural milieu represents only part of a broader survey unit.

With both their starting point and their evolution established, classics and ancient history might be regarded as the canary in the coal mine regarding the future of the humanities. They were the origin of humanities in Australian and New Zealand higher education and have been a mainstay of the humanities until comparatively recent times, so existential threats to classics and ancient history and questioning of their general relevance clearly speak to the overall wellbeing of the humanities. In 1965, 1974, 1995 and 2007 (Dyer, 1965; Rankin, 1974; Horsley et al., 1995; O’Sullivan and Maitland, 2007), surveys appeared regarding how classics and ancient history were taught in Australia and New Zealand. As incremental studies, they allow us to chart changes in what is offered. Yet the picture must be interpreted with nuance and not simply as a portrait of decline, since the field of classics and ancient history, at least according to our working definition, has evolved and expanded. However, these incremental studies do also note decline in some

areas by recording, *inter alia*, offerings such as Ancient Greek at Adelaide, Newcastle, and La Trobe that once existed, but are now defunct. These studies also reveal the loss of coherent and stable organizational platforms, such as the disestablishment of departments of classics and ancient history at universities including ANU, UTas, and Melbourne, together with the subsummation of classics and ancient history into more general majors, programs, and schools. As a result, this decade-by-decade analysis provided incidental data on the context of classics in our region of interest.

Although the teaching of Ancient Greek and Latin, together with ancient history of the Mediterranean world and the Near East, continues in many Australian and New Zealand universities, it does so in a context defined by a sense of crisis for the humanities (Jay, 2014). At time of writing, for example, Federation University, in Australia, has announced the axing of the Bachelor of Arts. This specific cut is framed by wider existential threats across the sector, including the Australian Government's decision in 2020 to raise the cost of Arts degrees *vis-à-vis* those deemed more 'practical' such as nursing, education and STEM-related fields as part of the Job-ready Graduates Package (Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2021), together with shrinking enrolments (Charles et al., 2022). In addition, the influential so-called Coaldrake Report into Australian higher education places emphasis on the provision of vocational education (Coaldrake, 2019: 11). This sense of crisis resonates with the field in other national contexts, including the United States and the United Kingdom (Ahlburg and Roberts, 2018). In an environment where the humanities have come under increasing scrutiny on account of supposedly lacking public utility, classics and ancient history are – once again – in a precarious position. In New Zealand, the same discourse of 'crisis' prevails and is indicative of similar trajectories of neoliberal reform and funding cuts in non-technical and non-scientific fields of study (Spencer, 2014; Newton, 2018).

The recent change to fees in Australia is only a recent iteration of awkward relationships between government policy and the humanities that traverse governments of different political parties and ideological positions. In Australia, the socially conservative Liberal-National Party coalition and the more socially progressive Labor Party have both pursued policies that have been inimical to the humanities, although the former has, over time, arguably proved less of a friend of the humanities in a general sense. That said, the wide-ranging Dawkins reforms initiated by the Hawke-Labor Australian government in the late 1980s have been perceived by many as hostile to the humanities (Forsyth, 2014: 118). These perceptions were fuelled not only by a strong government emphasis on the development of technical skills over a liberal education but also by specific flashpoints of controversy, including chair of the Australian Research Grants Committee, Don Aitken, declaring that there were fewer 'wankers' in science compared to the humanities (Forsyth, 2014: 118).

In this broader crisis, classics and ancient history, unlike some other humanities areas, such as cultural or literary studies, are in a double bind. Overall, subjects dealing with the ancient Mediterranean world may not find favour in any utilitarian 'pub test' that demands 'value' for the public expenditure on education, but they are also susceptible to criticism that the study of the classical world is linked to an elitist heritage, with teaching of the classics being an import to Australian and New Zealand higher education from English,

Scottish and Irish universities (Brown and Muirhead, 2003: 24). In line with these shifts in focus and priority, the study of the classical languages and ancient history has been critiqued from perspectives such as whiteness studies, feminist studies, and elitism (Gold, 1997; Hanson and Heath, 2001; Heng, 2018; Poser 2021). Yet, at the same time, proponents of classics and ancient history point to such education as vital to understanding the cultural and political traditions that have shaped the modern Western world, and thus have had a profound influence across the globe, including in Australia and New Zealand (Adler, 2016).

Such an influence informs the philanthropic Ramsay Centre for Western Civilisation at the Universities of Wollongong and Queensland and the Australian Catholic University. The ‘Western civilization’ and ‘great books’ focus of the Ramsay Centre ranges far wider than classics and ancient history. Units include study of Greek and Roman literature and philosophy, but the curricula at these universities span both centuries and disciplines. Only one of the universities associated with the Centre (University of Queensland) teaches classical languages, using *existing* units from the Bachelor of Arts considered later in the survey of all current classics and ancient history units. The Ramsay Centre’s funding, reception, and reputation add greater complexity to discussion of the teaching of classics and ancient history. The philanthropic bequest and the close involvement on its board of prominent politicians from both ideological sides of Australian parliamentary politics (including former Liberal prime minister Tony Abbott and Labor parliamentary leader Kim Beazley), is an important counter narrative to the impression that the political and funding landscapes in Australia are unsympathetic to this subject matter.

