



Australian Academy
of Health and
Medical Sciences

AAHMS submission to the consultation on the Australian Universities Accord Interim Report

September 2023

The Australian Academy of Health and Medical Sciences (AAHMS) strongly supports the Government's commitment to reform Australia's higher education system through an Australian Universities Accord and we welcome the opportunity to provide input in response to the Accord Panel's Interim Report.¹

AAHMS is Australia's Learned Academy for health and medical science – the impartial, authoritative, cross-sector voice for the sector. We advance research and innovation in Australia to improve everyone's health.

We are an independent, interdisciplinary body of Fellows – elected by peers for outstanding achievements and exceptional contributions to health and medical science in Australia. Collectively, AAHMS Fellows are a representative and independent voice, through which we engage with the community, industry and governments. Our response has been informed by input from Fellows of the Academy.

AAHMS broadly supports the vision of the Interim Report and its five immediate priority actions. We support the Interim Report's focus on delivering a high-quality and equitable higher education system that can ensure priority populations like First Nations, rural and remote communities, and those from low socioeconomic backgrounds can thrive within the sector. We agree that these are urgent issues and are pleased to see that action is already being taken by the Government to legislate some of the Interim Report recommendations.

We are, however, concerned that the Interim Report does not address some other significant issues – beyond those targeted by the priority actions – in sufficient detail; namely, issues associated with research, innovation and research training, which sit at the heart of Australia's higher education system. We acknowledge that it is not the role of the Interim Report to provide a detailed analysis of all the major issues, rather the aim of the report is to provide an initial overview that will then be addressed in more detail in the Final Report. Nevertheless, these endeavours are a fundamental part of the higher education system. We therefore highlight below several crucial areas that must be addressed in the Final Report to ensure it can set out ambitious goals that will positively impact not only on the higher education system, but on Australia's economy, productivity and wellbeing, for decades to come.

¹ Australian Department of Education (2023). *Australian Universities Accord Interim Report*. <https://www.education.gov.au/australian-universities-accord/resources/accord-interim-report>.

Universities have traditionally been the home of critical thought and open debate and it is important that the Accord reinforces this role and empowers universities to continue to play this important role in society.

Funding for research and innovation

The Interim Report rightly states that universities play a larger than normal role in Australia's R&D system when compared internationally. This brings with it immense opportunities for universities – and the wider R&D sector – to ensure Australia can address the significant societal challenges we face, from climate change and environmental sustainability through to social and health inequities. Research and innovation drive economic growth, create jobs and bring considerable societal benefits through the translation of research findings. To remain competitive, Australia must return gross domestic R&D expenditure (GERD) to a positive trajectory as a percentage of GDP – with a target of 3%. To achieve this, Australia should leverage both government funding and other funding sources to create a diverse funding landscape that can maintain financial sustainability for the sector. We continue to urge the Review to advocate that the Government move quickly towards this 3% target. In 2019 (the last year for which Australian data are available), Australia spent 1.8% of gross domestic spending on R&D, compared to the OECD average of 2.56%.² Business Expenditure on R&D (BERD) should be a crucial focus for building overall investment. Health and medical research in universities, and the 50+ independent or associated Medical Research Institutes (MRIs) in Australia, provide the backbone of innovation and translation in biomedical and clinical sciences, and accounts for less than 25% of all research expenditure (approximately 0.4% of GDP).

The Final Report must also provide detail and recommended actions towards ensuring National Competitive Grants can cover the full cost of research. The Interim Report acknowledges the cost of research as being an issue however it is not clear how the Accord will work towards this goal – or how decisions made in other areas of the Accord may influence research funding. For instance, recommendations that impact international student intake will flow on to affect research funding. The Review should consider and mitigate these risks to ensure the Accord does not result in unintended consequences for the research community.

Translation of research and innovation

The Interim Report highlights the importance of sharing and translating university research. AAHMS strongly supports actions that will facilitate the translation of research and innovation across all disciplines for public benefit. The field of health and medicine presents a prime opportunity to test and scale up measures here, including the kinds of pull and push factors mentioned in the Interim Report.

Our 2021 report, *'Research and innovation as core functions in transforming the health system: A vision for the future of health in Australia'*, describes how the health system could be aligned more closely with the health and medical research and innovation landscape to deliver precisely these kinds of benefits – ultimately delivering better outcomes for the community.³ Our report, and our submission to the consultation on the Accord Discussion Paper (submitted in April 2023), highlights the critical role of universities (and MRIs) as a key driver of this

² OECD data on Gross domestic spending on R&D: <https://data.oecd.org/rd/gross-domestic-spending-on-r-d.htm>.

