Australian Universities Accord: Review of Terms of Reference Response from Bond University 19 December 2022

Bond University welcomes the Australian Universities Accord Review and looks forward to contributing to this important discussion. The Accord is timely. Australia must create a higher education system that offers sufficient breadth and depth of opportunities for learners from every background, and at each stage in their careers, to access knowledge and skills that are relevant to build prosperity for the individual and the nation. We must build a sector that is agile and responsive to the demands of our current workforce, adaptive to future trends and changes, and supportive of the individuals who are creating the economies of the future. We must also retain quality and accountability at the core of our higher education system. This is key to our ability to provide responsibly for our own citizens, and for expanding our participation in the international education market and enjoying the consequent benefits of exchange of ideas and knowledge, cultural competency, and export revenues. Our submission has been kept purposefully brief and focused on high-level issues that the Panel might prioritise. We look forward to further consultation during 2023 and would welcome an opportunity to provide more detail on any of the matters raised. Bond University Bond University is unique in Australia. We are Australia's first private, non-profit university. Since foundation in 1989, Bond has provided an alternative to the largely homogenous public university system. The University has built a strong reputation and successfully graduated over 32,000 students, all of whom have forgone their access to Commonwealth Grant Scheme funding (or its equivalent in past systems) to seek a model of education that is suited to their individual needs. We are unashamedly focussed on our students’ experience and the high-quality, transformative education we offer. In the 2022 Student Experience Survey, Bond ranked first amongst Australian universities in all six categories: learner engagement, learning resources, skills development, student support, teaching quality, and overall educational experience. The success of Bond University provides an instructive case study on how institutions with independent missions can provide alternative choices for students, and thus add strength to the system as a whole. The ability of independent providers to succeed and contribute in this way is dependent on policy settings that are competitively neutral and do not unfairly disadvantage any student who chooses a particular provider. A student should be able to choose the university wherein they believe they will succeed, based on their personal background, capacities and preferences, and the institution’s programs, support and services.

Terms of Reference

The broad ambition of expanding diversity in the sector by setting policies that encourage greater focus on mission and quality within universities, and reflect the principles of competitive neutrality, run through many of the key areas for review set out within the Terms of Reference. This submission makes high-level comments against a few of those areas:

Meeting Australia’s knowledge and skills needs, now and in the future

In order to meet the diverse needs of our nation's economy and society, the Australian university sector must deliver a quality educational experience that equips our students with the skills and attributes needed to succeed in an increasingly complex, digital and competitive global landscape. To achieve this, we need a system that supports institutions of different shapes, sizes, structures and missions, and policy settings that support institutional autonomy, innovation, and continuous improvement. It is most unlikely, and history has proven it impossible, that any central agency can predict with accuracy the required number of student places in specific programs at specific institutions to best meet the future demand of the broad economy for skills and tertiary training outcomes. Hence, there needs to be flexibility built into the system that allows individual institutions to be responsive and to cater for different and changing demands from both students and industry. In this regard, we ask that the Accord Panel to focus on policy settings that remove any barriers that exclude private institutions from contributing to our national aspirations and the targets that will be set in response to its recommendations. Further, we ask that the Panel be conscious of unintended consequences in its decision-making and avoid any impact on competitive neutrality between the public and private sector. Any policy framework should have at its core the fundamental value of respecting the judgment of students themselves, and then supporting their choices in a fair and neutral manner.