While scholars from within the humanities acknowledged that public funding was often meagre (Davies, 2019: 59), the Ramsay money was by no means uncritically welcomed. Universities including the Australian National University opted not to accept Ramsay funding (Vidakovich, 2018). Critiques of the funding source included the epistemic validity of the ‘Western civilization model’, the potential that the content and teaching could foster an ‘inward’ focus that would actually weaken the teaching of humanities, and the white supremacist inferences in the Western civilization rubric (Bonnell, 2019b: 66; Maher et al., 2021: 312). From a governance perspective, there was controversy that the funding and curricula were bypassing usual approval processes and would weaken academic autonomy (Claren and Thomas, 2019; Davies, 2019: 59). As noted, the Ramsay Centre itself and the controversy it generated ranged far wider than classics and ancient history, although the classics were from time to time mobilized as rhetorical weapons. Subverting the tradition of many universities having a Latin motto, academic Andrew Bonnell sarcastically suggested that the University of Queensland could use the Latin tag attributed to the emperor Vespasian, this being ‘pecunia non olet’ or ‘money does not smell’, as a new motto (Bonnell, 2019a). Classics and ancient history are therefore caught at points of tension between perceptions ranging from contempt for their lack of contemporary relevance to criticism that they enshrine narrow privilege. The wider controversies surrounding the Ramsay Centre demonstrate a willingness in some quarters to fund the humanities, but the precise basis of this particular gift made its reception controversial.

Our Antipodean focus duplicates and continues our starting point, which was Dyer's overview in 1965. Then as now, this focus gains cohesion from the shared educational history of classics and ancient history in both countries, commencing with the creation of 19th century universities and university colleges. This study examines each publicly funded university in Australia and New Zealand to determine where classical languages and ancient history continue to be taught at the bachelor level. Indeed, it analyses every relevant unit<sup>1</sup> of study offered by Australian and New Zealand universities ( $n = 422$ ). Here, we seek to identify the range, type and vitality of this teaching. Underpinning this fine-grained analysis of what is taught, the study also thematically examines the value propositions associated with classics and ancient history; that is, those public-facing statements that are meant to attract students and also provide a glimpse of the stated intellectual ethos and broader utility underpinning the program in question. The focus on publicly funded universities is driven by contextual factors: the aforementioned governmental emphasis on degrees having utility and practicality is inextricably associated with the expenditure of public money, thereby making it logical to focus on public universities and how classics and ancient history are defined and defended in this environment.

## **From the beginning: Classics and ancient history in the Antipodes**

The teaching of humanities in Australia and New Zealand universities often began with classics. The first universities and university colleges, including Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide, Otago and Canterbury, evolved around the appointment of a professoriate from British universities (Gascoigne, 1996: 24; Selleck, 1996). Often the first professor in any field of the humanities was a professor of classics, and classics remained the senior discipline in the faculties of arts in these early Antipodean universities, with other fields such as medieval history and English literature coming later in the 20th century (Moorhead, 1995: 182–183; Dale, 2012: 70). Note, however, that the first classics professors taught Latin and Greek rather than ancient history, with content such as history, religion and literature being accessed through the reading of texts in their original languages.

In particular, the classics came to Australian and New Zealand education as a kind of requisite for those planning a career in public service. As Robert Anderson notes, studying classics was a common educational experience for British and colonial elites, including those in the Antipodes (Anderson, 2006: 47). To emphasize the importance of classics at that time, the first and – for a time *only* – degree offered by the University of Adelaide, founded 1874, was the Bachelor of Arts and Classics (Harvey, 2012). Classical learning was thus intrinsic to Antipodean political and cultural elites. Early New Zealand Prime Ministers including William Fox and Alfred Domett matriculated to Oxford and Cambridge when classical knowledge remained an entry requirement. Australia's first Prime Minister, Edmund Barton, studied classics at the University of Sydney (Rolfe, 2007: 28), an Australian example of a type of educational background shared by many of his contemporaries in the British Houses of Commons and Lords in the 19th century – a

classically educated milieu characterized by Christopher Stray (1998: 2) as a ‘realm of male-dominated elite culture’. Indeed, there were professors and departments of classics not just at the University of Sydney but also at the other colonial ‘sandstone’ universities in Melbourne, Tasmania and Adelaide. Similarly, the University of Queensland originated in 1909 with an academic core of four professors, teaching chemistry, physics, mathematics and classics (Gregory, 1987: 104).

By the early 20th century, however, murmurings about the place of classics were apparent and provide the underpinning context for current crises. It might surprise that the teaching and study of classics was already being contested by the beginning of the 20th century. In 1910, the newly appointed Professor of Classics at the University of Queensland, John Michie, found himself part of the “great matriculation debate” and had to contend with political and educational doubts about the need for the new university to teach Latin and Greek, and for classics to be a prerequisite for entry to the Arts degree (Thomis, 1986). At the university’s inauguration ceremony, Michie, noting he was outnumbered in the foundational professoriate by science and mathematics, reflected that science was “becoming the aggressive factor in modern education” and “there was a danger that the study of the humanities might be neglected” (Bryan, 1966: 32).

These concerns were global rather than exclusively local, and the early debate described above is noteworthy as a prelude to later dialogues of crisis in Australia and New Zealand. These discourses also relate to the universities in Great Britain and to those founded on British models in the Commonwealth, and earlier in the United States. By 1975, Geoffrey Kirk, Regius Professor of Greek at Cambridge University, described the Classics as “diminished but not yet precarious” (Kirk, 1975: 536). Other research from the same period noted a consistent decline in student numbers, linked to significant changes in education, including the abolition of the need for the Latin O Level for entry to Oxford and Cambridge and the replacement of many grammar schools with comprehensives (Forrest 2003: 42–66; Department of Education and Science, 1977: 2–3). By 1980, Peter Walcot, also a classicist, thought that in British universities degrees in English and history remained “buoyant”, although institutions were weaker in the provision of languages (Walcot, 1980: 10). By 1989, a volume of scholarly papers by American classicists focused on their particular discipline, once the cornerstone of a liberal arts education, as being in “crisis” (Culham and Edmunds, 1989).

