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On behalf of:

Myself

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Foreword:

I am an Australian citizen, a graduate of Monash University and completing a PhD at Swinburne University of Technology with published work in Bioengineering. Outside of my PhD, I have been employed as a sessional lab demonstrator (casual arrangement) for the last five years. My connection to higher education policy can be traced back to student representation, including my current tenure as National President of the Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations (CAPA).

I was suggested to consider submitting a separate submission as a private citizen to put forward ideas outside the remit of CAPA's representation. As a young person optimistic about change, I could not resist the opportunity to fully immerse myself in this historic moment in the higher education sector. There should also be a special acknowledgement to my supervisors, Dr Huseyin Sumer and Prof. Paul Stoddart, that fostered my academic development. It is their dedication to academic principles that inspired my development into the advocate that I am today.

My vision for transforming higher education is rooted in fundamental beliefs of university function and responsibility in the 21st century. I believe that universities are institutions dedicated to discovering and disseminating new knowledge. It is the home of intellectual curiosity in a way that is almost childish or naïve. Students that attend these institutions are there to embark on a journey of self-discovery, their lecturers being stewards that guide them. Through this process of personal growth, graduates develop 'how to think', analyse, critique, debate and formulate new ideas. This is the foundation of building innovative minds and becoming responsible citizens who understand their civil duty in a democratic society. For the reader, this conviction will reveal itself consistently throughout this submission.

I thank the University Accords committee and the Minister of Education, Jason Clare, for this opportunity to contribute to reimagining post-secondary education in Australia.

Sincerely,



Errol Phuah

Summary of Recommendations

1. Governments should take the policy stance of allowing their citizens to decide for themselves what they wish to study. Instead, they should ensure universities provide the education to develop soft skills that allow their citizens to transition between careers rather than herd them down specific career ways.
2. Accessibility begins in early childhood and schools. This should be the primary focus on assisting the most vulnerable.
3. Accessibility should be more than getting a foot in the door; real opportunity can only be realised when the welfare system ensures those that gain access have a real chance at achieving.
 - a. Rethinking of the Youth Allowance, ABSTUDY and Austudy schemes to include the cost of living that takes closer account into the individual's living situation. i.e. cost of living in the particular city
4. The Government's policy on education should be seen as an investment in good citizenship for the population it represents as opposed to the individual's responsibility in an egalitarian society.
5. The Government(s) needs to amend the University Act of each university to allow for greater transparency and engagement with the university community to ensure a collegiate culture is the primary driver of the university environment.
6. Vocational education schemes are nationalised under the Federal Government to ensure consistency across the country and more easily integrated into the existing higher education system.
7. The vocational education system forms an alternative bridging pathway into the university system.
 - a. Certificates 1-4 be recognised as prior learning to one year of an Associate's degree.
 - b. An Associate's degree is recognised as one year of prior learning to the first year of a Bachelor's degree.
8. Universities should be strongly encouraged to return to in-person teaching per pre-covid conditions.

9. That quality of education instead be measured by surveying a graduate's optimism, confidence, ability to self-reflect and willingness to question norms.
10. The bureaucratic processes of grant writing are reduced to increase the productivity of academics.
11. That the changes to the Job-Ready Graduates be reversed.
12. That funding is disseminated more broadly through the research community in smaller quantities to allow sufficient funding to collaborate.
13. That funding for research be increased in both the block funding and competitive grants (ARC and NHMRC).

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

From the days of Menzies and Whitlam, both sides of politics valued the intellectual development achieved at universities, with their governments leaving their mark on higher education. Critics of their policies were seemingly familiar that their contribution to higher education only served the aristocrats of our society. The Dawkins reform of the Hawke/Keating era would expand university access to the masses to prepare the workforce for the technological shift with the internet and computers. Universities have since become the portfolio for promoting social mobility and employability rather than the personal development of individuals.

I was born in a generation where my parents envied those that could attend university because it guaranteed a well-paid professional career. My parents may have been in Singapore then, but the demand for university-educated professionals worldwide was broadly comparable in the 1970s and 1980s. It should then be no surprise that my generation would be nurtured into believing a university education was the promised land. Unfortunately, the optimism of this generation may have been defined by an anomaly in history; a paradigm shift in technology that they may not see happen again in their lifetime.

