# Submission on the Universities Accord Interim Report

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SEPTEMBER 2023

THE UNIVERSITY OF
NEWCASTLE
AUSTRALIA

TEACHERS
&TEACHING
RESEARCH CENTRE

**Executive Summary**

The Teachers and Teaching Research Centre (TTRC) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Australian Universities Accord.

Established in 2013, the TTRC is led by Laureate Professor Jenny Gore and sits within the School of Education at the University of Newcastle. Over the past two decades, the TTRC has been an Australian leader in high quality impactful educational research into initial teacher education, quality teaching, teacher development, school change, leadership, student aspirations, equity, and STEM education.

The Universities Accord comes at an important time for education in Australia and the direction of the country more broadly. The higher education sector was particularly hard-hit by the Covid-19 pandemic – a cost borne especially by precariously employed staff and students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Funding shortfalls created by the previous government's Job Ready Graduates scheme have added to uncertainty. The youth mental health crisis, a cost-of-living crisis, and indexation of HECS/HELP tied to CPI have created undue pressure.

The sector needs certainty, underpinned by quality and equity.

The interim report and the government's acceptance of its five key priorities broke ground on this important reform process. In our submission, we pose three bold ideas which build on the identified priorities, address unwarranted assumptions, and highlight gaps in the interim report.

### 1. Deliver excellence in learning, teaching and student experience by providing academic development in Quality Teaching.

The University of Newcastle is uniquely positioned in this respect because it has already successfully piloted and implemented *Quality Teaching* academic development. This program centres on an evidence-based pedagogical framework, the Quality Teaching (QT) Model, which honours the complexity of teaching and provides a practical way for all academics – regardless of their discipline or level of experience – to develop deeper conceptual understandings of quality pedagogy. *Quality Teaching* academic development can support analysis of practice, course planning, peer review of teaching, and the formation of communities of practice. Evaluations are extremely favourable, with 98% of participants indicating the course will positively impact their teaching and 96% indicating it will have a positive effect on student outcomes.

We recommend that the Universities Accord makes Quality Teaching academic development available across the sector to support academics to refine and enhance their teaching practice in order to deepen student learning, generate high-quality learning environments and improve student experience.

### 2. Debunk the myth that equity in participation, access and opportunity depends on lifting the aspirations of students from key equity groups.

Our world-leading decade-long program of research on the educational and career aspirations of Australian school students found that the vast majority of young people – regardless of their background and circumstances – hold high aspirations for their post-school futures. However, during primary school and the early years of secondary school, students from disadvantaged and marginalised backgrounds are more likely to begin to close off the idea of pursuing higher

education, while others eventually abandon their desired educational and/or occupational pathways.

At the same time, we found students experience enormous pressure to pursue higher education and that the "widening participation" agenda, while rooted in equitable aims, has come at expense of vocational education and training. The needs of students, employers, and the future of Australia are overlooked by the privileging of a university pathway. We applaud the Accord's focus on raising the status of VET.

Nurturing students' career and educational aspirations is the responsibility of all those who engage with young people on a day-to-day basis. Based on our research, the TTRC developed two free online courses which equip key adults (teachers, principals, parents, carers, grandparents, coaches, community members etc.) with information, knowledge and resources to support young people's post-school educational and occupational futures:

- Aspirations: Supporting Students' Futures, an online course for Australian teachers and school leaders; and,
- When I Grow Up: Supporting Children's Aspirations, an online course for parents, carers, family members and community members.

The two courses treat all key adults as fundamental to a better-functioning career guidance ecosystem that prepares young people for their post-school futures. We recommend the Accord provides evidence-based career education to teachers, parents/carers and family members.

## 3. The Accord must value and recognise university staff

The wellbeing, security and support of academic and professional members of University staff will be integral to the Accord achieving its aims. Our research highlights the reforms required to ensure we stop shedding talent and have an academic workforce ready to consistently and sustainably deliver high quality teaching, learning and research. We recommend a series of actions by the government and by universities at a local level:

 Governments should:

- Lift higher education funding to support a cutting-edge research and teaching workforce.
- Hold universities to account for systematic underpayment of staff.
- Amend legislation covering the transition of casual staff to ongoing employment.

Universities should:

- Create a mechanism for contract and casual academics to be included as paid chief investigators on grants, particularly prestigious grants such as those from the Australian Research Council.
- Develop consistent guidelines for hiring and managing staff on contracts to mitigate the precarity of their employment and protect them from exploitation.
- Make funding available for all staff, including those employed on contract or as casual academics, to participate in professional development, training and attend conferences.