Access and opportunity

Bond University attracts a diverse student population, who actively choose an alternative to the public system despite not receiving the advantage of Commonwealth Supported Places (CSP) to subsidise their tuition fees. Bond maintains our commitment to accessibility through significant institutional investment in scholarships supported by a program of philanthropic giving to student financial support. Bond’s private status has not impacted on our ability to create opportunity for disadvantaged student cohorts, despite sometimes a myth otherwise. Bond’s low SES student participation ratio compares favourably to our peers, exceeding seven of the Go8 universities and two of the three largest universities in our region. In the last year, almost one-quarter of our student population received some form of financial aid. Our Nyombil Indigenous Support Centre, established in 2012, has helped our Indigenous student population grow to 2% of the total student population in 2021. Our Indigenous student success rate of 86% is well above the sector average of 75%. In 2021, 46% of Indigenous students at Bond received scholarships to support their studies. Bond’s educational model is built around small class sizes, personalised support services, an active and engaging campus life and strong peer networks and, because of this, we are a particularly suitable destination for many students from backgrounds that might leave them less prepared for the rigours of higher education. Our extensive scholarship program goes some way to breaking down the barriers for access and opportunity. However, the most critical tool for supporting Australian students to access an education of their choice is the HELP loan scheme. Australia has led the world in establishing the income-contingent HELP loan scheme as a mechanism that removes the financial barrier of upfront fees for students who otherwise would not access higher education, while still encouraging responsible choice and creating a reasonable obligation for repayment. In considering mechanisms for supporting access and opportunity, we ask that the Panel recognise the merits of the income-contingent loan scheme and consider options for expanding or extending it, such that more students can benefit from it and all students receive equal access irrespective of choice of institution. Moreover, we suggest the Panel endorse the concept of continual learning over a person’s career and ensure that the mechanisms of the HELP scheme do not inhibit or prevent further study. Specifically, the Panel might explore how a bona fide student who has reached the cap on their HELP account might pursue further (post-graduate) study but in a financially responsible way.

Investment and affordability

The large public universities are the foundational institutions of the Australian higher education system. They have established the high benchmarks for both learning and research that define the Australian system and attract the international market. They represent a large and ongoing investment by the Australian public and so it is appropriate that the Accord’s Terms of Reference give particular attention to the funding and contributions model and the Job-ready Graduates package. However, there are a myriad of other funding pools and mechanisms within the Higher Education Support Act (HESA). Generally, these are smaller pools of funding targeted to support specific student groups, including the Disability Support Program, Indigenous Support Program, OS-HELP, and the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program . Separate administrative requirements attached to each of these schemes typically add to the administrative burden and inefficient application of the much-needed resources. More significantly, the eligibility criteria for accessing each of these funds varies and they often exclude institutions that have genuine capacity to contribute to the objectives for which the scheme was established. In many cases, funds are made available exclusively to Table A Universities, contravening the principles of competitive neutrality that the Commonwealth Government has committed to. Bond University asks that the Accord Panel give consideration to ensuring competitive access to these additional programs to ensure that eligibility is governed by quality and outcomes rather than provider type. Specifically, it appears unfair and inequitable for various disadvantaged student groups to be excluded from support, which is available to their peers, purely on the basis of their choice of university.

Quality and sustainability:

Supporting a competitive and resilient international education sector. The Government has recognised the significant contribution that international students make to the Australian economy, by enriching our communities, increasing our skilled population, and expanding our international collaboration and trade and investment links. Recent data shows Australia gradually recovering its position as a destination of choice for international students after losing market share to countries like the UK and Canada, where there have been assertive recruitment strategies put in place with welcoming policies and flexible visa options. It is critical that Australia’s recent momentum be maintained. International students come to Australia with a broad range of ambitions and interests. The traditionally dominant model of undergraduate or postgraduate degree level study, often combined with period of work experience, has been successful. Recent Australian moves to increase access to post-study work rights have been important in this regard and make sense in a constrained skills and jobs market, though competitor destinations are providing similar or more generous incentives. A significant outcome aim of the Accord will be to create a more diverse university sector in Australia, with fit-for-purpose study options and more choice for students. As our sector matures, we must ensure that the policy settings for international students also develops. Bond University asks the Accord Panel to recognise the diversity in the objectives and ambitions of an increasingly dynamic and complex cohort of international students and give consideration to balanced policy settings that will support growth in the industry and the cultural and economic benefits international students bring.

Delivering new knowledge, innovation and capability

Bond supports an open and transparent research system that recognises the full cost of research and research training. While a small institution by size, Bond delivers high quality research in areas aligned to our core strengths. For instance, a recent 2022 measure of innovation weighted for size (the proportion of successful entrepreneurs among graduates in the last decade), ranked Bond second in Australia. Unlike public institutions, private universities do not have the capacity to cross-subsidise research from CSP funding. Further, research activity is constrained by limited access to develop and seed research activity as the current Research Block Grant formulae distributes funding on lag indicators, benefiting those institutions that can invest upfront in scale. We ask that the Panel consider research funding mechanisms that recognise the full cost of research and support non-public high-quality institutions.