

Advocating for the Learners: Calling for more Demand-Side thinking

My journey through the education system has been anything but conventional. At the end of Year 12, a period of homelessness disrupted my life, coinciding with the critical assessment period. As a result, I was unable to complete my exams and, consequently, could not enter university. At the time, less than a quarter of people went to university, so I didn't see it as a significant setback. However, that decision and the circumstances surrounding it have had a lasting impact on my life.

Fast forward to today, and I find myself towards the peak of my career. Despite not having significant formal education system qualifications, I invest time and money in my education regularly. Yet, the barriers to entering formal education are still high, laden with organisational and compliance hoops, as well as finding a mismatch in my needs versus the offer of the university system. Instead, I find the services I need in the alternative learning economy—platforms like LinkedIn Learning, FutureLearn and Coursera - where I can get just in time learning, at the point that I need it and to the level that I need it. These platforms have become go-to resources for staying skilled in today's rapidly evolving economy. That's become obvious when you consider the high rates of enrolment in the Professional Career Certificates on platforms like Coursera, with millions of enrolments annually, and tens of thousands within a month of new courses being released.

While there are hundreds of thousands of Australians completing post-graduate education in the Australian education sector, there are millions more with a pattern of lifelong learning that are meeting their needs outside of the sector. It is this group that I believe is under-represented in the Accord report and is also a group which represents an enormous opportunity to serve from the higher education sector. The work of the Future Skills Organisation, and the other Jobs and Skills Councils in Australia is drawing our attention to the large demand that will exist for reskilling during careers – and a significant opportunity for Australian Universities

The Australian Universities Accord: A Supply-Side Focus

The recently released Australian Universities Accord Interim Report provides a comprehensive overview of the challenges and opportunities facing Australia's higher education sector. While the report does an excellent job of addressing supply-side issues, such as funding models and university operations, I believe it falls short in addressing the demand-side needs of students and lifelong learners.

Student-Centred Approach: A Missed Opportunity

The report mentions a "student-centred, needs-based funding model" but fails to elaborate on what this entails (Page 5). A truly student-centred approach would consider the diverse pathways through which individuals engage with higher education. It would lower barriers to entry and offer more flexible learning options, acknowledging that not everyone's journey is linear or conventional.

In advocating for a student-centred funding model, it's crucial to also consider appropriate safeguards that ensure both quality and accessibility. This model should be compatible with a more expansive view of education, one that serves lifelong learners at various stages of their careers. Instead of the current product model, where education is a one-time transaction often limited to early adulthood, we should think of education as a lifelong subscription service. This would allow

individuals to dip in and out of learning experiences as their career and personal development needs change, without the burden of cumbersome re-enrolment processes or financial barriers. Such a shift would not only make education more accessible but also more relevant in a rapidly changing job market.

I believe the sector can deliver this, but the compliance obligations and the lack of clear funding act as disincentives for this to be developed.

Affordability and Equity: A Deeper Dive into Funding Mechanisms and Processes

The report identifies affordability as a key issue but stops short of offering actionable solutions, particularly in the context of competing with alternative education platforms (Page 33). The traditional university system, with its cumbersome admission processes and high costs, is increasingly out of step with the needs of today's learners. This is especially true when compared to online platforms that offer immediate, affordable access to quality education.

One way to level the playing field is to introduce more flexible funding mechanisms, such as learning funds that can be easily accessed and spent across a range of educational options. Imagine a system where a student or lifelong learner has a government-backed 'Education Wallet.' This wallet could be used to pay for courses ranging from traditional degrees to short skill development courses, without the need for complex administrative processes. The only requirement would be the ability to provide funds, making it significantly easier to engage with the education system.

This approach would not only democratise access to education but also put Australian universities in direct competition with online platforms. For example, if I wanted to enrol in a Digital Marketing course today, I could sign up for an Industry Professional Career Certificate on Coursera in just 5 minutes using my credit card. In contrast, enrolling for an equivalent course at a university would require me to go through a Recognition of Prior Learning process, submit personal statements, have my career assessed, and then potentially wait weeks or even months for the course to start.

The current university enrolment process, with its focus on evaluating skills and capabilities through multiple layers of assessment, serves as a barrier rather than a facilitator of education. This is particularly problematic for people like me, who may not have formal qualifications but have gained skills through work experience and self-study. A streamlined, user-friendly enrolment process that recognises various forms of prior learning and skills could go a long way in making Australian universities more competitive.

By simplifying enrolment and funding processes, Australian universities could attract a broader range of students, including those who might otherwise opt for alternative education platforms. This would not only increase enrolment numbers but also diversify the student body, making for a richer, more inclusive educational environment. It's time for Australian universities to evolve their funding mechanisms and processes to meet the needs of today's learners.

Moreover, the regulatory environment surrounding Australian universities needs to be re-evaluated to better serve the needs of learners, particularly those looking to reskill. Currently, universities spend a significant amount of time and resources complying with complex regulations, which often diverts focus from educational innovation and responsiveness. A more relaxed regulatory framework would allow universities to pivot more quickly to meet the changing needs of the job market and offer courses that are directly relevant to reskilling efforts. By shifting the focus from satisfying regulatory requirements to meeting the actual needs of learners, universities can become more agile and competitive, better serving the Australian workforce in the process.

Aligning Education with Future Job Markets

The report states that over 90% of new jobs will require post-school qualifications, with over 50% requiring a bachelor's degree or higher (Page 10). While this is a crucial insight, the report does not sufficiently address how universities should adapt their curricula to meet these evolving needs. Universities, if they are to reflect demand-side thinking and be more responsive to student demand, need to be agile, aligning their courses with industry demand and offering modular, stackable credentials that serve both traditional students and lifelong learners.

In addition to aligning curricula with industry demands, universities should also consider partnerships with industries to co-create courses that are directly relevant to the job market. These partnerships could involve industry professionals contributing to course content, offering real-world case studies, or even providing mentorship and internship opportunities for students. This collaborative approach ensures that the education provided is not only theoretically sound but also practically applicable, thereby increasing the employability of graduates.

Furthermore, the sector should invest in predictive analytics to forecast the skills and qualifications that will be in high demand in the future. This data-driven approach can guide curriculum development and help educational institutions stay ahead of the curve. By proactively adapting to future job market needs, universities can offer courses that prepare students for emerging fields and technologies, thereby making their education more valuable and relevant. This forward-thinking strategy would not only benefit traditional students but also attract lifelong learners looking to stay competitive in their careers.

The Risk of Fragmentation and International Competition

By not adequately addressing demand-side needs, Australian universities risk becoming smaller and more constrained in their focus. This gap opens the door for organisations outside of traditional education institutions and international competitors to step in. Platforms like Coursera and LinkedIn Learning are already filling this void, offering flexible, affordable education that meets the needs of today's learners. And it's clear that the international university sector is building the capability to compete for online learning experiences within Australia, in a way that may be preferable for lifelong learning and career reskillers.

Conclusion: A Call for a Balanced Approach

The Australian Universities Accord Interim Report provides valuable insights into the state of higher education in Australia. However, it leans too heavily towards supply-side solutions, neglecting the demand-side needs that are equally crucial for the sector's sustainability. As someone who has navigated the complexities of both formal and alternative education, I see a pressing need for a more balanced approach. One that not only addresses the operational challenges universities face but also the real-world needs of students and lifelong learners.

By doing so, we can create a more inclusive, agile, and responsive higher education system that serves all Australians, regardless of their educational journey.