

The Universities
Accord
Interim Report
Submission

September 2023

dassh Promoting the
Arts, Social Sciences
and Humanities

Acknowledgement of First Nations

The Australasian Council of Deans of Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities proudly acknowledges First Nations people as the First Peoples and Traditional Owners and custodians of the land and water on which we rely. We acknowledge and respect that Aboriginal communities are steeped in traditions and customs built on a disciplined social and cultural order. This social and cultural order has sustained up to 50,000 years of existence. In particular, we acknowledge the powerful opportunity our sector has to embrace, learn from and improve through better understanding and integration of Indigenous Knowledges.

About DASSH

The Australasian Council of Deans of Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities represents more than 250 Deans, and Associate and Deputy Deans, from 43 universities across Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand, leading schools and faculties that teach tens of thousands of students and several thousand scholars.

DASSH supports those who have responsibility for governance and management of research, teaching and learning across those member institutions. DASSH members were consulted widely as part of this submission process. They provided feedback through in-person consultations, a national online meeting, a survey, and via various forms of digital communication.

This Submission was prepared in response the Commonwealth Government's Universities Accord consultation process. We are grateful for the opportunity to engage with the Advisory Panel and to represent the views of our members.

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Executive Summary

DASSH welcomes the extensive, ambitious and broad ranging set of ideas that the Interim Report canvasses.

The university sector has proven itself to be resilient, entrepreneurial and high performing by global standards. But persistent structural problems remain that must be addressed if the sector is to deliver on its potential to be one of the key pillars supporting Australia's economic growth and a flourishing society.

Universities play a critical role in creating, preserving, and disseminating knowledge. Beyond vocational training and applied research, universities are intrinsic to enhancing individual prospects, economic growth, and societal wellbeing. The Interim Report highlights a far too narrow view of the contributions universities make. The Accord must broaden its understanding of the purpose universities serve and the multifaceted benefits they create.

We endorse the focus on driving sectoral change with Indigenous-led approaches and recognise the imperative of Indigenous participation and leadership. Elevating Indigenous Australians' participation and success in higher education is essential for the sector and the nation.

While we support the creation of a First Nations Higher Education Council, we stress the need for institutional and sectoral transformation to address the long-term challenges created by colonial structures of knowledge and value.

DASSH strongly agrees with the ambition to break down the barriers for students from groups who have so far been excluded from universities—Indigenous, regional, and low socioeconomic status students. But the scale at which the Report envisages participation will require significant investment.

We recommend a needs-based approach to funding the sector be established. We strongly support the removal of punitive measures in the Job-Ready Graduates package and a renewed focus on fostering inclusivity and achievement.

Funding the sector must move away from attempting to manipulate student preferences with price. It must be replaced with a system that reduces barriers to participation and provides students maximum freedom of choice.

The cost of university teaching supported by government must also recognise that teaching and research are fundamentally linked. A contribution to that research should be included in any funding model. Comprehensive funding of research and the alignment of research and teaching are critical. We support curiosity-driven and commercialised research for a dynamic and competitive university sector.

DASSH strongly disagrees with the Interim Report's ideas on institutional specialisation. Research is fundamental to university teaching and learning and they should not be separated. Specialisation also presents very clear risks to the standing and capacity of regional institutions and national knowledge diversity.

Drawing insights from Aotearoa New Zealand's experience, we argue that while there are potentially some positive aspects to the creation of a Tertiary Education Commission in Australia, there are considerable risks relating to bureaucratisation, administrative burden, and mission creep.

DASSH welcomes the breadth of ideas within the Interim Report. Our vision is for a comprehensive understanding of universities' roles and a policy framework that empowers us to contribute fully to societal advancement and economic prosperity.

The Purpose of Universities

The Interim Report rightly recognises that universities play a critical role in developing the skills of Australians, equipping them better to advance their prospects and those of society more broadly. Yet universities do much more than this.

Universities exist to do three things:

To create knowledge

To protect knowledge

To pass that knowledge on

These functions have been fundamental to the purpose of universities since their emergence over a thousand years ago. The value of knowledge and ideas has not always been recognised but as Australia attempts to transition to a clean and knowledge-based economy their worth has never been greater.

The Interim Report recognises aspects of this but falls short in fully understanding what universities are, the purpose they serve and the benefits they create.

It is critical for Australia's universities to flourish, and in turn our societies be improved by our contributions. And it is also critical for policy settings to be established that ensure that the benefits that flow from universities are properly understood.

