Response to the Australian Universities Accord Interim Report
Western Sydney University The College

Western Sydney University The College (The College) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Australian Universities Accord Interim Report. With a strong commitment to access and equity, The College has delivered high-quality education pathways to thousands of students in Greater Western Sydney, who would not have otherwise had the opportunity to attend University. The College provides a unique education and wraparound support model, specifically catering to the needs of students from underrepresented groups. The College commends the Panel on the considerations put forward in the Interim Report to enable fundamental changes in the tertiary education system to support equity in participation, access, and opportunity. Provided below are further considerations for the Accord Panel.

Increasing aspirations, confidence and university completions through combining key considerations in the Interim Report to create integrated secondary pathways

The College strongly supports the considerations put forward in the Accord Interim Report to increase "access to preparatory and enabling programs to provide more pathways into higher education" (page 79), to provide "scaffolded learning support to help students achieve their qualification in minimum time and with minimum debt", along with "increasing access to enabling programs across all institutions, ensuring these programs remain free for students and institutions receive sufficient funding for delivery". These considerations, combined with aligning and improving outreach programs across the broad schooling system and the provision of timely careers advice, are strongly supported by The College.

To gain access to tertiary education, currently, some enabling, and pathway programs require students from underrepresented backgrounds to study for longer, and in some cases, incur additional debt in comparison to students who gain entry directly into a bachelor program. The baseline for 'minimum time to complete' depends on the pathway students selected to gain access to the university system. For example, a student who does not meet the entry requirement for a bachelor course may need to complete a six-month enabling course prior to entry to the bachelor program, or undertake six months of additional study in a Diploma program. Through delayed future potential earnings and additional course costs, even with high-quality pathways and fully funded enabling programs, students from underrepresented backgrounds remain at a disadvantage. The delay in these students moving into the workforce, also presents a disadvantage for society and our economy at large.

As Minister Clare has pointed out, the 'cost' to educate is significantly cheaper than the cost to incarcerate, with a university student costing taxpayers approximately $11,000 a year, and a prisoner costing approximately $120,000[1]. The Mitchell Institute found "every young person who is not able to actively engage in work or study after they leave school, produces a direct cost on Australian taxpayers and government through lower tax revenues, higher dependence on public health and higher costs on crime and law enforcement system"[2]. Similarly, estimated average lifetime welfare costs to government fall with increasing educational attainment[3] and higher educational attainment reduces the time a person remains unemployed[4]. Higher educational attainment not only provides an economic advantage by reducing costs to taxpayers, it also results in a direct benefit to the economy at large. Universities Australia has reported that, for every 1,000 new graduates entering the workforce, 120 new jobs are created for people without a degree and the wages of those without a degree are increased by $655 a year when more graduates join the national workforce[5]. Given the prediction that more than 90% of new jobs will require a post-school qualification, attracting, retaining, and supporting students from underrepresented groups is now more important than ever. The current education system is fragmented with a 'stop-start' approach. Secondary school students make assessments regarding their suitability for

[1] Q&A – National Press Club. The Hon Jason Clare MP
[2] Lamb, S, Huo, S (2017). *Counting the costs of lost opportunity in Australian education*
[3] DSS Payment Trends and Profile Reports, https://data.gov.au/dataset/dss-payment-trends-and-profile-reports
[4] Chapman B & Lounkaew K (2015) Measuring the value of externalities from higher education, Higher Education 70: 767-785.
[5] Universities Australia (2019) *Our universities make an enormous contribution to Australia's economic & social prosperity*

tertiary education outside of the system[6] and may be deterred from considering tertiary education based on their own understanding of the system. Similarly, preparation programs to support a successful transition to tertiary study usually take place after students have completed secondary education.

Enabling programs provide a 'bridge' between secondary school and university and play an important role in supporting underrepresented groups to attend university. Consideration could be given to a new type of enabling/ pathway program, that is specifically designed to be delivered to students in their final years of secondary school, in partnership between their school and a local university.

Consistent with the Panel's consideration that skill pathways can be improved "by creating qualifications that are more modular, stackable and transferable between institutions and institution types" (page 16), The College submits that pathways between secondary school and tertiary education could be 'smoothed' through integrating tertiary pathway programs in secondary schools.

An integrated pathway program in senior secondary education could bring together several key ideas discussed in the Interim Report. Supported by strong and aligned outreach programs in early childhood and primary, an integrated pathway program in senior secondary education offers the following benefits:

- improving familiarity with higher education by bringing university education directly to under-serviced communities.
- attracting students who had not previously considered tertiary education.
- increasing preparedness for post-secondary education study through enabling all students to develop foundational skills necessary for successful participation in the tertiary system.
- supporting students to make informed further study choices and be retained within the secondary school system.