The emphasis on learning Ancient Greek and Latin, and studying a variety of texts written in these languages, continued to diminish in universities around the world over time, especially as university administrators desired to make their humanities offerings more appealing to a broader array of students, including those who might consider taking units as electives. And so there began an increase in the number of ancient history offerings. In post-war Australia, and to a lesser extent in post-war New Zealand, higher education began to expand. Initially, this expansion echoed the pattern of the first universities in both countries, with a foundation professoriate and foundation teaching that axiomatically included the classics, with the foundation of the Australian National University in 1946 exemplifying this. Even by then, however, some caution and even alarm was apparent. Richard Johnson, the professor of classics at ANU, expressed

concern at the limited scope for specialization in his small department and doubted it could establish an international reputation (Foster, and Varghese, 2009: 171–172).

The next decades witnessed the foundation of more universities, but increasingly without the axiomatic or at least unchallenged presence of classics and ancient history. Some universities of the 1950s and 1960s, including La Trobe, Monash, Newcastle and Macquarie, introduced the teaching of classics and ancient history, albeit not always with ease. For example, the Faculty of Arts at Macquarie University was the site of a protracted conflict over the introduction of Latin and Ancient Greek from the late 1960s. Nonetheless, the presence of classics and ancient history in these newer and non-sandstone universities provides an importantly complex impression of the discipline as not being confined to the older sandstone institutions. There is further complexity in that other new universities began and continued without classics and ancient history, including the universities of the 1970s and the Dawkins-era universities, including the University of Southern Queensland and the University of the Sunshine Coast, or universities formed through the merger and elevation of technical and teaching colleges. As Charles et al. (2022) point out, newer and non-sandstone universities generally valorize ‘real world’ utility, an emphasis at odds with teaching the languages and history of the ancient world. In other universities of the post-war era that did include classics and ancient history, the offers have contracted, including, as will be discussed, at Newcastle and La Trobe.

A further layer of complexity is the potential for ancient history to survive and even thrive without classics. Indeed, ancient history in translation proceeded apace, mirroring trends in the teaching of the classics in the United Kingdom and the United States. Similarly, the Department of Classics at the University of Adelaide was ‘riding an expansionary wave’ in the 1970s. Yet, by this point, Latin and Greek were no longer a necessity for either matriculation or graduation from the Bachelor of Arts, so, while there was expansion, this was in the teaching of ‘in translation’ courses or the teaching of ancient history in English (Rankin, 1974: 70–71; Newbold, 2008: 4). These started out as sober political history units, with particular attention being paid to classical Greece in the 5th century BC, the Hellenistic age, Republican Rome, and the early Principate. By the 1980s, these units were supplemented by an emerging array of social history offerings about the same cultures, with forays being made in other areas, such as ancient Egypt and the Near East, while research in the 1990s reported the popularity of ancient history in translation units (Horsley et al., 1995: 100). It was at this point that university entities offering classics and ancient history were at their most expansive, with both depth and breadth in their academic portfolio.

Rationalization of the higher education sector in the 1990s onward resulted in many stand-alone departments of classics and ancient history in arts faculties being subsumed into larger organizational structures (Dalziell, 1998: 32). In such cases, classics and ancient history, instead of remaining intrinsic to the academic identity of the university and its ambitions for comprehensiveness, became competitors of sorts to a number of other disciplines residing within. Over time, the lines between ancient history and history, in particular, became blurred, more so as the importance of reading ancient texts in the original languages became further de-emphasized. Enrolments in the ancient languages became smaller and smaller (Horsley et al., 1995: 79), and so questions began to be raised

about their ongoing viability. Some proponents of the classical languages continued to stress the importance of the languages to scholarship (O'Sullivan and Maitland, 2007: 109), but these appeals increasingly fell on deaf ears. Classics and ancient history, as intellectual entities, were losing their distinctiveness, their 'special place'. It is also important to note broader sectoral shifts that impacted on universities. These included the almost total eclipse of teaching Latin and Ancient Greek in both government-funded and private secondary schools in both Australia and New Zealand. The relative strengths and weaknesses of classical language teaching in schools is complex, with the teaching of the languages being uneven. As Matters (2018) notes, classical Greek has always had small numbers in Australian schools and is currently only taught in two states. Latin "seemed doomed" in the Antipodes by the 1970s, but has experienced occasions of revival and remains more widely available compared to Ancient Greek, even if the number of schools where it is taught is relatively small overall (2018: 48).

The state of the discipline in higher education has been more recently charted in the two aforementioned surveys published in 1995 and 2007 respectively. Both examined *how* the classics were taught, and so did not focus on *what* was taught, and *why* that was the case – the focus of this study. In 1995, the analysis showed a higher education sector where many universities still had a Department of Classics and Ancient History as a distinctive entity and where there was a reasonable degree of optimism about the field's future and the emergence of a new generation of academics (Horsley et al., 1995: 100; O'Sullivan and Maitland, 2007: 119). Since then, a further challenge to more traditional humanities studies has presented itself in the so-called 'invasion of others', which resulted in considerable disciplinary and conceptual fragmentation in the humanities (Hall, 1990; D'Acci, 2004). The broader field of the humanities has become an example of the aforementioned double bind whereby right-of-centre politicians would argue that these new offerings, including women's studies, cultural studies, media studies and queer studies (Bérubé and Nelson, 1995), would fail to pass the 'pub test' (Piccini and Moses, 2018), while the left-of-centre might view the remaining traditional offerings as inappropriately elitist and insufficiently decolonized.