Together, these three bold ideas will strengthen the Accord and support the government to deliver on its objectives for a fair and equitable, high achieving and excellent higher education system.

**1. Deliver excellence in learning, teaching and student experience by providing academic development in Quality Teaching.**

The TTRC agrees with the view that the Australian higher education sector must deliver a world-leading learning experience. To achieve this aim, we require a highly skilled, professional academic workforce. Academics require a strong conceptual basis in quality teaching supported by opportunities to engage in well-designed academic development programs that support best practice and enable improvement in teaching and learning[1].

**Recommendation:**

**Make *Quality Teaching* academic development available across the sector to support academics to refine and enhance their teaching practice, thereby generating a high-quality learning environment and improving the student experience.**

This reform will address three key policy areas outlined in the interim report:

- enhancing the professional development of academic staff in teaching, especially for those newly employed to teach;
- promoting collaboration and shared best practice in learning and teaching; and,
- ensuring the system encourages improvements in quality learning and teaching.

*Quality Teaching* academic development has already been successfully piloted and implemented at the University of Newcastle. It centres on an evidence-based pedagogical framework, the Quality Teaching (QT) Model, which honours the complexity of teaching and provides a practical way for all academics – regardless of their discipline or level of experience – to develop a deeper conceptual understanding of quality pedagogy. *Quality Teaching* academic development can support analysis of practice, course planning, peer review of teaching, and the formation of communities of practice.

### *Quality teaching in higher education*

Many academics are experts in their fields but that doesn't necessarily translate to expertise in teaching. Academic development focused on pedagogy could ensure that the highest possible standards of teaching are upheld.

In Australia, the *Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2021* mandates that academics should not only have relevant disciplinary knowledge but also skills in contemporary teaching, learning and assessment. However, the way this requirement translates into practice has been uneven and haphazard, with teaching quality long taking a backseat to research as a measure of 'success.' Despite the government also mandating that 20% of performance funding be attributed to 'the student experience' (measured by student satisfaction with teaching), how to support university staff to genuinely enhance teaching quality has received scant attention in federal policy.

At present, student evaluations are the dominant mechanism for signifying and addressing the quality of teaching in universities, despite clear evidence of the lack of reliability and bias

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[1] Patfield, S., Gore, J., Prieto, E., Fay, L., & Sincock, K. (2022). Towards quality teaching in higher education: Pedagogy-focused academic development for enhancing practice. *International Journal for Academic Development*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1080/1360144X.2022.2103561

in student evaluations[2]. An over-reliance on this approach to improving teaching in universities has left the sector with a warped understanding of quality teaching. Student evaluations typically take up 'quality' as a form of accountability, emphasising the delivery of products and services. Here, the *management* of teaching ends up being emphasised, rather than the *practice* of teaching.

'Teaching excellence', like student evaluation, is another visible approach to addressing teaching quality in the academy. Academics who win institutional and national teaching awards are recognised as 'good teachers'. Ultimately, however, such approaches often fail to address what actually constitutes effective teaching and can reflect award-submission-writing prowess more than teaching ability. They provide little or no support for teaching staff seeking to understand and refine their practice.

Even when teaching and learning are touted as the intended focus of academic development programs, the pragmatics of teaching tend to dominate, with an emphasis on policy, logistics, and course management – such as how to work technology in a lecture theatre or tutorial room, or upload content on a learning management system. Such programs are often provided to academics newly employed to teach, leaving them with little or no conceptual basis to underpin their knowledge of quality teaching. Indeed, as the OECD noted in its own review of teaching quality in higher education[3], rather than simply asking academics to learn *more* information about teaching and learning, a focus on the acquisition of more sophisticated conceptions of teaching quality is likely needed for genuine improvement.

Moreover, academic development is often narrowly associated with attendance at workshops or seminars, rather than seen as an ongoing component of academics' legitimate professional work. As such, paid opportunities to engage in these academic development programs is often not provided for casual or sessional staff, who deliver between 50% and 80% of undergraduate teaching in Australian universities. While some institutions implement peer observation and feedback processes to embed a culture of professional growth and learning, such opportunities are often experienced as judgmental and focused more on procedures than pedagogy. This is because many of these kinds of initiatives lack clear protocols for how to observe and analyse teaching, and lack a sophisticated a model of pedagogy to support observation, analysis and discussion of practice.

A solution: In our recent research[4], we trialled an evidence-based pedagogical framework, the Quality Teaching (QT) Model, to enhance conceptual understandings of quality teaching in the academy. The QT Model honours the complexity of teaching and provides a practical way to develop deeper conceptual understandings of quality teaching. The QT Model was selected for this program given research demonstrating positive effects of QT Model-based professional development on teaching quality, teacher morale, teacher efficacy and student academic achievement in K-12 schools[5,6].

