

Review of Australia's Higher Education System:

Introduction

[REDACTED]

Drawing on this experience, including many interactions at all levels with the Humanities sector, from State and Federal Ministers through university academics, administrators, postgraduates and undergraduates to high school students and parents, internationally as well as domestically, [REDACTED] principal focus in this initial submission is on **the first of the seven Terms of Reference** in the recently announced "Review of Australia's Higher Education System" or "Accord". Our comments in this submission [REDACTED] are oriented towards "advancing education" in general, specifically by "**promoting discussion**" of a *liberal arts education*.

"Quality education" is not just a matter of "skills" and "needs". "Knowledge" is not just a matter of professional training. Education properly and seriously understood is also about (even mainly about) the getting of *wisdom*, about developing a growing awareness and recognition of the best things that have been thought and said about the human condition in one's own tradition and in others': not only because this is a life-good in itself but because wiser people capable of genuine critical thought (the ability to 'read' and make informed articulate judgements about complex human situations) make better citizens, leaders and workers. The professional task of fostering this development in our society falls or ought to fall principally to the Humanities function within our universities: [REDACTED]

But for a mix of historical reasons the Humanities in Australia are not performing this function as well as they might. As Glyn Davis and others have written, our oversized and homogeneous universities are not offering a truly diverse mix of learning opportunities for Australian undergraduates, regardless of their socio-economic backgrounds. And this applies particularly in the liberal arts. The huge size, monochrome design and radical corporatisation of our universities, along with the science-driven research model and professional-training orientation (the instruction model), have tended in the Humanities to **incentivise mediocre research while disincentivising first-class teaching**. The Humanities sector needs seriously to address teaching quality: this is not even considered in the Review. In almost every Humanities department and school across the country class size is not even the worst issue: the lack of coherent integrated courses of study is a more fundamental

problem. Students are bounced from one academic research specialisation to the next, these 'units' then being randomly assembled into a 'major'. There is no sector-wide attempt to assess or take seriously student learning experience of this 'education' or its life outcomes.

[REDACTED], a liberal arts education on the model of several famous and successful American institutions would offer a rich and integrated learning experience currently unavailable to most undergraduates in this country, while also offering a more student-centred teaching model as an alternative example for the rest of the sector.

Background

[REDACTED] a significant gap [REDACTED] in university humanities education in Australia [REDACTED] liberal-arts, 'great books' style undergraduate degrees and programs, [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] These degrees offer a uniquely structured, coherent and multi-disciplinary small-class teaching-centred model, based on the long-established but contrasting programs offered by Columbia University in New York and St John's College in Annapolis, [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] The underlying 'great books' program [REDACTED] is based on a varying collection of classic texts (including in philosophy, literature, art, music, and the history of science and mathematics) that collectively constitute a thorough foundation in Western thought, art and institutions, but including, where appropriate and feasible, reference to other traditions [REDACTED]

Our hope is that over time, [REDACTED], students and staff alike will see for themselves the appeal and value of an innovative and transformative approach that fosters a deeper cultivation of the whole person, thus equipping students for the future: their careers but also their lives. Other universities in turn may see the value of offering and funding such degrees themselves, alongside their current models. Such programs would represent a major innovation in the higher education sector and beyond, offering an innovative curriculum model while simultaneously shifting some of the emphasis within the university Humanities sector away from research and back to teaching. This will greatly benefit domestic undergraduate students, including by helping at least a small part of the university sector to return to its foundational texts in transmitting thousands of years of illuminating thought and creative inquiry to new generations.

[REDACTED] scholarly understanding derived from the study of many of the great texts of our past certainly enriches the student's entire life: but it also equips him or her to make a better contribution to the workforce and society of the future. Close engagement with and group discussion of so many of the great ideas and works of art of our past makes individuals better thinkers, writers and speakers – invaluable assets in whatever career they choose and in whatever

community they join. Through collaborative exposure to highly complex and long-esteemed texts representing the classical world, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, Modernity and Postmodernity, with occasional comparative reference where possible to non-Western material, [REDACTED] scholars are able to develop a genuinely critical mindset, applicable in all walks of life, while immersing themselves in a rich and broad intellectual and artistic heritage.

As J.M. Anderson has argued,

because **great books** are inherently challenging and complex, they are well suited for developing cognitive abilities and stimulating higher-order thinking. They expose students to momentous ideas while teaching them how to penetrate to the root of things, follow their intellect, and acquire genuine understanding. They force students to stretch their minds by thinking through complex arguments in all fields of inquiry... in the first place [they] imbue students with the habits of thought and mind appropriate to an educated person, such as verbal expression and judgment; in the second place, they can be used to teach students... effective communication, critical thinking, ethic and civic responsibility, problem solving, quantitative literacy." ("Why Community-College Students Need Great Books", *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 3/23/12).