The integration of tertiary pathways into secondary schools could:

- be led by universities with expertise in pathway programs, in partnership with secondary schools, with students being enrolled at both a tertiary provider and secondary school.
- complement the role of University Centres proposed in the Interim Report, with students undertaking study at both their secondary school and a University Centre.
- involve the offering of a series of enabling and skills-based microcredentials. These microcredentials could be designed to provide students with the opportunity to develop skills in areas of priority, pursue opportunities that align with their interests and abilities and at the same time gain a 'taste' of tertiary study, while developing the skills necessary to be successful in tertiary study, including literacy, numeracy, reasoning and digital skills.
- involve a 'dual credential model', where completion of university microcredentials would simultaneously contribute to completion of the final secondary school certificate and provide students with the necessary enabling/ pathway education to successfully transition to tertiary study. This would enable students to engage in a tertiary credential before completing secondary school. While there are programs that enable students to engage in tertiary study while at School, these programs are generally targeted to specific courses or areas of interest and not funded as specific pathway programs and are not delivered at scale. A holistic sector wide approach to smoothing the transition between the secondary and tertiary systems does not exist.
- include tailored wraparound support, provided by both the schooling and tertiary education systems, including the provision of career advice and the support for students to find jobs in their area of interest before engaging in tertiary study.

An integrated secondary/tertiary pathways model would 'level the playing field' prior to completion of secondary school for students from underrepresented groups and 'smooth the transition' to tertiary study. This approach would ensure all students are better prepared prior to commencing tertiary study both in terms of foundational literacy, numeracy and reasoning skills, and career guidance.

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[6] Australian Universities Accord Discussion Paper (2023).

> The College proposes the Panel consider system-wide expansion of enabling programs that simultaneously prepare students for tertiary study before completion of secondary school, and raise aspirations of underrepresented groups through:
>   (a) policy and regulatory change within both the schooling and university system that would support the implementation of integrated secondary school/ university pathways.
>   (b) funding the development of a nationally coordinated approach to enable universities to establish and deliver integrated secondary school/ university pathways.

Addressing 'skills gaps' through an integrated tertiary education sector and innovative curriculum approaches

The College strongly encourages the Accord Panel to consider how innovatively integrated vocational and higher education opportunities can support the capability building of the nation, given that "skills development in many areas of study will require both the best elements of Vocational Education Training (VET) and higher education" (page 56). Integration of vocational and higher education must be considered through the lens of targeted skills development and improving the employment prospects of university graduates, whilst also contributing to university students' capacity to 'earn and learn'.

The College recognises the skills challenge and the role of an integrated tertiary sector in developing a new approach to education to keep pace with the changing needs of people and industry. At a national level, this challenge is evidenced by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) recently placing Australia's skills gap as the second worst in the developed world, with a record 480,000 positions unfilled across the country in May 2022[7]. Locally, population growth and higher rates of educational attainment, coupled with a shift towards a knowledge-based jobs market, is driving an emergent resident professional worker population that need access to high-quality rapid upskilling. Western Sydney University's leadership within the Institute of Applied Technology – Construction pilot with TAFE is evidence there is not only an appetite from employers for responsive and high-quality tertiary education solutions that deliver skills development to an evolving labour market, but also highlights partnerships with Industry are critical in designing education solutions to meet their ever-changing needs.

The College recognises the challenges faced by universities and the VET sector and not only supports the interim reports consideration of a review of the AQF and equitable access to Commonwealth Supported Places (CSP) for students to undertake VET studies (page 49), The College encourages the Accord Panel to recognise the challenges the tertiary education sector is faced with when having to operate under the auspices of separate regulators and consider how the regulatory environment could be simplified through establishing a single regulator responsible for tertiary education quality and standards. National training packages can be quite rigid at the best of times. The College recognises the importance of 'skills based' VET qualifications and recommends assessing whether VET providers such as TAFE and dual sector universities could become 'self-accrediting' in the same way universities are, at AQF levels where both vocational and higher education operate (particularly at AQF 5 and 6). Not only would this allow for more responsive VET solutions to industry skills needs, but it would also enable opportunities for collaboration between vocational and higher education providers in designing truly integrated tertiary solutions to the nations skills needs.

> The College proposes the Panel consider removing barriers that are preventing vocational and higher education from truly integrating, whilst also considering the simplification of the regulatory environment. The College propose this to be done through:
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>   (a) funding the development of nationally coordinated layer of 'self-accrediting' VET providers that operate in the same way self-accrediting universities operate.
>   (b) a new layer of funding to universities who have successfully integrated vocational education into university qualifications to support the additional costs associated with operationalising these.

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[7] Closer industry, university ties will connect workers to skill gaps.