Initial submission to the Australian Universities Accord review

Centre of Excellence for Equity in Higher Education, University of Newcastle

This initial submission recommends priorities for the ongoing review, in the context of the published Terms of Reference, and draws on extensive expertise and experience at the Centre of Excellence for Equity in Higher Education (CEEHE) at the University of Newcastle, NSW. We welcome the opportunity to continue to engage with the review process as it develops in 2023.

CEEHE is a site of innovative research and practice, brought together in critical thought to generate transformative impact for equity in and beyond higher education. Our work—in practice, research, facilitation, and support—aims to address persistent inequalities and is grounded in a unique 'praxis-based' social justice framework. https://www.newcastle.edu.au/ceehe

1. Meeting Australia's knowledge and skills needs, now and in the future

Enhance the delivery of quality education that meets the needs of students across all stages of lifelong learning and develops the skills needed now, and in the future. This will include recommendations for new targets and reforms recognising that more than nine in ten new jobs will require post-school qualifications, and fifty per cent of new jobs are expected to require a bachelor's degree or higher.

- Public universities and the TAFE system should be securely and comprehensively funded so that Australia is well placed for the knowledge and skills required to navigate an increasingly complex and unpredictable set of globalised contexts.
- All students should have access to high quality teaching, regardless of discipline-area, and ability to afford study.
- All students should have access to Indigenous knowledges and methodologies as a key part of addressing Australia's knowledge and skills needs. This will progress commitments to national reconciliation and help to ensure future welfare and well-being as a society, and environmental sustainability, reparation and justice.
- Building the needed knowledge and skill for the future requires inter-disciplinary perspectives across sciences and humanities. A commitment to sustaining teaching, learning and research in STEM and in Social Science and Humanities is therefore imperative.
- Targets and reforms need to be carefully considered in order to address the role and purpose of higher education beyond employability metrics and support cross institutional approaches to equity.

2. Access and opportunity

Improve access to higher education, across teaching, learning and research. This will include recommendations for new targets and reforms to support greater access and participation for students from underrepresented backgrounds (including First Nations Australians, those from low socio-economic backgrounds, people with disability, and regional and rural Australians).

- A key finding of a recent Australian Government funded *International Literature Review of Equity in Higher Education* (Appendix 1) developed by CEEHE was how the way 'the problem' of equity is understood has important implications for the efficacy of equity initiatives.

- o There is wide-spread acceptance that the drivers of student inequity are long-standing and entrenched in structures of social inequality. Despite this, students from underrepresented backgrounds are too often constructed as 'the problem' in that they are somehow deficient as individual students, who are seen to lack preparation, aspiration, confidence or resilience. This is a 'deficit model' that turns attention away from the important work of challenging social inequities and generating strategies for institutional change.
  - o The International Review proposes a 'Multidimensional Framework for Equity in Higher Education' to counter embedded deficit imaginaries (for an in-depth discussion of the Framework, see Section 7.1 of the attached Review).
- Students from underrepresented groups require access to the resources and quality education that will enable them to participate in higher education.
  - o This demands a higher education system that redistributes opportunities and resources to those navigating financial disadvantage.
  - o Inequalities are reproduced when students from under-represented groups are forced to study within conditions of poverty.
  - o Scholarships are a useful mechanism to support students facing disadvantage but cannot replace a well-designed funding system.
- All higher education staff should have access to high quality professional learning and development that specifically addresses questions of equity in the development and delivery of equity initiatives, student support, admissions, teaching, curriculum development and assessment. Rigorous professional development (RPD) was a key finding of CEEHE's *International Literature Review of Equity in Higher Education* which articulates how RPD can generate dialogue between research and practice to identify and tackle insidious inequalities that otherwise might be overlooked (Burke et al, 2022, p.122).
- Equity initiatives should be funded through long-term commitments to equitable and inclusive higher education. Short-term funding cycles are an obstacle to transformation of educational inequalities.
- Equity research, policy and practice should be deeply informed by the representation of the values and perspectives of students from under-represented communities.

3. Investment and affordability

Explore funding and contribution arrangements that deliver equity, access, quality and longer-term investments to meet priorities in teaching, research, workforce and infrastructure. This will include a review of the Job-ready Graduates Package.

- Students should be able to afford to access all degree programs in the Australian higher education system, regardless of the subject or discipline area.
- Higher education policy should be informed by student aspirations and values and should also contribute to wider social concerns such as justice and sustainability. The narrow focus on job-readiness excludes such concerns and alienates many students who are motivated to make a broader contribution to their communities.
- Dedicated federal equity funding should be retained, and grown, with context-driven and culturally responsive evaluation guiding its allocation and implementation rather than standardised measures.
- A key insight from the recent *International Literature Review of Equity in Higher Education*' is that 'despite the centrality of funding regimes on the entire operation of higher education, the rationalities that guide funding (Olsen & Peters, 2005) rarely intersect social justice and

equity concerns. This is important because it not only ignores the significant economic and material inequalities that undermine student equity agendas but also contributes to the harmful deficit imaginaries that project the problem of lack in the attitudes and bodies of individual students (Burke et al, 2022, p.40).