[2] Heffernan, T. (2022). Sexism, racism, prejudice, and bias: A literature review and synthesis of research surrounding student evaluations of courses and teaching. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 47(1), 144–154. https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2021.1888075

[3] OECD. (2010). *Learning our lesson: Review of quality teaching in higher education*. https://www.oecd.org

[4] Patfield, S., Gore, J., Prieto, E., Fay, L., & Sincock, K. (2022). Towards quality teaching in higher education: Pedagogy-focused academic development for enhancing practice. *International Journal for Academic Development*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1080/1360144X.2022.2103561

[5] Gore, J., Miller, A., Fray, L., Harris, J., Prieto, E. (2021). Improving student achievement through professional development: Results from a randomised controlled trial of Quality Teaching Rounds. Teaching and Teacher Education. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2017.08.007

[6] Gore, J., Lloyd, A., Smith, M., Bowe, J., Ellis, H., Lubans, D. (2017). Effects of professional development on the quality of teaching: Results from a randomised controlled trial of Quality Teaching Rounds, Teaching and Teacher Education. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2017.08.007

The wide-reaching benefits reported by academics in our study signal a potential way forward for the sector[7]. Academics from a range of disciplines and from associate lecturer to professor levels attended a short workshop introducing the QT Model and then used the framework for self-assessment, peer review, or within a community of practice. At the end of the relevant teaching periods, participants reported direct benefits for analysing practice, course planning, collegial collaboration, and improving the student experience. Importantly, the QT Model provided a much-needed conceptual and practical way for academics to understand the practice of teaching, with fresh insights about what constitutes quality. It provided a new lens with which to reflect on, analyse and enhance ways of working.

Our study established proof of concept for the QT Model in the higher education sector and offers a way forward[8].

The introductory QT workshop has since been converted into a self-paced, online professional development course[9]. The course includes an overview of the QT Model, unpacks its language and structure, and provides opportunities for academics to practice 'coding' real-life lectures and tutorials (in video format) to develop their understanding of the Model. In *Quality Teaching* academic development, the process of 'coding' is used to help educators gain fine-grained insights into teaching practice, with a 1-5 coding scale used to support rich analysis and/or discussion of practice. After completing the course, academics can then use the Model to guide self-reflection, course and assessment design, peer review of teaching, or as part of a community of practice (with a small group of academics collaboratively observing, and providing feedback on, one another's teaching using the lens of the QT Model). To date, approximately 250 staff members across disciplines and academic levels have enrolled in the course. Evaluations are extremely favourable, with 98% of participants indicating the course will positively impact their teaching and 96% indicating it will have a positive effect on student outcomes.

The course can be easily transferred to other platforms at either the institution-, Faculty/College-, or School- level. Moreover, given that *Quality Teaching* academic development is a pedagogy-based form of professional development, it is applicable to all universities, non-university higher education providers, and vocational education providers, making it a relatively low-cost and straightforward solution to a sector-wide problem.

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[7] Patfield, S., Gore, J., Prieto, E., Fay, L., & Sincock, K. (2022). Towards quality teaching in higher education: Pedagogy-focused academic development for enhancing practice. *International Journal for Academic Development*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1080/1360144X.2022.2103561
[8] Ibid.
[9] Patfield, S., Gore, J., Prieto, E., Fray, L., & Sincock, K. (2022). *How to deliver quality teaching in universities.* Campus Morning Mail. https://campusmorningmail.com.au/news/how-to-deliver-quality-teaching-in-universities/

## 2. Debunk the myth that equity in participation, access and opportunity depends on lifting the aspirations of students from key equity groups.

The TTRC agrees with the view that the Australian higher education sector should provide equal opportunity to participate for all members of society, regardless of their background. We also agree that there are many pressing concerns for the sector to address in relation to equitable participation, particularly around the rising cost of living and student debt.

We disagree, however, that part of the solution is to encourage students from disadvantaged and marginalised backgrounds to simply aspire to higher education based on an assumption they lack the self-belief to do so. Rather, as briefly noted on page 74 of the report, a key part of the solution lies in providing quality career education through a coordinated national approach. We contend that this goal can be achieved through also providing high quality career education for key adults such as teachers, parents/carers and family members, who play a key role in shaping how young people think about, and pursue, their post-school futures[10,11].

