THE AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL FOR EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH (ACER) RESPONSE TO THE AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITIES ACCORD PANEL INTERIM REPORT

The Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) recognises the importance of universities, and the higher education sector more broadly, to the prosperity and success of Australia. ACER welcomes the intent and focus of the Universities Accord in creating a system that enables all Australians to consider the option of university education and be supported in embracing this opportunity.

In our submission to the Accord Panel, we would like to provide reflection and insight into the following key areas:

- Recognising the higher education 'life cycle' begins well before university enrolment.
- Continuing to build the emphasis on equality of opportunity and equity-focussed support.
- Accepting that the cost of educating students is vastly different depending on context and as such funding models need to change.
- Developing tools to identify, assess and articulate the breadth of skills developed in higher education.

Our reflections on each of these issues are provided below. We feel we are well placed to provide advice through this process based on our extensive experience working with the higher education sector over many decades. Our independence from government, universities and other education providers puts us in a unique position in Australia. We also draw on expertise across the full spectrum of education. As a not-for-profit educational research organisation established in 1930, ACER researchers engage in a diverse range of issues relating to education from early childhood to vocational and workplace education.

Alongside each issue discussed below are links to research undertaken by ACER and others that may be of use in further informing the Panel in developing recommendations to the Minister.

Recognising the higher education 'lifecycle' begins well before enrolling at university

The Accord Panel's Interim Report highlights the necessity for increased levels of education attainment across the Australian population into the future. This direction will continue a trend that has been stimulated over the past 50 years as we reached near-universal school completion rates and increased opportunities for further study. The Interim Report highlights a similar sentiment held by ACER – to genuinely improve learning across society, a system-wide approach to education needs to be implemented.

For those following a 'traditional' pathway into tertiary education – that is, students making a transition from school to university or VET – the importance of a well-equipped schooling system is paramount (Edwards et al., 2023). Ensuring conditions for success in developing a strong teacher workforce in Australian schools and early childhood settings should be a focus for the Accord Panel, and we welcome the Interim Report's reference to this. As the Report notes, approaches to raising the profile of the teaching profession and stimulating growth in enrolments requires cooperation across states and territories, and cannot be directed by the Australian Government alone.

Recognising that an increasing number of higher education students are not following the 'traditional' pathway to enrolment is also central to supporting growth in the system. 'Linear' thinking relating to progression through post-school education is no longer helpful when considering admissions, teaching and student support in Australian universities. As such, we see the Accord Panel's statement, 'The tertiary education sector must adapt to facilitate growth in lifelong learning' as one of the most important made within the Interim Report. Considering the role of Adult Education in building foundational skills, as well as the way in which enabling courses can best be implemented are two areas that could help in facilitating sustainable growth in both vocational and higher education into the future.

Further, in order to sustainably grow the higher education sector, we believe an emphasis on improving university admissions approaches is needed. A growing sector means a wider diversity of needs and supports on entry to university. We see the need for developing admissions processes that are focussed on helping higher education providers to understand the capabilities and needs of their students prior to enrolment – for the purpose of providing necessary support to ensure successful outcomes. This is needed for both 'traditional' and 'non-traditional' pathways to university. Some suggestions and approaches to greater admissions transparency have been suggested by ACER in prior consultations (ACER, 2016).

Continuing to build an emphasis on equality of opportunity

ACER welcomes the renewed emphasis on creating an education system where outcomes are not so heavily dependent on students' background. We strongly support efforts to widen opportunity for all Australians to access high quality education that raises expectations and then supports these aspirations.

In our submission to the panel, we would like to emphasise one small but important part of building a system that supports all students. This relates to the need for more robust mechanisms for data collection relating to 'equity groups' to inform evidence-based policy and practice within our higher education system. The Interim Report's note that there is a need for improved institution- and system-level means for collecting information relating to 'emergent equity cohorts' (p.50) is important. Consolidating what is already known in this space and making efforts to build a stronger evidence-base should be more central in policy development for higher education into the future. Further to this, the intersectionality of 'equity groups' needs greater recognition. There are well documented overlaps between 'traditional' equity groups, such as low-socioeconomic status, and 'emergent' groups like out of home care leavers and refugees (Harvey, et al., 2016). Developing ethical, yet systematic ways to collect data to support students for success should be a priority.