We want to see another big innovation that will take us on the next economic explosion in our lifetime; the next big thing like the 'internet'. Recent entries include 'industry 4.0', 'blockchain technologies' or 'cybersecurity'. The truth is it is difficult for any government to pre-emptively predict which industries will create new jobs, and if we try to, we run the risk of channelling

people down a short career path. How do I know? Because Australia has already tried this before.

My father studied for an IT degree in the 90s long distance at the University of Southern Queensland, and our family migrated to Australia based on the skills shortage of IT professionals and became citizens in the early 2000s. Every business in Australia was moving its operations onto computers, and many created IT departments to maintain these new systems. By the 2010s, computers became easier to set up, and the number of IT jobs dropped because every business found it significantly cheaper to outsource their work to IT consultants. This experience taught me an important lesson. A career in high demand today might not continue to grow; it might even shrink within a decade.

The point of this personal story is to explain the risks governments take on behalf of those of low socioeconomic backgrounds when offering education into careers they predict will flourish. It is possible to end up worse off with a poor career outcome and student debt. In later sections, I will mention where the shift from university teaching from 'developing how to think' to 'developing competency with technical skills' has made students less versatile and less able to adapt to new situations.

If we anticipate a fluid movement of people in different careers in the future workforce, then now more than ever, people need to learn 'how to think' so they can adapt to new situations and new careers. The idea of lifelong learning through perpetually returning for formal re-educate is an indictment of what the system has become. It suggests university graduates are incompetent without formally retraining in a new field. For example, my formal degree was not in bioengineering, and I was not formally trained to read spreadsheets or write policy briefs. These were skills developed from self-guided learning, which universities were supposed to teach graduates. If we want to meet Australia's knowledge and skills needs, it begins by returning degrees to the role of fostering self-discovery.

Recommendations:

14. Governments should take the policy stance of allowing their citizens to decide for themselves what they wish to study. Instead, they should ensure universities provide the education to develop soft skills that

allow their citizens to transition between careers rather than herd them down specific career ways.

Access and opportunity

The truth is that policies that create more university places only skim the surface of addressing the challenges of accessibility and opportunity. One of the challenges that must be addressed is the assumption that access to the university system is a victory for social justice; sadly, this is only half true. The most disappointing part is the sudden change in policy attitude for those who struggled but made it into the system; these people are now privileged and entitled. They should be 'grateful' for the opportunity with the added expectation to not complain because others now have it worse than you.

From personal experience, I've seen meltdowns in the classroom with a student struggling to cope with working three jobs whilst attending classes. Accessibility was checked, but the genuine opportunity was nowhere to be seen. In reality, any student that needs to work excessively due to the cost of living will not have the same opportunity to perform as another that can work a single job or less. Those that pass with distinctions are shortlisted to work for high-paying salaries in big firms like KPMG and Deloitte. Essentially we are looking at the self-perpetuation of privilege.

This is where our welfare system (Youth Allowance, Austudy and ABSTUDY) has lost its effectiveness in addressing inequality and needs to be reviewed. There needs to be a means test of parent incomes at the age of independence (18) and adjustments to the cost of living. It is worth considering that the cost of living for a student studying in South Australia will be experiencing different from the costs for those living in Sydney. Logically such costs could be taken into consideration than a flat rate amount for these welfare payments.

The PhD cohort experiences similar privilege shaming when advocating for higher PhD stipends. 'At least you had the chance to do a PhD' is a recurring theme that seemingly overrides any perceived inequality of opportunity. A student that needs to work more hours to cover their cost of living will never have the same opportunities open to them as one that receives a stipend. Even the legislated low end of the RTP stipend of ~\$28,800 is below the poverty line and has been left unaddressed.

PhD students are not entitled to Austudy mainly because "we chose to do a PhD". We indeed had a choice. However, if you were the first in the family to attend university on campus and the first in the family to be offered a scholarship to undertake a PhD like me, then you will most definitely seize the moment just like I did. Many PhD students have stories similar to mine, yet we are often rebuked for the hardship we faced for seizing an opportunity we earned.

The other challenge I would refer to is the access of those often hidden in plain sight from society or in remote areas of the country. These are people that mainstream society is unaware of or has unfairly dismissed as beyond help. On the topic of social mobility, it is my view that it is best achieved from early childhood schooling. Young people, especially those in remote areas, need proper access to schooling. It is entirely acceptable for young people to decide that they learn best through vocational education and pursue a path that celebrates their ability to contribute to a society that makes them happy. If such a path eventually leads to a university degree, then we should find a way to make this possible. To celebrate diversity, we must first recognise and facilitate different learning styles – this will be covered in a later section. For now, I will declare that vocational learning is not intellectually inferior; this is a stereotype from when administrators found it easiest to 'assess' the masses using books and exams. The failure here can often lie with the examination's inability to detect an individual's talent rather than an individual's actual failure.

