

Australian Universities Accord Interim Report Submission

September 2023

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[REDACTED]

Two months ago, we did not even know each other's names, let alone contemplate submitting a joint response to the *Australian Universities Accord Interim Report*. It was not a chance meeting that brought us together, rather a very intentional introduction through a former university lecturer we both shared at different times, across different subjects and who then connected the two of us across different countries.

Our lecturer was generous with his time and plainly passionate about his subject - keen to both teach and learn from those in his classes due to a genuine interest in his field and education more broadly. This generosity and enthusiasm did not dwindle as students graduated and although we had each graduated several years before, we separately kept in touch with him and his wife in an almost quasi-continuation of his courses. *How did what we learn impact our current work? Did we want to continue studying?* These questions, discussions and at times gentle prodding left both of us confident in requesting his support to write letters of recommendation for respective applications. Taking time to work through our intentions and goals, and then put together a thoughtful reference was all done outside of any official employment hours.

It was this familiarity with our academic and burgeoning career pursuits that led to him suggesting a meeting so that the two of us could meet as like minded students and continue on a learning journey together.

We believe that the Interim Report is a detailed and pragmatic response to the higher education sector - a sector of increasing significance as Australia continues to find its place in the global economy of the 21st Century. However, we strongly believe that there is a gap in the Report around the role of higher education as a truly unique experience in one's personal development and community building itself - not merely a means to an end; that is, solely as a direct means to employment.

To be sure, secure and dignified employment is a necessity for all and not all students may have the 'luxury' of attending university nor the choice of study whether due to financial or other pressures. We acknowledge that increasing access especially for First Nations students is rightly a key component of this Interim Report. Still, everyone deserves to be inspired and too unbalanced a focus on linear outcomes may render the higher education system transactional. Over the last seven years, not more than 61% of higher education students rated their learner engagement experience positively (QILT Satisfaction Survey, 2022). It may be supposed that this rather middling level of learner engagement is in part a result of the wider higher education ecosystem, and not simply a disconnected example of the student as consumer. By and large, staff and lecturers are inquisitive and passionate about their area but Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) including pressure to publish and limited resourcing for teaching assistants can push out the personal aspect of learning in higher education institutions and opportunities.

KPIs play a pivotal role in shaping the behavior and priorities of professors in the pursuit of excellence in the academic realm. While KPIs have traditionally focused on research output,

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publication metrics, and grant acquisition, a critical aspect that often remains overlooked is the invaluable time and effort professors invest in mentoring and guiding their students beyond the confines of the classroom. This oversight not only fails to accurately represent the holistic impact of educators but also inadvertently disincentivizes professors from meaningfully engaging with their students.

The relationship between professors and students extends beyond lectures and assignments. Rather, it can be a mentorship provided by professors that greatly contributes to a student's intellectual and personal growth, influencing their career trajectory and long-term success. These mentorship activities encompass guiding students through research projects, assisting with career planning, providing emotional support, and nurturing a passion for lifelong learning. However, the current KPI framework tends to underappreciate these interactions, inadvertently leading to a discrepancy between what is rewarded and what is truly impactful.

This misalignment has the potential to adversely impact a student's educational experience. Professors, who may be compelled to focus solely on research-driven KPIs to secure promotions or recognition, might be disincentivized from investing substantial time in mentorship activities. This in turn, limits the scope of student-professor interactions to formal academic settings and curtails the development of strong, nurturing relationships that can profoundly shape a student's educational journey.

To address this issue, it is imperative to broaden the scope of KPIs to incorporate the depth and quality of professor-student engagement. Evaluative measures should recognize the time spent in one-on-one consultations, mentorship sessions, and collaborative research endeavors. Moreover, peer evaluations, student feedback, and success stories of graduates who have benefited from intensive mentorship should be integral to the assessment process.

The implementation of inclusive KPIs can yield multifaceted benefits. Firstly, it would foster a culture of engagement, encouraging professors to invest in the holistic development of their students. Secondly, it would lead to more well-rounded graduates who not only excel academically but also possess vital life skills imparted through mentorship. Finally, it would fortify the reputation of educational institutions as places where meaningful interactions flourish, attracting potential students seeking a rich educational experience.

We opened this submission with a short anecdote of how this very submission came to be and the role of our former lecturer to bring us together. The current higher education system does not adequately support, nor motivate academics to provide such investment in the continued learning life of students and those who do - such as our lecturer, are motivated to do so on top of existing obligations and responsibilities and at a cost - financially or as a price of time to themselves. Limiting professor-student mentor opportunities has far-reaching consequences. By expanding KPIs to encompass these vital mentorship activities, universities can foster an environment that values meaningful student-professor interactions. This shift not only ensures that educators are acknowledged for their comprehensive contributions but also enriches the educational experience, preparing students for success both academically and beyond.

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Personal Comment

Through my work in a consulting role [REDACTED], it is difficult to avoid the importance placed upon developing and strengthening workforce skills for the future prosperity of the country as a whole. In Victoria, development of government bodies such as the Victorian Skills Authority and Office of TAFE Coordination and Development, expansion of Free TAFE, government programs to retrain workers (such as through the digital jobs program), and greater interest in practical placements from higher education institutions attest to this. However, as the Interim Report affirms, *growth for skills* is not just a matter of quickly putting 'bums on seats' in the relevant skill courses of the day to put it cheekily, but is achieved *through greater equity*. I firmly believe that greater participation and equity is achieved through increasing accessibility, developing support networks, to cultivate interested, motivated and lifelong learners in whatever field from every background. As this is ultimately fostered in person to person, rather than person to content relationships and interactions, higher education must move towards a student to society instead of student to sector approach. Still early in my career I am unsure about what direction I wish to take. However, with the support of my former lecturer, I have been able to be supported and appropriately challenged in my thinking as to what comes next, not just as a worker but as a member of the community with something (yet fully known) to offer.

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This concern is really important to me because during my undergraduate education, I was pretty lost and it was only after the mentorship and guidance of my professors did I feel empowered to explore and discover my interests. My professor has gone above and beyond to guide me through my undergrad studies, early career, and now back into academia. He leveraged his network to help guide me in the path of [REDACTED] and spent time crafting my letters of recommendation that resulted in my admission at the world renowned [REDACTED] with a prestigious fellowship. Without the support and guidance of my professor, I probably would not be where I am now.

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