³ Australian Academy of Health and Medical Sciences (2022). *Research and innovation as core functions in transforming the health system: A vision for the future of health in Australia*. <https://aahms.org/vision/>

alignment.⁴ The pull and push mechanisms outlined in the Interim Report can only succeed if there are certain foundational elements to build upon. Many of these already exist in the health and medicine landscape, making it a field that is primed for quick and sustainable action. For instance, the Interim Report talks about research broker bodies. Australia's [NHMRC-accredited Research Translation Centres](#) are designed to fulfil this role in health and medicine by bringing together stakeholders across academia, industry and health to translate research into evidence-based practice.

The Interim Report states that '*we need clear measures to indicate how useful our university research actually is to end-users*'. We urge the Review to consider the role of consumer and community involvement in developing and enacting these measures. Consumers and communities must have equal opportunities to shape, participate in and benefit from research that is relevant to them, as active and valued partners.

Support for early- and mid- career researchers

We strongly support measures to better understand Australia's research workforce needs. The Interim Report calls out early career researchers as being a group that requires more support. However, it is not clear from the Report what changes will occur through the Accord process that will specifically benefit this group. We highlighted in our April 2023 response to the Accord Discussion Paper that early- and mid- career researchers (EMCRs) play a crucial role in securing the future of our research and innovation workforce – across all disciplines.⁵ The Final Report should detail a plan of action to ensure the sector can attract and retain talented researchers at these career stages.

Moreover, embedding research in industry provides career opportunities for EMCRs and real-world experience. The health and medical workforce have unique opportunities for embedding researchers in industry, given this workforce is highly skilled and the healthcare sector is the largest sector in the Australian economy. A system that further facilitates and rewards researchers embedded in industry with university / MRI appointments is required.

Collaboration for national excellence

We are pleased to see that the Review will give further consideration in the Final Report to promoting collaboration and shared best practice within the higher education system. We welcome the Panel's consideration of an Australian Tertiary Education Commission, based on the principles of independence and expertise, which would take a national view of how teaching and research programs are advancing Australia's interests. We note that others have suggested that the Learned Academies would be well placed to contribute to such a body to inform national coordination and planning and we would endorse this position. The Academies represent an independent, expert voice across a range of higher education and research matters, including at the important intersection with national policy development.

Australia is home to world class higher education institutions that produce excellent research, however, there is a lot of duplicated effort. The Accord is working within an ecosystem that has limited resources. In such circumstances, we should seek to foster excellence by targeting our strengths while also promoting collaboration. The Review should seek to create an

⁴ Australian Academy of Health and Medical Sciences (2023). AAHMS response to the Department of Education discussion paper on the Australian Universities Accord. <https://aahms.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/AAHMS-submission-AUA-consultation.pdf>

⁵ Australian Academy of Health and Medical Sciences (2023). AAHMS response to the Department of Education discussion paper on the Australian Universities Accord. <https://aahms.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/AAHMS-submission-AUA-consultation.pdf>

environment that balances these crucial components to ensure Australia's higher education system remains equitable and strategic.

We also urge the Review to clarify its vision to promote cross-sector working. Universities must play their part in educating a future workforce equipped to tackle the big challenges of today and the future – many of which will require solutions developed through cross-sector working. The Accord should be used to develop the institutional frameworks needed to ensure these collaborations and interactions can occur seamlessly. Discovery research and translation research can be embedded in health and in industry. For example, the appointment of staff conjointly in hospitals and universities means they are ideally placed to identify issues in healthcare and then to discover and deliver interventions to solve those issues. Providing mechanisms to develop and support the research and innovation workforce and career pathways within industry will be a bold long-term change. Flexibility is needed for research students, EMCRs and senior researchers to work across the academia-health-industry interface.⁶

Student involvement and succession planning

We would encourage the Review to ensure it has sufficient and ongoing input from students as it undertakes this Accord process. Students should play a vital role in the development of policies that will impact them. Bi-directional involvement with students, ensuring their voices are heard and acted upon, can help position these important stakeholders as partners in delivering a higher education system that can benefit the full Australian community. The Final Report should also incorporate a clear explanation of how students informed the review outcomes.

Succession planning is a long-term preparation process for developing replacements for key positions to ensure continuing leadership in an organisation. Succession planning in universities is essential if we want to ensure the sustainability of a world-class higher education system. The Interim Report does not detail how the Accord will manage higher education succession planning. We suggest that the Final Report consider this as an important aspect in embedding strong leadership and expertise for the future.

Finally, we would not that we are also aware that many of the challenges resulting from the Job Ready Graduates package are yet to be addressed. We acknowledge that many of these have been identified in the Interim Report and we support the Review considering solutions as a matter of urgency.

For questions about this submission, or to arrange a consultation with Fellows and Associate Members of the Academy, please contact Lanika Mylvaganam, Head of Policy (policy@ahms.org) at the Australian Academy of Health and Medical Sciences. The Academy is grateful for the input received from our Fellows and Associate Members in developing this submission.

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⁶ Australian Academy of Health and Medical Sciences (2022). *Research and innovation as core functions in transforming the health system: A vision for the future of health in Australia*. <https://ahms.org/vision/>