## Methods

Following this context, the discussion and findings of this study rest on two primary datasets. The first is the fine-grained analysis of the unit offers at every public Australian and New Zealand university teaching classics and ancient history. The second comprises the value propositions that universities have articulated to explain the value of these offerings and to encourage enrolment. It was determined to investigate the web presences of *all* Australian and New Zealand universities offering Bachelor's level classics and ancient history education meeting the parameters of the ASCS definition. To do this, all units being offered in universities meeting this definitional sense of offering classics and ancient history would be recorded in a database. After looking at a small sample of universities, it became clear that some universities still had units 'on their books' that might no longer be offered in reality, thereby giving a false reading of breadth. To circumvent that, it was decided that evidence must be found that the units were either



*being offered* in 2021 (online university handbooks assisted with this), or were *scheduled* to be offered in 2022. This *could* mean that some units that will be offered in the further future have been excluded.

Guided by a preliminary pilot sample of three Australian and three New Zealand universities, categories for units was formulated. These enabled a higher-level understanding of the state of classics and ancient history in the target regions. This preliminary sample indicated that offerings broadly fell into clearly identifiable areas of the two classical languages, other ancient languages, the teaching of ancient history that broadly comprised the Roman Republic and Principate and Fifth Century Athens and the Macedonian Empire, later antiquity, and then miscellaneous offerings. As a result, basic data were collected regarding whether the following types of units were offered in “Ancient Greek”; “Latin”; “Other Languages”; “Greek and Roman History”; “Late Empire/Byzantine Studies”; and “Other Ancient History”. After this preliminary survey, examination of all public universities enabled a finer-grained insight into the types of offerings that remain available. Study of unit titles, synopses, and learning objectives revealed that categorization would have to extend beyond the organization of content by time period (e.g., Republican Rome) or geography (e.g., the Peloponnese). Unit content categories instead focussed on thematic approaches and methodologies. These categories included “Art and Archaeology”; “Traditional History”; “Literary Studies”; “Social Studies”; “Reception Studies”; “Ancient Greek”; “Latin”; and “Other Languages”. Interrogation of course and unit content was needed in many cases to determine the best fit for a unit; for example, to determine if a (hypothetical) unit called “Roman Art and Society” would be best placed in the “Art and Archaeology” or the “Social Studies” category. The few units found dealing with ancient philosophy were placed into “Literary Studies” given that they largely involved the interrogation of ancient texts in translation. Survey units extending beyond our defined period were not included, nor were units that existed for the primary purpose of theological or religious training. “Special topic” or capstone units were also omitted from the data as content details were naturally lacking. The categories revealed by the initial scan were useful, with the exception of “Reception Studies”, which tended to be poorly represented, with only 7 units currently being offered. It was nonetheless retained as the units placed into this category did not fit any of the other categories well.

The possibility of studying a major in classics and ancient history was also recorded, as a kind of proxy of the degree to which the broader discipline area remained well defined and identifiable among the university’s other undergraduate offerings in the humanities. Although this study was intended to focus on Bachelor’s level education, it was deemed important to record whether there was the possibility of undertaking Honours in a field meeting our broad definition. In Australian and New Zealand universities, an Honours year, taken upon completion of a 3-years Bachelor’s course, typically includes specialist research training courses as well as the writing of a short dissertation. An Honours year was thus taken to be a proxy of the possibility of studying classics and ancient history at a higher level, such as through to a Research Master’s or PhD – an important consideration for the future of the discipline and the fostering of a new generation of scholars. In one Australian case (Macquarie), it was noted that no Honour’s level was offered, but there

was, nonetheless, a clear pathway into a structured Master's program that would provide preliminary higher degree research training.

The value proposition of the lowest-level university entity administering classics and ancient history education, such as a department or discipline area, was also recorded to ascertain how universities are positioning the study of topics that have come under attack for their alleged lack of vocational utility. These value propositions are the statements made on public-facing school or departmental websites that articulate the value of studying classics and ancient history, with this value pertaining to the individual student, or to wider society. These value propositions are not driven or framed by external accreditation bodies, such as those shaping the value propositions of, for example, a Bachelor of Business (Hogan et al., 2021: 282). Nonetheless, it was found that each entity advanced a statement proposing the merit of undertaking study in our field, with these statements intersecting with social needs, contributions to society and justifying the offering. These value statements were subjected to thematic analysis, a qualitative data analysis technique originating with clinical, social and psychological research, with this approach facilitating 'identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data' (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 79). Thematic analysis also allowed the identification of core ideas and repeated points in these statements. Attention to specifics of language, including the verbs used to explain the outcomes of study, enabled what Braun and Clarke (2006) describe as an inductive process of identification emanating from the data itself. The data from 22 universities was a manageable size that enabled manual coding.

All data collected for analysis were subjected to double-checking and then discussion between the researchers in order to assure inter-rater reliability. This data collection process occurred over July-August 2021.

## Findings

### *Broader findings*

In Australia, there are 37 publicly funded universities. Of these, 17 have some kind of teaching presence in the areas that, following the ASCS definition, comprise classics and ancient history. Of the 8 public New Zealand universities, 5 were active in our area. Thus, 22 universities out of a population of 45 public universities were relevant to this study. Ostensibly, this figure approaches half of all universities in our region, and the fact that this number of universities teach some sort of classics and ancient history at bachelor's level would indicate that the overall discipline is in good shape. But further interrogation of what exactly is offered quickly dispels this impression and permits a tighter analysis of the current state of the field. Firstly, let us look at the representation of these 22 universities across broader educational categories.

