

Australian Universities Accord Interim Report Submission from the University of Divinity



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Summary

The University of Divinity thanks the Australian Universities Accord Panel for its Interim Report and for the opportunity to make a submission. The University welcomes the five immediate first steps. This submission responds to five long term issues ahead of the Panel's final report:

1. the education imperative
2. improving participation
3. diversifying higher education providers
4. Tertiary Education Commission
5. universal learning entitlement

The University of Divinity

The University of Divinity is unique in the Australian higher education system as:

- Australia's smallest University with around 1,500 students
- an entirely industry-based provider resourced since its establishment (through an Act of Parliament in 1910) by religious orders and faith-based organisations to equip leaders and staff through education and to pursue research
- Australia's number 1 University for student engagement, due to the high quality of teaching, small class sizes, and missional alignment across staff, students and industry
- home of the School of Indigenous Studies, established in 2021 as the first serious effort in Australia to provide higher education and research in Christian theology delivered by and for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

1. The Education Imperative

The Interim Report is commendable for its strong focus on improving access and participation, and placing First Nations people at the centre of tertiary education. The Report commences, however, with the assumption that the fundamental problem Australia needs to solve is the changing nature of the workforce and the likelihood that we will need very significant growth in the number of workers with degrees in the future. This needs to be qualified in three ways to reflect the strategic capacity of higher education to shape Australia's future:

- a) Improving the qualifications of Australia's workforce needs to be achieved across the whole tertiary sector, not solely through higher education.
- b) The critical and distinctive role of *higher* education is conceptual learning and research, activities that design our preferred futures. Higher education graduates will include those with the innovation and imagination to shape the technological developments that will create new occupations, to reinvent what work itself looks like.
- c) Higher education must equip graduates for a wide range of careers into the future. This includes the getting of wisdom – learning how to learn, and how to transition from one career to another – as well as the acquisition of specific skills. This is where the humanities and social sciences, and disciplines such as pure mathematics, have a critical role in preparing Australia for a prosperous future.

Finally, the place of values and character in higher education must be central to the Accord if it is to have an enduring future. For some decades participation in higher education has been seen increasingly as the promotion of individual self-interest and self-improvement, rather than a

collective effort that aims to improve the quality of life for the nation, state and neighbourhood. Fundamental to this is assisting students to reflect deeply on how they can contribute to the service of others. It also requires a collective shift in the national mindset about education, as this generation's investment in our communal future, rather than a tool for individual gain.

The ancient ideal of education for the common good must be deeply embedded in the Accord.

2. Improving Participation

The University of Divinity welcomes the strong focus on improving participation across the full range of Australian culture and society. We make two comments based on our experience.

First, funding arrangements need to support equity. The Job-Ready Graduates package need to be unwound to ensure that Commonwealth support is provided for all disciplines at a level that makes a real difference to students. For example, the University received equity-based CSPs for students enrolling in its Counselling awards, but the CSP funding provides only 11% of the cost of the award with students paying the remaining 89%.

Similarly, for many students from cohorts with low participation rates, stipends are essential (in addition to tuition fee scholarships or HELP) so that students with significant family and community responsibilities are able to devote the necessary time to study without juggling work commitments as well.

Second, improving access and equity cannot be done by simply admitting more students to the same institutions and classes, as this will result in an ever worsening staff / student ratio and diminish the quality of the educational experience. The University of Divinity attributes its nation-leading results in student engagement surveys to its commitment to small class sizes in which academic staff know each student by name, and something of their needs, vocations and capacities.

3. Diversifying Higher Education Providers

An unanswered question in Australian higher education is whether greater diversity in the University sector is needed, and across the non-University sector more broadly. Underlying this is the question of what makes a University a University. We support the continued inclusion of research as a fundamental part of being an Australian University, but encourage diversification of how research is measured and, indeed, what counts as research to reflect a wider range of cultures of knowledge beyond traditional Western concepts focussed on peer-reviewed outputs alone.

The University of Divinity's view is that size and institutional mission should not be barriers to University status, but that the standards for being a University need to be clear for the long-term. Our experience has shown that funding mechanisms can make this possible: we have benefitted from provision of Research Block Grant funding for twenty years, on the same formulas used for other Table A and Table B institutions, punching well above our weight due to the quality of our research and our strong industry partnerships. Such funding mechanisms do not, however, exist in some other programs where a critical mass of administrative infrastructure is assumed, creating a barrier to innovation and creativity that should form part of a diverse University sector.

In relation to University governance we note that the University of Divinity Act provides for a very different model to most Universities, with the University Council composed essentially of industry

representatives from the University's partner churches and without government appointees. This has greatly assisted links to industry, while use of a skills, experience and diversity matrix has ensured the University Council has been well-equipped for its tasks. We therefore suggest approaching changes to University governing board membership with care to avoid further limiting the diversity of Australia's University sector.

4. Tertiary Education Commission

The University of Divinity supports in principle the proposal for a Tertiary Education Commission that has strategic oversight of the tertiary education sector. Great care will be needed to delineate the work of the TEC from that of TEQSA, to avoid over-regulation, and from that of the Department of Education. The TEC could be effective both in addressing emerging needs and in improving the diversity of the tertiary education sector, provided its mandate is clear.

We suggest the following elements for inclusion in the design of a TEC:

- a) TEC to be accountable to the Minister for a National Tertiary Education Strategy that drives the TEC's work and how it engages with providers. This would parallel (but be distinct from the compliance focus of) TEQSA and the Higher Education Standards Framework.
- b) Use of mission-based compacts between the TEC and all participating tertiary providers (Universities, University Colleges, Institutes, VET / TAFE, both public and independent), the compacts to be (i) aligned to the National Strategy and relating to specific funding programs, and (ii) proportionate to the size and mission of individual providers and (iii) proportionate to the scale of funding.
- c) Engagement between tertiary providers and the TEC to be required only for providers that receive or wish to receive Commonwealth funding for research or teaching.

5. Universal Learning Entitlement

The University of Divinity strongly supports the principle of a universal learning entitlement that is student-centric, following the student to the provider and course of their choice. If carefully designed and implemented, this step will support proposed targets in access and participation, as well as more diverse higher education sector. Ideally, the universal learning entitlement should work across the whole tertiary sector – University and non-University, public and independent providers, higher education and VET – to maximise learning pathways that suit students, their communities, employers, and national priorities.