University Accord Submission

– Learn Grow Become

# Who we are (context)

Engaged Learning Solutions Pty Ltd (Learn Grow Become) is a regionally based social enterprise focused on improving the equity in student success through to and in tertiary studies. At present this includes partnering with education organisations and institutions to target learning mindset and behaviours for students of equity cohorts with our online Learn2Learn programs, and with reinvestment into Indigenous education initiatives (including our own Indigenous Learn2Learn program). We also host a Student Experience podcast which involves key interviews with researchers, business folk and staff across the sector, with the aim of broadening the conversation around student experience and success in tertiary education. Our CEO and Founder has experience within and working with higher education institutions – both at a staff and student level. She also has facilitated workshops for Young Change Agents and the Smith Family with grade 6 students and above. Our Learn2Learn programs were designed to meet a prevailing gap in student support – in other words the personal development needed to create proactive, resilient, and successful students.

# Key areas for review

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

At present we see key challenges in the following areas:

1. High school students, particularly in the public sector, are still being told they have one chance at a career, and if they choose subjects (primarily ATAR) incorrectly the will “screw up” their chances for life. This approach, in addition to limited career advice resources and support creates additional pressure and can also lead students to believing that they do not have a future in tertiary or higher education.
   1. Perhaps a rethink of how and where ATAR needs to be applied – is it necessary for all degrees for example? At Finders University for example they offer an alternate pathways option for disadvantaged cohorts to enter without reliance on year 12 results.
   2. How can we ensure that students of all ages and identities are accessing (not just “have available” – assuming they find out about it) relevant and useful career information? How can we ensure that this is provided and delivered with a cultural and community lens, and in a safe manner?
   3. How can we help program providers AND students recognise that courses are no longer a single path to a single destination, or necessarily an obviously connected destination. Adaptability and proactive behaviours are key to post tertiary success – perhaps more so that then specific degree taken.
   4. More value of lived experience – the existing RPL system is often more work than undertaking the subject itself. This needs to be easier if we want people to be able to transition across different jobs and careers to meet skill shortages.
   5. What about programs like Inventorium where it is a non traditional curriculum, assisting disadvantaged youth to remain in an education stream? How can we better support students moving through to higher education?
2. In high school, students are generally taught either with a generic (one size fits all) or a highly coached approach. Neither of these actually develop the skills, mindset and behaviours of independent learning needed in higher education and beyond.
   1. At the risk of sounding like we are pushing our own programs – we believe that overtly teaching students the skills, strategies and behaviours at multiple levels in their learning will improve the wellbeing and learning outcomes for all students.
   2. The focus on ATAR as a success measure (and NAPLAN) for High Schools means that students who may succeed but not do as well (or perceived as not academic enough) are discouraged from undertaking ATAR subjects. This predominately affects Indigenous and other equity cohorts. This focus also means that High Schools are often not prioritising lifelong learning behaviours and employability attributes.
3. The unmeasurable nature of so-called soft skills and attributes – the core skills and behaviours needed for successful lifelong learning and adaptability.
   1. One of the big challenges (including with the new microcredential framework) with our education assessments is that we cannot easily measure attitude, mindset and behaviours at scale. Employers are looking, for example, for people who know the theory of working in a team AND can also apply that knowledge for a positive team outcome. We need to find a way to show the importance of these skills (and students focus on what is being assessed).
   2. Ensure the students have the opportunity to learn and practice these skills and attributes BEFORE they are expected to apply them. Students are generally assumed at higher education to have Learning and practical skills that they have not previously been taught (hence our Learn2Learn program).
   3. Let’s be more upfront with what is expected from graduate attributes. If what we (and employers) are seeking is teamwork skills, let’s not hide it as “groupwork”. It really isn’t the same thing – and what employers want is teamwork.
4. It feels like we need a more agile type of education provider – recognising there is an element of risk here.
   1. Both TESQA and ASQA are important for quality, however the complete standardisation of programs and industrialisation of education mean that the adaptability and relevance of the Tertiary Education market is increasingly not meeting the growing needs of future business. Yes, it’s controversial.

