Submission on Priorities

**Review of Australia’s Higher Education System**

The name Accord caught my attention. It suggests considerable disagreement within Australia’s higher education system. Is this so? Or is the problem waste, inefficiency, ineffectiveness, dysfunction, exclusion, or what? In the official documentation that supports this review I could not find a clear answer.

What I did find was that seven eminent people have been appointed to do a Review and propose an ‘accord’ for an education system that has so far served Australia relatively well. Yes, there are grumblings about how the system could “do better” (as our school report cards used to say), but exactly “what is the problem here?”

For guidance I looked at the seven stated priorities. Neither individually nor collectively do they address the central questions:

* What is the problem the Review is trying to address?
* What are the current and future education needs of the nation?

Without clear direction from answers to these questions the submission guidelines effectively encourage people to add to the laundry list of concerns and ad hoc suggestions that are endlessly recycled in the media. Also, they expose the Panel to potential criticism for not addressing the expectations of government (always changing), and ‘the people of Australia’ (who knows what these are)?

But the central problem is that the Review / Accord could meet most of the published priorities (access and opportunity; affordability; good governance; interconnectedness; quality; sustainability; new knowledge, and innovation) and still not be fit-for-purpose.

Notwithstanding the request of the (current) minister, Australia does not need a new ‘plan’ or ‘policy’ or ‘accord’ but rather a coherent strategy that integrates all the forms (and political jurisdictions) of its education system. To ground this strategy requires analysis (such as a comprehensive review of the current system, especially, its structural rigidities); evidence of performance, and some scenarios of likely potential futures. Agreement about these factors from a wide range of constituencies would create a solid backstory for the strategy.

The relevant branches of government would also need to agree and commit to which parts of the system they will fund as a public good or co-fund as a private investment. This issue has been at the heart of many previous redesigns of our education system. It also speaks to the issue of the roles of educational institutions and key beneficiaries of the system. For example, can a university degree designed and delivered by an academic cohort really deliver ‘job-ready graduates’ or is a key role of employers to ‘customise a basic education skill set’?

While I recognise that stakeholder and interested party concerns need to be considered, my observation is that this process will generate a laundry list of unrelated and often contradictory self-interested priorities. Universities are prone to start their strategy development process from a similar position of no return. To cater to the resulting list of perceived needs they produce a glossy statement of Vision, Mission, Ethics, and Goals (for each group). But seldom a strategy.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Australia needs a coherent strategy rather than an “accord”. And here resides the irony of your set of Priority Issues. It is hard to find anything that is controversial. Yet, by nature and design good strategy is focused. This requires it to make hard trade-offs across divergent interests.

Australia is a country that can do anything that its wants. But it is also a country that can’t do everything that it wants.

So, the challenge is to provide an Accord that seeks consensus *or* design a strategy to deliver a world-leading education system that might garner bipartisan political support.

1. See for example, T. M. Devinney and G. R. Dowling, *The Strategies of Australia’s Universities: Revise & Resubmit* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)