Ancient Greek and Roman history have a solid coverage and represent the core offering of programs in classics and ancient history or similar, with most universities offering an equal number of Greek and Roman units. Latin is also well represented. It is significant to note that some universities (Adelaide, UTas, La Trobe, Massey) offer Latin but not Ancient Greek, even though Ancient Greek is as vital for studies of the Roman

world as Latin. One might presume that these universities once offered Ancient Greek but dispensed with it. No university had Ancient Greek but no Latin. A variety of other languages from the ancient world are also available, though the presence of some of them, such as Ancient Hebrew (ACU, Charles Sturt, Macquarie, Otago) or New Testament (Koine) Greek (ACU, Charles Sturt, Otago) owes more to a) the presence of religious studies or divinity and theology than it does to the pursuit of ancient history, and b) the incorporation of a church-affiliated schools or colleges of theology within the structure of a public university.

Note that, in some cases, the language is not offered by the entity responsible in a general sense for ancient world studies, but is offered by an entity with a close connection to that language. For example, in the University of Sydney, “Classical Hebrew” is offered by the Department of Hebrew, Biblical and Jewish Studies instead of the Department of Classics and Ancient History. A smattering of other ancient Near Eastern languages can be found, which can be studied to various levels of intensity, such as Akkadian (Melbourne), Ancient Egyptian (Auckland, Macquarie, Melbourne, Monash), Coptic Egyptian (Macquarie), and Syriac Aramaic (Melbourne). Units of Later Roman/Byzantine studies are not rare, but most universities only offer a single unit. “Other history” tends to follow an Ancient Near Eastern route, with those universities with strengths in the languages of this area also offering units on Ancient Egypt or Western Asia.

### *Finer-grained unit analysis of units*

Table 1 presented the major high-level educational types of classics and ancient history. In Table 2, we see the degree to which individual units advertised as being offered in 2021 and 2022 cohere with finer-grained categories of educational type. This will allow us to discern the representation of traditional together with somewhat newer categories of classics and ancient history.

Overall, the data suggest that the offerings in New Zealand universities offering classics and ancient history tend to be somewhat richer and more varied than they are in Australian universities. Of note is that units of “traditional history”, “literary studies” and “social studies” tend to be more evenly spread in New Zealand compared to Australia, where “traditional history” tends to dominate. For a small country with few universities,

**Table 1.** Broader categories of education in the Australian and New Zealand public universities offering classics and ancient history.

Category	Number (out of 22)	Percentage (of the 22 universities) (%)
Ancient Greek	12	55
Latin	17	77
Other languages	9	41
Greek and Roman history	22	100
Later Roman/Byzantine history	9	41
Other history	9	41

**Table 2.** Presence of individual-unit categories among the Australian and New Zealand public universities offering classics and ancient history.

Category	Number of units	Percentage of total units (%)
Art and archaeology	26 (AU) + 11 (NZ) = 37	9
Traditional history	85 (AU) + 17 (NZ) = 102	24
Literary studies	28 (AU) + 17 (NZ) = 45	11
Social studies	29 (AU) + 21 (NZ) = 50	12
Reception studies	6 (AU) + 3 (NZ) = 9	2
Ancient Greek	34 (AU) + 21 (NZ) = 55	13
Latin	45 (AU) + 27 (NZ) = 72	17
Other languages	37 (AU) + 15 (NZ) = 52	12
Total	290 (AU) + 132 (NZ) = 422	100

there is also a much higher concentration of the languages compared to what is found in Australia, where a heavy presence of the languages is only really found in the older universities, and especially Melbourne, Sydney and UQ, and UWA to a lesser degree. As stated above, “reception studies” was an uncommon category.

As was to be expected, most universities offering units fitting our broad definition of classics and ancient history tend to offer more traditional units in the areas of Greek and Roman history. That said, some have opted to merge Greek and Roman history, especially at an introductory level. A notable example is Wollongong’s “Lost Worlds: The ‘Big History’ of Ancient History”. This unit “explores case studies from Ancient Egypt, Greece and Rome”, the novelty being how climate change and vulcanism might have affected ancient societies. In addition, three such units offered by Monash include a smattering of Indigenous Australian history amidst discussion of the ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern world around 1000 BCE.<sup>2</sup>

The so-called ‘invasion of others’ in the humanities (D’Acci, 2004) is apparent in the area of interest to this study. Units referring to “sex”, “gender”, “women” and “identity” are now commonplace, with such units being more common in New Zealand universities, many of which seem rather thin with respect to more ‘traditional’ units. Massey uses terminology such as “multiculturalism” in one of its units (“Ancient Multiculturalism: Egypt, Greece and Rome”), while “Leaders and Leadership in the Classical World” also suggests an attempt to couch historical studies in modern terms of political and corporate leadership. Reception studies was relatively scarce, and its inclusion as a category was suggested by the relative salience of the category in Otago (“Tales of Troy: From Homer to Hollywood”; “Power and Politics in Roman and Modern Times”) and Victoria (“Anthony and Cleopatra”), which universities formed part of the small initial sample. That said, Monash offers “Greek Tragedy: Performance and Reception”, while UNSW has “Gods, Heroines and Heroes in Greek Myth” and UWA “After Antiquity: Receptions of Greco-Roman Culture from Augustine to Atwood”. Of interest is that La Trobe offers “Ancient Rome: Slaves, Empire and Film” and “The Agora to Hogwarts: Greek and

Roman Culture in the Modern World”, but *no* courses in the realm of traditional ancient history.