As institutions that create, protect and pass on knowledge, universities produce the following benefits:

- Our students and graduates have improved life chances
- Graduates benefit from higher incomes across their careers, irrespective of the discipline they study
- They create an informed population with heightened civic virtue that is the bedrock of our successful multicultural democracy
- Firms, government and society benefit from a better educated and higher performing workforce

The Interim Report recognises aspects of this but falls short in fully understanding what universities are, the purpose they serve and the benefits they create.

Personal fulfilment comes from education and delivers greater long-term wellbeing for our graduates.

The Interim Report envisages a university sector which is an advanced vocational training system and an applied industrial research facility.

Indigenous Focus

DASSH strongly supports the Interim Report's focus on Indigenous participation and in particular the importance of having Indigenous-led approaches to sectoral change.

It is critical for the sector and for Australian society more generally to drive a much higher rate of participation and success for Indigenous Australians in higher education. DASSH also encourages the Accord process to take the historic opportunity of this sectoral reset to drive more fundamental changes to university leadership and governance.

Our members support the creation of a First Nations Higher Education Council. This would provide an excellent opportunity for Indigenous-led policy formulation and could guide the higher education sector on how to improve the integration of Indigenous Peoples and Knowledges in both university governance and curriculum.

But members expressed concern that reforms may end up being incremental or only make marginal changes to the way universities work with and for Indigenous communities. While it is essential that the voice of First Nations Australians is encapsulated in a formal Council, it is equally important that institutional and sectoral change takes place in parallel with this.

DASSH members, who have extensive experience with Indigenous communities, have identified three areas that should be a priority focus for the Accord's programs in this domain:

- **Attraction and retention of Indigenous students**

The work to increase participation and success of Indigenous Australians must be a high priority and this entails all universities developing stronger links to Indigenous communities at the high school level, developing appropriate support throughout time at university and after graduation. Engaging with employers to help promote culturally safe workplaces is critical. This will require a step change approach to resourcing as well as in the relationships universities have with Indigenous communities. It will also take time.

- **Data Sovereignty**

Indigenous data sovereignty is crucial for effective data collection and governance in Australia. Current government data collection often fails to provide useful information for Aboriginal people, highlighting differences rather than aiding decision-making. Indigenous data governance, where Aboriginal people are not just in an advisory role, is key to operationalising data sovereignty and in turn to realising the potential for sector change that is sought in the Interim Report.

- **Cultural Load**

DASSH members support a large concentration of Indigenous academics and report that one of the biggest challenges the group experiences is burnout due to cultural load. A huge set of expectations and work is put on the shoulders of a small number of not well supported academics. In some cases they may be the only Indigenous academic in a faculty or college. The Accord seeks to transform the rates of participation in the academic workforce, a laudable aim. But as it does so the management of cultural load must be a critical priority.

Equity and Opportunity

DASSH welcomes the Interim Report's ambitions to expand the university sector.

The Interim Report rightly recognises that as our society and economy develop further a greater proportion of the labour force will require higher education. For example, Jobs and Skills Australia estimates that more than half of all new jobs will require a bachelor's degree or higher by 2026.¹

As highlighted in the 2023 Intergenerational Report and also by the World Economic Forum in its Future of Jobs report, cognitive skills like communication, empathy and problem solving are highly prized by employers the world over.²

Having a higher number of Australians studying at universities will improve not only the prospects of the workforce and economic productivity. It will also enhance the lives of Australians and strengthen our multicultural democracy.

The expansion that is proposed is heroically ambitious both in the scale of the sector it envisages as well as the socio-economic diversity of the putative student body. As the Interim Report notes, the vast majority of the increase will need to come from groups that currently the sector finds very difficult to attract and retain.

DASSH welcomes the Interim Report's recommendation on which the government has acted to scrap the punitive aspects of the JRG package that had a damaging effect on precisely the groups the government is trying to improve access to the sector.

DASSH members lead schools, faculties and colleges that teach a large proportion of minoritised groups. More than a third of all Indigenous university students and more than half of all university students who identify as gender diverse study HASS disciplines.³

HASS disciplines enrol a higher proportion of female students than any other discipline. In 2021, 30 per cent of all female students were enrolled in HASS disciplines compared to 14 per cent of female students in STEM. DASSH members are critical to achieving the greater participation ambitions of the Interim Report.