Accept that the cost of educating students is vastly different depending on context

The Interim Report highlights the role of the higher education funding system in achieving the ambitious attainment targets proposed, particularly to support the enrolment, sustained participation, and attainment pathway for students in equity cohorts and from regional and remote locations (p.46). It also 'recognises the additional costs involved in teaching students from equity groups and underrepresented communities' (p.79) that may indicate the need for a tailored funding model. This is an important direction to take – reliance on funding streams such as HEPPP/IRLSAF (a very small amount of funding in the context of the Commonwealth Grant Scheme funding) to 'cover for' equity-based support will not lead to systemic change and growth in participation.

The research we have been involved in supports the conclusions of the Panel: there are significantly higher costs associated with providing support and education for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. An economies of scale study involving researchers from ACER, Victoria University and ANU for the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, found that the cost of supporting low SES students was six times higher for undergraduate students and four times higher for postgraduate students compared to students from medium and high SES backgrounds (Devlin et al, 2023). For our system to genuinely improve educational opportunity, an overhaul of the funding model needs to happen.

The study mentioned above identified that this cost differential came as a result of the complex support and physical resources required for low SES students. These students often required access to multiple support services – disadvantage is intersectional. Furthermore, there are substantial costs in locating university campuses in areas that specifically serve under-represented populations – for some universities, their mission is to serve such communities.

We support the consideration of new approaches to mission-based compacts as a key 'system shift' for Australian higher education (p.28 of the Interim Report). Our previous work has argued the importance of considering a move from *activity-based* to *mission-based* funding policies. This kind of fundamental change is required: tinkering around the edges will not achieve the systemic change that is now needed.

Develop tools to identify, assess and articulate the breadth of skills developed in higher education

As highlighted in the Interim Report, graduates from higher education programs require a mix of transferable work-related skills and learning capabilities if they are to effectively engage in the world of work (p. 53).

Graduates need the opportunity to develop critical thinking, problem-solving and research skills, and demonstrate this capacity along with discipline-specific and job-relevant knowledge (p. 54). There are also difficulties in transitioning from VET to higher education, as the recognition of prior learning practices and credit transfers are inconsistent across the sector (p. 53).

We see the critical importance of having a clear, national framework on which skill development can be articulated and used for recognition, development of teaching and learning resources and potentially for regulation. The Interim Report highlights the work of Jobs and Skills Australia in the development of the Australian Skills Classification (ASC) and the mapping of this taxonomy to higher education curricula (p. 54). Another (or perhaps a complementary) avenue to this could be through a revised Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF). ACER recently completed work for the Department of Education, demonstrating an approach to development of a 'skills matrix' that could underpin the AQF. This work was closely based on the recommendations of the 2019 AQF Review, chaired by the late Professor Peter Noonan, which, as the Interim Report notes, aimed to give greater recognition to skills alongside knowledge (p. 109). The 'skills matrix' demonstrated in the ACER report has potential to ensure that Australian qualifications deliver recognised and transferable outcomes that serve the needs of individuals and industry. While it was developed for the Department's internal purposes, the panel could presumably obtain the ACER report for their reference. More clearly articulating the wide range of skills developed through higher education will be critical for establishing a tertiary education system that values and unites the strengths of vocational education and higher education.

In addition to national frameworks, academics require support to ensure that these more transferable skills and learning capabilities are being taught and assessed through their courses, and in a progressive manner that ensures students can build and further develop these skills throughout the duration of the course. ACER has developed Skill Development Frameworks for Critical Thinking and Collaboration, which demonstrate how these skills can progress. These frameworks could act as important guides to academics in developing and delivering their own courses (Heard, 2020, Scoular, 2020) and ensure that courses are designed to intentionally develop and give students the opportunity to demonstrate these skills. ACER is working with the Australian Council of Deans of Science and Victoria University to support academics in the development of their own assessment frameworks for their courses, to ensure that learning outcomes related to both discipline-specific and transferable skills are being assessed through their courses (Tangalakis et al., 2023; MacKinnon et al. 2021).

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