4. Governance, accountability and community

Enhance regulatory and workplace relations settings to support universities to meet their obligations to both staff and students.

Explore the contribution that higher education makes to the Australian community, national security, and sovereign capability.

- Higher education is an important part of the social fabric of Australia and should be inclusive of all communities. This requires that universities are held accountable to their local and regional communities and cooperate as a cohesive sector committed to student equity rather than compete in ways that undermine the equitable access and participation of students from underrepresented groups.
- Efforts towards addressing the inequities in higher education are limited by the existing deficit model of equity, which regularly places equity practice outside the core work of the university.
- Sensitively constructed accountability, monitoring and evaluation structures are required to pursue equity in higher education. The recent *International Literature Review of Equity in Higher Education* developed by CEEHE emphasises how evaluation of equity programs has tended to focus on the quantifiable, and on rapidly achievable outcomes. Quantifiable outcomes can however be relatively minor in their capacity to transform enduring relations of inequality, and rapidly achieved outcomes can be short-lived.

5. The connection between the vocational education and training and higher education systems

Explore possible opportunities to support greater engagement and alignment between the vocational education and training (VET) and higher education systems. In particular, the panel will have regard to the experience of students in navigating these systems and ensuring a cohesive and connected tertiary education system.

- It is imperative for the future of Australia, and for creating more equitable higher education, that all students (and potential students) can access all parts of the tertiary system across VET and university provision.
- There needs to be greater resource and infrastructure sharing across tertiary education institutions, especially in regional, rural and remote areas. Regional students must navigate a wide ranging and ambiguous series of pathways offered by a multiplicity of providers. Greater coordination of resources would help to produce clearer pathways for students.
- More flexible, publicly funded pathways could enable students to access academic and vocational forms of tertiary education, and this would support equity of participation. Such flexibility should however avoid standardisation (e.g., different regional areas and how the different Universities connect to TAFEs). This inevitably presents a challenge to higher education of providing flexible and enabling pathways through different forms of tertiary education that recognises and values diverse cultures and community contexts.

6. Quality and sustainability

Examine the challenges faced by domestic and international students and staff due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the temporary and permanent impacts on the way the higher education sector works.

Support a competitive and resilient international education sector, reflecting the important role international students play in our society and economy, and Australia's interest in deepening partnerships abroad.

- All students should have access to rich higher education experiences, including engagement with a research environment. This will ensure quality and equity for all university students and avoid inequities in the system.
- Funding to enable the higher education sector to recover from the significant challenges it has faced, including refining, sustaining, and further developing new strategies and approaches that have been emerged because of COVID-19.
- Ensure an inclusive culture for international students in which the cultural diversity they bring is recognised as enriching Australia and in which domestic students and staff can develop greater global awareness and citizenship.

7. Delivering new knowledge, innovation and capability

Support a system of university research that delivers for Australia, securing the future of the Australian research pipeline, from basic and translational research to commercialisation. In doing so, the Accord will explore relevant initiatives and other opportunities and to further boost collaboration between universities and industry to drive greater commercial returns.

The review will synchronise with the ARC review and consider issues raised through that review and other areas of government that impact on the capacity of the higher education system to meet the nation's current and future needs.

- The review should consider how to better fund research that is dedicated to building the field of higher education studies in Australia, particularly relating to access and opportunity.
- The review should consider the importance of community-engaged research.
- The recent *International Literature Review of Equity in Higher Education* developed by CEEHE identified opportunities, for example, to have evaluators working closely alongside university staff responsible for equity programs with a sense of collegiality and a shared drive to success, rather than as an imposed enforcement body.

Appendix 1

a. Burke, P. J., Bunn, M., Lumb, M., Parker, J., Mellor, K., Brown, A., Locke, W., Shaw, J., Webb, S. & Howley, P. (2023 – in production). International Review of Equity in Higher Education: Dismantling deficit in equity structures by drawing on a multidimensional framework. Centre of Excellence for Equity in Higher Education. A research report prepared for the Australian Government Department of Education Skills and Employment National Priority Pool Program.

b. Burke, P.J., Parker, J., Lumb, M., Bunn, M. and Shaw, J. (2023 – in production). A Companion to the International Review of Equity in Higher Education: dismantling deficit in equity structures by drawing on a multidimensional framework. Building generative collaboration, rigorous professional development and ethical evaluation. Prepared for the Australian Department of Education, Skills and Employment (DESE), and funded by the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program's National Priorities Pool.