With respect to the ancient languages, some universities maintain a multi-layered offering. Auckland, one of the elite New Zealand universities, stands out as an example of an entity where the classical language offering is *much* stronger than the history side of the spectrum. Indeed, there are 17 units of Ancient Greek and Latin versus nine units of history, some of which are only coming on board in 2022, and three units of Ancient Egyptian. Sydney has a more balanced portfolio, but still offers 18 units in the original Mediterranean languages. In strong contrast, some universities offering the ancient language have the very barest of offerings. For example, Massey offers “Introductory Latin” and “Immediate Latin”, with no Ancient Greek listed as available. Monash similarly only has introductory and intermediate Latin units, but does extend this into Ancient Greek, making a total of four units. UNE has eight units available, which at first seems generous, with units that are introductory, intermediate and advanced, but students must follow a ‘streamed’ offering whereby they can study Ancient Greek or Latin as mutually exclusive options. How this works for students wanting to study both languages is not made clear. Note that these UNE units, together with composite Greek/Latin units from other universities, had to be included in the “Other Languages” category as they clearly did not fit into the “Ancient Greek” or “Latin” categories.

One of the most startling revelations is that Adelaide, a sandstone university that retains a professorial chair in classics, and which has taught classics since its foundation, has reduced its classical language offerings to merely one unit entitled “An Introduction to Latin”. Another unit called “Latin and Greek for Scientists”, as the name suggests, is not aimed at students of the ancient world and was included in the “other languages” category. Otago’s anatomy course similarly includes “Origins of Anatomical Language”, seemingly intended for science students.

### *Majors and honours*

The presence of a major in an area cohering broadly with classics and ancient history points to the degree to which the discipline area remains embedded in the university’s undergraduate offerings. By the same token, the possibility of undertaking an Honours degree gives an indication of the extent to which the university believes in the broader disciplines of classics and ancient history has a future, given that an Honours degree is the usual prerequisite for higher degree research study. [Table 3](#) below captures a) whether Australian and New Zealand universities with a presence in classics and ancient history offer a major in the area, or whether students are only able to undertake a major in a related field; and b) whether undertaking Honours in classics and ancient history is possible, or whether students need to pursue a related area.

Of the 22 universities offering classics and ancient history units, an ostensibly healthy 16 (73%) offer a major in the field. Of these, the vast majority also offer an Honours degree in classics and ancient history, with the exception of Massey and Wollongong, where students must instead pursue an Honours in “history”. Note that honours is not available in *any* discipline area at Macquarie, meaning that students intending to pursue

**Table 3.** Availability of undergraduate majors and honours in Australian and New Zealand universities with a presence in classics and ancient history.

University	Major in classics, ancient history, ancient languages or similar	Major in related discipline only, e.g., history, archaeology, theology	Honours in classics, ancient history, ancient languages or similar	Honours in related discipline only, e.g., history, archaeology, theology
ACU		✓		✓
Adelaide	✓		✓	
ANU	✓		✓	
Auckland	✓		✓	
Canterbury	✓		✓	
CSU		✓		✓
Flinders		✓		✓
La Trobe	✓			✓
Macquarie	✓		MRES	
Massey	✓			✓
Melbourne	✓		✓	
Monash	✓		✓	
Newcastle		✓		✓
Otago	✓		✓	
Sydney	✓		✓	
UNE	✓		✓	
UNSW		✓		✓
UQ	✓		✓	
UTas	✓		✓	
UWA	✓		✓	
Victoria	✓		✓	
Wollongong	✓			✓

doctoral education must first study a Masters of Research (MRES). Happily, students *can* pursue this in classics and ancient history. Not surprisingly, all the traditional Group of 8 universities in Australia, bar UNSW, offer both a major and honours in classics and ancient history while, in New Zealand, all the similarly traditional universities offer both options. That said, some of the Australian universities offering a major in classics and ancient history have a rather limited portfolio, with the languages being tokenistic in some cases, such as at Adelaide, or a shell of what was likely once offered, such as at Monash and UWA.

### *Value propositions*

Thematic analysis of the value propositions made by the universities offering education in the broader field of classics and ancient history enriches this data. Analysis of the wording

and the articulated intentions in these statements indicates important differences between universities and their offerings. From our thematic analysis of the content of these statements, which were tied to relevant organizational entities, or to descriptions of majors in classics and ancient history, it became possible to code these statements into four distinct types of value proposition that were being made to stakeholders. These patterns comprised: an appeal to knowledge for knowledge's sake; an assertion that studying the classical past enriched the understanding of the present; the assertion that studying classics and ancient history provided people with useful and transferable skills especially useful for careers; and, finally, that offering classics and ancient history placed universities on a continuum with the traditions of centuries of Western education. These patterns emerged from the process of double-checking and discussion. As noted above, classics and ancient history offers are not driven by the same external accountability as, for example, business, and therefore do not have to publicly frame their value to meet the demands of accreditation. However, the front-facing communication does prompt prospective students or other parties involved in decision making about what sort of course to pursue (Zhang, 2017). The following table shows which universities are associated with these four value propositions. Note that, where the value proposition was not connected directly to classics and ancient history, the value position overarching the classics and ancient history offerings was used. This is indicated in the table below for CSU, Flinders, Newcastle, UNSW and Wollongong. (Table 4)

All universities offering classics and ancient history could be aligned to at least one of the four value propositions identified in the thematic analysis, except for CSU, whose statement only referred to excellence in teaching and where the teaching of New Testament Greek resided in a theological college embedded in the university's structure.

The notion that studying the ancient world is its own reward was found in most of the value propositions. For example, Wollongong emphasized a simple exploration ("explore") of the "political, social and economic contexts of Rome and Greece". Similarly, Victoria used verbs such as "explore" and "learn" in the context of the civilizations of ancient Greece and Rome. UTas emphasized that such study "enriches knowledge", although there was a nod to the concept of a liberal arts education, with the statement that "History and Classics programs are an excellent way to obtain a general education and understanding of humanity".