2. Access and opportunity - Improve access to higher education, across teaching, learning and research.

At present we see key challenges in the following areas:

1. Even post COVID, oncampus students are able to access support services more easily than distance or online students.
   1. For some Universities, the outcomes for online learners are seen as less important – perhaps because these students are not “seen”. Rather than embracing more online services and a blended approach to learning and a student experience, many Universities have focused energies on “returning to normal” which by its very nature disadvantages many equity student groups.
   2. The provision of local support in regional areas (for example CUCs) enables more regional/rural based students to access and feel supported in tertiary studies. The one challenge we foresee with this model is that not all students may feel safe or welcome in the formalised learning space represented by these Centres/ traditional learning. Alternative (and perhaps attached) workshop areas and casual yarning spaces may help broaden their application and inclusiveness.
   3. Where online students are experiencing difficulties (personal, educational, other) they often do not have the same amount of support as oncampus students and are more likely to struggle meeting academic deadlines or accessing advice (different relationships with academics, relationships with support services, belief that they can access services oncampus or online)
2. Tertiary Entry/ Access Programs – These seem to be great programs for developing academic technical skills needed for higher education, although they are still do not incorporate the development of personal learning approaches needed for managing study as part of life.
   1. Yes, this is what we do – we have had students who completed a STEPS program sign up for our program because they didn’t have the confidence in their own ability to learn, particularly for those who did not have a recent work history either.
   2. Having these externally funded seems to ensure that internal politics and priorities are not preventing these programs from being made available.
3. Culturally safe learning environment – still a significant gap
   1. Whether this is academics teaching about settlement of Australia with no context or reference to the Indigenous impact or intergenerational trauma impacts, or for migrants or international students being treated as stupid because of language challenges – there is a significant amount of work that is required in this space in order to ensure safe and respectful learning environments.
   2. We need to question the suitability of our educators if their primary focus is not the successful (and safe) education of their students. This includes internal requirements for researchers to teach if this is not to the best benefit of their students.
   3. Tertiary (and other level) Education programs should also require teaching how to incorporate Indigenised learning practices (which benefit everyone) into curriculum and delivery. Until we are able to address this it will be difficult to close the gap in Indigenous education outcomes at all levels.

## 3. Investment and affordability & 4. Governance, accountability and community

At present we see key challenges in the following areas:

1. (Institution internal finance) Separation of student related income from key success drivers (academic inputs, student support services).
   1. This results in limitations of accountability and connection between activities which benefit student retention and outcomes and incoming funding.
   2. It also has the risk of fund allocations for student services to be diverted into projects based on political agendas rather than student impact.
2. Need for clear expectations and accountability to local communities and student community
3. Separate funding model for distance student support provided by other (local) centres to ensure students not disadvantaged by University funding arrangements. (similar or part of HEPPP for example where distribution is not part of University discretion)

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

1. Are certificate courses meeting the needs of employers? Or are they designed as a one-size-fits-all “response” to a market need?
2. Do Certificate 1 and 2 courses provide employment opportunities or are they designed more to assist students to progress into learning?
3. How do we step up from basic traineeships (monitoring students through a checklist approach and getting people into a work space) to assist them to develop adaptability and a positive work ethic which can support them in an ongoing way?
4. Currently the mindset (and dare I say snobbery) between the two approaches makes it difficult for many VET students to feel welcome in Higher Ed.
   1. Do they need to flow from one to the other, or are we better to identify which careers are better suited to each approach and create a full pathway in that institution (eg. Certificate and diploma in HE, and Degree options in VET)??

## 6. Quality and sustainability.

1. The current reliance on HEPPP funding for student support services at many institutions means that international students are often left unsupported once they enrol and arrive.
   1. Ideally there should be a minimum level of support/service required for enrolled students regardless of their particular cohort/ how they are identified.
   2. More focus is needed for the reputational impact of student experience for all cohorts (potential impact on international students coming to Australia for example) – currently short term financial focus only.
2. More recognition on the lived experience value that international and mature age students bring to the learning experience of all students – which current assessment structures and educator attitudes may not consider
   1. Review a reliance of examinations at all levels of education – how is this actually assessing the ability, knowledge and application? Preferential funding for higher value assessment types and approaches? Increased requirements in evaluations that assessment type is actually assisting in the learning process.

## 7. Delivering new knowledge, innovation and capability

1. Perhaps requirements that Universities partner with other organisations for grant funding to be allocated?
2. Interestingly whilst many Universities like to foster entrepreneurship and research, they are also highly risk adverse for their own operations. This suggests that they are not designed to support being more innovative in their own operations, mindset and culture. The chase for rankings and being very politically dependent may be a big factor in this. Perhaps a different way of ranking and allocating funding may help support a shift here (what gets measured gets adopted as it were).

Thankyou for the opportunity to contribute to this accord. We are happy to be involved in further consultation and are excited by the potential of this review of the tertiary sector.