**Recommendation:**

**Provide evidence-based career education to teachers, parents/carers and family members that equips key adults with information, knowledge and resources to support young people's post-school educational and occupational futures.**

The TTRC has two courses which fulfil this need:

- Aspirations: Supporting Students' Futures, an online course for Australian teachers and school leaders; and,
- When I Grow Up: Supporting Children's Aspirations, an online course for parents, carers, family members and community members.

The two courses treat all key adults as fundamental to a well-functioning career guidance ecosystem that better prepares young people for their post-school futures. These courses stand apart from other available offerings, because they are derived from a decade-long program of research conducted by the TTRC into the educational and occupational aspirations of Australian school students (Years 3-12). In this research, we found that rather than 'lacking' aspiration, students from underrepresented equity groups often foreclose on the idea of higher education and are more likely to be enrolled in schools lacking the resources and staffing to provide adequate career education.

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[10] Prieto, E., Sincock, K., Patfield, S., Fray, L. & Gore, J. (2022). New possibilities for engaging school teachers in widening participation: professional development to support student aspirations. *Australian Educational Researcher.* https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-022-00592-7

[11] Shergold, P. (2020). *Looking to the future – Report of the review of senior secondary pathways into work, further education and training.* https://cica.org.au/wp-content/uploads/Looking-to-the-Future-Report-June-2020.pdf

### *Career education in Australian schools*

A large body of research has demonstrated that career development in Australia varies in quality across schools and often does not meet the needs of young people[12,13,14,15]. Such findings are reinforced by the *Review of Senior Secondary Pathways into Work, Further Education and Training* led by Professor Peter Shergold in 2020, which found that career development in Australian schools is largely based on outdated paradigms, restricting young people's understandings of, and preparations for, the world of work[16]. Similarly, in our own recent longitudinal research examining the post-school transitions of young people across higher education, vocational education and the labour force, we found that many young people believe the current career development framework in schools to be based on assumptions about work and education that no longer exist[17].

In Australia and many other countries, career development has traditionally been facilitated by a career adviser or counsellor, a role which encompasses a wide range of professional work associated with the provision of information, guidance and advice to students. More recently, there have been calls for a 'whole-of-school' integrated approach to career development learning, where classroom teachers work alongside career advisers to more broadly embed career education in daily classroom activities as part of a career guidance 'ecosystem'[18]. Such an approach aligns with the view that contemporary career development involves equipping young people to be lifelong learners, armed with the tools they need to find meaningful careers and a broad range of values, skills and knowledge[19].

Our professional development courses align with and extend beyond this view by treating all key adults as being fundamental to a well-functioning career guidance ecosystem that better prepares young people for their post-school futures. Even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, career development in Australian schools was often described as fragmented, variable, and inadequate. It is crucial, now more than ever, to adequately prepare young people to

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[12] Groves, O., Austin, K., O'Shea, S., & Lamanna, J. (2023). 'One student might get one opportunity and then the next student won't get anything like that': Inequities in Australian career education and recommendations for a fairer future. *Australian Educational Researcher, 50*, 519–536. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-021-00468-2

[13] Keele, S. M., Swann, R., & Davie-Smythe, A. (2020). Identifying best practice in career education and development in Australian secondary schools. *Australian Journal of Career Development, 29*(1), 54-66. https://doi.org/10.1177/1038416219886116

[14] Walker, K., Alloway, N., Dalley-Trim, L., & Patterson, A. (2006). Counsellor practices and student perspectives: Perceptions of career counselling in Australian secondary schools. *Australian Journal of Career Development, 15*(1), 37-45. https://doi.org/10.1177/103841620601500107

[15] Rice, S., Gillis, S., Leahy, M., & Polesel, J. (2015). *Career development: Defining and measuring quality.* https://www.voced.edu.au/content/ngv%3A68749

[16] Shergold, P. (2020). *Looking to the future – Report of the review of senior secondary pathways into work, further education and training.* https://cica.org.au/wp-content/uploads/Looking-to-the-Future-Report-June-2020.pdf

[17] Jaremus, F., Sincock, K., Patfield, S., Prieto, E., Fray, L., & Gore, J. (2022). Aspirations, equity and higher education course choice: The path travelled. National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education. https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Jaremus_UON_Final.pdf

[18] Groves, O., Austin, K., O'Shea, S., & Lamanna, J. (2023). 'One student might get one opportunity and then the next student won't get anything like that': Inequities in Australian career education and recommendations for a fairer future. *Australian Educational Researcher, 50*, 519–536. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-021-00468-2

[19] Shergold, P. (2020). *Looking to the future – Report of the review of senior secondary pathways into work, further education and training.* https://cica.org.au/wp-content/uploads/Looking-to-the-Future-Report-June-2020.pdf

successfully navigate the complex educational and employment landscape that lies before them. As such, we need to do better to build the capacity of teachers, school leaders, parents, carers, and other key adults to understand and support their students' post-school educational and occupational aspirations and guide them towards making meaningful and fulfilling post-school transitions[20].

