



Submission on Universities
Accord Interim Report

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31 August 2023

Prof. Mary O'Kane
Chair
Universities Accord Panel
C/- Department of Education
GPO Box 9880
Canberra ACT 2601

Dear Professor O'Kane,

Open Universities Australia Pty Ltd insights and response on the Australian Universities Accord Interim Report.

Open Universities Australia (OUA) welcomes the interim report presented by the Australian Universities Accord, and we are particularly encouraged by the detailed consideration given to driving participation growth from cohorts currently underrepresented in Australian Higher Education. We deeply appreciate all the hard work involved and contribution from the panel in the coordination of the review and preparation of the interim report.

In summary, we endorse each of the critical steps identified in the Review to be taken now and are in full alignment with the overall reform to be growth for skills through greater equity. In particular, the cessation of the 50% pass rule and the extension of demand driven funding to all First Nations people undertaking Higher Education are important immediate actions to address marked equity of access challenges facing the sector today.

In terms of considerations for change presented, we offer the following thoughts and suggestions in line with our submissions to the Accord process so far, supported by 30 years of experience helping to enable students to access education that is right for them.

2.1 A larger, fairer system

We agree with the importance of increasing overall participation and attainment within tertiary education as a key pillar to enable Australia in meeting its future skills needs and for a fairer and more inclusive society.

Given previous equity participation targets established in the Bradley Review have not yet been achieved, despite significant progress made, we wholly support a renewal of effort here, underpinned by a funding system that supports the need identified. The establishment of a long term and evidence-based strategy, with collaboration across the sector to drive parity of access through time will be important. However, essential to the success of this renewed effort will be an in depth understanding of the barriers that remain today, with policy reform and implementation design to overcome these.

The need to set targets for overall tertiary education participation and attainment is acknowledged. However, given the challenges inherent in predicting Australia's future learning and skills needs, we recommend the panel also consider the levels at which attainment targets are set. To grow participation and enable a more adaptive and responsive labour market to the evolving needs of the economy and society, attainment targets should also be established to drive the development of and engagement with shorter forms of learning. Setting attainment target(s) for shorter forms of learning could positively impact the achievement of broader attainment objectives, while at the same time incentivise a necessary maturation of offerings by providers and improve the breadth of availability and choice for all Australians.

It is still unclear to us whether the proposed universal learning entitlement approach outlined in 2.1.4 will be a material improvement to the demand driven funding system in terms of opportunities for eligible students from underrepresented groups. In principle, should this framework be developed and adopted, or an alternative funding model designed and implemented, provided the outcome delivers availability of a funded university place for all eligible students from underrepresented groups, we are fully in support.

2.2 Meeting Australia's future skills needs.

The positioning of the "Ten possible 'system shifts' to improve Australia's higher education system" outlined on p.20 of the Review is encouraging. Of note is the identification that learning and teaching will need to be reformed, with an ambitious commitment to student experience and use of technology. We also see that to keep pace with competition from educators globally and institutions outside of the sector to meet the evolving needs of students and society, Australia's universities have an opportunity to become more innovative and adaptive to learner needs and skills demand.

Global investment into online and hybrid learning and skilling will continue at pace. It should be anticipated that in the eyes of students, traditional boundaries between markets and educators will further dissolve. Market dynamics will continue to impress the need for innovation and adaptation by Australian education institutions in the delivery of curriculum, services and experience. These pressures are also an accelerating dynamic - the competition of tomorrow (international educators, private providers, and industry) driven by technology and innovation will be vastly more compelling relative to the competition of today. Increasing investment in technology and the ongoing development of internal capabilities to innovate and deliver a world class overall student experience is critical.

The Review acknowledges the need for more granular and relevant data to inform policy and track progress as well as the challenge of the translation of skills requirements from the economy into action from the higher education sector. We believe that transparency of real time learner demand and feedback on student experience delivery is a fundamental signal from which the sector and society will materially benefit. Improving efficient and effective matching of students into learning choices, while enabling feedback loops for educators about what courses and service level standards are required, should be considered in the spirit of bold and transformative sectoral change.

2.3 Equity in participation, access and opportunity

As noted above, we support the finding that growth in participation of equity groups will be necessary to meet Australia's future skills needs and for a fairer and more inclusive society. In our experience, the additional costs universities face when serving equity cohorts is cited as a key constraint to deeper participation by providers on OUA's marketplace (thereby limiting offerings and availability). Further funding support for universities to address these constraints will be needed in order to grow the participation of equity cohorts nationally.

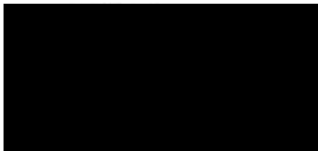
Making it easier for students to enter, exit and return to higher education through a consistent national approach to admissions with recognition of prior learning and experience is crucial. Opportunity exists to support lifelong learners more actively as they explore and choose study that is right for them. As noted in our submission in April, the challenges that students face in comparing options, moving between various tertiary systems, and unclear support systems to assess and access their funding options, remain barriers to access.

