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SUBMISSION TO THE UNIVERSITIES ACCORD PANEL (1 September 2023)

Thank you again for this opportunity to make a further submission to the Australian Universities Accord Panel. As requested, this submission sets out three reflections on the Interim Report.

① **AQF Reform for skills uplift and to support lifelong learning (Endorsed)**

The Panel's intent to endorse the **full implementation of [Australian Qualifications Framework \(AQF\) Review](#)** as a matter of national priority is fully supported. I was a member of the Noonan AQF Review Expert Panel and set out the case for implementation of the AQF Review in a [submission](#) made to this Panel in April. The AQF Review reforms are a critical policy enabler to underpin the effective operationalisation of the Accord Panel's findings and recommendations for **a learner-centred, connected, cohesive and harmonised tertiary system**. In particular, the implementation of the AQF Review Reforms will support national aspirations to

- meet Australian (knowledge and) skills needs now and for the future through innovative qualification design,
- establish parity of esteem between vocational education and training (VET) and higher education (HE),
- enable multidirectional and non-linear learning pathways,
- make lifelong learning a practical reality for all citizens,
- increase industry-university collaboration in qualification design, and
- develop a strengthened tertiary system.

Of particular importance is the urgent need to establish an **ongoing AQF governance body**, as was recommended by the Noonan Expert Panel, to oversee and give effect to the AQF Review recommendations, some of which require further development. A revised AQF also requires clear links through each level of sector regulation to assure that the benefit of its improvements will flow quickly and easily to users of the AQF. (See [AQF Review](#) Recommendations 19-21)

It is also suggested that the proposed Tertiary Education Commission (TEC) should develop, as a matter of priority also, a **National Lifelong Learning Strategy** to provide the framework and roadmap that brings together the interrelated components for national aspirations around future skills development, lifelong learning and a strengthened tertiary system (such as, for example, the National Skills Passport, the National Skills Taxonomy, a Lifelong Learning Entitlement, intergovernmental cooperation, a unified credential platform, common credit points system to enable credit transfer and recognition of prior learning/experience, quality life-wide careers advising, etc).

② **Inclusive, intentional curriculum design to support diverse cohorts (Not addressed)**

Recommendation: Universal Design for Learning and Transition Pedagogy should be specifically identified in the Higher Education Standards Framework to ensure that all students are enabled to fully participate and are supported to succeed over the course of their tertiary studies.

The keen focus on supporting diverse student cohorts who are admitted to our institutions to engage successfully and productively in high quality learning is absolutely endorsed. The Interim Report discusses the urgent need to assure "Excellence in learning, teaching and student experience" (e.g., in Section 2.4) and touches on "Curriculum design and delivery that is responsive and collaborative" (e.g., Section 2.4.3, primarily in the context of teaching quality and university-industry engagement). The current consultation on the necessary requirements for an institutional *Support for Students* policy that assures the timely provision of critical academic and non-academic support proactively and at scale, is a key enabler of success for all students, particularly equity-bearing students. **A cogent way to assure adequate, contextualised and personalised support provision is to drive that support provision through intentional, responsive curriculum design, rather than leave it languishing outside and apart from the key learning integrator that is the curriculum.**

Inclusive, intentional curriculum design to support diverse cohorts is one matter that is not addressed in the Interim Report in any great detail. The imperative for high quality curriculum design, that does not leave student success to chance, is compelling. This was recommended by the Equity Practitioners in HE Australasia's (EPHEA) [submission](#) on the Accord Discussion Paper (EPHEA Recommendation 14):

“Universal Design for Learning and Transition Pedagogy [should] be specifically identified in the Higher Education Standards Framework to ensure that students can fully participate and are supported over the course of their studies.”

Comprehensive and equitable attention to quality curriculum design to support *all* learners in a universal tertiary system, such as that argued for by the Accord Panel, **is currently a critical missing piece in system-wide quality assurance**. HE lacks a systematic approach to this critical success enabler. The mainstream prioritisation of institutional quality in inclusive course design (and its enabling of attendant quality in teaching, delivery and support provision) will be fundamental and determinative for increasingly diverse cohorts' learning, success and retention. The academic sphere is the most important site for success and the nurturing of participation and learning engagement that engenders a sense of belonging to enable persistence and achievement of desirable graduate outcomes. **The word 'curriculum' is currently not mentioned in the HESF, other than under the Provider Category Standards as regards university-industry engagement**. While the HESF focuses, as it should, on teaching quality and course design for quality learning *outcomes*, the achievement of those desirable learning outcomes via scaffolded, organised and carefully sequenced curriculum design, that is not overwhelming to the new learner in the discipline, is not at all referenced.