We have extensive experience with the distinct challenges that these groups face because of these enrolment trends. As part of the Universities Accord submission process we engaged directly with students, and they reported familiar challenges which will need to be addressed if the expansion of the sector is to succeed:

- **Low success rates**

Students who are low-SES, Indigenous and/or regional or rural struggle to succeed due to inadequate preparation and require extensive support and often highly scaffolded approaches to teaching and learning.

[1] Australian Government. (2023). *Intergenerational Report 2023: Australia's future to 2063*.

[2] World Economic Forum. (2023). *Future of Jobs Report 2023: Insight Report*.

[3] Department of Education. (2022). *Selected Higher Education Statistics – 2021 Student data*.

<https://www.education.gov.au/higher-education-statistics/student-data/selected-higher-education-statistics-2021-student-data>

- **Cost of living**

Students face difficulties finding affordable housing close to their chosen university. For example, based on conservative estimates it costs a student a minimum of \$712 per week to live in Sydney.

- **Caring responsibilities**

Students with caring responsibilities face significant barriers in accessing higher education, such as the costs of childcare.

- **Cost of travel and relocation**

Students from regional communities face financial pressures in attending university.

- **Opportunity cost of studying**

Students from poor households face stark opportunity cost considerations and substantial resources will be required to offset those costs for these cohorts.

- **Social isolation**

These students find it hardest to forge social bonds at universities and this contributes to their high attrition rates. Large scale efforts to overcome these problems will need to be put in place.

We recognise the ambition of sectoral expansion and dramatically increased participation rates of low-SES, rural, regional and Indigenous students.

But if this is to be realised, significant investment will be needed to ensure the success of groups which, at present, are least well prepared for university education.

The best way to do this is to ensure a needs-based approach to funding. The needs of these cohorts are very significant along many dimensions, from social support to cognitive skills development, and without levels of financial support at the scale that is needed the ambition to widen the sector in such dramatic terms will not succeed.

Funding Model

The attempt to drive student choice through price signalling under the Job-Ready Graduates package was flawed, ineffective and unfair. Funding and price signalling must not be used to drive student preferences or behaviour.

DASSH strongly recommends that the following principles should be the foundation on which new funding settings are based.

- **The system must enable student preferences to drive study choices**

Students are best placed to judge what they want to study. Price should be removed as a relative consideration.

- **Student needs must drive funding levels**

As mentioned above, this will become particularly urgent given sectoral expansion of the kind envisaged in the Interim Report. An expanded student body will come with expanded needs, and this will require a needs-based approach to funding across the sector.

- **Social isolation**

These students find it hardest to forge social bonds at universities and this contributes to their high attrition rates. Large scale efforts to overcome these problems will need to be put in place.

Research

Research is central to universities and our members were surprised at how little focus was given to this area in the Interim Report relative to the other areas.

DASSH strongly endorses the aim to more adequately cover the true cost of research.

The Government can work towards this goal in a number of ways.

The current funding model creates perverse incentives to cross subsidise research with teaching revenue. The Accord process provides a good opportunity to recognise the integrated nature of research and teaching.

They are both vital to Australia's capability as a nation and teaching should be underpinned by research. Funding of the sector needs to reflect this reality.

In recent years universities and government have sought to drive greater commercialisation of research as the productivity benefits it promises are considerable. Many of the disciplines represented by DASSH have been leaders in research translation.

But the Accord process must also recognise that curiosity-led or pure research that can't be immediately commercialised is critical to the dynamism, competitiveness and richness of the university sector.

A strong and durable commitment to fund research comprehensively is critical to the sector's future.

DASSH welcomes the Government's announcement that it has agreed or agreed in principle to all ten of the recommendations put forward as part of the recent ARC Review.

Specialisation

The Interim Report flags the possibility of institutional specialisation of research and teaching through a mission focus within universities. It implicitly questions the need for universities to do both research and teaching without explaining exactly why it is a bad thing.

DASSH is strongly opposed to breaking the link between research and teaching at universities.

All universities must continue to undertake high quality research. Removing research or even reducing its role would significantly degrade Australian universities and diminish the student experience. Education by knowledge creators is what sets universities apart and in 'pure' areas of knowledge it is existentially important.

Delinking research from teaching has very significant broader risks. Most obviously universities that serve rural and regional communities are likely to face the greatest pressures to specialise toward a teaching focus. This would create critical gaps in both the educational offering and research connectivity in precisely the areas where the Interim Report reckons the greatest contribution should be made.

There is a secondary risk associated with subject area specialisation in which Australia's national knowledge base would be weakened as universities exit some fields to focus on others.

