

Response to the Australian Universities Accord Interim Report

1st September 2023

As the peak student representative body at the University of Newcastle, the University of Newcastle Students' Association (UNSA) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the Interim Report of the Australian Universities Accord Panel. Overall, we support the holistic and progressive reforms proposed, and actions already in implementation, such as the repeal of the 50% pass rule outlined in the Job Ready Graduates package. We make the following submissions based on consultation with the elected 2023 Student Representative Council (SRC) members and direct student feedback. We also express our support for the submissions to the Accord made by the National Union of Students (NUS), particularly in the areas outlined below.

We applaud the Interim Report's focus on increasing outcomes for students from disadvantaged backgrounds including First Nations students, students with disabilities and those from regional and remote areas. As the University of Newcastle has a significant number of students who fit into these underrepresented categories, we support the Accord's finding that engaging with these students is essential for Australia's future, and also brings great strengths to universities and communities.¹

Addressing financial barriers to study

As discussed in the Interim Report, Work Integrated Learning (WIL) leads to better outcomes for students and enhances their study and training; however, unpaid WIL placements pose a considerable barrier for completion of tertiary studies. This has been pertinent over the past 18 months as rapid inflation, and a record 7% HECS-HELP indexation, has meant students undertaking unpaid WIL are subject to increased financial burdens as they are often unable to complete normal hours of paid employment.

While UNSA supports an increased focus on WIL as part of the university curriculum, this must come with adequate welfare considerations and support, whether from a university or government level. Unpaid student placements, particularly in the allied health fields where students must complete up to 1000 unpaid hours, are in some cases an exploitative practice. We submit they should be replaced in favour of programs which provide adequate financial compensation for students. Removing this financial barrier to study is essential in order to attract more people into tertiary study and to meet the expected demands for skilled labour as predicted in the Interim Report.

Present financial support for students in health-related disciplines, such as scholarships and subsidised accommodation, should be further expanded so all students have equitable access to appropriate support. Student representatives at UNSA have heard the experiences of many students who are required to travel, both to Sydney and regional centres, to complete their mandatory placement. This travel is often for a period of weeks and can leave students thousands of dollars out of pocket in accommodation and travel costs. Alternatively, students make long journeys back to

¹ For example, the University of Newcastle is first in the sector for number of full-time enrolments for Indigenous students. The University of Newcastle, *Annual Report* (Report, 31 March 2023) 4.

Newcastle on weekends or other days off placement for their casual jobs in order to maintain an income. This can inhibit those from financially disadvantaged backgrounds from completing particular degrees. This needs to change, starting with ending placement poverty for students.

WIL programs should be co-designed with student input to ensure they equitably address welfare concerns, with holistic consideration of the costs involved to students. This should include any required costs for accommodation, travel, parking, uniforms, equipment, and the like. Support for students should also be increased to tackle instances of unsafe working conditions for those completing placement. For example, ensuring students are aware of, and can easily access, safety measures and support when completing health-related placements at night-time in regional locations. This will require fostering close working relationships between universities and placement host organisations, and continually involving students in these discussions.

Raising student support payments above the poverty line

Financial barriers should also be addressed through reforms to the Australian welfare system as advocated for by the NUS, including “expanding Centrelink access by lowering the age of independence to 18 and lifting the rate above the poverty line”.² The PhD stipend must also be increased to align with minimum wage to support postgraduate students in completing their research and decrease their reliance on insecure work.³

Governance, SSAF and Student Voice

Student unions and associations provide essential services on campus. However, the fundamental power imbalance between student organisations and universities results in insecure funding, and many organisations must negotiate funding to continue operations on a yearly basis. Despite this, student organisations are shouldered with expectations from universities to maintain a high level of student experience. UNSA is a not-for-profit organisation which is entirely SSAF funded. Due to our relatively small size, there are minimal commercial opportunities for UNSA to pursue to generate income. This makes us incredibly reliant on a regular flow of SSAF funding.

UNSA’s current operations see us provide weekly free and discounted food services to students, organise small and large-scale student events, publish student media, operate the democratically elected SRC and provide management and oversight for Clubs & Societies.⁴ Within our agreement to provide these services at the University of Newcastle, UNSA is subject to rigorous reporting requirements, without the same level of scrutiny and transparency of SSAF spending being placed on

² National Union of Students, Submission to the Australian Universities Accord, *Interim Report*, 29 August 2023, pg 2.

³ Parliament of Australia, *Increase Research Scholarship Rates for PhD Students*, Parl Petition No EN5085 (2023).

⁴ See generally UNSA, *About UNSA* <<https://unsa.org.au/about/>>; Clubs and Societies were previously managed through a University of Newcastle body called Student Central, but in 2021 the responsibility to manage clubs and societies was transferred to UNSA (excluding sporting societies which are managed by NUSport, a controlled entity of the University). However, as UNSA continues to see the number and size of clubs grow, we are still required to go through a formal negotiation process with the University to receive additional SSAF to fund this growth, creating challenges for budgets and administrative burdens on UNSA staff.

other SSAF-allocated entities within the University. Further, responsibility for key events on the University calendar has been transferred to UNSA without the provision of adequate additional funding to meet expected outcomes and campus activations.

While UNSA welcomes increased SSAF reporting and student consultation requirements, as per the 2022 SSAF Guidelines, we argue that these do not satisfactorily provide sufficient transparency of SSAF allocation.⁵ The present system of student consultation as outlined in the Guidelines is insufficient and, in UNSA's opinion, not rigorously adhered to.⁶ We submit that there should be an increase in direct representation of student interests in SSAF allocation. For instance, the University of Newcastle SSAF Advisory Group is currently constituted by 10 members, two members being students and only one of which is required for quorum. We propose that students should constitute 50% of SSAF Advisory Groups, and for there to be greater impartiality between the panel and the stakeholders bidding for SSAF funding. Increasing student involvement in SSAF governance is crucial to ensure student money is spent appropriately on programs that meet the evolving needs of students at each institution.

UNSA joins calls from the NUS for a return of student money to student hands, and supports proposals for the Student Services and Amenities Fee (SSAF) being collected directly by democratically elected independent student organisations (i.e. student unions/associations), rather than universities who hold the power in determining allocation of these funds. While safeguards and accountability measures would continue to be crucial under this model to ensure SSAF is spent for a proper purpose, it would give students greater control over how their money is spent. Alternatively, a minimum 50% of SSAF should be allocated to student unions across the country as per the approach in Western Australia.⁷ Students should ultimately be directly responsible for determining how their fees are spent across various non-academic programs and support systems and be able to tailor this to the needs of their own campuses and student cohorts.

UNSA also supports other reforms proposed in the Interim Report to improve the governance of universities and to increase student representation in peak governance bodies. We also support the suggested implementation of a student charter and a duty of care model to ensure student safety on campuses, particularly in approaches to sexual assault and sexual harassment (SASH). Universities should take a student-centred approach to decision-making, change processes, design of curriculum, spaces and programs on campuses, among other priority areas. Listening to the experiences of students, especially groups facing additional barriers such as First Nations and international students, is key to co-designing the future of the sector.

We thank the Accord for their thoughtful consideration of our submission.

Georgie Cooper

President, University of Newcastle Students Association
On behalf of the UNSA Student Representative Council

⁵ 'The Guidelines' being the Student Services, Amenities, Representation and Advocacy Guidelines.

⁶ It is the opinion of UNSA that universities do not take sufficient steps to comply with student consultation requirements, and consultation with elected student representatives to date has been minimal.

⁷ See *Universities Legislation Amendment Act 2016 (WA)* ss 42, 79, 108, 160.