

Submission to Interim Report, Australian Universities Accord

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I am an Emeritus Professor of Federation University, with specific expertise in the following areas:

- The youth labour market and the so-called 'school to work' transition;
- Apprenticeships and traineeships; and
- Vocational education and training (VET) policy and practice.

I have also researched and published on higher education topics, and have chaired university curriculum committees and graduate studies committees. I have managed many nationally competitive research grants, and have also undertaken research for the OECD, UNESCO, and the United Nations (International Labour Organization), among other international bodies. I have been involved in the development and review of many government initiatives, primarily in VET but also in higher education, over the past three decades.

I have provided, at the end of this submission, those publications of mine which have most relevance to the topics I have raised. Each of these cites important works on the topics by other authors.

A general observation on lack of evidence and the faulty premise of the report

The Interim Report is very much data-free, and is also missing references to relevant scholarly literature on higher education, of which great deal is available. There is thus not really clear evidence of need for radical change.

The report contains general statements that more graduates are needed. Unfortunately this is asserted on the basis of an unpublished consultancy report. In any case, Figure 2.1-2 (p. 44) shows that Australia is in fact tenth among OECD countries for 25-34 year olds holding diplomas and above, only three percentage points below Great Britain which is a comparable country, and well above the OECD average. This is actually quite respectable. Australia has a very high proportion of mature-aged university students, compared with some other countries in which most degree-educated people gain their first degrees as young people. Thus if Figure 2.1-2 was repeated for, say, people aged 25 to 64 years, Australia would almost certainly move well up the ladder. The problem, if there is one, does not have to be solved by radical increases in school-leaver entry to university. Some of the occupations in shortage cited in the report, e.g. nursing and teaching, have substantial proportions of mature-aged people studying degrees and, in the case of nursing, diplomas as well. One of the great strengths of Australian HE (and VET too) is that people can study at any age.

Three biggest reflections

My three biggest reflections on the report are listed below, and more detail is provided overleaf:

1. The proposal for a national regional university is misguided and such an institution would be counter-productive.
2. The report consistently assumes that (a) university students are young people and (b) that they do not enter the workforce until they have completed their studies. Neither of these assumptions is true.
3. The report has not provided any detail about the current state of pathways between VET and higher education, and simply makes a call for improvement.

National regional university

This is an impractical and dangerous idea. We already have a number of universities serving Australia's regions; I myself have worked at two of them. Each of these has multiple campuses; and they are all members of the Regional Universities Network (RUN) where they work together to

improve higher education in and for the regions. It would have been helpful had the Interim Report provided a map of the campuses of the universities serving the regions, which would display their coverage and identify any gaps needing to be filled.

Regional universities are knowledgeable about, and connected to, their local regions. Nothing would be gained, and a great deal would be lost, by having instead a national regional university.

The nature of the student body

The Australian higher education student body is very diverse in many respects, not least by age. Some students are young, entering straight after school or after a 'gap year', some are older, and some break their studies and return later. Many, especially, but not only, mature students, study part-time while working full-time; of the remainder, nearly every full-time student works part-time. The Australian system accommodates all of these combinations, which is a great strength.

The report contains implicit assumptions that all students are young and are yet to embark upon a working career. This could not be further from the reality. Most Australians now start work at the age of 14, and their careers span school years and, in the case of those who proceed to university directly, their university years. The proportion and intensity of such part-time work is increasing. Employers accommodate their young employees' studies and location moves, and indeed the part-time working careers often develop into lifetime careers. I have data from multiple research projects on this matter, which is summarised in one of the references below. Yet in the Interim Report, student-working is referred to negatively, and as something to be deplored (p.77-78).

Movement from VET to higher education

In general there is only a cursory mention of VET – nor, really, should there be more, as the report is about higher education. However, there did need to be a demonstrated understanding of VET, which is lacking. A call for an 'integrated tertiary system' is misguided. VET and higher education are different in their purposes, student groups, study modes, curriculum, provider base, funding systems and governance. They are best kept separate, but with increased pathways. The Interim Report contains no suggestions for increasing pathways. No data are provided in the report on student movements, or on provisions made by higher education providers to accommodate VET qualifications. For example, nursing and early childhood are just two well-known areas where large number of students routinely progress from VET diplomas to higher education degrees, and it would have been useful to have mentioned these two areas as examples.

