

## UNIVERSITIES ACCORD DISCUSSION PAPER

### Response on Interim Report “Equity of Access through mission-based compacts”

Dear Mary O’Kane and the Accord Panel

Western Sydney University’s Portfolio of Engagement and Advancement welcomes the opportunity to make this submission on the considerations of change outlined in the Accord Interim Report. This response recognises a range of priorities required to achieve the goal of “growth for skills through greater equity” via the community focussed mission-based compact.

Engagement and partnership as a tool to break cycles of disadvantage is presented within the 2023 budget announcement of almost \$200 million dollars toward place-based initiatives. The Accord Interim Report reflects the value of place-based initiatives through the mission-based compact consideration and Priority Action 1, the funding of new Tertiary Study Hubs. This response notes the need to ensure the work of community engagement and authentic partnerships is valued, enabled and evaluated. This response argues that engagement and the work carried out to ensure equity of access is integrated throughout the higher education system to ensure the goals of the Interim report are met, not conducted entirely as a secondary activity. We endorse the 5 immediate priority actions put forward in the interim report and recommend further consideration is given to a number of priorities outlined below, which can be separated into two key areas:

#### 1. **Improvements to the funding and regulatory mechanisms and conditions for universities to support community engagement, access, participation and success for equity students.**

A consideration for change includes the recognition and formalisation of the role institutions play in their communities through mission-based compacts. This responsibility is articulated within the Higher Education Standards Framework (HESF) yet there is no formal mechanism for universities to demonstrate they are meeting these requirements. To address the issue of support and evaluation:

- a. **Broadened definition of community** - Mission-based compacts should reflect both the local and global communities served by universities.
- b. **Accountability reporting** – the compacts should form part of accountability reporting against the HESF for government funding.
- c. **Australian Carnegie Community Engagement Classification** – this benchmarkable classification process, introduced to Australia in 2021, can support the work of the mission-based compact. The Classification provides independent assessment of a university’s commitment to community engagement while providing capacity building across the sector in engaged teaching, research and community outreach.

The interim report recognises that “current equity funding is inadequate and will become even more so as the need for greater equity increases”. There are also challenges within current mechanisms to support the access and success of students from equity cohorts and National Equity Strategy can address these issues, which include:

- a. **Limitations to the equity categories** - The current equity group categories are too broad and do not reflect the range of indicators that often generate systemic disadvantage for students or reflect intersectionality or multi-factorial disadvantage.
  - b. **Limited or lacking equity related student data** – Subsequently there is a lack of coherent and consistent data on the broader range of indicators of systemic disadvantage, which in turn limits the sector-wide capability to accurately monitor, report and develop effective strategies to support student success and achieve greater equity in the system in the long term.
  - c. **Outdated equity access, participation and success targets** – currently there are no targets for participation or success, since the scope of the Bradley review has passed, and future target-setting will be limited by the broadness of the current equity categories.
  - d. **Long term National and institutional integrated strategy and planning** – No consistent National Equity Strategy with national targets but flexibility at institutional level for University’s to set goals and strategies as best serve their regions and communities.
  - e. **Limited sector wide evaluation and best-practice** – there is currently limited coordination at national level across the sector to evaluate and share best-practice examples of models or programs to support equity students across the full student lifecycle.
  - f. **Unstable funding arrangements** – current annual HEPPP allocations on an equity group enrolment basis are inadequate when operating costs continue to increase. This funding model also does not enable a longer term, needs-based approach to funding programs for equity student access and participation.
2. **Consideration to how the “opportunity cost” of a university education can be alleviated for students in low income or low socio-economic circumstances.** The interim report recognised the “cost of participation” in higher education as one of the challenges which “affects underrepresented groups the most”, and there is a vital need to address cost of living barriers which affect many students in order to create greater equity within the system.

## **Area 1: Improvements to the funding mechanisms and conditions for universities to support community engagement, access, participation and success for equity students.**

### **Recommendation 1: Redefine community to beyond the local**

Standard 13 of the HESF states a higher education provider registered as an Australian University, “demonstrates strong civic leadership, engagement with its local and regional communities, and a commitment to social responsibility.” The mission-based compact detailed in the Interim report points to demonstrating engagement with the universities ‘unique community’. While many compacts will reflect the local, it is important to broaden the definition to non-geographically close communities.

### **Recommendation 2: Accountability and funding**

Mission based compacts should form accountability reporting against the HESF for funding. This should be further evidenced by the Carnegie Elective Classification. The Australia release of the Classification provides a critical, independent review of a university’s investment in community engagement. It further provides a framework for benchmarking, collaboration and capacity building.

### **Recommendation 3: Redefine student equity groups to better reflect the diversity of students and establish robust national data indicators to monitor cohort progress.**

The current student equity categories do not adequately reflect the diverse range of learners within the Australian Higher Education system. The method used to identify ‘low SES’ does not provide a full and accurate representation of equity cohorts, however at present this is the primary indicator used. The present Tertiary Collection of Student Information captures a number of indicators but they do not fully reflect key equity factors such as low income or financial hardship, carers, care experienced students, refugee and asylum seeker students (adequately) or students of Pacific Islander descent, to name only a portion of the range of cohorts facing significant structural inequalities.

### **Recommendation 4: Development of an equity data strategy to capture multiple factors of disadvantage as outlined above regarding equity categories, and monitor student participation through their education journey**

Currently no centralised data source exists to understand nuanced equity group outcomes including access, retention and success. This limits a sector-wide ability to set targets, monitor and track progress with more granular considerations of students facing disadvantage, developing recognition of the complex barriers students face. Data collection can be improved across both (a) student equity cohort tracking and (b) monitoring, reporting and improving outreach activities to understand the impact of intervention strategies and share best practice.

