Australian Universities Accord: Interim Report (Sept 2023)

Response by Hon Assoc Prof Ian Thomas, RMIT University

Introduction
The timing of this review is welcomed, and the Interim Report Indicates that signific and thoughtful effort has been put into identifying the many complicated, and interconnected, issues facing higher education.

I have a number of comments, which will be presented in point form. The title of the classic western film "The Good, the Bad and the Ugly" provides the structure for my response, however, I will alter the ordering slightly. Also, I will not focus on any of the details that have been proposed to implement any changes, but I will concentrate on the broad principles and issues identified.

The Good (aspects of the Report)
. The broad concepts and directions for equity in participation, access and opportunity for people/students who have faced degrees of disadvantage because of their health, social and economic backgrounds, is most appropriate, as is recognition of the need to support First Nations people in their education.

. The recognition of the need to support students when they are undertaking work-experience placements, specifically developing financial assistance for those who would otherwise be supporting themselves with paid employment, is a very important initiative.

. Actions to provide better recognition of the experiences (i. e. prior learning, gained by students, including "workplace experience and general capabilities" (p16)[i] are also critical to help make deeper links between educational experiences and society, thence the value of (and to) graduates.

. In tandem with the previous points, recognition of the need to develop and support mechanisms to encourage life-long-learning is to be welcomed.

. Critical to the future of education and the development of flexible and resilient graduates is the identified need for consideration of the professional development of academic staff in teaching (oldies and newies), and encouraging collaboration for best practice learning and teaching – although it seems that this has not made it to the level of a Priority Action anywhere (rhetorical question – when is pedagogy ever a priority?)

. Understanding that "graduates need a mix of transferable work-related skills and learning capabilities to participate effectively in the workforce" (p53) is in line with research and with future expectations of the un-knowability and insecurity of jobs, on top of the challenges global warming will precipitate. That graduates have capabilities to productively manage future situations will be critical for their personal satisfaction, and physical and mental health, and for society generally. The critical issue is to acknowledge that capabilities (like critical thinking, interpersonal ability, ethics and management abilities) are paramount. Likewise, guiding students to the process of knowledge acquisition is a key requirement of education, however, simply filling them with information is not a key issue - already they are flooded with information, but they need to learn how to assess its validity and reliability, and how to analyse it generally.

. The point is made that "an important part of the higher education workforce are academics who are both excellent teachers and cutting-edge researchers" (p88) is true, but the pool of such individuals is small. Academic careers encourage research activity rather than

promoting teaching (despite the rhetoric and PR material). So, it is most encouraging to see the recognition to encourage “another important though smaller workforce cohort are academics who are both excellent teachers and active practitioners in their profession.” (p88) To be up with the ‘leading-edge professional practice’ these people are always involved in research (just like the cutting edge researchers) but they are probably not publishing in the academically mediated ‘high quality’ journals, rather in professional publications and reports.

Yes, we need the active employment of those ‘excellent teachers and active practitioners’, and to ensure they have a role in universities, we need to see equal recognition given to the research they undertake and report in the professional context.

. The potential proposal of “rewarding institutions taking a leadership role in learning and teaching, fostering excellence and improved performance across the sector” (p90) is certainly one to be applauded. However, the idea of excellence is inherently elitist, which may fit with research activity, but is inappropriate when we need to be seeking effectiveness in teaching, to facilitate learning.

The Bad

. The apparent lack of appreciation of how technology ‘comes about’ is most concerning. Without being stated, the apparent premise of the Interim Report seems to be that knowledge of technology is sufficient to provide people with jobs, and to support, possibly improve, Australian society. Appropriately, much is made of professions like “teaching, medicine, engineering, dentistry, nursing, veterinary science and allied health”, however nearly all the discussion relates to the associated knowledge and skills, suggesting these professions, and possibly (?) all others have a simply transactional existence (i.e. taking what they have and using it).

This ignores the context for technology – being that technology comes about through society’s needs, and has to operate within the bounds of social frameworks (morals/ethics) and resources. So, all technology has an intimate relationship with society (historical experiences, current pressures, future expectations and hopes).

The issue then is what sort of education will best lead to our expectations and hopes; specifically what is needed to manage the many wicked problems our society, and ecosystems, face. This will not be achieved through a transactional mindset. It needs an education system (and product) that enables graduates to interact with society (communities, employers, peers, governments, etc.). This means that technological skills are important, but equally are the capabilities to interact and communicate with others, understand how to collect and analyse information (research), and be critical/thoughtful thinkers.