Based on our research, we were commissioned by the Commonwealth Department of Education to develop a free online professional development course for teachers.

> *Aspirations: Supporting Students' Futures is an innovative professional development course for all Australian teachers and school leaders working in all states and territories[21].*
>
> This 10-hour course consists of six units and provides a suite of digital resources (including data, videos, activities, links to readings and further information) designed to support teachers in understanding and nurturing their students' aspirations and elucidating pathways to higher education[22]. The units are underpinned by a conceptual framework, designed to enhance understanding of aspiration formation and the role teachers play in supporting students from diverse backgrounds, as well as practical applications within and outside the classroom. The course is applicable to all teachers and school leaders across government, Catholic, and independent sectors, as well as to preservice teachers. To date, the course has been completed by more than 2,000 Australian teachers who overwhelmingly found it valuable in informing their practice.

Building on this course, we created a shorter version for parents, carers and the wider community.

> *When I Grow Up: Supporting Children's Aspirations is a self-paced online course for parents, carers and the wider community[23].*
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> This course provides an enriched understanding of what parents, carers, and community members can do to support and nurture the educational and career aspirations of young people. Underpinned by an extensive program of educational research conducted by the TTRC (see below), the course delves into the crucial decision-making period when young people's ideas about their post-school futures form and become entrenched. Across four units, the course explores why aspirations are important, trends in children's aspirations for different educational and career pathways, key factors that influence aspirations, and the powerful role of everyday

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[20] Prieto, E., Sincock, K., Patfield, S., Fray, L. & Gore, J. (2022). New possibilities for engaging school teachers in widening participation: professional development to support student aspirations. *Australian Educational Researcher.* https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-022-00592-7

[21] University of Newcastle. (2018). Aspirations: Supporting student' futures. Aspirations: Supporting Students' Futures - University of Newcastle's Catalog

[22] Prieto, E., Sincock, K., Patfield, S., Fray, L. & Gore, J. (2022). New possibilities for engaging school teachers in widening participation: professional development to support student aspirations. *Australian Educational Researcher.* https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-022-00592-7

[23] University of Newcastle (2019). When I grow up: Supporting children's aspirations. When I Grow Up: Supporting Children's Aspirations - University of Newcastle's Catalog

conversations and experiences in shaping the way young people imagine their futures and engage in decision-making. Participants gain confidence in understanding and actively supporting and equipping young people, knowledge of post-school pathways, and practical tools to help them navigate toward desired pathways. To date the course has been completed by more than 2,000 people from 95 countries and has been rated extremely positively.

### *Our research: Student aspirations for university and university-related careers*

Across a four year period (2012-2015) we surveyed 6,492 Australian school students about their educational and occupational aspirations, investigating how aspirations are formed, shaped, solidified or transformed throughout schooling[24,25,26]. Overall, we found that university is the most desired educational pathway among young Australians, with 50.3% of students in our sample expressing interest in university as the highest level of education they plan to complete. By contrast, 13.9% indicated vocational education as their highest level of intended education, 12.6% indicated high school, and 23.1% indicated that they didn't know what level of education they planned to complete. Put another way, of the 77% who indicated a clear educational aspiration, 65% expressed interest in university.

In an open-ended survey question, students were asked to nominate occupations to which they aspired. Responses were coded using the Australian and New Zealand Standard Classification of Occupations (ANZSCO). The ten most frequently named Skill Level 1 occupations (i.e., those occupations requiring at least a bachelor's degree) were[27]: arts professionals, school teachers, veterinarians, architects, science professionals, engineering professionals, medical professionals, social and welfare professionals, legal professionals and registered nurses/midwives.

