

Australia Universities Accord – Interim Report 2023

Institute for Culture and Society, Western Sydney University

Response

The Institute for Culture and Society, Western Sydney University is encouraged by the breadth and depth of thinking brought out in the Interim Report. Our focus in this response is on matters pertaining to research. These are connected to issues of governance, administration and teaching as well as broader national and international economic and social conditions and policy settings.

Interim Report findings

The report identifies baseline measures that index Australia's funding contribution to research from government and industry relative to OECD countries (p. 92). Expenditures is low yet university R&D is quite high. The claim that no additional funding is available for research is a weak one. Australia must establish at least median parity with OECD levels of research funding.

Review of tax concessions is one government lever to incentivise low levels of industry investment in research. Corporate tax reform is also long overdue. Financial services, mining industries and global tech firms need to be taxed in ways that reduce the spiralling inequality between corporate profits, private and inherited wealth, and the working poor (Piketty 2014). Revenue would then be made available to address social justice, climate change and research in higher education, to name some of the high-level issues in need of urgent attention and no-nonsense policy.

Universities can also better manage their budgets to redistribute internal funding to support research. We address this matter below.

Governance and Values

The Accord Interim Report is rightly concerned about the culture and structural logic of governance in universities and the sector. The use of external consultants by universities should be subject to a full review across the sector, in line with current Federal, State and Territory internal reviews.

Universities need to address this matter, which goes to the heart of integrity – a value held across the sector. Tax-payer contributions along with fees charged for degrees should not be spent on consultancy firms, which often provide template 'advice, recommendations, and insights' to universities (Khalili 2023, Mazzucato and Collington 2023). Universities are in possession of relevant knowledge to guide and inform strategic objectives both internally and to government and industry.

Practically, it is not a good optic for university boards to be populated by members with backgrounds in the consultancy sector, particularly the Big Four. Future directions of the university should reflect a commitment to a public mission, broadly understood.

Future Growth and Workforce

The Public Universities Australia submission to the Accord Discussion Paper noted 'Australia is the only OECD country that experienced a continuous "brain drain" for over 60 years' (p. 18). This predicament raises several questions:

1. How to align the national focus of the Accord with international contexts for academic excellence, chiefly in research, which provide pathways for international academics to move to Australia?
2. How to coordinate a national plan that addresses the substantial growth of tertiary and higher education expected in the sector, which requires an available and suitably qualified labour force?
3. Given the predominantly national research focus of proposals submitted to the ARC, what scope is there to develop a scheme that promotes international collaboration that facilitates pathways for international academics to spend a period of sustained time in Australia?

Review of the visa and immigration system is a mechanism to support an increased migration of international academic staff. Australia already has a high level of international collaboration in research. National and institutional policies can provide incentives to scale this up to exchanges of 1–3 years and fellowships with potential for conversion into continuing positions.

Funding options to support such policy initiatives may be found by attending to suggestions outlined above (Governance and Values).

Knowledge Diversity

Importantly, the diversity of knowledge practices is central to the flourishing and renewal of disciplines, which feed into and inform R&D. The regimes of measure that determine discourses and institutional practices of research excellence and impact are poor devices for capturing the breadth and depth of innovation across the disciplines. Universities need a policy framework that supports them to balance strategic research planning addressed to community needs and disciplinary performance against the need to compete in international ranking systems.

Exercises such as the Australian Research Council's earlier incarnations of journal rankings coupled with an institutional culture that valorises external research income above the substantive content of research collaborations, findings and outputs result in a bias that impacts on hiring and employment policies and decisions. This is especially noticeable in the case of international hiring practices, which tend to favour researchers and academics from countries with relatively similar systems of determining research excellence (the UK being the most pronounced in terms of system equivalence and source of international hires).

A consequence of this tendency is that universities gravitate toward a reproduction of the same, which is predicated on colonial history. This does not bode well for a national academic culture and economy that aspires to be founded on and supportive of a diversity of knowledge practices. Follow-on impacts then manifest in Australia's capacity to increase and diversify the range of R&D activity, which has economic implications.

HASS-STEM Collaboration

One primary site for disciplinary innovation is collaboration between HASS and STEM disciplines. The ongoing review of the ARC presents an opportunity to devise policies that encourage and institute such collaborations. We recommend a special funding scheme for basic research be developed that supports the objective of increasing collaboration between HASS and STEM. This may encompass cross-body collaboration and policy dialogue between the ARC and NHMRC.

Dedicated government block funding of HASS-STEM research initiatives distributed equably to research strength areas across the sector would enable the foundations and preparatory research to be undertaken that results in submissions to the ARC/NHMRC.

Ongoing policy attention is required to break down the silo mentality that continues to pervade the sector to the detriment of invention and innovation. The Australia Universities Accord should not hesitate to make this among its primary objectives. Student and staff mobility will also benefit from clear policy initiatives that support such an endeavour.

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