Three suggestions for improving pathways:

1. I suggest that you call a meeting of chairs of Academic Boards and/or Curriculum Committees at universities who would readily explain the systems they have for encouraging articulation from VET. For example at Federation University, new higher education program proposals must show how they do this.
2. Data on movements between the sectors could be obtained from existing databases such as the NCVER's Student Outcomes Survey, or, for young people, the LSAY longitudinal survey. Also, I am informed that the ABS has a Multi Agency Data Integration Project (MADIP), bringing together data from many different administrative collections, which in this case could include Total VET Activity and the Higher Education student data collection. The Unique Student Identifier, which every student has, would assist with this.
3. VET teachers/trainers have important potential for encouraging movement to higher education. Currently the qualifications of the VET teaching workforce are not high, compared with the late 20th century when, in Australia, most TAFE teachers undertook a degree-level teaching qualification while already working as teachers. Now, only a

proportion do so. Increased movement of students between VET and HE would be assisted by the presence of more VET teachers with a university education, who could convey to their students what higher education studies are like, thus helping to break down any perceived barriers. In some discipline areas, VET teachers hold higher-level qualifications in their subject areas, which probably assists student progression (I do not know of any research on this matter, however). The group ACDEVEG (the Australian Council of Deans of Education Vocational Education Group) consists of lecturers teaching higher-education VET pedagogy courses. I suggest you meet with ACDEVEG members (of which I am one) to explore this matter. We could consider adding into our programs a topic on how VET teachers can encourage and assist movement of their students into HE. ACDEVEG members, with their deep knowledge of VET, are also aware of articulation possibilities in a range of discipline areas. <https://www.acde.edu.au/networks-and-partnerships/acde-vocational-group/>

Other areas of substantive agreement or disagreement

I support the need to review the funding system in HE, but only in limited ways. I would not support systemic changes which could cause diversion from the real work of universities. There is, however, a need to change HECS-HELP rates for Commonwealth supported places as a matter of priority, particularly in arts, social sciences and business where the previous government attempted to discourage demand. Such degrees are as important as any other for an educated society and workforce, and the high fees could well be deterring students who had an interest in studying in those areas. Research is needed into this matter.

I support the provision of more financial support for students undertaking compulsory work placements, but do not support effort being put into the expansion of work placements to other subjects. As so many students work already, there is no need to provide placements for the purpose of developing students' employability skills. Students' employers are generally very accommodating of the need for students to take time off for compulsory placements, but there is no rationale for forcing students and their employers to accommodate placements that are unnecessary.

There is a need for better and more accessible statistical data on higher education. When researching a journal article comparing university degrees and apprenticeships in UK and Australia (referenced below), I found that the UK has much more easily accessible data on characteristics such as student age. Australia would do well to examine the UK's data reporting system.

Relevant articles of mine on the main topics covered above: (More references can be provided)

Smith, E. (2023). *How young people combine education and work: An under-explored phenomenon*. NORRAG News special issue #8, on The Education-Training-Work Continuum (ed. Michel Carton & Christine Hofmann), 61-64. <https://resources.norrag.org/resource/view/779/441> (Note: This paper summarises my major research projects on the topic. Several projects include university students.)

Smith, E. & Tuck, J. (2023). Do the qualifications of vocational teachers make a difference to their teaching? *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*. 28:1, 1-25. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13596748.2023.2166690>

Smith, E. (2022). Expanding or restricting access to tertiary education? A tale of two sectors and two countries. *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*. 27:3, pp 500-523. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13596748.2022.2076059>

Smith, E. & Brennan Kemmis, R. (2014). Credit transfer from VET to Higher Education: A pathways policy meets a roadblock. *Research in Post Compulsory Education*. 19(2), 230-244. (Note: This was written before the VET Fee-Help scandal emerged. It refers to much useful pathways literature.)