Due to the longitudinal nature of our survey, we were able to investigate how interest in these occupational categories varied across the school years. In Australia, the assumption that aspirations take shape around the middle high school years results in the provision of most career education in Year 10. However, our data clearly show that in some occupational categories, interest appears to rise or fall towards the very end of high school. For example, students are less likely to aspire to be a vet or artist as they mature, but more likely to aspire to architecture, engineering, medicine, social work or law. Furthermore, significant interest in these careers is often expressed as early as Year 7, sometimes Year 5. In other careers, such as teaching and science, student interest is more consistent across year levels. Variation across year levels might relate to ongoing assessment by students of their abilities and achievement levels as they age or, indeed, to a more realistic understanding of what is

[24] Gore, J., Patfield, S., Holmes, K., Smith, M., Lloyd, A., Gruppetta, M., Weaver, N., & Fray, L. (2017). When higher education is possible but not desirable: Widening participation and the aspirations of Australian Indigenous school students. *Australian Journal of Education*, *61*(2), 164–183. https://doi.org/10.1177/0004944117710841

[25] Gore, J., Ellis, H., Fray, L., Smith, M., Lloyd, A., Berrigan, C., Lyell, A., Weaver, N., & Holmes, K. (2017). Choosing VET: Investigating the VET aspirations of school students. National Centre for Vocational Education Research. https://www.ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/publications/all-publications/choosing-vet-investigating-the-vet-aspirations-of-school-students

[26] Gore, J., Patfield, S., Fray, L., & Harris, J. (2022). Community matters: The complex links between community and young people's aspirations for higher education. Routledge.

[27] Gore, J., Holmes, K., Smith, M., Fray, L., McElduff, P., Weaver, N., & Wallington, C. (2017) Unpacking the career aspirations of Australian school students: towards an evidence base for university equity initiatives in schools. *Higher Education Research & Development, 36*(7), 1383-1400 https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2017.1325847

involved in certain careers. Nonetheless, it appears that students are forming career interests at an early stage of their schooling.

These results reinforce the importance of robust career education in schools to meet Australia's skills and needs now and into the future. Well-structured, timely, and evidence-based career education will also help to ensure students from underrepresented groups, such as first-in-family students, do not foreclose on the idea of higher education[28,29].

### *First-in-family students*

First-in-family, or first-generation students, are those who do not have a family history of higher education. Our research on student aspirations demonstrates that first-in-family students often face intersecting forms of disadvantage[30]. In particular, we found evidence to suggest that prospective first-in-family students are more likely to belong to one of the existing targeted equity categories compared to their peers with university-educated parents. Specifically, first-in-family students are more likely to identify as Indigenous, come from a lower SES background, and live in regional or remote Australia – the three longstanding and unmet targets of higher education equity policy. In addition to this structural disadvantage, first-in-family students experience educational disadvantage associated with not having access to parents/carers with firsthand experience of university. As such, despite many prospective first-in-family students thinking about university or a university-related career as a possible post-school option, it can represent an unknown and unfamiliar space[31,32,33].

In examining educational aspirations longitudinally over time (2012-2015), we found that across *every* stage of schooling covered in our research (Year 3–12), prospective first-in-family students were less likely to aspire to university than their peers with university-educated parents. Our findings suggest prospective first-in-family students begin to rule out the idea of higher education from as early as Year 3[34].

Even after accounting for other socio-economic and demographic factors, logistic regression analysis showed that young people with university-educated parents were just over 1.6 times more likely to aspire to university than their prospective first-in-family peers. This finding mirrors enrolment trends; if a young person has a university-educated parent, it almost doubles their odds of attending university[35].

[28] Patfield, S., Gore, J., & Fray, L. (2021). Stratification and the illusion of equitable choice in accessing higher education. *International Studies in Sociology of Education.* Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1080/09620214.2021.1912633

[29] Patfield, S., Gore, J., & Weaver, N. (2022). On 'being first': The case for first-generation status in Australian higher education equity policy. *Australian Educational Researcher, 29*. 23–41. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-020-00428-2

[30] Ibid.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Gore, J., Patfield, S., Fray, L., & Harris, J. (2022). Community matters: The complex links between community and young people's aspirations for higher education. Routledge.

[33] Gibson, S., Patfield, S., Gore, J., & Fray, L. (2022). Aspiring to higher education in regional and remote Australia: The diverse emotional and material realities shaping young people's futures. *Australian Educational Researcher, 49.* 1105–1124. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-021-00463-7

[34] Patfield, S., Gore, J., & Weaver, N. (2022). On 'being first': The case for first-generation status in Australian higher education equity policy. *Australian Educational Researcher, 29*. 23–41. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-020-00428-2

[35] Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2012). *Education at a glance 2012: OECD indicators*. Retrieved from http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org

While the triumph in 'being first' needs to be recognised for the new course it sets in family and community histories[36,37], prospective first-in-family students – like many other underrepresented equity groups – need access to a career guidance ecosystem to support their aspirations as well as their eventual post-school transition.

