

# TD School submission to the Australian Universities Accord review (ToR)

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TD School brings together different perspectives, data, information, tools, concepts, techniques, and theories from multiple disciplines to inform its transdisciplinary education degree programs and research. The first of its kind in Australia, TD School was established to help tackle complex problems that require building bridges between fields of study and expertise. TD School seeks to provide a space where ideas can be shared more fluidly between industry and universities, and people can thrive through exposure to new ways of thinking. TD School is the home of the UTS flagship Bachelor of Creative Intelligence and Innovation degree, which has won numerous national and international awards for its extensive collaboration with industry and contribution to the development of graduates' capacity to create social and environmental impact.

The assumptions about disciplinary structures and hierarchies that are currently baked-in in education policy and funding arrangements promote rigid graduate career pathways and stifled innovation and industry/university collaboration opportunities. The key proposal outlined in this submission argues that the terms of reference must reflect the need for the higher education policy to be led by a strong vision of a desirable future, rather than patching up the existing broken system. This includes **encouraging future-orientation, adaptation and innovation** through policy as **the key characteristics of the university sector**, rather than perpetuating reactive responses to ongoing disruptions and crises.

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

- Expand the notions of 'knowledge and skills needs' beyond a narrow focus on employability.

The narrow employability discourse that links outcomes of university education to current industry needs fails to acknowledge that future shocks are likely to demand new, yet unknown, types of responses and capabilities. To foster a thriving society in the face of an unknown future, university graduates need to

be prepared for an **evolving career over a lifetime rather than a single profession**. Graduates also need to be equipped with the **knowledge and skills to create positive social and environmental impact in the world**, whether through waged employment or otherwise. Universities should be incentivised to foster these future-oriented graduate capabilities through their education programs. Current accountability and higher education quality measurement systems (eg. QILT) and funding schemes (eg. Job-ready graduates) fail to consider and acknowledge education outcomes beyond the labour market outcomes (eg. rate of employment, salary, etc).

Possible approaches might include

- developing expanded concepts of ‘knowledge and skills needs’ to include metrics of social and environmental impact (eg. linked with the UN Sustainable Development Goals or a new Australia-specific scheme) in addition to the economic contribution made by university graduates.
- developing appropriate measures of university education contribution to ongoing human development and evolving careers (eg. the capacity for university graduates to transition between professions and careers over a lifetime) in addition to the employability outcomes.

- Highlight differentiation, experimentation and innovation across the higher education system as a whole as the core components of meeting the ‘needs of the future’.

In the coming decades, Australian society will weather multiple protracted crises, with the ‘future needs’ yet unknown (but likely to include the need to respond to a changing climate, disruptive technologies and increasing social, economic and political instability). In the current economic climate, universities are stretched to the limit and positioned to deal with the ongoing disruptions in a reactive manner. University sector is homogeneous and individual higher education institutions compete against each other without great differentiation (eg. regional areas are in a great need of professional skills, yet regional universities are struggling to grow their enrolment numbers).

Possible approaches might include

- An expansive definition of ‘future needs’ (beyond ‘industry needs’ and employability outcomes), with a mandate and government support for universities to experiment and innovate to uncover yet unknown future needs and opportunities.
- Recognising areas of strength and differentiation across universities (as well as future potential revealed through experimentation) and encouraging growth in those areas.

## 2. Access and opportunity

- Highlight the need to ensure access and opportunity across both undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

This is an area of major importance to the Australian university sector. We believe many stakeholders will be well-positioned to comment on the undergraduate education access needs. However, it should not be assumed

that underprivilege and underrepresentation is resolved by gaining an undergraduate degree. A diversity of career and education pathways should be recognised, and **challenges in accessing postgraduate education** should also be included in this review. Workplace and employer perspective should play a key role in reviewing access and opportunity in postgraduate education.

### 3. Investment and affordability

- Ensure that the review of funding and contribution arrangements are led by a strong vision of a desirable future rather than purely economic considerations. The current funding arrangements are primarily driven by the perceived need to balance between the private and public value of higher education (with ‘value’ being conceptualised predominantly in economic terms). The Job-ready Graduates Package privileges some disciplines over others, based on untested assumptions about the current and future value of certain knowledge and skills. This has unintended consequences limiting access to education for some groups (eg. the current focus on STEM underprivileges women). Perpetuating inequalities is undesirable, even if it would make sense from an economic perspective. In the review of the Accord, the economic considerations should be accompanied by the question ‘what kind of future do we wish to create through higher education’.
- Value and encourage a range of disciplines and education pathways. There is a need for adaptation and continual development of knowledge and skills in Australia. A new crisis or shock might demand new skills and knowledge that we failed to predict as being needed in the future. Given this uncertainty, it is counterproductive to privilege certain disciplines or career pathways over others. Adopting an ecosystem metaphor, the best way to create a resilient and thriving society is by ensuring there is a diversity of capabilities to draw from as the circumstances change.  
Possible approaches
  - Valuing diversity of pathways in and of itself (irrespective of their economic potential).
  - Ensuring not simply access to education, but also equitable access to the different options (ie. the current focus on STEM is unfavourable for women).