As an extension to the above value proposition, several universities emphasized the importance of studying the ancient world to gain a better understanding of the present. Canterbury refers to such current issues as "abuses of political power and the rise of demagogues", "questions of cultural identity", "the problematic nature of empire and colonialism", "the nature-nurture debate", and the "plight of refugees and asylum seekers, among others". The same university, although acknowledging that "an understanding of the rich Classical past is ... immensely rewarding in itself", adds that "it ... gives students a keen lens through which to view the modern world now". Other universities were somewhat less emphatic, but nonetheless exhibited similar statements. Macquarie, for example, claimed that, "With a broad and rich understanding of ancient times, we can better understand who we are today and where we are going in the future".

**Table 4.** Value propositions in all Australian and New Zealand public universities offering classics and ancient history.

University	Knowledge for knowledge's sake	Understanding the present through the past	Useful, transferable skills	Follow in the footsteps of tradition
ACU			✓	
Adelaide	✓			
ANU			✓	
Auckland		✓	✓	
Canterbury	✓	✓		
CSU (Theology)				
Flinders (Archaeology)		✓	✓	
La Trobe	✓	✓	✓	
Macquarie	✓	✓	✓	
Massey		✓		
Melbourne	✓	✓		✓
Monash		✓		
Newcastle (History)	✓		✓	
Otago		✓		
Sydney	✓			
UNE		✓		
UNSW (History)		✓	✓	
UQ	✓			✓
UTas	✓	✓		
UWA		✓		✓
Victoria		✓		
Wollongong (Archaeology and Ancient History)	✓			

Given the fight for relevance of classics and ancient history in a world increasingly privileging vocational training, only 8 of the 22 universities put the acquisition of useful, transferable skills at the front and centre of their value propositions. ANU contends that studying ancient history equips the students for “a wide range of careers including secondary and tertiary education, business and commerce, government departments, the media, and public and private sectors in the arts and culture”. ACU similarly claims that studying the ancient world, together with religion in society, allows students to develop “skills for the future workforce”. Aside from making the claim that studying history will allow students to “tackle some of the greatest questions of contemporary times”, ACU makes a more specific reference to honing skills in “interpretation, analysis and written expression”.



Notably, only a small number of universities (all Australian sandstones) embrace an element of cultural elitism in their value statements. They did this by claiming that they are the only university in the state to offer classics and ancient history (UQ and UWA), while Melbourne similarly observes that Ancient Greek and Latin “have been taught at the University of Melbourne since its very foundation and have been a core element of higher education for many centuries”. These same universities highlight other virtues that are ineluctably associated with both their age and their wealth, such as possessing on-site collections of antiquities from the classical world.

In short, the thematic analysis of value propositions revealed a significant emphasis on communicating utility, including the general ability to understand the present through studying the classical past ( $n = 14$ ), together with the specific acquisition of career-relevant skills ( $n=8$ ). Some universities ( $n = 5$ ), however, brought together an appeal to acquiring knowledge for its own sake with the more applied or utilitarian assertion that students will be able to better understand the present through understanding the past. Only Macquarie and La Trobe combine an appeal to acquiring knowledge for its own sake, understanding the present through the past, *and* acquiring career-relevant skills. Strikingly, only one university, Wollongong, staked a values-based claim to acquiring knowledge for knowledge’s sake on its own. Other universities making this value statement ( $n = 9$ ) juxtaposed it with the other more utilitarian propositions.

## Discussion and concluding remarks

The overall impression is that very few universities maintain a portfolio of units in any way reminiscent of the heyday of classics and ancient history, when departments rode an expansionary wave. Some offerings remain more or less intact, particularly at the more elite and presumably better funded institutions such as at Melbourne or Sydney – yet the latter is the only university to retain a Department of Classics and Ancient History as an academic entity. Others would appear to be but faint shadows of their former selves, such as Adelaide, where study of the classical languages has been all but erased. Some universities retain vestigial elements of what once was likely a specialized entity devoted to classical and ancient history. Here, Newcastle is a salient example, with a few ancient history units making up a History major in the Bachelor of Arts following a rationalization that the university’s leadership characterized as offering a “more contemporary approach to liberal arts ... that is responsive to student demand, graduate employability, research priorities and social innovation” (Anon, 2017). More noteworthy is the situation at UNSW, where some ancient history units remain, but the closest major of relevance is simply entitled “history”. In New Zealand, Auckland, Canterbury, Otago and Victoria soldier on with a relatively well-rounded portfolio. Massey is something of an outlier, with only two Latin units attempting to balance the historical offerings that, in themselves, are not especially complete.

Another significant observation is the cry for contemporary relevance reflected in unit names that use concepts and terminology emanating from other fields in the humanities. Sensationalist, reductive, or provocative unit names prevail in some offerings, and perhaps reflects contemporary educational circumstances, with recent high school

graduates very likely receiving much of their exposure to the ancient Mediterranean world through Hollywood than through studying ancient texts. Calling a unit on the early Principate “Imperial Rome: Power and Perversion in the Age of Augustus and Nero” (Monash) is suggestive of tropes that would cause many content experts to bristle, or at least suggest that the unit might be based, for the most part, on Robert Graves’ *I, Claudius*. ANU offers “Emperors and Madmen: The Early Roman Empire”, a title again redolent of Graves, or perhaps the 1999 film *Gladiator*. Otago also deploys racy titles with “From Augustus to Nero: Scandal and Intrigue in Ancient Rome” and “Murder and Corruption in Ciceronian Rome”. Adding “Slaves, Gladiators, Prostitutes” to a rather more staid “Roman Social History” also seems an exercise in titillating interest among prospective students, and thus driving more enrolments. Of course, it is possible that the contents of the aforementioned units are much less racy than their titles suggest – our analysis did not permit us to go into great detail about individual unit content. That said, whether more evocative titles can attract more students to study the ancient Mediterranean world remains to be seen. Here, one might assume that there is a level of competition within the faculty, or indeed across the university, with respect to electives. A captive audience already committed to an ancient history major might not be swayed by adventurous unit titles, but a student from elsewhere in the university, and whose knowledge of the ancient Mediterranean world has come mainly from popular culture, might very well be.

