



A submission in response to the
Australian Universities Accord Interim
Report

From the RMIT University Student
Union (RUSU)

Executive Summary

RUSU is in favour of proposed priorities in the interim report that are aimed at supporting students into higher education, particularly those priorities that focus on removing financial barriers to access and that commit funding to ensuring underrepresented students have access to university services that will support them to complete their education.

We are also in support of measures to strengthen student voice across the sector, including a legislated increased Student Services and Amenities Fees (SSAF) allocation for independent student organisations, and increased oversight of the sector through the creation of a national student charter and a higher education commission.

If the final report is to achieve the goals of increasing access to higher education, it must include commitments to the priorities listed above, as well key performance indicators for institutions and measures for success.

Our Priorities

STUDENT VOICE, INSTITUTIONAL GOVERNANCE AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Students are the largest stakeholder in the higher education sector and their voice is essential for a well-run system. Independent, student-run organisations, such as student unions, are best positioned to represent the needs of students. Independent, student-run organisations already supply vital support services to students and advocate on behalf of the student body to ensure universities are acting on key issues, such as sexual assault, student welfare and learning and teaching quality. These student organisations require predictable and guaranteed funding of at least 50% of Student Services and Amenities Fee income, in order to provide consistent services to students.

Yearly negotiation for funding allows universities to dictate the activities and scope of student unions, limiting their autonomy and preventing unions from maximising the effectiveness of their resources due to the insecurity of yearly negotiation for funding. To give strength to the voices of students, it is crucial that student unions receive reliable and legally established funding.

Student voice must also be integrated into the established administrative and governance frameworks of universities, such as University Councils and Academic Boards, recognising that students are experts in their own educational experience. Consistent funding for student unions will ensure that students in representative roles are properly resourced to participate effectively, confidently, and productively in these governing bodies.

A national student charter, developed in collaboration with domestic and international students, is essential to ensure students have guaranteed rights to a high-quality education, safety, and well-being on campus. The focus of the charter should be on ensuring the safety of students and guaranteeing universities take responsibility for the way students are treated within their campus (both physical and digital). This can be achieved through actionable measures that would be enforced by either the suggested Tertiary Education Commission or a designated Student Ombudsman.

The release of the NSSS results in 2022 showed that both the Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency (TEQSA) and Universities Australia had failed to compel universities to act in any effective

way to make positive change to the prevalence of sexual assault at Australian universities or to the formal reporting processes within institutions. Whether TEQSA, or a Tertiary Education Commission, there is a need for a sufficiently funded and accessible entity capable of managing student grievances and imposing penalties on universities that demonstrate neglect in addressing issues that impact students.

Interim Report Considerations RUSU Supports:

1. Creating new structures and empower existing ones for students to advocate for their interests in institutional and national-level decision making
2. Providing a greater percentage of the Student Services and Amenities Fee to student unions to ensure the support and representation of students.
3. Developing a national student charter, in collaboration with domestic and international students, ensuring a national commitment and consistent approach to the welfare, safety and wellbeing of all students
4. A Tertiary Education Commission which could protect and promote student voices, in light of the new, student-focussed vision for the sector, including the role for a new Equity Commissioner
5. Strengthening the role for the Commonwealth Ombudsman in student complaints, for both international and domestic students

SUSTAINABLE AND EQUITABLE FUNDING AND DEBT

The most significant barrier to entry and completion for most students in Australia, remains the cost of living whilst studying. The final report must address the financial challenges students face and provide solutions that reduce barriers tied to cost of living.

Adjustments should be made to the current income support system. Reducing the age of independence to 18, elevating the rates of Austudy and youth allowance to levels above the poverty line, and ensuring that engaging in part-time study or unpaid work placements doesn't negatively impact support payments are crucial steps.

A review of student contributions and the arrangements for repaying through the HELP system is necessary to alleviate the potential burden of student debt and create fairer repayment conditions. Students in 2023 will be the most indebted in generations. Any changes should aim to achieve equal access alongside equitable loan repayment expectations. Income disparity should be addressed with financial support and reduced fees not increased debt.

The final report must provide mechanisms to address placement poverty. Unpaid placements remain a barrier to both entry and completion, usually of underrepresented student groups, in in-demand disciplines. Working with state governments and employers to increase the number of paid placements available is essential, as is providing participating students on compulsory placement with better incentives, including appropriate financial support.

Interim Report Considerations RUSU Supports:

1. Changing income support payment arrangements, including eligibility tests around independence, part-time study, and unpaid work placements

2. Reducing the cost-of-living barriers to higher education through improved income support measures and more opportunities for part-time study
3. Providing appropriate financial support to students on compulsory placements, particularly to address urgent skills shortages
4. Improving WIL (Work Integrated Learning) and placements by providing participating students with better incentives and financial support

Interim Report Considerations that RUSU Opposes:

1. Exploring the advantages and disadvantages of ICLs to help students meet living expenses
2. Examining a funding mechanism such as a levy on international student fee income. Such mechanisms could provide insurance against future economic, policy or other shocks, or fund sector priorities such as infrastructure and research.

EQUITY BEYOND ACCESS

RUSU strongly supports the commitment in the interim report to increase equity cohort participation in higher education, however the final report needs to extend this commitment beyond access to one of equity in participation for the duration of study. Enabling increased entry for underrepresented cohorts into higher education is not sufficient on its own to ensure a higher number of graduates from these backgrounds. It is imperative to provide substantial and well-structured support throughout their learning.

To achieve this the final report should consider student driven funding with additional university finance available for students from underrepresented backgrounds. As with SSAF, additional funding provided to universities for each student from an equity cohort would be legislated to be used for the provision of staff, resources or services that provide support specifically targeted to assist students from equity groups through to completion. It is essential that the majority of this funding is spent internally within educational institutions, with caps placed on the percentage of funding that can be spent on outsourcing support to external organisations or for licencing external services. This will ensure greater oversight of support services, more tailored reporting on their efficacy and greater privacy protections for student data.

Interim Report Considerations RUSU Supports:

1. exploring the potential for [deliver] a student-centred, needs-based funding model (similar to that used for determining school funding) that recognises the additional costs involved in teaching [supporting] students from equity groups and underrepresented communities

FUTUREPROOFING THE ACCORDS

If it is the intension of the final report to create a blueprint for higher education that will serve Australia for 30 years, it needs to include mechanisms to ensure its ongoing relevance and usefulness. Structurally, the final report needs to focus on actionable goals and deliverables, with clear measures for success. This should include incentives for universities to put final report recommendations in place, targets for equity student access and completion, a repositioning of support services as a central function of higher education (with reporting that reflects this), and the establishment of an independent higher education commission with the power to sanction universities that fail to meet targets.