

Australian Universities Accord

Response to the Accord Interim Report

The Australian Science Communicators (ASC) commends the Universities Accord consultation process and appreciate the opportunity to provide comment at this stage.

This submission emphasises the pivotal role of science communication professionals in enhancing the impact and public perception of university research, and stresses the need for more ambitious aims for the Universities Accord.

The need for quality science communication

We consider that the need for quality science communication to support and enhance Australia's higher education system has not been adequately addressed in the Interim Report or the sector more broadly.

Science communicators being limited almost exclusively to the role of 'science PR' in many universities thoroughly ignores the obligation on the part of universities to make public research appropriately and accurately accessible to those who fund it, benefit from it, and use it.

The Business Council of Australia's *Seize the Moment* report notes that "nine in ten Australians agree that spending on research and development is vital to give us a competitive edge"¹, and yet many are unaware of the true impact of this R&D investment. This clearly shows the current shortfall in communicating the research effort and its impact.

It is our view that effective science communication plays a crucial and yet underappreciated role in facilitating the implementation of the recommendations of the Australian Government's Australian Universities Accord Interim Report by:

1. **Providing universities with evidence-based practice in engaging communities, policy-makers and stakeholders**
 - a. Just as university researchers are valued and respected for their high-quality work and research output, similar emphasis is needed for trained professionals and academics whose expertise is in the translation and transformation of technical details of contemporary research into messages that different stakeholders can access: science communicators.
 - b. It is essential that communication professionals are considered at the beginning stages of the research process (e.g. during grant development), so adequate funds can be allocated for their time and expertise, and that funding models incorporate provision for communication activities.

¹ https://assets.nationbuilder.com/bca/pages/7307/attachments/original/1692333523/BCA_SEIZE_THE_MOMENT-FINAL-WEB.pdf?1692333523

- c. Trained science communicators can assist with reporting to funders, research participants and local communities, strengthening the link between research and society.
- 2. Linking research to impact**
 - a. Science communication links academia and the Australian people, including policymakers, industry stakeholders, and the wider community.
 - b. Of note, there is specific expertise developed within the field in how best to engage hard to reach audiences.
 - c. Effective science communication is vital to make complex research findings accessible and understandable, enabling stakeholders to grasp the potential implications and applications of research outcomes.
- 3. Promoting collaboration**
 - a. Science communication promotes integration within the tertiary system and collaboration between universities, industry, and government.
 - b. Effective communication channels share information about significant research problems and capabilities, helping stakeholders identify mutual interest and collaboration opportunities.
- 4. Public engagement**
 - a. Quality science communication helps universities connect with the public, enhancing research awareness.
 - b. This fosters a sense of relevance and opens doors for public support and funding opportunities.
 - c. By promoting a better understanding of the importance of research, science communication can also help build trust between universities, government, industry, and the general public.
- 5. Facilitating policy implementation**
 - a. Clear communication strategies are crucial for effective policy implementation and public buy in.
 - b. Stakeholders need to grasp how research outcomes integrate into policies to effect the desired shifts in higher education.
 - c. Science communication can facilitate this understanding and encourage support for evidence-based policy decisions.
- 6. Addressing equity and access**
 - a. The commitment to *access for everyone*, as mentioned in the report, requires communication efforts to reach diverse audiences.
 - b. Effective science communication can play a role in reducing barriers to access by ensuring that information about educational opportunities, research initiatives, and potential collaborations is shared widely and in a way that is accessible to individuals from various backgrounds and communities.

As such, we implore the Accord vision to acknowledge and build in adequate support and resources for roles such as that of the science communicator professional within the higher education sector, along with the researchers who inform their practice.

The ASC has a specific focus on communication in the sciences. While there are specific challenges faced by ASC members, we expect that our recommendations would readily be applied across other fields including the humanities, arts, economics and business, for example. It is the view of the ASC that the Universities Accords should appropriately acknowledge and include the role of these professionals in any forward-looking vision.

A missed opportunity

Further, the ASC adds our voice to others calling for the Accord process to be more ambitious. We specifically echo the statement from Science & Technology Australia in their April submission² and their submission in response to this Interim Report:

“To avert a decline in Australian living standards in the next decade, we must use the Universities Accord to make a ‘once-in-a-generation investment in Australia itself.’ At its heart, the Accord should state a bold ambition to ramp up our national investment in R&D and develop the specialised, STEM-skilled workforce we need to control our future.”

Other bodies have provided submissions on STEM-research, social science and R&D investment shortfalls, and we add our voice to their concerns. In light of the ARC’s recent report³ highlighting the 331% economic returns to Australia from research investment, failing to recommend a more radical review of university sector funding would be hard to justify.

About the Australian Science Communicators

The Australian Science Communicators (ASC) is the peak membership body representing the interests of those who work in, study, teach and have an interest in the field of science communication. The Australian Science Communicators has been bringing science communicators together for 30 years.

² <https://www.education.gov.au/australian-universities-accord/consultations/australian-universities-accord-panel-discussion-paper-consultation/submission/16030>

³ <https://www.arc.gov.au/news-publications/media/media-releases/new-report-shows-arc-funded-research-delivering-exceptional-outcomes-australia>