

Australian Catholic University

Feedback to the Australian Universities Accord Panel

Australian Universities Accord: Interim Report

August 2023

Feedback on the *Australian Universities Accord: Interim Report*

Australian Catholic University (ACU) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback to the Australian Universities Accord Panel (the Panel) on its interim report.

ACU acknowledges the significant task before the Panel to drive lasting reform in Australia's higher education system, which will serve to meet the current and future needs of the nation.

Noting the Panel's request for brevity, ACU provides the following feedback on the report. This supplements ACU's previous submission to the Panel on its Discussion Paper.

Mission-driven differentiation in Australian higher education

At the outset, the interim report states:

It is the Review's belief that Australian higher education would benefit from having a wider range of complementary institutions differentiated by their unique missions. (p. 2)

ACU endorses this view. The Panel should consider refining the incentives in the current system to provide additional support to institutions to encourage them to focus on developing their particular specialisations, discipline strengths, or distinct contributions to the communities they serve.

To be clear, ACU's view is that what is needed to optimise Australian higher education is for universities to focus on disciplines and activities that align most closely with their unique missions, not a stratification of provider types into research-focused and teaching-focused universities. All universities should continue to conduct the full range of activities – from sub-bachelor teaching to advanced research – in their areas of focus.

This change could be achieved by refining the scope of mission-based compacts, supported by additional funding and streamlined base-funding arrangements, to facilitate greater innovation and diversity amongst universities. This would also foster a higher education system that drives excellence, and which is more efficient and responsive to the needs of the nation.

ACU, for example, has committed itself to focus on meeting the needs of the care economy. The university has demonstrated research and teaching strengths in the areas of health, aged care, educating veterans and initial teacher education. It is uniquely positioned to further develop and leverage these strengths in the national interest.

This can be facilitated through mission-based funding. As the 2023 Intergenerational Report shows, Australia's population will exceed 40 million people within four decades. An ageing population requires a highly trained, robust and significantly expanded aged care workforce. Exploring new models of care, understanding the drivers of better health and wellbeing in light of longer life expectancies, and developing workforce productivity, are all vitally important areas of policy and economic focus to which ACU could make a greater contribution, with adequate support.

Fundamentally, mission-based compacts should be underpinned by a base funding model and regulatory setting which recognises universities as autonomous institutions.¹

In this regard, ACU reiterates the policy proposal and principles for reform it presented in response to the Panel's discussion paper.²

ACU makes two further comments on mission-based compacts, and institutional differentiation.

¹ *Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2021.*

² See Australian Catholic University. (2023). *Submission to the Australian Universities Accord Panel: Response to the Discussion Paper.* <https://www.acu.edu.au/about-acu/leadership-and-governance/government-and-public-policy/policy-submissions>

First, “mission” in this context should be understood broadly. A university’s mission may be driven by its geographic location, the communities it serves, its unique history and/or the disciplines in which it has developed particular specialisation.

To illustrate, ACU has built its reputation in the areas of Health and Education. ACU’s mission is shaped by its identity as a publicly funded Catholic university, open to people of all faiths and of none. Today, ACU draws on its rich history and distinct institutional mission to produce graduates in a range of disciplines, who demonstrate high standards of professional excellence, are socially responsible, and highly employable.³ The university educates students in courses which span education and arts, health sciences, law and business, and theology and philosophy. Reflective of its long history delivering higher education in health and education, ACU educates the largest number of undergraduate nursing and teaching students in Australia, serving to meet significant workforce needs in both the public and non-government health and education sectors.⁴

Second, ACU stresses that achieving greater differentiation within the higher education sector should not involve diminishing the activities of some universities to teaching-only roles. Rather, there should be a greater emphasis on specialisation informed by institutional mission.

ACU is concerned by commentary in the interim report that contemplates abandoning the requirement that all Australian universities should, by definition, engage in research. ACU equally opposes submissions to the Panel that suggest research activity (and funding) should be increasingly concentrated among a small cadre of elite universities.

ACU believes that such changes would diminish the quality – and equity – of Australia’s higher education system. The equity objectives so strongly promoted by the Panel – particularly enabling an increasing number of students to receive a high-quality education at Australia’s universities – would be undermined if policy measures resulted in greater stratification of the sector.

With respect to research funding for universities, a further central and pressing issue is the need for government to ensure that research funding covers the full costs of research. This is imperative if the nation is to successfully compete with its OECD peers (amongst others); recognising that Australia scores poorly compared to its OECD peers in international rankings such as the Global Innovation Index and risks falling further behind.

