

Executive Summary

I thank the panel for their work on preparing the Universities Accord Interim Report. I am also appreciative of the chance to provide my feedback on the interim report, in the hope that the issues that are raised here can be considered in the discussions leading to final report. I group my responses below according to some of the themes suggested on the consultation page.

I. Three biggest reflections on the Interim Report

1. Although achieving equity and fair access is all well and good and are noble goals, I feel that the discussions are often starry-eyed and skirt the following hard truths:
 - Intellectual capacity. Increasing the proportion of the population that have access to university education means that some people that would not have been admitted in the past will now be admitted. I am not aware of any evidence indicating that the intellectually capacity of the general populace is growing at the same rate as the anticipated rate of increase in university attendance, whether someone is from a low SES background or not would be irrelevant. Some people are just not suited to study in a one-size-fits all university system like what we have in Australia and many other countries. Perhaps lessons can be learned from the Dutch higher education system, where there are different types of universities that cater to different capabilities, interests and career aspirations.
 - The discussions focus only on meeting target figures and none on what sort of distribution of quality is expected or desired from the increased proportion of university graduates. Is meeting the target with a large proportion of graduates of passable quality sufficient for our needs and desirable, or do we really want a high proportion of high quality graduates? If it is the former are there no better pathways for most school leavers to obtain a better future than going to university? What sort of support system would be needed to achieve the desired composition of graduates and how would this all be funded considering that university resources are already stretched as they are?
2. The priority action items should include an increase to research funding to levels comparable to other leading economies. The declining and now abysmal level of funding in Australia should be a national shame. Also, the research evaluation process needs to be reformed so that research funding is equitable and does not become a runaway system where a large proportion of funding becomes concentrated on a small proportion of researchers and institutions.

3. The priority action items should also include concrete plans to reduce the dependence and exposure of Australian universities and capability to conduct research on international student tuition fees. International students should receive the resources and support that their fees paid for and not have it diverted for subsidising university research.
4. As raised in other responses to the interim report, the view of higher education in the report leans too much towards a purely utilitarian view. For instance, on p. 11 it is stated that “Courses must be designed with the skills needs of industry in mind”. To what extent would it be appropriate for public funding to be used to benefit for-profit and private industries? Given the existential challenges faced by the current and future generations with the threats of climate change, misinformation and artificial intelligence, critical thinking skills are becoming more important than ever. But the interim report seems to suggest that the main purpose of higher education is merely to serve economic needs and generating wealth rather than societal good.

II. Areas of substantive agreement or disagreement

Part 2: Areas for further consideration

H. Research, innovation and research training (page 19)

The panel recommends a ‘light touch’ automated metrics-based research quality assessment systems. It is not clear what ‘light touch’ refers to and why a metric-based system is still being recommended despite the fact of well-known issues with the use of metrics in research assessment and the perverse behaviours that they induce. Following “Goodhart’s Law” these metrics can and have been manipulated by individual researchers, universities and journals alike to improve their citation counts, league table rankings and impact factors. This is in contradiction to the recommendation in the final report from the recent review of the Australian Research Council Act. In recommendation 10 of that final report for that review, the panel states that “We do not recommend that ERA and EI be replaced by a metrics-based exercise because of the evidence that such metrics can be biased or inherently flawed in the absence of expert review and interpretation.” Unfettered reliance on metrics will create a research environment where research funding and important decision making becomes dominated by careerists and their cliques rather than genuine innovative thinkers and scholars.

The reliance on metrics other than as a supplement to qualitative considerations and diverse expert judgement will surely lead to disastrous outcomes.