

Dear Review Panel,

Priority Action 5

I strongly support the Interim Report's recommendation to improve university governance, particularly focusing on the membership of governing bodies and (as I said in my March submission) ensuring additional involvement of people with expertise in the business of universities. This is critical in order to rebuild a strong foundation for enabling other changes. In devising new legislation to enact this, it is important to make sure that at least some of these members are appointed independently to assist with accountability to the public.

We also need State governments to take seriously their role in the oversight of the universities in their State. While a hands-off approach may have been appropriate 20 years ago, changes in the sector mean that State governments are in effect the only mechanism for providing checks and balances to a university's operation and direction. State parliaments need to engage in dialogues with the universities in their State and understand, support and sometimes challenge their operation.

As requested by the Accord panel, I shall now focus on three areas in the Report.

3.1 National governance

Commendations: I strongly support the following areas that have been identified for further consideration by the Accord panel: the establishment of a Tertiary Education Commission (TEC) and its role to oversee development of a fit-for-purpose tertiary system, operating with a degree of independence, to advise government on policy reform and implementation ('long-term, coordinated, expert advice' – Go8 submission), support the ongoing partnership of the Accord, determine funding allocations (mission-based compacts), track progress on targets, consider future institutions, promote the student voice, establish a centre to research the sector itself, and oversee a National Learning & Teaching Committee.

Comments/Suggestions:

- **The Role and Significance of TEC:** The establishment of the TEC will be a critical part of the framework to ensure the success of the Accord. Its importance is that it will help to ensure the long-term broad value of higher education for Australia that spans many years, rather than short-term changes to the system that might have unintended consequences. By focusing on comprehensive long-term strategies, TEC can act as a stabilising force in shaping the future of higher education.
- **Coordination and Collaboration with Existing Bodies:** Consideration needs to be given to how TEC will work with TEQSA, ASQA and other bodies. We need a coordinated approach that does not frustrate institutions, government or the community. One bold suggestion worth exploring is having TEQSA report to TEC, or alternatively granting TEC an oversight role in relation to TEQSA's activities. This arrangement could help to maintain a unified vision.
- **Promoting Parity of Esteem:** In considering an aligned tertiary education system, I strongly support the comment about encouraging parity of esteem (p113). Recognising the distinct but equally valuable contributions of both TAFE and higher education is crucial for the overall growth and development of our education landscape. We need to measure and report the positive outcomes generated by both systems.

3.2 Institutional and collaborative governance

Commendations: I strongly support the following areas that have been identified for further consideration by the Accord panel: adopting and improving a code of practice for university governance, enhancing public reporting, empowering students and Indigenous people in all aspects of university operation, and providing more funding and independence to student unions.

3.3 Sustainable funding and financing

Commendations: I strongly support the following areas that have been identified for further consideration by the Accord panel: improving needs-based funding and recognising that some students need more support than others, recognising different costs of delivery, strengthening research capacity, ensuring true cost transparency, addressing the funding shortfall in the Job Ready Graduates (JRG) package, making the HELP scheme fairer (including a review of student financial contributions and ensuring that HELP debts are manageable), revitalising teaching and research infrastructure, and being transparent about and reporting on cross subsidisation of university activities.

Comments/Suggestions:

- **Regarding Employment Prospects for Science Graduates:** There are comments in the Report on p132 about employment prospects for science graduates. Studies by the Australian Council of Deans of Science (ACDS) and others have demonstrated that while only around half of science graduates find employment as traditional scientists, we should view this not as a negative outcome but as a testament to the versatility and value of their education. Employers across industries recognise and highly value the critical thinking, problem-solving and evidence evaluation skills that science graduates possess. These foundational skills are instrumental in supporting a diverse array of occupations throughout Australia. It is essential that our education system embraces and promotes the broader applicability of these skills beyond traditional science careers.
- **Enhancing Teaching Quality:** The Report rightly highlights that the community, governments and institutions have raised questions about the quality of teaching in higher education. The academic staff who deliver the teaching need time and support to reflect on and improve their teaching. (I am making a distinction here between the academic staff and the educational designers and other support people.) The number one complaint from academic staff at the frontline in universities is the current workload. The JRG has led to a cut in funding which makes it even more difficult from a financial point of view. There is very little leeway to experiment and innovate in education. I support the comment in the Report (p133) that, in addition to carrying out the day-to-day teaching, institutions need to have the financial capacity to also pursue teaching excellence and innovation.
- **Funding for Scholarship and Base Research Capacity:** In the context of my previous comment, the Report includes a very useful discussion on p134 about providing funding for base research capacity. When we acknowledge the importance of research-informed teaching (supported by base research capacity) and the desire to ensure that content and teaching methods remain at the cutting edge in universities (scholarship), then it makes a lot of sense to identify separate funding for 'scholarship, research and innovation' as suggested. Something along these lines should be supported in the system to ensure transparent and realistic funding of academic activities.

Additional comments

- **Refining Targets for Participation and Attainment:** While I support the establishment of targets for participation and attainment (p43), perhaps the targets need to be more finely

grained to address areas of underrepresentation in specific disciplines. For example, anecdotally medicine may have lower-than-average participation from low socioeconomic groups. By tailoring targets to address discipline-specific challenges, we can work towards more inclusive and equitable representation across a range of academic areas.

- **Ensuring Inclusivity in the Development of Compacts and Missions:** I support the discussions around compacts and missions in various places in the Report. The panel should consider how to make sure that these compacts/missions engage all staff at an institution, not just the executive leadership. If we are to truly embed differentiated missions, then it requires collective commitment, shared belief, and a sense of ownership from all stakeholders, including staff and students.
- **Next steps:** I strongly support the comments (p141) about establishing forums and working groups, with shared access to evidence and examples. There is a lot of good will in the sector about the Accord and the forums will help to enable progress and embed changes for the better.
- I have contributed to the ACDS submission in response to the Interim Report and I support the comments made about Learning & Teaching, Research and Funding in that submission.

I thank the panel for their very consultative approach to the Accord. In particular, I commend the panel for the recommendations about the immediate actions in the Five Priority areas, the many useful areas for further consideration, and the intention to have an ongoing dialogue.

Yours sincerely,

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Australian Award for Teaching Excellence (Physical Sciences) 2006

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