“Bringing together the data from number and type of the units offered and the thematic analysis of the value statements yields insights into the concerns and priorities of current offerings of classics and ancient history. Of particular salience is that study of the classical past facilitates a better understanding of the present. Among proponents of this value proposition is Canterbury, which asserts that its classics and ancient history students engage with ‘issues that still concern us today’ such as slavery, refugees, and the abuse of power. Unit offerings, not only in their focus but also in the greater emphasis on social over traditional history, harmonize with this value statement. At Auckland, teaching focal points include society, life, death, and family life. These make clear the intent to study the past in a framework of ideas and institutions that are relatable to present-day issues. Similar assertions in value statements on understanding the present via study of the past synchronize with offerings focusing on life, death, gender, modern popular culture, sex, happiness, and multiculturalism at Massey, Otago, Flinders, Macquarie and La Trobe. In short, these universities, through their ancient history offerings, have made an appeal to contemporary relevance, and put forward the claim that study of the ancient Mediterranean world will facilitate a greater and more nuanced understanding of the present, all of which hints at privileging the concept of application.

It would seem to be the case that unit offerings and their overarching value statements seem responsive to discourse and priorities of which, in Australia, the Job-ready Graduates Package is only the latest iteration of demands that universities should teach students content that will lead to ‘job readiness’. The longer history of these demands and their impact on higher education is demonstrated by a striking circumstance: not one of the new Australian universities formed in the Hawke-Keating era of the late-1980s and early-1990s feature in this analysis. Above, it was noted that Australia and New Zealand’s first universities began with the classics as a foundational part of their teaching.

Later, the so-called verdant universities of post-war Australian expansion in higher education also came into existence with classics and ancient history as part of their teaching, including ANU, La Trobe, Macquarie, and Monash. Some, including Macquarie and Monash, even became noteworthy for specializations such as ancient Egypt. However, the next phase of expansion of higher education following the Dawkins reforms signalled above from the late 1980s onwards created a new suite of universities that do not include classics and ancient history in their teaching and research.

In the introductory remarks, we proposed that classics and ancient history are akin to the proverbial canary in the coalmine: humanities in Australia and New Zealand began with them and they represent, in microcosm, existential tensions and challenges that have beset the humanities in general. For instance, the decline of classics at Newcastle University (first the loss of Ancient Greek from 2012, then Latin, then the downgrading of the department to a major in the Bachelor of Arts) was the prelude to further arts-based threats, including to philosophy. Other universities have followed cuts to the classics and ancient history by further cuts, such as to archaeology and sociology at UWA. Although it did not have classics and ancient history units, the 2022 decision to do away with the Bachelor of Arts at Federation University in Australia is indicative of a possibility for further abolition of the humanities in the Antipodes.

Our survey of the current status of classics and ancient history in Australia and New Zealand should thus serve as a warning to the whole of the humanities, and an indication that their future, if placed entirely in the hands of unsympathetic policy makers and university administrators, is likely not one of traditional intense – and thus costly – mastery of the particular, but an encounter with the general painted in broad – and thus economical – brush strokes. Aside from these forces, it clearly behoves humanities scholars to do more to champion the humanities, and make more compelling cases for their contemporary relevance in a world that is increasingly oriented to ‘job readiness’ and ‘transferability of skills’. These points, of course, do require nuance. As discussed above, the Ramsay Centre has created opportunities for teaching Western civilization courses at three Australian universities, two public and one private, and has support from leading political figures from contrasting political persuasions, but the money has not, however, increased the offerings of classics and ancient history at their hosts. For example, the Ramsay Centre at the University of Queensland uses existing courses. In any case, the remit of the Centre itself moves far beyond the classical world both in disciplinary areas, and in its temporal scope ([Ramsay Centre, 2022](#)).

In sum, this study has focused on public universities given that critical and existential questions regarding offering classics and ancient history revolve around the expenditure of public money. Among these institutions, it is the older (and thus likely better resourced) ones in the major cities that seem to provide the greatest shelter to classics and ancient history, although some smaller religious colleges including Avondale, Australia’s newest university, maintain some ancient language teaching through offering Koine Greek and Hebrew for biblical studies. Yet even at the largest and oldest universities, the privileging of classics and ancient history within the institution has long passed, despite the obvious historical legacy and small occasional coups, such as securing community benefactors with an interest in the discipline.<sup>3</sup> It remains to be seen how reimagined ancient history

offerings, together with appeals to contemporary relevance, will allow the discipline to hold the line in other, less-well-resourced institutions in Australia and New Zealand.

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### Notes

1. Universities use different terminology from each other for individual subjects within a program, including unit, course, subject and (especially in New Zealand) paper.
2. The inclusion of these three units at Monash was heavily debated, as was one that fell into the “social history” category. That said, the main emphasis of all four of these units is clearly on the regions and era relevant to this study.
3. A good example, from the University of Queensland, is the establishment in 2013 of the Paul Eliadis Chair for Classics and Ancient History, which was made possible through private benefaction.

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