

1 September 2023

Professor Mary O’Kane AC
Chair, Australian Universities Accord Panel
C/o Commonwealth Department of Education

Dear Professor O’Kane,

Re: Killing Democracy Softly

I write to make a brief submission in response to the Universities Accord Interim Report, as published by your Panel and launched by the Federal Minister for Education, The Hon. Jason Clare MP, on 19 July 2023 at the National Press Club. There are two points I would like to make.

The first relates to my own 11 April 2023 submission. I have read the Interim Report carefully, looked through any number of other submissions, and followed reporting of Accord matters. Because of that I can see that there has been a degree of tentative progress on most of my eleven student-focussed recommendations. I thank the Panel for that even whilst noting that in no case has there yet been entirely sufficient or complete progress. Given that I would re-commend those recommendations for your consideration, even whilst thanking you for efforts to date.

If I was to pick out one and only one of my recommendations for additional emphasis at this stage, then it would be the only one where I can see no Interim Report or related progress at all. There’s a strange disconnect between the emphasis in the Interim Report on global connectivity, the importance of soft diplomacy, and the non-industry nature of intercultural connection on the one hand, but then no concrete Languages education initiatives on the other. Aside from my own April submission there was a pertinent and similarly themed contribution from the Languages and Cultures Network for Australian Universities. I would commend this as an area for focus between now and the Final Report.

The second point concerns something not directly covered in my initial submission, nor properly covered in the Interim Report. It concerns the role of universities in perpetuating democracy. Whilst the Interim Report mentions the perpetuation of democracy twice in passing, nowhere does it commit to re-democratising university governing bodies, re-democratising institutions internal to universities, or re-democratising student representation and free student media. I can see any number of places where that outcome might be achieved depending on developments from here. But nowhere is it made explicit that electoral franchise and democratic institutions will be restored.

At a moment when the Accord Panel is projecting large increases in participation in higher education, if the already-weak internal democratic institutions within universities are weakened even further, it will mean the bulk of the Australian population will have formative university educational experiences in substantially democracy free zones. My prediction is that over time that will weaken the possibility of the perpetuation of democracy at all. Democracy and the exercise of freedom is, in substantial part, a learned behaviour that can slowly be unlearned as well.

Those who are ambivalent about the survival of democracy would be well-advised to take head of the different flavours of autocracy stalking the world at present, tied as they are to various forms of violence, war, hatred and intolerance. As imperfect as Australia’s democracy is and as imperfect as other substantially democratic societies are, I greatly prefer them to the dark shadows that seem just over the horizon. It’s in this context that I am concerned that the Interim Report offers nothing by way of re-democratising university communities. I call for inclusions in this area for the Final Report.

For convenience I **attach** my previous recommendations and re-commend those to you, whilst also calling for measures to re-democratise universities along the lines indicated above. I thank you for taking account of my submission.

Yours sincerely,



Adrian Cardinali

Summary of April 2023 Recommendations

Recommendation 1 (Consulting Students): That the Accord Panel conceive, negotiate, and implement an appropriate proactive direct-consultation method with Australia's university students and their representatives, as a mechanism to fairly compensate for systematic barriers to their genuine and fair participation in the Accord process.

Recommendation 2 (Rebuilding Advocacy and Representation): That amendments to Student Services and Amenities Fee provisions be developed and implemented, which would concurrently restore quality independent advocacy staffing levels, student association funding, and student representative support at universities across the country.

Recommendation 3 (Rebuilding Student Media): That amendments to Student Services and Amenities Fee provisions be developed and implemented, which would encourage the re-establishment and re-development of a wide, varied, quality and rich democratic and independent student media landscape.

Recommendation 4 (National Advocacy and Representation): That amendments to Student Services and Amenities Fee provisions be developed and implemented, which would divert a modest but fair proportion of each student's fees to fund their national representation.

Recommendation 5 (Student Housing): That provisions be developed for the guarantee of quality low-cost student accommodation for, at a minimum, students who are moving beyond certain defined domestic limits to study at the relevant institution, and those who are international students relocating from overseas.

Recommendation 6 (Income Assistance): That to continue to widen participation in higher education and give access to sufficient development opportunities, all coursework masters and doctorate programs should be made eligible for relevant Austudy or Youth Allowance payments.

Recommendation 7 (Research Stipends): That higher degree research stipend numbers be radically increased to meet the needs of the expanded research student population, and that rates be adjusted such that they are the equivalent to a real and fair wage and not below the poverty line as is currently the case.

Recommendation 8 (Tuition Fees and Debt Relief): That tuition fee reduction and debt relief measures be explored and implemented, including a progressive return to free undergraduate education, significant and serious price amelioration measures in postgraduate coursework education, and widespread debt relief.

Recommendation 9 (Employment): That measures be implemented to address persistent and ongoing gaps in the treatment of casual university staff, to increase the conversion of ongoing casual and sessional roles to ongoing positions, and to create more early career researcher pathways across the full range of institutional intellectual inquiry.

Recommendation 10 (Reinvigorating Humanities): That any and all reasonable steps are taken to restore the fair and crucial role of the Humanities and languages in Australia's universities, including but not limited to ensuring sharp expansion of program and staffing capacity, reversing any and all artificial disincentives to study including regressive tuition fee structures, and promoting renewed scholarship.

Recommendation 11 (Reinvigorating Languages): That a comprehensive, nationally coordinated, well-funded and high-quality languages and cultures promotion program be implemented, such that scholarship and study of non-English languages blossoms and expands across the period of a transformational Universities Accord.