## *Pursuing post-school pathways*

One of our recent studies also investigated how student aspirations translate into actual post-school educational and occupational pathways[38]. This study extended our initial work investigating school students' aspirations by following up with students one-to-five years post-school. Additional data were collected in 2021 via online surveys (n = 52) and interviews (n = 21) with original participants.

As an important foundation for policy, we found that most students' educational and occupational aspirations changed at least somewhat in the years following their schooling. The majority of our participants indicated that their career aspirations (64%) and their educational aspirations (60%) had changed either "to a great extent" or "somewhat" since leaving school. Less than a third of participants indicated that their education (29%) and career (21%) aspirations had not changed at all.

The most prevalent and disruptive obstacle for participants in meeting their aspirations was mental ill-health. A conglomeration of personal, relational, and economic challenges drove both acute and long-term episodes of mental ill-health. Such episodes were common among participants who felt compelled to abandon their desired educational and/or occupational pathways and forge a new path. The experiences of mental ill-health shared by many of these students are a reminder of the vulnerability of young people, even before the occurrence of the global COVID-19 pandemic.

University students from underrepresented equity target groups in particular faced an array of challenges arising from their lack of access to knowledge about specific careers, specific courses, or the university system in general[39]. Some students commented that their access to information about education and career options during school was, by and large, positive. However, there was a general consensus among interview participants that the career education they received at school was insufficient to prepare them for the realities of life after school, including participation in higher education.

Concerted efforts will therefore need to be made by universities and governments to ensure those from underrepresented equity target groups are able to access the same kinds of information and advice as their more advantaged peers, key to which is professional development for teachers, school leaders, parents/carers and family members.

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[36] Patfield, S., Gore, J., & Fray, L. (2021). Reframing first-generation entry: How the familial habitus shapes aspirations for higher education among prospective first-generation students. *Higher Education Research & Development, 40*(3). 599-612. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2020.1773766

[37] Patfield, S., Gore, J., & Fray, L. (2022). Degrees of 'being first': Toward a nuanced understanding of first-generation entrants to higher education. *Educational Review, 74*(6). 1137-1156. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2020.1740172

[38] Jaremus, F., Sincock, K., Patfield, S., Prieto, E., Fray, L., & Gore, J. (2022). Aspirations, equity and higher education course choice: The path travelled. National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education. https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Jaremus_UON_Final.pdf

[39] Ibid.

## 3. The Accord must value and recognise university staff

University staff were largely overlooked in the Accord interim report, despite being integral to achieving the government's reform objectives.

A 2020 NTEU issues paper found that casual and fixed term staff account for 66 percent of higher education employees[40]. But accurate numbers are hard to verify, as universities are only required to report on Full Time Equivalent (FTE) positions. Frequently, casual academics work on part-time contracts, so the FTE reporting obscures the true number of people whose employment is precarious. This precarity doesn't just affect individuals[41]. Insecurity, systematic underpayment, and a lack of support for contract and casual workers erodes Australia's intellectual capital, is resulting in a "brain drain" from the sector, and has a direct impact of the educational experience of our students[42].

**Recommendation:**

**Government reforms are needed to stop the leaking of talent and practical steps should be taken by universities to support precariously employed academics and improve the quality of degree programs for all Australians.**

The Accord should:

- Lift and sustain higher education funding to support a cutting-edge research and teaching workforce.
- Hold universities to account for systematic underpayment of staff.
- Amend legislation covering the transition of casuals to ongoing employment.

Universities should:

- Create a mechanism for contract and casual academics to be included as paid chief investigators on grants, particularly prestigious grants such as those from the Australian Research Council.
- Develop consistent guidelines for hiring and managing staff on contracts to mitigate precarity and protect individuals from exploitation.
- Make funding available for all staff, particularly contract and casual academics, to participate in professional development, training, and attend conferences.

### *The precarity of contract employment*

Contract and casual workers in Australian universities have borne the brunt of the 'change processes' brought on by the past few years of disruption. Revenue losses – predominantly from falling numbers of international students, funding cuts to higher education and

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[40] NTEU. (2020). The Growth of Insecure Employment in Higher Education. Submission to the Productivity Commission. https://www.pc.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0012/337998/sub036-productivity-attachmentb.pdf

[41] Harris, J., Smithers, K., Spina, N., & Heffernan, T. (2023). Disrupting dominant discourses of the Other: examining experiences of contract researchers in the academy. *Studies in Higher Education*, *48*(1), 37-48.

[42] Spina, N., Smithers, K., Harris, J., & Mewburn, I. (2022). Back to zero? Precarious employment in academia amongst 'older' early career researchers, a life-course approach. *British Journal of sociology of Education*, *43*(4), 534-549.

research, and the government's decision to not extend Job Keeper to public universities during the pandemic – saw thousands of casual and contract academics exit the system[43].