Point (a) regarding tracking equity cohorts and monitoring student outcomes is featured in the first section of this response. Firstly, an expansion of the current categories relating to equity groups is required, in order to better reflect the range of circumstances which generate systemic disadvantage for students. Underpinning that, more nuanced data collection on students to afford better monitoring and evaluation of student outcomes will support more effective strategies to address disadvantage.

Addressing the second point, the United Kingdom has an existing service to provide data management and analysis nationally to provide greater insight and evaluation of widening participation strategies. Full implementation of the Unique Student Identifier would also help monitor student participation across activities and sectors, helping develop a better sector wide picture of student journeys.

### **Recommendation 5: Institutional mission-based access and participation plans to create accountability for implementing sustained strategies targeting under-represented cohorts and their success in higher education**

We recommend that institutional funding and strategies to increase the access and participation of equity students are mission based, moving away from funding being enrolment or cohort based, to support University’s to develop strategies which best reflect their institutional profile and the communities they serve. The current model of annual HEPPP funding allocations lacks sustainability and certainty for institutions, as it is currently dependent on enrolments from 3 broad equity categories year-on-year to determine a total funding allocation to support programs. This creates organisational challenges for institutions and particularly those more dependent on domestic enrolments as a main source of revenue, which can similarly fluctuate on an annual basis.

In line with the recommendation above, institutions could be required to submit Access and Participation Plans, similar to those submitted in the United Kingdom to the Office for Students, which outline long term strategies to address disadvantage through place-based approaches. The plans should be defined against a nationally consistent framework recognising the range of priority learner indicators and aligned through a commonality of student lifecycle phases to drive national consistency, whilst providing enough flexibility for institutions to be locally responsive.

Similarly, it is important that institutions are given the flexibility to apply place-based approaches that suit their institutional profile and the region in which they serve. The Accord interim report notes the success of the Queensland Consortium model and the Western Sydney University initial submission outlined the success

achieved in access and success through specific place-based approaches which were tailored and culturally responsive to the needs of the University's region.

**Recommendation 6: An adequate, stable and consistent long term funding allocation for Universities to implement multi-year strategies to support access, participation and success of students from under-represented groups**

In recognition of the important role pre-access programs play in encouraging students from equity groups to access higher education, longer term funding commitments are essential to meet the future supply of students into the higher education system and achieve the 55% degree qualified population target for 2050. It was noted in the original Accord submissions that the HEPPP funding initiative was originally intended to constitute 4% of the Teaching and Learning Base Funding Grant, but at present sits at 1.8% of CGS. Concurrently, through natural cost increases via inflation, the operating costs for delivering programs of support for under-represented students have increased against an overall decline in the funding available to do so.

A movement to a four-year funding cycle would be more effective in generating long term institutional strategies. Funding allocations should take both the institution's current equity cohorts into consideration along with future projections based on the university's regional population. Expanding the equity categories, as discussed earlier in this response, could also help determine funding arrangements to better reflect the multiple and nuanced factors of disadvantage students face and provide more adequate levels of funding towards initiatives to support them.

**Area 2: Consideration to how the "opportunity cost" of a university education can be alleviated for students in low income or low socio-economic circumstances.**

**Recommendation 7: Further consideration to needs-based funding or changes to Centrelink entitlement eligibility in order to best target financial support toward student living expenses, with financial pressures remaining a key barrier for equity cohorts**

We recommend that there is consideration of income or circumstance contingent grants for students in greatest need, to facilitate participation in higher education. As an alternative to this, Centrelink schemes should be reviewed to ensure students in most need are targeted and part-time students are not penalised.

Funding models to be considered could include those with income and circumstance-based criteria that are designed to alleviate the financial burden or "opportunity cost" of undertaking a bachelor's degree for the poorest students, for example the previous UK model of 'maintenance grants'. Whilst not covering full living costs or expenditure (e.g., the total amount awarded for most in financial need was approximately \$18k per annum), the maintenance grants provided a way to alleviate the financial burden on students and minimise the impact of "time poverty" that can lead to poorer educational outcomes for students in low socio-economic circumstances. Assessments were made on a sliding scale providing those with most need (lowest household income) with the highest grant amount up until a specific threshold.

**Recommendation 8: National student placement stipend scheme**

Student placements have been recognised during the Accord feedback process as a key barrier for low socio-economic students in successfully complete a bachelor program. The report produced by the National Union of Students and Foundation for Young Australians clearly indicates that concerns about funding their living costs has a detrimental impact on students' university experience and academic achievement (2022, NUS)

With many bachelor's degrees now incorporating placement hours, this time detracts from a students' ability to undertake part-time work and financially support their living expenses. Anecdotally, employers or placement providers have offered to subsidise or pay students for placement work, recognising the contribution they make whilst undertaking workplace related learning. Western Sydney University has undertaken considerable work in exploring paid placement opportunities. This model can be expanded into a national scheme that provides guidelines to universities and employers on a reasonable expectation of a stipend for students.

Thank you for the opportunity to make this submission and for your consideration of our input. We look forward to receiving the Australian Universities Accord Final Report.

Prepared by  
Professor Alpha Possamai-Inesedy, Pro Vice-Chancellor Engagement and Advancement  
Sophie Partridge, Director Future Student Engagement  
Katie Aguilera, Associate Director Engagement and Partnerships  
Jim Micsko, Senior Manager, Engagement Programs

References:

- 2022, National Union of Students, [Locked out of youth allowance: student poverty and centrelink in Australia \(changetheage.asn.au\)](https://www.changetheage.asn.au)
- 2023, Universities Accord Interim Report - [Australian Universities Accord Interim Report - Department of Education, Australian Government](https://www.education.gov.au/australian-universities-accord-interim-report)