Response to the Australian Universities Accord Interim Report

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Submission by:

Professor Jillian Hamilton PhD, PFHEA Queensland University of Technology ██████████████
Dr Andrea Adam, FHEA Associate Director Academic Development University of Tasmania ██████████████
Honorary Associate Professor Marina Harvey PhD, PFHEA Australian National Teaching Fellow Faculty of Arts, Macquarie University ██████████████

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Executive Summary

This response to the Interim Report focuses on Chapter 2.4: Excellence in learning, teaching and student experience and responds to two key themes.

Our **key reflections** on this report are:

1. The pivotal **role of Academic Developers** in achieving the aims of the Accord, particularly in chapter 2 is omitted and needs to be acknowledged in the final report.

2. A **proven, successful, transferrable model** for recognition and sharing best practices in learning and teaching is available, and enables all of the Considerations for Change (p.89), in particular a. and c..

Areas of substantive agreement in the response include a strong endorsement for:

- **Consideration for Change: b.** (p. 89): "[enhance] the professional development of academic staff in teaching, especially for those newly employed to teach" and the call for proposals that reflect b. (p.90): "encouraging all institutions to provide high-quality accredited professional development in teaching for academic staff…,"

- **Consideration for Change: d.** (p. 89) namely, "rewarding institutions taking a leadership role in learning and teaching, fostering excellence and improved performance across the sector".

- **Call for proposals** (p.90) regarding
  - establishing a National Learning and Teaching Committee (within the Tertiary Education Commission)
  - rewarding institutions taking a leadership role in learning and teaching, fostering excellence and improved performance across the sector.

Written response to the Interim report

Introduction

We thank the panel for the opportunity to respond to the Australian Universities Accord Interim Report. We respond as Directors of the national Advancing Academic Development awards (https://www.advancingacademicdevelopment.net/) and focus on:

- *Chapter 2.4: Excellence in learning, teaching and student experience*, specifically
  - *2.4.4.2 Sharing best practice and driving high-quality learning and teaching* and
  - *2.4.4.3 Incentivizing and valuing all academic roles* and endorse considerations for change.

Theme: Reflections

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*We **strongly endorse** the spirit of:*

Consideration for Change b: "Enhancing the professional development of academic staff in teaching, especially for those newly employed to teach" (p. 89)

And we strongly agree with the potential proposal b: "encouraging all institutions to provide high-quality accredited professional development in teaching for academic staff…," (p.90)

Reflection 1. We are concerned that the Interim Accord does not currently acknowledge the pivotal role of Academic Developers in achieving these aims.

Firstly, the interim report discussion states that, "the Review has heard of under-investment and under-prioritisation of teaching capability" (p.88). **We point to evidence that substantiates this anecdotal claim** in the research of Fraser and colleagues (2019), which concluded that a quarter of Australian universities offer less than two days of teaching induction for new staff.[1]

We reflect that the role of Academic Developers needs to be acknowledged in the final report. This is an area that the Interim Report discussion has not, so far, addressed in substance. **We offer a**

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[1] Fraser, K., Ryan, Y., Bolt, S., et.al. (2019). Contemporary induction to teaching in Australian universities. International Journal for Academic Development, 24(3), 286-300.

rationale for the pivotal role that Academic Developers play in strengthening teaching capability across the higher education workforce, for inclusion in the body of the report (in 2.4.4.3).

That is:

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Academic Developers are key to achieving the goal of promoting higher education capability

Academic Developers (also known as Professional Developers, Educational Developers, Educational Designers, Learning Designers) are pivotal in:

- leading the professional development of academic staff in teaching
- promoting collaboration and sharing of best practice, and
- ensure continuously up-to-date teaching knowledge and practices in the face of rapid advances in higher education pedagogies, curriculum and assessment design, strategies for supporting student learning, and new technologies.

Unlike research training (which is inherent within higher degrees by research (HDR) programs), the higher education sector does not require that academics undergo systematic teacher training as a prerequisite for teaching in universities. Therefore, it is imperative that every academic engages in academic development within their university and benefits by gaining the knowledge, skills, and practices that are needed to become effective educators. Every academic that engages in academic development brings enormous benefit to their students and to their university– whether by more clearly understanding the attributes and processes of learning; by taking a scholarly and evidence-based approach to teaching; or by pursuing excellence in supporting, inspiring, and assessing learners. Since every academic will go on to teach and support many thousands of students over the course of their careers, the reach and impact of academic development expands a thousand-fold. Of all the investments that universities make, there is therefore no greater return on investment than academic development. It has a profound impact on student ratings of their study experience.

As a nation focused on delivering a world-leading learning experience and building a contemporary, internationally competitive Higher Education sector, we must ensure a highly skilled, inspired, and inspiring, Higher Education workforce. While academic development is imperative for early career and sessional staff, it needs to be ongoing throughout the careers of academics as our teaching methods, new technologies, and community expectations advance and change over time.

