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Humanities lobby group heads for Melbourne

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Emma Macdonald

Education Editor for The Canberra Times.



Executive director Steven Schwartz says the national peak organisation is too far away from its membership base. *Photo: Andrew Quilty*

Canberra is losing the Council for Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences because of a lack of political access and the need for it to be based in a bigger city.

The national peak organisation for the humanities was formed in 2004 and based in the ACT, at the Australian National University, to maintain close proximity to policy makers.

But in an email to members, executive director Steven Schwartz said a decision had been taken to move to Melbourne.

He said it was increasingly difficult for CHASS to remain in Canberra, where political access had been harder to come by in recent years.

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"Over the last year we have found our Canberra location increasingly challenging," he said. "Access to politicians and public servants, one of the reasons for choosing Canberra in the first place, had become increasingly difficult.

"Appointments must be made far in advance and are as easily kept by simply flying to Canberra. Because most of our members are not located in Canberra, our forum has had difficulty attracting paid attendance. We are just too far away from our main membership base."

Billed as the humanities' equivalent to the powerful science lobby, the Federation of Australian Scientific and Technological Societies, CHASS has fought to increase the national recognition of, and funding for, the arts and social sciences.

In 2011 it relocated to the University of Canberra and suffered a funding cut under the Gillard government when it moved onto project-based funding rather than organisational funding - making membership funding more crucial to its survival.

In order to capitalise on a recruitment drive and to better serve its 85 members - including universities, national academies of social sciences and humanities, research centres, art galleries and performance centres - it will move its two-person secretariat to RMIT next month.

Professor Schwartz noted the most recent annual forum in July had drawn 200 delegates but 150 were from Canberra and it had been increasingly difficult to attract interstate members. "It's not without a downside that we leave Canberra and we are aware there is a trade-off and we will lose certain things when we move ... such as proximity to all the national cultural institutions."

But Professor Schwartz said there was little advantage to staying in the capital, despite geographical proximity to Parliament House.

"Originally being in Canberra meant being accessible to the corridors of power, and it might have been that way 10 years ago, but it is not as though you can just drop in to see a politician nowadays," he said.

"In fact, you might have a better chance if you make a proper appointment and fly in - it's harder for them to pull out if they know you came from Melbourne."