The nexus between teaching, learning, and research is integral to ensuring that every university student receives a quality, holistic education, and that universities are responsive to the communities they serve as part of their social licence. The interconnection between these activities is fundamental to an Australian university education, as recognised by the Bradley (2008) and Coaldrake (2019) reviews.⁵ ACU therefore strongly affirms that every university, by definition, should continue to be required to engage in teaching, research and community engagement.⁶

Tertiary Education Commission

The interim report canvasses the idea of establishing a new Tertiary Education Commission (TEC).

ACU is open to exploring the potential merits of such a proposal but would be keen to understand more about the proposed powers of such a body, its structure, membership, and the level of independence it would have from Government. ACU also has some reservations regarding how a TEC would be funded, and recommends consideration be given to whether the resources devoted to new bureaucracy might be better invested in other areas of the higher education system.

³ ACU graduates have high full-time employment rates, with a 94 per cent employment rate for undergraduates and 97 per cent employment rate at postgraduate coursework level; significantly higher than the national averages. QILT (2022), 2022 Graduate Outcomes Survey – Longitudinal (GOS-L).

⁴ Department of Education and Training, 2021 Higher Education Data Collection – Students, Special Courses. Section 8, table 8.3.

⁵ Bradley, D. et al, (2008). *Review of Australian Higher Education: Final Report*, p. 123; Coaldrake, P. (2019). *Review of the Higher Education Provider Category Standards: Discussion Paper*, p. 11.

⁶ *Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2021*.

If the government is minded to establish a TEC, its responsibilities could perhaps include working with universities to distribute and oversee mission-based funding. As the interim report suggests, it could also pursue greater opportunities for alignment and collaboration between the higher education and VET sectors (while acknowledging their distinct characteristics and contributions).

Ultimately, the Panel's reforms and a TEC (if established) should serve to deliver a policy and funding environment which:

- supports universities to deliver on their missions;
- incentivises them to innovate and play to their particular strengths; and
- mobilises institutions to adapt to the changing needs of the communities they serve.

Work-integrated learning and placements

As the Panel observes throughout its interim report, one of the primary roles of universities is to ensure future generations of Australians possess the skills needed for the jobs of the future. Universities, however, cannot undertake this task without the support and involvement of government, industry and accreditation bodies.

In particular, there is a clear need for reform with respect to work integrated learning (WIL) and placements. As the interim report acknowledges:

[D]ifficulties supporting sufficient placements in healthcare (particularly nursing, allied health and psychology) and education are exacerbating shortages in these critical professions (with similar effects in other professions). (p. 50).

In its previous submission to the Panel, ACU presented a suite of practical reform proposals to help address significant bottlenecks in the supply of WIL and placement opportunities in initial teacher education (ITE) and health courses. This included creating a clearinghouse to provide an equitable and transparent mechanism for allocating placements.

A further issue relates to accreditation requirements. For instance, accreditation bodies can be inclined to defend traditional policies and requirements with respect to mandatory WIL/placements for entry into their respective professions. These bodies evidently serve an important function in ensuring high professional standards are maintained in critical service areas and the workforce. However, overly protectionist stances can also promote inflexible policies which may hamper/slow down innovation in these professions (such as, for example, the use of advanced simulation in place of some in-situ health placements and as adopted in some overseas jurisdictions) into professional entry requirements. This can hinder the higher education system's ability to respond to the skills needs of the economy, especially during times of crisis and critical workforce shortage.

Efforts could be made to better engage accreditation bodies in discussions around workforce skills and training needs, for example, by providing a space at the Commonwealth level for these bodies to play a more active role in policy discourse and inform discussions around professional standards. A TEC, if established, could perhaps play a facilitative role in this respect.

It could also explore related issues, such as tackling the issue of "placement poverty" by providing better supports for students undertaking WIL and placements. As the interim report identifies, mandatory WIL/placement requirements often require students to forego paid work to undertake (unpaid) placements. This places pressure on students, and especially impacts individuals from low-SES and regional backgrounds, and those with caring responsibilities (typically women).

Financial support for students undertaking mandatory WIL/placements is crucial to reducing attrition in key professions – such as nursing and teaching – and to meeting growing workforce demand.

Equity and enabling places

ACU supports the worthy equity objectives advanced by the Minister and the Panel in their framing of the aims of the Accord process.

ACU itself has a longstanding and demonstrated commitment to supporting equity in education and widening access to higher education, particularly amongst disadvantaged communities. For example, the university's decision to open a new campus in Blacktown in Western Sydney in 2021 aligned strongly with ACU's mission and recognition of the transformative power of education. Socio-economic indicators show high levels of disadvantage in Blacktown, including lower incomes and educational attainment levels, compared to Greater Western Sydney and Greater Sydney.⁷

ACU, however, submits the Panel should take a much greater focus on strengthening pathways and preparatory programs in higher education, which can play a pivotal role in equipping underprepared and educationally disadvantaged students with the knowledge, skills and mindset they need to approach and succeed in higher education. This is crucial to supporting the equity objectives articulated by the Panel and government. The equity agenda will not be achieved without a renewed focus on, and greater investment in, pathways and supporting student preparedness for higher education study.

