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Universities Accord Interim Report Response

1 September 2023

Dear Universities Accord Panel,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback to the interim report, and considering the substance of my submission to the earlier discussion paper.

My submission is made in a personal capacity and is not affiliated nor representative of any organisation.

Noting the panel's request for succinct submissions and high-level reflections my response to the interim report is focused on the system shifts articulated in the interim report.

My feedback is grounded primarily in longstanding interests and scholarship on matters of disability inclusion in Australian higher education, augmented by observations that emerged from doctoral study into Australian higher education policy-making ¹.

1. It will be an integrated tertiary system, with a commitment to access for everyone with the potential and application, achieving significant growth in pursuit of ambitious national skills and equity targets.

An integrated tertiary system should be accessible to everyone – not just those with 'potential and application'. An integrated system should be post-secondary and accommodate valid educational opportunities for all.

The caveat of '*potential and application*' implies a tertiary system with a higher education bias, that excludes those deemed to be of lesser ability. Those deemed to be deserving of a place in higher education have been drawn disproportionately from narrow social and demographic backgrounds. At various points across time, legitimate exclusion from higher education has been based on gender, race, religion and disability.

Whilst the Panel is highly unlikely to be thinking of who might be legitimately excluded by the framing of this system shift, a more deliberate and inclusive framing may send a clearer message to the sector of the magnitude of the task at hand. The placing of caveats that only some may have the underlying potential to succeed, or have the personal characteristics to apply themselves will legitimise system actors who pride themselves on exclusivity.

¹ Brett, M. (2020). The Heredity of Australian Higher Education. Doctoral dissertation, University of Melbourne.

2. First Nations will be at the heart of higher education.

No matter which direction post-accord higher education policy might take, this should be a non-negotiable policy ideal and objective. It is worth noting in this context that it is this group that has experienced the most sustained and pervasive exclusion, and why it is so important that when thinking of an integrated tertiary system that it be deliberately open and accessible to all.

3. There will be population parity in participation by 2035, supported by student-centred, needs-based funding.

It was heartening to see that claims of over representation of students with disabilities made in the discussion paper have tempered in the interim report. The numerator and denominator used in standard participation ratios for students with disabilities are not comparable, and have never been comparable². The overstated level of participation that arises from poor data collection has legitimised sustained under-investment on matters of disability in higher education.

In a context of sub-optimal higher education disability indicators and population reference values, the pursuit of parity for students with disabilities is problematic. There is a pressing need to reconceptualise disability in Australian higher education and devise more appropriate measures.

My personal preference is to adopt an ecological definition and approach to disability. An ecological framework recognises that disability is the product of interactions between people and their environments. There is a real risk in pursuit of parity for students with disabilities that the system drives to enrol as many persons with medicalised impairments as possible, at the expense of any meaningful reform to the learning environments in which they are enrolled.

The pursuit of parity of people with impairments runs the risk of continued under-investment in the more laudable aim of 'eliminating disability' from education. In language aligned with the Disability Discrimination Act, the higher education policy objective should be the more assertive elimination of direct and indirect discrimination.

It is already unlawful to develop or accredit curricula that excludes a person with disability from participation or subjects them to any other detriment (Disability Discriminating Act s22. (2A)). There is little to any substantive higher education investment in this objective beyond general expectations that this be funded via base funding,

The conceptual and policy focus from United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability to the Australian higher education Disability Support Program³ is on the provision of reasonable adjustments, or as this system shift frames things, needs-based funding. What is needed is less funding to enable needs-based adjustments, and stronger policy emphasis to support the elimination of discriminatory and disabling higher education environments.

² Pitman, T., Brett, M., & Ellis, K. (2023). Three decades of misrecognition: Defining people with disability in Australian higher education policy. *Disability & Society*, 38(2), 323-341.

³ See: Williams, A. R. (2016). Disability support in Australian higher education 1990–2009. Doctor of Philosophy, Melbourne School of Population and Global Health, University of Melbourne, and Brett, M., Knight, E., George, K., and Hildebrandt, M. (In press) University Student Engagement and Disability. (available on request)

4. There will be systematic investment in student support and equitable, efficient HELP arrangements.

Noting recent developments with proposed changes to the Higher Education Support Act that would mandate that universities have a dedicated 'student support policy'. The associated draft guidelines propose the imposition of financial penalties for universities who do not provide effective support for students. In this context it is worth clarifying where systemic investment is drawn from, and whether university incentives are appropriately structured and aligned.

