Submission to the Australian Universities Accord Interim Report

On behalf of the Australian Chairs of Academic Boards and Senates*

This submission is framed within Section 3.2 of the Accord's interim report

(Institutional and collaborative governance)

All Australian universities also have a body, known either as the Academic Board or the Academic Senate, which is charged with the Academic Governance of the organisation. This body is distinct from the Council (also sometimes known as the Senate), which is charged with Corporate Governance. This submission is made on behalf of the Chairs of Academic Boards and Senates across the nation. For consistency, we refer to the two bodies as the Academic Board and the Council respectively.

We look forward to a more extensive discussion of Academic Governance and the role of Academic Boards in the Accord Final Report.

Academic Boards are:

1. Enshrined in legislation for all self-accrediting universities.
2. The custodians of Quality Assurance for our major "products": our degrees and our research. The business of a university is based on its ability "to determine for itself on academic grounds who may teach, what may be taught, how it shall be taught, and who may be admitted to study" (Sweezy v. New Hampshire, 354 U.S. 234 (1957), p. 263). Quality assurance at universities is based on these abilities, which are reflected in the TEQSA Higher Education Standards Framework (HESF). Quality assurance has three natural groups, "providers of products/services", "expertise, support, monitoring and challenge" and "objective assurance and advice"- see diagram below. University Faculties/Schools are the providers, with central portfolios providing expertise and support, while Academic Boards monitor, challenge and undertake internal assurance. We refer to Burton Clark's (1983)[1] "triangle of coordination" of academic governance: https://www.jstor.org/stable/i341364.
3. The natural representatives for the two most dynamically involved stakeholder groups in the process -the university staff and the students – who are not identified as stakeholders in the Accord document. In particular, the academic staff have deep expertise in their discipline areas, pedagogy, teaching delivery and links with current international research, independent of their place of employment. These need to be recognised as a critical part of the integrity of academic awards. We refer to UNESCO Recommendation Concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel (1997).
4. A focal point for ensuring that each university's education and research offerings fulfil standards agreed with industries and professions.
5. A focal point also for ensuring that each university's offerings fulfil the standards that the scholarly disciplines expect of academic learning, teaching, and research.
6. A natural academic input into University Councils. Academic Boards provide expertise on academic, student learning and research matters to help inform external Council members. Recognition in the Accord of the need that Councils receive strong academic input could be strengthened by, for example, creating a national framework of Academic Boards.
7. Recognised by TEQSA as a natural quality assurance mechanism, and as a natural body for oversight of students at risk and the effectiveness of support mechanisms. See Guidance note: Academic governance | Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (teqsa.gov.au).

We must have quality institutional Academic Governance at the national level:

8. Reduce risk to the integrity of the national system, in particular during a time of turbulence in higher education in general and while we transition to a new model.
9. Strong and independent Academic Governance is needed in all initiatives proposed in the Accord paper. Looking just at the five priority areas, it is crucial: Extending access by creation of Regional University Centres; changing pass scales to support equity; support of First Nations students; minimising risk of structural adjustments to the sector while transitioning to a high equity and high participation system; and improvement of university governance. The need for sound Academic Governance pervades the whole document.

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[1] Clark, B.R. (1983). *The higher education system: Academic organization in cross-national perspective*. University of California Press.

10. The protection of academic freedom is enshrined in the French report and subsequent legislation: good Academic Governance will help value, implement and preserve that.
11. To ensure high quality education to all Australian students, to equip them and the nation for the challenges of the future, informed by the latest research from the both national and international perspective.
12. To maintain oversight of student performance, monitor students at risk and assess effectiveness of student support.
13. TEQSA's "threshold standards" approach has enshrined a minimum acceptable role for academic governance as the defender of academic quality and reputation in each Australian university. This role may be extended to a more aspirationally-framed future model for sectoral regulation, but it must not be lost or diluted.
14. To ensure that the international reputation and competitiveness of Australian higher education awards remains high, and attractive to international students, a robust national Academic Governance and Quality Assurance framework is critical. This is particularly so since the structure of our degrees is not completely aligned with international comparators.

We propose:

- That the final Accord document recognise that robust Academic Governance, alongside Corporate Governance, is crucial to the sound functioning of the Australian Tertiary Sector.
- Whilst recognising that our institutions may have different but equally valid models of academic governance, support is given to the development of a national code of practice, and we propose that the Tertiary Education Commission should be tasked with ensuring this. This could involve a governance model mapping project across self-accrediting and non-self-accrediting institutions.

Figure: The IIA's Three Lines Model – modified for University Governance
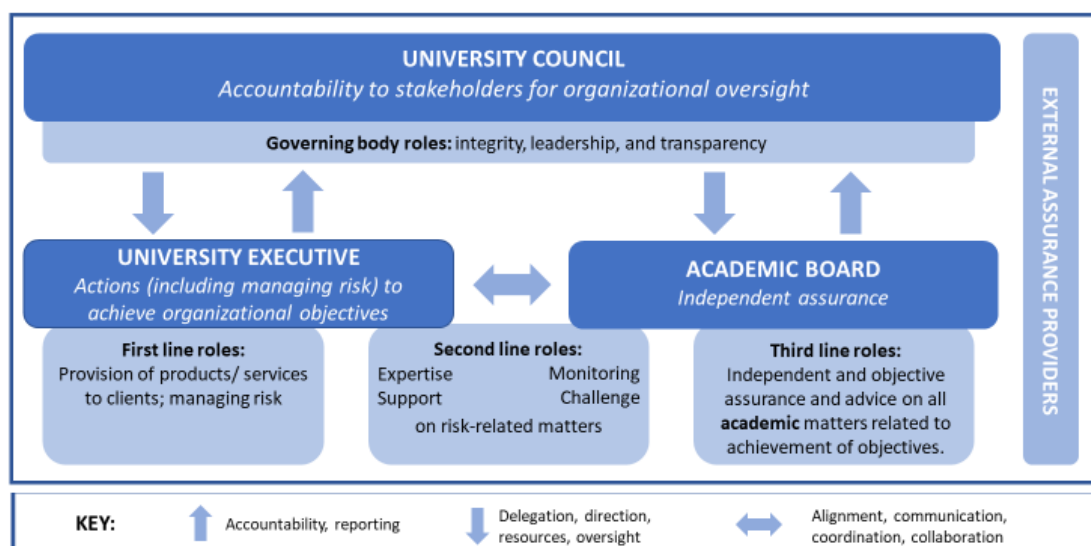
*The University of Melbourne Academic Board has indicated that it does not wish to be party to this submission.