I believe that social mobility and the love for lifelong learning start in early childhood. The motivation to learn develops from these early life experiences. Did they feel like the system supported and celebrated their way of learning, or did it alienate them with rejection? Because rejection by the system ultimately leads to resentment and rejection of the system. This is what nobody talks about, but the cycle must be broken at schools long before they reach university

Recommendations:

15. Accessibility begins in early childhood and schools. This should be the primary focus on assisting the most vulnerable.
16. Accessibility should be more than getting a foot in the door; real opportunity can only be realised when the welfare system ensures those that gain access have a real chance at achieving.

- c. Rethinking of the Youth Allowance, ABSTUDY and Austudy schemes to include the cost of living that takes closer account into the individual's living situation. i.e. cost of living in the particular city

Investment and affordability.

Committing to a university degree is an investment of both time and resources for a student. As mentioned in the previous section, interest in learning is developed at a young age; this is how students should decide whether they can afford and invest in something they wish to learn. Studying and working in an area you enjoy will bring personal satisfaction and happiness any day over an affordable education in an area that generates no personal interest.

Another consideration is the matter of student debt in the context of the current cost of living crisis. The inception of the Dawkins reform based its rationale that only students that earned a comfortable income would begin paying back their student debts. At the current income threshold of ~\$48,000 p.a., it is not easy to see how these individuals live comfortably. As a non-inflationary response to the cost of living crisis, it would be logical to increase the income threshold to a median salary of \$70,000 - \$80,000 p.a.

The final point to make is the Government's investment in its citizen. Higher education is an investment into human capital to become responsible citizens that understand their civic duty to a democratic society. We have seen the rise of populism, and the spread of misinformation is a threat to democracy. In this context, the Government should always endeavour to offer its citizens the highest level of primary, secondary and post-secondary education possible because, as a civilisation, ever collapsed by investing too much in the education of its people?

Recommendations:

17. The Government's policy on education should be seen as an investment in good citizenship for the population it represents as opposed to the individual's responsibility in an egalitarian society.

Governance, accountability and community

The governance structure at our universities is critical to setting the culture of its day-to-day operations. The allegations of wage theft, casualisation of workers, mass redundancies and neglecting the quality of education are all systemic and symptomatic of a culture that prioritises commercial interest over its academic purpose. This section is not about demonising individuals or groups of people but highlighting the underlying features that have contributed to this overall outcome.

In early 2022, I wrote a submission to the Parliament of Tasmania's Inquiry into the *University of Tasmania Act 1992* - on behalf of CAPA. The analysis suggests a disparity between the function and responsibilities of the University of Tasmania and the Council members. Where the university's purpose included serving the community and the public good, the council members were only obligated to serve the university's best interest. Whilst there is an assumption that a university serving its community and the public good is in the interest of the university, they are not exclusively correlated. We see prominent private universities in the United States that publish discoveries daily in the interest of the public good. However, the cost of their education and exclusivity play into the university's interest – less so for their casualised staff members and debt-ridden students.

The point here is the assumption that a university's interest is inherently connected to serving the public good. However, the corporatisation of universities will suggest that implementing lucrative business plans that serve some broad definition of the public good is entirely realistic but could have pretty grotesque outcomes that could be seen as unbecoming of a public university, and I will provide a few examples

There are many instances where universities heavily intervene in matters that may tarnish their image and reputation to the extent that individuals are silenced from speaking out and left unacknowledged. Some of the worst examples can be related to sexual harassment cases, where most internal investigations leave victims helpless and unsupported for speaking up. The most cynical critics would say universities will support the party they see the most benefits from supporting. This was particularly alarming when the most recent survey on sexual harassment noted that a large percentage of postgraduate students felt sexually harassed by university staff members (presumably supervisors). The most absurd activity to protect the university's reputation is the non-disclosure agreements universities put on staff and elected representatives.

This leads to my final point about student representation at universities. I would not be a national president at heart if I did not write something about this in my private submission. The ultimate 'gag clause' university invoke on student representation is funding cuts to SSAF. Some universities are more lenient than others, but the harshest circumstances often prevent sufficient funding for student representatives to be enumerated at a rate worthy of the hours they spend representing their constituents or to receive proper training to be responsible future leaders.

