

Reflections on the Interim Report

NAGCAS strongly supports all five priority areas. Each aims to address fundamental deficits and inequalities in the higher education system that disadvantage students, in particular students from equity backgrounds, while seeking to provide remedial action that will benefit students, staff and more broadly the workforce and the economy. NAGCAS recognises the fundamental good of higher education (HE) and always has. It acknowledges that the need for future work skills, for the benefit of the country cannot be realised without the increase of participation and success through tertiary education. To meet these future skill needs, the realisation of levelling the opportunity playing field is both fair and necessary. Participation is only part of the solution; three other important initiatives are required to meet the lofty goals outlined in the interim report, without which the aspirations will not be achieved:

1. Ongoing financial support for WIL for at risk cohorts, and adequate resourcing for wrap around services and, explicitly a co-investment in university careers services that are under resourced or, reliant on annualised funding such as SSAF. The current funding model undermines the potential to significantly enhance graduate outcomes, and so at risk cohorts remain so;
2. Support from employer groups for equity participation rates to drive the supply side of the equation needs further exploration: Equity groups, particularly those from low socio-economic backgrounds and regional, rural, and remote areas, often have reduced cultural capital, and therefore have distinct challenges in navigating traditional job seeking and recruitment processes. In many cases they cannot see themselves in these organisations/roles/companies that require the skills for the future and are often unfamiliar with the recruitment tools and processes required to bridge the gap to employment. Without commitment from employer groups to diversify their graduate workforce by reviewing their recruitment practices and adapting their workplace cultures to be more inclusive, Australia will continue to experience a skills shortage. Opportunities for Government to support **continued** collaborations between peak industry bodies (e.g., NAGCAS and the Australian Association of Graduate Employers (AAGE) to share best practice around education and employment and talent pipelines of equity cohorts to help inform future actions is recommended.
3. National approach for a careers system: lack of a clear policy direction is producing an uncoordinated approach for a national careers system in Australia which at present is absent.

Priority action areas

In relation to Priority Actions 1 and 4 and references to “*tailored wrap around support to help students to succeed and channelling funding resulting from the funding guarantee into 2024 towards a range of assistance*”, make explicit that funding also be allocated to:

- Provision of tailored personalised Career Development support for equity cohorts given the evidence-base that such interventions underpin student success and positive graduate employment outcomes. The evidence base includes:
 - Brown et al (2019, p.3) summarise a range of meta- analytic research studies which demonstrate the positive effect of career development interventions in influencing student engagement, graduate outcomes, confidence in making career decisions and retention;
 - The evidence base for career guidance /development learning is perhaps best reflected in its adoption as an important policy instrument to support the achievement of efficiency and effectiveness of education systems globally – specifically ‘the retention, performance, and progression of students’ (McCarthy and Borbely Plezce, 2019, p.1);
 - Eckstein’s (2022) national Australian research indicated that students with disability are hungry for transformative careers education programs that help them find degree-relevant work. They reported shedding disability’s stigma while finding their professional voice by saying: it’s about being “who we want to be ... regardless of our disability” (p. 42).
 - A number of studies in the US have shown the positive effect of career development programs at an early stage of an undergraduate degree on confidence in completing the degree, likelihood to graduate within 4 years, persistence with the degree and (Clayton et al, 2019, p.430-431).

Unless equity categorised students (in particular those from low SES backgrounds) are provided with resources including additional, personalised career support there will continue to be an uneven playing field when they graduate and the opportunity for fairer employment outcomes will be lost. The 2019 Australian study of employment outcomes from equity groups suggests “*graduates from the equity groups of low SES background, disability and NESB were found to be disadvantaged in labour market outcomes. For example, they were less likely to be in full-time employment, more likely to be mismatched in their jobs if there were employed and earned less. Graduates from NESB backgrounds were the most disadvantaged in these labour market outcomes*” <https://apo.org.au/node/234551>.

Areas of substantive agreement

NAGCAS welcomes a national placement and job broker systems (P.10 i) – However, NAGCAS advocates for a place-based/ hub & spokes approach (i.e. Aligned to a national system, embedded in universities and grounded in Careers and Employability Learning (CEL) methodology) to leverage and extend existing significant university/industry footprint and partnerships. This model would ensure a joined-up approach, both at an institutional and at a national level, would safeguard and strengthen existing university/industry relationships and further strengthen universities as anchor institutions. Benefits include:

- Streamline services to industry and students, minimising risk of duplication of services;
- Enhance opportunities across universities and industry for research commercialisation, co-design of curriculum and knowledge exchange;
- Ensure HE career professionals continue to interact with and service graduate recruiters for their hiring needs and talent acquisition strategies, further informing their practice of graduate recruitment processes and influencing and shaping how industry attracts and retains graduate and student talent – This co-dependent relationship that exists between the HE career professional and the graduate recruiter is critical to sustaining talent pipelines. To this end, opportunities to further strengthen ties between HE career professionals and graduate recruiters could be leveraged through closer collaboration with professional bodies such as the [AAGE](#), [NAGCAS](#), [SME Association of Australia](#) – and accrediting bodies.