### 4. Governance, accountability and community

- Include innovation and future-orientation as key components of university governance (including TESQA). Currently, university governance is dislocated from innovation, with accountability interpreted largely as a compliance exercise. Given the challenges the university sector is already facing (eg. the risks to integrity posed by AI and other disruptive technologies), there is a need to **enshrine innovation and adaptation as the key function of governance** and move away from a reactive approach, which puts the sector on the back foot.



TEQSA as the university regulator must play a more future-facing role (eg. through a mandate to fulfil this role and a legislated function) rather than dealing primarily with reaccreditation hurdles. University regulator should be about leading the future of the sector and not just governance based on past successes. Numerous examples of embedding innovation in governance exist across public sector organisations internationally.

- Conceptualise higher education contribution as being about supporting society in transition (not just in terms of the economic contribution and technological competitiveness).

The contribution made by the higher education sector to the Australian community should be seen as going beyond educating for jobs and technological innovation. As Australia transitions to the green economy and seeks to play a more proactive role in the context of political instability internationally, there is a need to move away from employability as a sole measure of success of higher education and build new knowledge about what makes communities and societies thrive amidst the disruptions.

As outlined earlier, measures of higher education impact should be expanded to include social and environmental impact beyond the narrow focus on economic growth and technological competitiveness, taking into account the responsibility to develop humans through education. This is underpinned by the concept of education as a human right that is valuable for its own sake. The instrumental view of education which positions it as a means to an end is insufficient, as it fails to acknowledge the multiplicity of ways higher education contributes to meaningful life across diverse Australian communities and internationally in the context of an uncertain and unknowable future.

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

Colleagues working in this space will be better positioned to comment on this aspect of the review. In our view, the links between VET and higher education systems must be considered in relation to the point (2) regarding access and equitable pathways, as well as point (1) regarding a lifetime of learning.

## 6. Quality and sustainability

- Emphasise future-orientation as a key feature of Australian higher education. Reliance on international student market is problematic, and we believe that colleagues across the sector will be well-placed to comment about this. However, the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and erosion of the international student share of the market are not one of situations that can be resolved once and for all. Given the climate emergency and increasingly volatile global political situation, it can be expected that the Australian higher education sector will face similar ongoing protracted crises in the future. These circumstances beyond our control and they are impossible to fully anticipate or

plan for. The higher education sector response should not be reactive (eg. devising strategies specifically for these challenges).

There is a need to develop longer-term resilience and future-orientation within higher education institutions. This includes concrete commitment to educating for the future and developing innovation and experimentation capacity within universities and higher education governing bodies, as outlined in our response to points (1) and (4).

## 7. Delivering new knowledge, innovation and capability

- Support research and innovation across and between disciplines, industries and sectors (eg. transdisciplinary and interdisciplinary research).  
Current research funding schemes systematically screen out transdisciplinary and interdisciplinary research due to the structure of disciplinary assessment panels such as in ARC funding schemes. Transdisciplinary and interdisciplinary research tends to be innovative at its heart and have real-world relevance, however, it does not have the support of the disciplinary hierarchies and structures due to the existing prestige structures. An **explicit focus on and support for research between and across disciplines** should be established through the Accord.
- Take a long-term view in supporting a diversity of research focused on systemic challenges across sectors.  
Current funding schemes that encourage collaboration with industry, such as ARC Linkage, privilege short-term research commercialisation potential over **research to support longer-term societal transitions**. There should be funding schemes supporting alliances between higher education institutions and a range of industry partners working together across sectors, seeking to understand and improve complex systemic issues. Further, new ways to value research in terms of its impact and contribution should be devised, in addition to the prestige associated with the funding amount gained (eg. research done in collaboration with not-for-profits might have significant social and environmental impact, but it will often be not on the same commercial scale as collaborations with tech industry in STEM disciplines).

We are grateful for the opportunity to participate in the consultation about the Australian Universities Accord. This review is an opportunity to set the foundations for a thriving university sector over the next few decades, and we believe, it is time to be bold in our vision for the Australian higher education.