However, even prior to the pandemic the oversized proportion of precariously employed staff at university was a major problem. Our research, with colleagues from QUT, Charles Sturt University and the United Kingdom, has identified that casualisation of teaching and short-term contract research disproportionately impact women, people from diverse backgrounds, and early career researchers[44]. The length of time one spends in precarious positions can limit career opportunities through reduced ability to obtain professional development or career planning. Casual academics are left unsupported in trying to achieve research and teaching targets that are required for the scarce number of ongoing positions. As such, some academics are left in precarious roles for years – or decades – and yet are overlooked for conversion to ongoing roles.

A big gap in the Accord's interim report is concrete action on improving employment conditions at universities. The Accord report rightly acknowledges the rife casualisation across the sector, noting that 69% of teaching is conducted by casual staff members[45]. While the report notes that casual employment can suit both employers and employees, a 2019 survey conducted by NTEU showed that 82% of casual staff would prefer part-time or full-time ongoing employment[46]. They want a future that includes professional development, maternity leave, and sick leave with provision for unanticipated needs such as chemotherapy. They want this stability so they can support their students to reach for the futures that they, in turn, desire.

The proportion of casualisation in universities poses a significant threat to the quality and sustainability of teaching and research – not because casual staff do not do excellent work, but because they miss out on the institutional resourcing and professional development they need to be able to properly support their students.

Universities have been stripped of many of the wraparound supports for students due to funding limits, with these responsibilities often falling to those who teach. However, casual academics are not provided with paid time to support student learning. They are only paid for class time and for marking. In most universities, casuals do not receive payment for time in which they are meeting with students, to provide individual supports.

The Accord recognises that recent staff underpayment scandals are "patently unacceptable" for a public institution but needs to go further to ensure that everyone in academic work is paid for the time that they spend on providing support for students' learning. Being paid at a rate of 10 minutes per assignment[47], as some academics are, means losing the opportunity to provide meaningful, powerful feedback to a student who might be struggling with their confidence or skills.

More consistent funding is required for universities to 'de-casualise' and ensure that we can attract, retain and enhance the quality of teaching and research. Such funding needs to be based on the universities' need to provide support to students, and not just linked to student numbers.

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[43] Harris, J. (2022). Here's what the government and universities can do about the crisis of insecure academic work. *The Conversation.* https://theconversation.com/heres-what-the-government-and-universities-can-do-about-the-crisis-of-insecure-academic-work-183345

[44] Spina, N., Harris, J., Bailey, S., Goff, M. (2020). 'Making it' as a Contract Researcher: A pragmatic look at precarious work. *Routledge.*

[45] Ibid.

[46] Ibid.

[47] Duffy, C. (2020). University underpayment so rampant tutors 'instructed to do a poor job' to avoid unpaid hours, former staff say. *ABC News.* https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-08-18/rmit-uq-now-among-universities-accused-of-underpaying-staff/12565528

At a local level, universities can quickly address three key issues.

1. Receiving grant funding and publishing your research is key for all academics.

Grants are the heart of research, allowing researchers to build new knowledge. Australian Research Council (ARC) grants are the biggest prize of all. Yet being on fixed-term contracts often excludes academics from applying for these grants. The ruling that Chief Investigators on ARC grants cannot be paid for their contributions implicitly excludes those in precarious positions, who are then required to work on projects either unnamed or unpaid. Academics in ongoing roles need to push back against institutional practices that marginalise the contribution of contract researchers.

2. One of the biggest influences on how researchers experience contract work is their direct manager.

Our research reveals the importance of managers having regular open and honest conversations with academics about the duration of contracts, supporting them in their research and teaching work and assisting with career planning. This work is a central role of the university. Staff managing contract academics should be supported with robust guidelines and a strong legislative framework.

3. Casual and fixed-term staff often miss out on training and conferences that can help them build their skills.

Casual and contract academics are generally not paid when attending professional development which means having to use their own time, and possibly miss out on paid work, to stay on the cutting edge for their students. Some universities, such as CSU, however, have pushed back against this trend in order to provide professional development on teaching for all sessional and casual teaching staff.

While university staff can – and should – push back against precarious work, higher education policies wield the ultimate influence. The Accord has a responsibility to ensure institutions are funded to a level that means research and teaching can be undertaken at the quality demanded by students, industry and the wider community. It must also hold universities to account for paying staff appropriately, for all time spent working, and improving conditions for those who are precariously employed.