Hamilton, J.; Harvey, M.; and Adam, A. (2023). *Advancing Academic Development: A strategic and sustainable model for recognizing and sharing good practice to promote excellence, build capability, and further learning and teaching leadership*

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Reflection 2. We offer a model of recognition that enables all of the considerations for change, in particular a and c.

The interim report discussion states that, "Currently, improvements in teaching practice and the student experience are often left to individual institutions and educators, rather than any systemic or collaborative approach to raising quality. This fails to capitalise on the many elements of good teaching within individual institutions that could be shared across the sector." (2.4.4.2)

In support of this issue, we suggest that an opportunity exists through the Accord to ensure that exemplars of good teaching are not only celebrated, recognised, and rewarded, but that best practices are documented (in written, video, and other multimedia forms) and shared across the sector to influence and inspire others through an open access, online repository of best practice. We also strongly suggest the report explicitly identifies mechanisms that can facilitate collaboration and sharing best practice. Such mechanisms are most effective when they are systematic and transferrable so that they can be applied across all levels of learning in higher education.

We offer **a proven, successful, systematic, and transferrable model** for sharing best practices in learning and teaching and teaching (enabling 2.4.4.2). This model may be applied across all levels of learning in higher education–including student learning; sessional, early career, and mature academics; academic developers, learning designers and technologists, and learning leaders. This model is potentially transferable to professional body awards and fellowships, institutional awards and recognition schemes, current approaches such as national awards (AAUT) (in which, currently, only peer reviewers gain insights into the practices), and new and emerging reward and recognition schemes.

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Features of the AAD recognition model

Application
- Applicants provided a *structured written case*, explaining the why, how, and what of the initiative/practices, evidencing:

  - Impact on students, peers, the sector, and (where applicable) industry/community (with quantitative and qualitative evidence).
  - Innovation
  - Scholarly underpinnings and a rigorous approach to evaluation of the practice;

Assessment
- In this model, rigorous, criteria-based peer assessment of the submissions occur at two points:
  - short-listing of written applications
  - judging of excellence via public presentations (with peer and panel assessments)

Inbuilt dissemination strategies
- Inherent strategies to disseminate and share excellence are built into the awards structure to increase impact, inspire others, and drive innovation. This includes:

  - public presentations of shortlisted practices at the award ceremony, and
  - video-captured presentations (or other short, sharp, informative multimedia resources) published in an online archive. (E.g.: see the Pecha Kucha-style approach of the Australasian Academic Development Good Practice Awards).

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The model fulfills the following aims:

- Quality assurance through clear criteria and rigorous peer assessment and benchmarking.

- Supporting diversity and inclusion through award categories that recognise the scope of teaching practice and practices.

- Encourages sharing and dissemination of knowledge and practices of excellence in learning and teaching.

From our extensive, long-term experience in facilitating awards and recognition (AAD, BLASST and STARS awards), we conclude that such an approach is not only valued by the sector, it also

- *Incentivises excellence* in University teaching and learning;

- *Drives innovation* amongst university teachers and institutions, to ensure a contemporary, high standard of education that is internationally competitive;

- *Builds the capacity of academics and universities* by highlighting best practice that others can adopt;

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- *Establishes nationally recognised metrics for teaching excellence*, given the rigorous, cross-institutional nature of the assessment process, and

- *Elevates the status and profile of teaching, student learning, and student success* in line with the high value placed on research by universities.

Theme: Areas of substantive agreement

We strongly endorse the following items:

- **Consideration for Change: a.** (p. 89) namely, "encouraging and rewarding effective learning and teaching practices…" and suggest that, in light of the many rapidly changing aspects of higher education, the scope of reward and recognition not be limited to digital technologies, or to frontline teachers.

- **Consideration for Change: d.** (p. 89) namely, "rewarding institutions taking a leadership role in learning and teaching, fostering excellence and improved performance across the sector" but argue that insight into such practices must not be limited to a small selection/judging committee (as is currently the case with the AAUT awards) but that, the awarded practices should be documented and shared across the sector within a repository of best practice to influence and inspire others. We also caution against limiting reward to performance-based funding (due to concerns for equity of opportunity) and propose reward should be in the form of accolades that contribute to reputational status and standing (which influences student choice).

- **Call for proposals** (p.90) regarding:
  - establishing a National Learning and Teaching Committee (within the Tertiary Education Commission)
  - rewarding institutions taking a leadership role in learning and teaching, fostering excellence and improved performance across the sector.

- **The proposal to launch a competitive funding program** across multiple institutions (universities and TAFEs) with material produced to be available under open access (p. 90). However, we advocate that this recommendation be amended to explicitly state that the funding be dedicated to *research and scholarship into the advancement of learning and teaching* and encourages cross institutional collaboration and knowledge sharing.

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