Unaddressed priorities in the Interim Report

Absence of a strategy for enhancing provision of personalised CEL in higher education that is appropriately funded and that is place-based and aligned to a national approach: While referenced on page 63 under 2.3.2.1 within the context of increasing aspiration and confidence, the report reads as non-committal in relation to investing in personalised careers services across all life stages. For example, there is no explicit mention of this under the considerations for change for policy areas’ section on page 68, while obliquely referenced in relation to supporting aspiration and potential in the potential proposals section on page 69. This is a considerable oversight. Improving access to and provision of personalised CEL to students across all life stages is mission critical to the Accord achieving its objectives:

- Such a system would include all education sectors and take into account all members of our communities including those who are neither in education or training (NEET). At present, each sector appears to be working in isolation. For example, in 2019, the Future Ready: A student focused National Career Education Strategy was released <https://www.education.gov.au/national-career-education-strategy>. The strategy focuses on improving career education in schools by:
 - o building teacher and school leader capability
 - o supporting parents and carers in their important role in these conversations
 - o encouraging collaboration between industry and schools.
- More recently, the National Careers Institute was established with a focus on marketing and promoting vocational careers and to elevate the status of VET as a career pathway <https://www.nci.employment.gov.au/>. Whilst each approach has merit, an over-arching strategy and national policy will elicit a joined-up approach and the development of a lifelong targeted career development system, where all Australians are able to easily navigate in and between education systems.

University career services in Australia are significantly under resourced in comparison to their UK and US counterparts. Findings from the NAGCAS **2021 National Survey of University Careers Services** conducted by NAGCAS reported on average, Career services are funded 47% from soft year-to-year funds. The Student Services Amenities Fee (SSAF) continues to be the main source of this funding (89%). Significant additional funding was also

received from the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP), 46%, increasing from 28% in 2017, and in-house funding, accounted for a mere 41%, reduced from 54% in 2017.

This funding model impacts central careers and employability services' ability to attract and retain appropriately qualified and experienced career practitioners further impacting the provision of quality service delivery to their two main stakeholder groups, students and industry. At the same time, adding to job insecurity and effecting staff wellbeing linking to the sentiment expressed in 3.2.2 , Universities as good employers:

- Only 6% (\$8.1M) of the 2021 HEPPP funding spend nationally was allocated to the Attainment & Transition Out phase of the student lifecycle *Data Source: Department of Education.*

The skills mapping tool, the National Skills Passport, the National Credentials Platform, improving skills pathways through in-demand, transferrable and stackable micro-credentials, short-courses and the provision of incentives for WIL, and improving the recognition of prior learning and financing work experience, are notable and welcome tools to support students' navigation of life-long and life-wide career pathways. However, these mechanisms are not a proxy for transformative CEL that enables graduates' effective career decision-making and is the basis of their being employed in the right roles for the right reasons and at the right time. This is critical to the effective functioning of the labour market, the economy, the education system, and the pursuit of social equity (Career Industry Council of Australia, 2015). At university, students use CEL to reflect on all aspects of their education experience and make sense of those experiences in terms of their future career, to inform career decisions and action plans. As such, it is both a core employability skill in itself, and also an enabler to recognise a wide range of experiences and skills (disciplinary learning, extra- and co-curricular learning, work integrated learning (WIL), service learning, previous career experience and part-time work), each of which can contribute to employability, and to each individual's career decisions and future (Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007; Artess, Hooley and Mellors-Bourne, 2017), along with strengthening career adaptability and resilience.

There is an established body of evidence that social background impacts upon all stages of a person's life and career (Bourdieu, 1999), including the choice and attainment of an occupation (Brown & Lent, 2016), knowledge about the workforce (Greenbank, 2009), as well as participation rates and grades in HE (Andrewartha & Harvey, 2017). Social background can impact upon an individual's ability to gain access to certain fields of work (Rivera, 2012a), to progress into senior roles (the 'class ceiling') and even salary (the 'class pay-gap') (Friedman & Laurison, 2020). The United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 8 (2015) reinforces the provision of decent work as an inherent dignity of the human person, specifying the provision of career development, workplace safety, living wages and the non-exploitation of workers as some of the key principles of decent work. Students from low SES backgrounds do not experience university in the same way as other students and, post-graduation, they continue to experience disadvantage in the labour market (Andrewartha & Harvey, 2017). Students from low SES backgrounds are underrepresented in courses which typically lead to the highest salaries (Andrewartha & Harvey, 2017) and as a result, occupations that pay the highest salaries (Productivity Commission, 2019; Pitman et al, 2019) including management and professional roles. This finding is significant as most jobs growth in Australia is driven by services (LMIP, 2021) and professional roles are substantial contributors to this growth (LMIP, 2021), a point that has been recognised in the Accord.

What measures of success should the Panel use to track the outcome of key Accord recommendations?

NAGCAS recommends that consideration be given to implementing at a national level new benchmark to enable HE institutions and the sector to measure the impact of employability strategies such as embedding WIL, employability skills, Career Development Learning, entrepreneurship learning into curricula and the impact of wrap around support services. **A recommended option is The Careers Registration (CR) methodology**, which involves collecting information directly from students on their level of career readiness and the extent to which they have engaged in activities that could enhance their employability each year at the point of (re)enrolment. CR is a widely established methodology across the UK which has been adopted by over 100 leading institutions, and the resulting data continues to gain momentum as a national interest for the sector, employers and government. At one level, it enables the tracking and reporting of the employability development of students while at a deeper level, it aids targeting of career interventions to student need. Careers Registration is gaining international traction, with uptake in Europe, Australia and New Zealand. Some institutions in Australia are using the more appropriate termed nomenclature of *Career Readiness* in lieu of Career Registration as CR describes the method for picking up careers data and there is even some regret that that term caught on in the UK.

The enclosed submission has received endorsement from:

- The Australian Association of Graduate Employers (AAGE) <https://aage.com.au/>
- The Career Industry Council of Australia (CICA) <https://cica.org.au/>
- Professor Sally Kift, President, Professor Sally Kift, President Australian Learning & Teaching Fellows (ALTF)