

A Response to the Australian Universities Accord Interim Report

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Disclaimer

This submission is the personal views of [REDACTED] taking from [REDACTED] experience at [REDACTED] a student organisation and does not necessarily reflect the views of [REDACTED] as an organisation.

Due to the timing of the accord submissions and a range of other contributing factors there was not sufficient time for this submission to be presented to a [REDACTED] Board meeting and endorsed by a vote.

It represents the views of [REDACTED] as an individual and not USASA as an organisation.

About the University of South Australia Student Association (USASA)

Established in 1994, the University of South Australia Student Association (USASA) is a not-for-profit, student-run organisation that exists to support the student body at UniSA. We represent over thirty-six thousand students across our 6 campuses.

The University of South Australia Student Association (USASA) is a non-profit student-owned organisation that strives to provide a diverse and exciting university experience for the students of UniSA. USASA provides services including academic advocacy, financial wellbeing, student clubs, social events, student magazine, grants, University branded clothing and student leadership.

USASA's aim is to empower students to shape their own University journey. USASA is run by the students of UniSA and is supported by employed staff responsible to the USASA Board. The USASA Board comprises 15 student representatives who are elected annually by students of UniSA.

USASA is funded through an annual grant from the University from Student Services and Amenities Fees (SSAF) collected from all undergraduate domestic students.

Empowering Student Voice

University of South Australia Student Association (USASA) recognises that students are the single biggest stakeholders in any higher education institution. It is integral to the good governance and function of a university that the student voice is integrated throughout all levels of university decision-making.

USASA's Student Voice initiative is an ambitious project which aims to create a grassroots approach to student representation at the University of South Australia.

Student Voice can be summarised by the basic principle that whenever and wherever decisions about students are being made at a university, students should be part of that decision.

Run by USASA, Student Voice aims to connect and support student representatives from across the University. The service provides best-practice resources and networks for students and staff involved in student representation and decision-making at all levels of the University.

Student Voice addresses the inherent barriers to being involved in university decision-making that student face and offers a fresh perspective on how the single largest stakeholder of any university can be involved in its Governance.¹

This model should be standard practice throughout universities, involving students in all decisions which affect them and bringing valuable lived experience into the room.

Student organisations across the country provide have experienced what it means to get students involved in student representation from a grassroots level for many years and are best placed to assist in enhancing the student voice. Regrettably, the future and funding of these organisations remain uncertain. Every year, student organisations must engage in negotiations with university management to secure funding, creating an imbalanced power dynamic that limits their autonomy in ensuring university accountability.

Ensuring Equitable Funding for Student Organizations

Currently, the distribution of SSAF to student organisations is unequal, with larger, wealthier metropolitan campuses typically exercising greater control over SSAF revenue compared to technical and regional universities. University of South Australia, for instance, allocates only 44.6% of its SSAF to student representatives, while campuses like Western Sydney University only receive 6.9%. This disparity is inequitable and necessitates action to provide all students with equal opportunities.

Student organisations are one of the biggest providers of non-academic services at universities and greatly contribute to university life outside of the classroom. In an era when information and indeed education are readily available at the click of a mouse, the student experience beyond the classroom is what makes universities unique.

Student organisations, especially on those which take the not-for-profit incorporated association model like USASA are extremely efficient and understand their membership best. Well-structured student organisations are dynamic, adaptable and well-informed making them the best aspect of any institution to enhance the student experience but this can only be done through appropriate funding.

To empower student voices effectively, it is imperative that student organisations have secure, legislatively mandated minimum funding from the Student Services and Amenities Fee (SSAF) and are shielded from the threat of retaliation. Moreover, these student organisations should be integrated within existing university governance structures such as University Councils and Academic Boards.

¹USASA Student Voice, USASA Website available at: <https://usasa.sa.edu.au/representation/studentvoice/>

A National Student Charter for Accountability and Safety

The development of a national student charter is a vital step towards safeguarding students' rights in education, safety, and well-being on campus. This charter must prioritise student safety and hold universities accountable for their treatment of students. For a charter to be effective it must be enforceable through actions taken by TEQSA or the Student Ombudsman.

Currently, students feel that Universities are unaccountable on these fronts. While TEQSA is meant to hold universities accountable against the Higher Education Standards they have shown a distinct unwillingness to enforce these standards. The standards themselves are not prescriptive enough and a student charter would fill in these gaps in rights and give an empowered national regulator a list of enforceable expectations.

I recommend a student charter include key safety & welfare-oriented rights that any student must have on campus.

Addressing the Persistence of Sexual Assault

The release of the National Student Safety Survey (NSSS) in 2022 revealed distressingly little progress in addressing issues like the prevalence of sexual assault at universities, despite five years of advocacy by student leaders. Stories in the report, such as "I was more traumatised by the reporting process than the assault," highlight the urgency of the matter. TEQSA and universities have demonstrated a lack of accountability to students, with TEQSA, in particular, failing to wield its regulatory powers to enforce standards related to student safety. A well-resourced, easily accessible body, whether within TEQSA or a new Commission, is imperative to address student complaints and impose sanctions on universities displaying negligence in matters affecting students.

Recommendations

1. Enact legislation mandating a national minimum SSAF allocation rate of 50% to student organisations.
2. Create a Federal Government taskforce to establish a Duty of Care code to be imposed on Universities.
3. Allow the Commonwealth Ombudsman to investigate student complaints against Higher Education institutions.
4. Empower a national regulator to issue penalties for Universities who do not investigate or provide support after SASH incidents.
5. All University institutions should have at least three student representatives on University Councils including an undergraduate, postgraduate and the student President (ex-officio)

Sincerely,

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