Whilst I have been a proponent of improved accountability for progress against equity objectives⁴, the risk of financial penalties currently proposed is likely to lead to disinvestment in student support. Students more likely to fail will be less likely to be offered a place, negating the need to augment the support these cohorts may require.

An unpassed bill before parliament and draft guidelines still out for consultation should not be confused with the system shift identified, but does serve to highlight how difficult it will be to formulate a sustainable policy framework that systematically invests in student support. This challenge should be seen at a tertiary system level that ensures that students have effective support at every point of the system. This will involve much more than fining universities for individual instances of student failure.

5. Research will be reprioritised, to strengthen its foundations and bring about widespread impact through translation and use.

The long-term drift away from pure basic research to applied translational research has been misguided. The foundations for high impact research are in individual curiosity.

6. Learning and teaching will be transformed, with an ambitious commitment to student experience and use of technology.

There is a need to invest more heavily in curriculum that is inclusive and accessible. Experience and technology should be seen as part of an integrated redesign of learning and teaching rather than additional concepts bolted onto fixed conventional standards. I have argued with co-authors that a deliberately Accessible model of higher education is warranted⁵. Key elements of this model include: a tertiary system that supports life-long learning; better transitions from school to tertiary education and multiple entry, exit and re-entry points supported with learner profiles/passports; personalised curriculum; and a deep commitment to Accessibility and inclusion. If the system can adapt to the diverse circumstances associated with disability, the transformational benefits for all students will be profound.

⁴ Brett, M. (2018). Equity performance and accountability. Retrieved from National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education website <https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/publications/equity-performance-accountability>.

⁵ Pitman, T., & Brett, M. (2022). Disability and Australian higher education: The case for an Accessible model of disability support. *Australian Journal of Education*, 66(3), 314-325.

7. Higher education and vocational education will be connected through pathways, partnership and an up to date qualifications framework.

Impediments to more coherent connections between higher education and vocational education include differences in approaches to assessment. Better funded programs have more sophisticated and valid assessment regimes. For example, medical education is better funded than most other higher education programs and has made more headway than others in matters like programmatic assessment. With higher education better funded than vocational education, the differences are starker. There is potential to fund more reputable RTOs and public TAFES to work with more established universities in advancing the quality of assessment practices, with spill over benefits to the quality of vocational education, better pathways, and better experiences for students who articulate between sectors.

8. Re-skilling and lifelong learning will be provided through more modular, stackable qualifications, including microcredentials, with full scaffolding and pathways.

This system shift is well advanced. There is a need to have stronger policy guidance on the validity of assessment in microcredentials. Stackable qualifications will have reduced credibility and utility if they rely on credit derived from low quality and poorly assessed microcredentials.

9. A new approach to mission-based compacts will address future planning, distinctive place-based impact, and institutional governance responsibilities.

Australian higher education is becoming more internationally oriented. Effective pedagogy and technology allows for students to have a high quality education experience irrespective of where in the world they are located, or originate from. Mission-based compacts that are distinctively place based should recognise that institutions are anchored in specific geographies and histories, but are transcending local origins through global platforms and interconnections. In the words of eminent higher education scholar Burton Clark:

To localise higher education is to risk becoming a permanent higher education backwater⁶.

Mission-based compacts should seek to empower Australian universities to be locally, nationally and globally relevant, 'Glonacal'⁷ rather than just locally place-based.

10. National governance will be coordinated and forward-looking through a new Tertiary Education Commission.

An arms length independent tertiary education commission is a welcome development, but it must be framed and established with an appropriate open access tertiary system mandate that is relevant to all adults. Exclusionary caveats, or well-meaning but misguided pursuit of parity of impairments at the expense of the elimination of discrimination, will undermine TEC objectives if not corrected.

⁶ Clark, B. (1983) The higher education system: Academic organization in cross-national perspective. University of California Press. p242

⁷ Marginson, S. (2004). Competition and Markets in Higher Education: A 'Glonacal' Analysis. Policy Futures in Education, 2(2), 175–244. <https://doi.org/10.2304/pfie.2004.2.2.2>