Further opportunity also exists for the Review to consider options to reduce the digital divide experienced by many regional, rural, and remote communities. Basic access to technology (computers and reliable internet as an example) continue to exist. These are all barriers which can impact underrepresented groups disproportionately, the alleviation and removal of which will help drive equity of access and participation for all Australians.

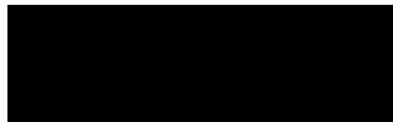
Thank you again for the opportunity to contribute to the findings of the Review. At Open Universities Australia, we remain committed to collaborating with the broader higher education community, government bodies, and other stakeholders in realising the vision laid out in the Universities Accord's interim report.

We are excited about the future of Australian higher education and we look forward to continuing to support the sector's journey of positive transformative change.

Sincerely,



Stuart Elmslie
Chief Executive Officer



Professor S. Bruce Downton
Chairman

About Open Universities Australia (OUA)



OUA exists to empower learners, regardless of geographic location, academic background or life stage, to access the education that's right for them.

Our mission is to remove barriers, enhancing access to quality education for all Australians – irrespective of age, location, or life circumstance.

For the past 30 years, we've been delivering on this mission by providing access to education for close to 500,000 students, connecting them with Australian universities across the country.

Equity of access for all Australian students

We serve a different kind of student to the traditional on-campus learner.

Students enrolled through OUA are most likely to be an adult learner, working part or full-time. They choose to study online because it helps to reduce some of the barriers they face in starting or continuing their study journey. These are typically people looking to begin, advance or change their careers.

OUA serves a nationally representative student cohort, with an average of 77% of students enrolled via OUA being based outside their chosen Universities' primary home state. As a ratio of overall student enrolments, students who enrol through OUA are more likely to be within an equity group when compared to sector norms. This reflects OUA's commitment to deliver access for all Australians.

¹ Dec 2022, Open Universities Australia Brand Tracker, Flood & Partners, commissioned research.

Enabling choice and informed decision making

OUA is a marketplace for online higher education, enabling thousands of students to access education annually, and receive impartial guidance to make informed decisions on the study choices that are right for them. Since formation as part of the Open Learning Initiative via the Keating Government in 1993, access to higher education has been facilitated for ~500,000 students, enabling diverse student cohorts across the country to start or continue their higher education journey.

Today, owned by 7 University Shareholders, OUA services ~35,000 students nationally through partnership with 28 universities, providing choice of over 950 courses and 2,700 single subjects across all broad fields of education. The OUA brand is the most recognised brand in online education, and is most known as the place to search and compare study options ¹. Nearly 9 in 10 Australians looking for tertiary education have heard of OUA, and more than 48% of people who are actively looking to study have visited open.edu.au in 2022.

Through provision of access to single subjects with no entry requirements, thousands of learners are supported annually to directly enrol and start their university journey regardless of prior academic attainment. OUA is uniquely positioned - with process, capability, and experience in enabling diverse student cohorts to access education nationally, navigating complex decisions and funding support, while representing populations across all regions of Australia and throughout all life stages and academic backgrounds.

OUA equity group student numbers as a % of total student numbers 2022

| | |
|-------|------------|
| 16.3% | LOW SES |
| 22.8% | REGIONAL |
| 1.6% | REMOTE |
| 4.1% | INDIGENOUS |
| 13.2% | DISABILITY |



Our Partners



Domestic Student Participation, Equity Groups, enrolled via OUA, 2018-2023.

| | | Domestic Student Commencements: Enrol via OUA | | | | | |
|-------------------|-----------------------|---|--------|--------|--------|--------|-----------------|
| | | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 | 2022 | 2023 Jan-Jul |
| INDIGENOUS | % SHARE | 3.00% | 3.20% | 3.30% | 3.70% | 4.10% | 4.10% |
| | STUDENT COMMENCEMENTS | 1075 | 1146 | 1275 | 1276 | 1258 | 1018 |
| DISABILITY | % SHARE | 8.70% | 9.20% | 9.90% | 10.90% | 13.20% | 14.90% |
| | STUDENT COMMENCEMENTS | 3074 | 3334 | 3816 | 3818 | 4095 | 3711 |
| LOW SES | % SHARE | 15.30% | 15.70% | 14.80% | 15.60% | 16.30% | 16.80% |
| | STUDENT COMMENCEMENTS | 5293 | 5560 | 5565 | 5332 | 4961 | 4134 |
| REGIONAL & REMOTE | % REGIONAL | 20.70% | 21.30% | 20.90% | 21.90% | 22.80% | 21.60% |
| | % REMOTE | 1.30% | 1.40% | 1.40% | 1.40% | 1.60% | 1.40% |
| SUM | | 22.00% | 22.70% | 22.30% | 23.30% | 24.40% | 23.00% |

Source: OUA enrolment data, Jan 2018 – July 2023