The Accord must ensure that the link between teaching and research remains firmly in place and that the policy settings ensure that as diverse forms of knowledge as possible are located across the country.

Our members have also noted that regional students stand to lose access to a rounded education if they are forced to travel to study certain disciplines or specialist areas. The UK provides an excellent example of this.

● The UK in focus

The experience of the United Kingdom can provide insight into the benefits and challenges of specialisation, particularly from a regional perspective.

A large number of universities in the UK have a specialist focus. Up to 23 per cent of institutions registered under the Office for Students in England are classified as small or specialist.⁴

Similarly, small and specialist providers represent three of Scotland's 19 institutions. In contrast, larger institutions have come to dominate the sector. In England, the 35 largest institutions by turnover represent half of the students enrolled in higher education.

Small and specialist institutions face significant financial challenges and are limited in their ability to make structural adjustments, such as being able to change the types of courses on offer. They also have limited research budgets which significantly impacts their ability to leverage funding.

[4] Venning, E. (2023). *Size is Everything: What small, specialist and practice-based providers tell us about the higher education sector*. Higher Education Policy Institute.

The University Centre Hastings, which was a regional institution, faced challenges delivering a wide array of disciplines in the late 2010s.

In facing this challenge, it encouraged and enabled students to use Hastings as a central university from which they could graduate from degrees offered at other universities.

The UCH initiative was conceived in 2003 and relied heavily on the specialist expertise of partner institutions to deliver courses to students.

The initiative was short-lived. It collapsed when the UCH was replaced by the University of Brighton's Hastings campus in 2009. By that stage all the university partners had withdrawn from the program.

Its closure had a significant impact on the local community. By pursuing this approach offerings at certain local universities shrank which meant that students in local areas missed out.

This is a strong example of the importance of long-term planning, policy stability and fostering reliable opportunities for local students to study according to their preference in the long term.

Tertiary Education Commission

● A working case study: Aotearoa New Zealand in focus

The Interim Report puts considerable emphasis on the potential for a Tertiary Education Commission to oversee the sector. DASSH is a trans-Tasman grouping and our members' experience in the Aotearoa New Zealand context provides a useful perspective on what a Tertiary Education Commission could look like if it were to be established in Australia.

In the early 2000s, the Aotearoa New Zealand government established a Tertiary Education Commission. It was intended to act independently of government. Its function would be largely strategic in allocating funding and providing policy advice. In practice, however, the TEC has had more of an operational role rather than a strategic one.

The role and function of the TEC is a topic of discussion in Aotearoa New Zealand at the moment, including its independence from government. DASSH members have also noted there has been considerable shift in the TEC's mission over time with the TEC coming to have an increasingly significant influence over higher education policy in Aotearoa New Zealand while also adding to the administrative burden of universities.

The following highlights some of the challenges and opportunities that could arise if a Tertiary Education Commission were to be established in Australia. These factors reflect the experience in Aotearoa New Zealand as well as observations made by our members.

Opportunities

● Support for disciplines

The TEC could provide support for individual disciplines and help prevent the loss of national capabilities. At present there is no oversight of the stock of disciplinary knowledge and the erosion or closure of areas is largely at the discretion of individual institutions. A TEC could provide an important guard against the ebbing of expertise.

● Removing barriers between HE and VET

The TEC could help to break down the barriers that exist between the higher education and VET sectors.

● Stabilise policy settings

Higher education in Australia has been subject to regular and at times highly consequential shifts in policy often at short notice. A TEC could provide a longer-term perspective on and stabilising force for policy.

Challenges

- **Increasing bureaucratisation**

The TEC could contribute to the increasing bureaucratisation of the higher education sector and could undermine institutions' independence. Universities must retain significant degrees of autonomy which is vital to their dynamism and core to their function, but that is very much at risk in an overly bureaucratised TEC. Equally, the Aotearoa New Zealand experience has illustrated at times an unclear division of labour between the Department and the TEC which has increased inefficiency and badly impacted the sector as a whole.

- **Administrative burden**

The introduction of a TEC could lead to a greater administrative burden for universities by adding significant reporting requirements that increase cost and inefficiency without tangibly improving universities' educational or research outcomes.

- **Mission creep**

There is the potential for the TEC to experience mission creep over time as evidenced in the Aotearoa New Zealand context, particularly if the parameters of the TEC are not well defined at the outset.

- **Short-lived policies**

Major changes to the sector such as the proposed TEC need to have long-term support to avoid the destabilising impact of short-term policies as seen in the UK.