Transition Pedagogy

Like Universal Design for Learning (UDL), [Transition Pedagogy](#) is a proven enabler of inclusive and intentional curriculum design and its development and delivery to support *all* learners. Particularly, it provides a mechanism (via six core curriculum principles) for intentional *first-year* curriculum design that mediates a relevant, involving and social transition to tertiary academic study that is not overwhelming to the new learner in the discipline. Transition Pedagogy was developed in 2009 under an [Australian Learning and Teaching Council Fellowship](#) as an integrative framework to operationalise whole-of-student-life, whole-of-institution approaches to supporting diverse students' multiple transitions, learning and success over the student lifecycle. This year alone, in the context of the Universities Accord, I have already been invited to give seven keynotes on the benefits of its application “to foster a critical sense of belonging and student identity, through involvement and connectedness with the student's university and discipline experiences” ([Kift, 2015, p. 54](#)).

The curriculum principles underpinning Transition Pedagogy informed the development of current Standard 1.3 in the *Higher Education Standards Framework 2021*. To take two examples of institutional application (and there are many): Transition Pedagogy has been holistically applied at UTS since 2011 with proven impact for enhanced student retention and success from [first](#) to [final](#) year (e.g., McKenzie & Egea, [2016](#)); it also informed the development of the successful Victoria University Block Model, that the Panel referenced in its Interim Report at p 82 (e.g., McCluskey, Weldon & Smallridge, [2019](#)).

Originally conceptualised to assure the quality of transition over the first-year, Transition Pedagogy has now been applied and adapted by many universities in Australia, and internationally, to multiple key transition points across the student lifecycle (e.g., pathway programs, capstone design and postgraduate experiences). It has also found resonance within diverse disciplines, cohorts, practitioner groups and contexts. It enables proactive management of the multiple transitions students experience over their learning journey into, through and out of, their course of study, and has been [identified](#) as being instrumental in supporting student mental wellbeing in that regard.

Rather than problematising diversity and difference, Transition Pedagogy focuses on what individual students have in common – *their learning engagement mediated through curriculum* – and **harnesses curriculum as the organising device for the broader academic and social experience**. The Transition

Pedagogy ethos is – if it's important to student success, it's important enough to be addressed in the curriculum. This is done in contextualised, discipline-specific ways that reduce cognitive load and free students up to focus energy on their discipline learning engagement. **In the context of the current consultation on a mandated *Support for Students Policy*, Transition Pedagogy provides the mechanism to drive the timely, whole-of-course triage of academic and non-academic support through the curriculum** to build student capability and agency via targeted skills development, support mediation and engagement and interaction opportunities.

A particular strength of Transition Pedagogy is its harnessing of **new ways of collaborative working, by activating cross-institutional partnerships between academic and professional staff and students** for whole-of-university uplift in intentional and inclusive curriculum design. Through such collaborative design, with all institutional actors who impact student success at the curriculum design table, including students themselves, it is possible to:

- scaffold and sequence just-in-time contextualised skills' and literacies' acquisition,
- enable peer relationships for a sense of belonging in a [relationship-rich](#) educational culture,
- proactively attend to transitions' *affect* and iterative impact on identity formation,
- develop assessment and feedback literacies,
- support mental health and wellbeing, and
- embed career development learning for agentic lifelong learning engagement to support the up-skilling demands of the world of future work.

Such an integrated and holistic model is effective, efficient and, critically, quality assured and sustainable once it becomes embedded in core curriculum design and delivery.

③ **Belonging (Proposed new enhancement measure)**

Recommendation: That consideration be given to revising the current measure of belonging (and engagement) in the Student Experience Survey and to harnessing the power of 'belonging analytics' that track and support student development of a sense of belonging. That consideration also be given to including in the HESF the requirement for HEPs to foster and monitor student belonging.

The Accord Panel stated that universities “have an obligation to students to foster belonging...” (Interim Report, p 132). 'Belonging' is a multifaceted construct and can be experienced by students as “complex, fluid and as multiple micro and macro belongings. Belonging is...bound up with identity, it flickers and is in flux, it may stick, slip and slide in different times and spaces” ([Gravatt, Ajjawi & O'Shea, 2023](#), p 10). Equity-bearing students generally have a lower sense of belonging and this was exacerbated over COVID ([Mercer-Mapstone et al, 2022](#)). There is currently one belonging question in the annual Student Experience Survey (SES) (under 'Engagement', which is consistently rated at very low levels by students). The most recent SES data show that 'sense of belonging' has not recovered since the pandemic (for undergraduates rated at 46.5%; for postgraduates rated at 44.7%). **Counter-intuitively, students' sense of belonging is greater in the first year than in the final year.**

Given the impact of the pandemic of students' sense of belonging and connectedness, work is now occurring on developing 'belonging analytics' (see, for example, Buckingham Shum et al (2023) [Belonging@Scale](#); UTS CIC 2022 Workshop on [Belonging Analytics | UTS:CIC](#)). **No reference to the critical success enabler of student 'belonging' (nor 'engagement') appears in the HESF.** Better measures for belonging should be developed to track this important enabler of student mental wellbeing, persistence, transition management, academic achievement, retention and success. The recent analysis by [Crawford and colleagues](#) of 1.1 million undergraduate and postgraduate student responses to the SES over 2013-2019 to predict belonging is of particular value in this regard.