The focus on small group class discussion is particularly important in the programs we fund. As Hamann, Pollock and Wilson have argued (*College Teaching*. 60(2): 65-75, 2012.):

a long line of research underscores the benefits of student-oriented pedagogy, especially discussion, for achieving desired learning outcomes and student satisfaction (Prince [43]). In regard to the overall desiderata of classroom instruction—student interaction, critical thinking, problem solving, cooperation, mastery of content—the salutary effects of student discussion are legion (e.g., Ellis et al. [17]; Gall and Gall [20]; McCarthy and Anderson [35]; Nicol and Boyle [38]; Philips 2005). Discussions promote communication skills (Dallimore, Hertenstein, and Platt [12]), but they also improve learning (Bender [3]; Davis and Hillman Murrell 1993; Huerta [26]), including cooperative learning and critical thinking (Garside [21]). For example, in her comparison of student learning of material taught in lecture and presented in discussion, Garside ([21], 212) reports "significantly more learning with regard to higher-level items" in the discussion mode. Similarly, Lyon, and Lagowski (2008) show that students participating in small discussion groups scored higher on exams and attained higher course grades than those not attending discussion sessions.

In a society steeped in consumerism, fake news and trivial or evanescent social media obsessions, as well as startling ignorance of its own past, the development of engaged, informed, articulate, deep-thinking and well-read individuals has never been more important. A society with a diminished awareness and appreciation of its own heritage and institutions is a weakened society, less agile and confident in itself, less able to confront the challenges and seize the opportunities presented in a rapidly transforming world. At the same time the globalised and AI-driven workplace of the future will increasingly need innovative, language-capable strategic thinkers aware of the human dimension---as Steve Jobs and others have observed.

Proposal

Against this background, [REDACTED]

██████████ calls under Area 1 of the “Accord” for a **review of the tertiary sector particularly as it relates to the humanities and liberal arts.** (While we have no brief regarding the social sciences, sciences or professionally-oriented degrees such as law, engineering, medicine, business studies etc, experience in the US suggests that professionals in these fields, and thus the fields themselves, do benefit measurably from a prior liberal arts exposure.) The current research-driven-cum-professional-training national uniform model, with its huge classes and (in the Humanities) lack of coherent integrated discipline focus, may be delivering “skills” and “training”, or even “knowledge”, but it is not delivering truly educated or wise individuals. “Critical thinking” on this model rarely means true judgement of the whole (as the phrase literally means) but prejudiced and adversarial presentism. And the worthy ambition to broaden access to this system so as to include more students from disadvantaged backgrounds ██████████ means little if the system we hope they will have improved access to is itself flawed.

Accordingly, two alternative models seem indicated. One is the model sketched out by Glyn Davis, Peter Coaldrake and others: of an entirely new class of tertiary colleges, more specialist and teaching-focussed, such as CalTech in the US or NIDA in Sydney, delivering liberal arts and other areas of non-research-based education. Such colleges are common in the much larger United States tertiary sector.

██████████ A new liberal arts college on the model of Australia’s single liberal arts college, Champion College in Sydney, or the many examples in the United States, would have been one good direction ██████████

██████████ took the view, however, that since Australia’s tertiary sector is much smaller, and also pragmatically conservative in its preferences for similar professional training institutions available in each of the major cities close to where most families live (unlike in the US or UK where students typically move away from home for their university degrees), it would not support such larger-scale institutions in any numbers. Even Champion has struggled to attract students in its 15+ years of existence. Such institutions would in our view take generations to become viable either financially or reputationally: indeed might never become so. Massive subsidies would be required in the form of either taxpayer funding or very high fees (schools for the rich): regional versions would be unsustainable without incentives to attract our majority metropolitan population.

We took the alternative view: that a raft of liberal arts colleges, degrees, diplomas or just majors could be created *inside or in affiliation with* the existing metropolitan and regional universities. ██████████

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] the demand for courses such as these is sufficiently solid to support extended majors or other diplomas of this type across the sector, where better staff-student ratios could be enabled either by changing the mix of research-and-teaching and teaching-only positions or by creating smaller stand-alone teaching units within residential colleges or other sub-units. Above all, teaching prestige needs to be structurally enhanced vis-a-vis research in the career as a whole. Academics on long-term teaching-only secondments from their usual disciplines, earlier career academics, or those who wish from the start to make teaching their life's work, can all be incentivised to flourish within these teaching-centred liberal arts majors or courses by promotion and status. Many academics in the Humanities would enjoy the 'teaching outside the discipline' feature of 'great books' courses. Why not have classicists teaching Shakespeare, philosophers teaching *Antigone*, or literature professors teaching Thucydides? Why not read Dostoevsky or Dante as stand-alone texts in translation? (The [REDACTED] CEO has offered such a course himself, within an English major offered in a high-prestige research-heavy university in Australia.) None of this would preclude undergraduates from studying with research specialists in parallel majors. Best of all, why not develop over time a cadre of specialists in this kind of great books small-class teaching? The pleasure and fulfilment involved are significant for many who value their teaching over their research. Furthermore this model might set an example for the rest of the Humanities sector in how traditional discipline cores might be taught.

In short we need to use this review to think outside the box about **a new liberal arts teaching model in the Humanities**. The undergraduate experience in this sector in Australia is currently unsatisfactory in several ways, but we can address this from within the institutions, above all by making it possible to offer world-class 'great books' liberal arts degrees to small groups taught by dedicated teachers. This would be to the great benefit of our country as well as many individual Australians. We hope that the "Accord" process will offer significant opportunities to discuss this further with the Minister and stakeholders.

[REDACTED]

19 December 2022