. On p54 an apparent conclusion is stated, that “Courses must be designed with the skills needs of industry in mind.” Fine, industry is one of the stakeholder in the education game. However, society, the environment, and (even) the students/graduates are equally stakeholders, and must be included in the parameters associated with curriculum design (and delivery).

. Any resources expended on the likes of a national skills passport would be better employed in supporting the development of capable graduates. A passport would be yet another bank of information, lacking the context of the actual worth of the graduate.

. Certainly “online learning broadens access to education, especially for time poor and remote students” p82, but any use of data like that of the Student Experience Survey on p82

to think at online technologies should be endorsed generally, is very premature. The point that "... online students ... consistently rate their engagement with learning at lower levels than students studying on campus" (p83) is key, since it is their learning, not just engagement with resources etc., that is important.

Importantly, in the context of the SES sorts of surveys, is that the questions on which the data are based may provide some indication of students' memories of variable situations over several weeks, but cannot provide a nuanced overview of their learning. Critically, 'skills development' is not something to be self-reported, nor something that can be commented on until a student has graduated and has relevant experiences in the application of their learning.

The Ugly *(i.e. complex, needing effort and coordination for implementation)*
. Recognising that over-seas students deserve a better deal is very important – providing an education that helps them to contribute meaningfully to society (wherever they settle), must be much more than just taking their money. This is a difficult problem, which is less of an issue for most STEM focused educators who communicate in 'universal' science language, but a big issue for other disciplines where the understanding of social context is delivered via the English language. With access to meager funds universities will always be tempted to enrol students with the lower levels of English proficiency (for the $) and hoping that academics and service staff will help them 'get though (survive)'.

. Especially since the 1990s, and over many years before, there has been plenty of tension between teaching and research - specifically whether to have universities doing both, or to revert to having two sets of institutions, focusing on either research or teaching. There is no simple solution to this issue. Whichever way it goes, the honest approach would be to ensure that prospective students are forewarned about the focus and approach of the institution – and warned that ranking tables are designed to promote the academics, not necessarily facilitate education.

Whichever way it goes, there does need to be the recognition that those who focus on good teaching are also doing research, into the scholarship of learning and teaching to inform their practice (and that of others).

. The 'Vision for Australia's future higher education system' is a bit like a corporate mission statement, although with more clarity about direction(s). To make clear what is actually the intent of future tertiary education, it would be preferable to acknowledge that there are competing and interconnected aims espoused in this vision. Rather than try to present a utopia, how about acknowledging the complexity we have little insight into the future – that is apart from global heating, and its ramifications. Then you can present the principles that the education system should be trying to achieve. (You may like to look back at the structuring of the principles for Ecologically Sustainable Development that were articulated and reported by the UN, and Australian Government in the 1980s as an example).

. In the context of "Education for professional, paraprofessional and advanced technical occupations has some specific features and challenge" (p56) an important insight is articulated, i e. "... academic staff should be chartered and/or active in the profession they are teaching." This is critical if the curriculum design and delivery is to have relevance to current (and future) professional practice, as distinct from historical texts. The challenge is to facilitate this when currently employment of academics hinges on their research success and potential, and where bringing 'outsiders' into the classroom is made tedious/difficult/impossible.

. A most worthy proposal, especially for these graduates and their chances of gaining satisfying employment (since their chance within the university system is low) is that "... researchers and higher degree by research (HDR) graduates should also have transferable critical thinking and problem-solving skills" (p57) The problem for implementing it is that even if the students' supervisors have those capabilities, they probably have no insight into passing them onto students, and given they generally are provided with negligible time and resources for supervision, then this becomes little more than 'a nice idea'.

. The concept behind the sub-heading "Measuring excellence" (p89) is embarrassingly elitist. Also, measurement is not the issue, and should not be the focus, when we are considering the maintenance, if not development of societies. Assessment of student/graduate abilities is the issue.

It is encouraging to see that while the sub-section goes on about 'quality' (which is in the eye of the beholder – the one who dreams up the parameters), the "Considerations for change" show much greater awareness of the need to aim for "encouraging and rewarding effective learning and teaching" actions. In addition to the four conventional suggestions listed, there needs to be proposals for actually assessing the abilities (capabilities) demonstrated by graduates – then there can be a feedback loop into the educational institutions to ensure that curricular and pedagogy are relevant and forward-looking. Then there would be less need for reviews like this Accord process.

The difficulty relates to getting resources to set up and implement a robust assessment tool, and the critical problem of working out a system to make contact with graduates to sample within their professions.

[i] Australian Universities Accord Interim Report, 2023 – and for all subsequent quotes