Furthermore, while there is merit, in and of itself, in increasing access to places in bachelor degrees as a means of widening university participation across the nation, this alone is unlikely to be sufficient to meet the equity targets proposed by the Panel.⁸

Indeed, the federal government's recent proposal to require universities to develop and comply with new support for students policies highlights the imperative to ensure that students are enrolled in courses in which they can succeed, and that they are adequately supported to progress through their higher education journeys. This is in the interests of students, higher education providers and government, and supports the efficient use of public funding.

To this end, ACU notes the Panel's observation on page 64 of its report:

Evidence shows that students who enter a bachelor degree after an enabling course typically achieve better outcomes than those admitted via other sub-bachelor pathways. Increasing the provision of enabling courses and recognising them formally as part of the credentials framework, would support higher levels of equity participation.

ACU strongly endorses the Panel's proposal to increase access to enabling courses.

As ACU has noted previously, the existing anomalous approach to the allocation of enabling places should be reformed to provide students at all universities access to Commonwealth funded enabling places. ACU, for example, currently receives zero Commonwealth funded enabling places and must subsidise its own foundation programs to assist students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, to develop the skills to transition successfully into higher education. Without enabling places, the university is limited in its capacity to support more individuals to be better prepared for, and access, higher education.

As more students from equity and traditionally underrepresented cohorts enter higher education, and consistent with the Panel's ambitions in respect of participation targets, proper support for students to make the transition into higher education – such as enabling programs – will be increasingly vital.

ACU submits that the existing funding and distribution system for enabling courses is inadequate and should be substantially reformed. There is a need to start afresh, with all universities having

⁷ Blacktown City Council. (2017). *Social profile: Blacktown City Council 2016*, at 30.

⁸ See, for example, Norton, A. (2023, August 4). 'Will demand driven funding for all Indigenous students make much of a difference?' <https://andrewnorton.net.au/2023/08/04/will-demand-driven-funding-for-all-indigenous-students-make-much-of-a-difference/>

equal access and opportunity to offer enabling programs, and a much greater investment in these programs, to help realise the vision for greater equity and access in Australian higher education.

The importance of consultation on recommendations contained in the final report

The interim report floats a huge number of reform ideas, generally as embryonic concepts without operational detail. As a result, most of the consultation to date has occurred at a very high level, with limited consultation around implementation, funding or interaction with other reforms.

Many of the ideas raised in the interim report are worthy on their face value but have the potential to create significant unintended consequences if not carefully implemented or properly funded.

ACU urges the Panel – or the Government, if the Panel’s role concludes in December – to undertake proper and thoughtful consultation with universities and other stakeholders regarding the implementation (and, indeed, the desirability) of specific proposals once the Panel narrows its focus to a smaller number of recommendations.

While ACU acknowledges the Government will be keen to embrace the Panel’s recommendations and show early progress on reform, especially in the context of the 2024 Budget, the very essence of an Accord – namely, the building of consensus – and ensuring that generational reform is built on a sound footing relies on proper consultation taking place on the Panel’s final recommendations.

Appendix A: About Australian Catholic University (ACU)

An ACU education builds on the Catholic understanding of faith and reason working together in pursuit of knowledge and promotion of human dignity and the common good.

An ACU education seeks to transform lives and communities. Students are challenged to look beyond the classroom, solve real-world problems, develop their own search for meaning and cultivate strong professional ethics. They are invited to stand up for people in need and causes that matter.

ACU is open to all. As is common with great Catholic institutions the world over, the university is inclusive and supportive of everyone, every day – regardless of their faith or tradition.

ACU is a young university making a serious impact. We're ranked in the top two per cent of universities worldwide⁹ and in the top 10 Catholic universities.¹⁰ The university has seven campuses around Australia, a campus in Rome, Italy, and an online campus – ACU Online.

Opportunities for personal and professional growth are critical to ACU. This is a university of service – so much so that it is built into the curricula. All ACU courses offer work placements, internships, or volunteering opportunities.

⁹ *Times Higher Education* World University Rankings 2023. Percentage calculated as ACU's world rank as a proportion of the total number of universities in the world: *International Handbook of Universities 2019*, Palgrave MacMillan.

¹⁰ International Federation of Catholic Universities members ranked on *Times Higher Education* World University Rankings 2023.