Why does this happen? Some say it has to do with the risk of students embezzling funds; others will say to prevent student associations from doing anything substantial when the university does wrong to the student cohort. The truth lies in between but is skewed more towards the latter point. My biggest personal gripe on this matter is the recent defunding of the Postgraduate and Research Student Association (PARSA), which ANU recently defunded due to 'governance issues'. It baffles me that the institute responsible for developing young people to become responsible adults would rather kill off their organisation when they stumble than teach them how to be better. I have much respect for the ANU, but it exemplifies the loss of patience in digging deep to develop young people into responsible adults.

Recommendations:

18. The Government(s) needs to amend the University Act of each university to allow for greater transparency and engagement with the university community to ensure a collegiate culture is the primary driver of the university environment.

The connection between vocational education and training and higher education systems

The biggest concern of modern education is the inability to recognise the diversity of learning styles within the population. Despite having success with education, I always felt out of my element at school. My life story made sense only last year when informed I was autistic, which explained how concentrating on the lectures and classes was exhausting and near impossible. It also expressed why education felt more effortless, even instinctive, when education became more vocational in a PhD.

Although my story is one of triumph, I would not be distracted by the survivor's bias, the support I had from family, friends, school teachers, the NDIS, my supervisors, the academic communities across the country, the university administrative staff, and even my Vice-Chancellor herself. All of my successes can be attributed to the support of others; it is circumstantial and not available to the most vulnerable. This is where my recommendations for addressing vocational education would play a small but crucial part in helping others that did not fit the traditional system find their place in an egalitarian society.

The suggestion is simple: nationalising the vocational education system to ensure the schemes are consistent throughout the country. Certificates 1 to 4 will be a vocational pathway that will account for prior learning for a two-year associate's degree. A two-year associate's degree will account for prior learning to the first year of a bachelor's degree in a relevant field. A system like this works because the first year of university is an introduction to the discipline. Many students are there fulfilling a breadth requirement to find what they like or catching up on the learning they never learned in year 12.

Furthermore, it allows those that learn best by 'being hands-on' an alternative pathway to years 11 and 12 and still enters university with their fundamentals established for the second year. In doing so, we can easily connect the vocational HECS scheme with the university scheme in one continuum. This is how we celebrate diversity in our population and increase accessibility from the cradle to the grave. Nobody gets left behind.

Recommendations:

19. Vocational education schemes are nationalised under the Federal Government to ensure consistency across the country and more easily integrated into the existing higher education system.
20. The vocational education system forms an alternative bridging pathway into the university system.
 - d. Certificates 1-4 be recognised as prior learning to one year of an Associate's degree.
 - e. An Associate's degree is recognised as one year of prior learning to the first year of a Bachelor's degree.

Quality and Sustainability

Quality of education can be challenging to measure as the outcomes we want to see are often intangible, and the lag period can often be years after to (maybe) know what the consequences will be for a change. For example, the consequences of online learning may not be fully understood until years later after these graduates are in the workforce. One thing we do know, however, is that humans (generally) are social creatures that benefit from their surroundings. People are happier when they have access to natural light and the greenery of nature because that is how we evolved.

Technology has changed how we live and provided alternatives, but what we call adapting to lockdowns is not the same as evolution. Adaptation is the plasticity of individuals to tolerate the variability of our environment; we will continue to live but are quite more disgruntled than we saw during the lockdowns. Those that enjoyed the lockdowns do not contradict this point I am making but represent the diversity within our population. The reason for the evolutionary biology lesson is to address that just because we 'can' adapt to online learning does not mean we should or that it would be more effective. No 'selective pressures' eliminated the natural environment-loving majority, and our entire population did not 'evolve' towards absorbing online work/learning. So why are we treating temporary adaptation adversity as an evolution of humans? The point is that online learning, like recorded lectures, should be supplementary to in-person learning like in the pre-pandemic and not a complete substitute because we absorb information better in a stimulating environment.

The counter-argument is the flexibility of online learning compared to in-person learning, which is true in the most pragmatic sense. However, we should unravel why flexibility is needed. Is it because:

- the cost of living has become so high that a student must have multiple jobs
- are they carers for a dependent
- they have a learning disability
- they live too far from the campus

I am sure there are multiple reasons, but these are the most common. The underlying issue seems to all relate to an increasingly inegalitarian society because of the deficiency of our welfare system to ensure all students have the genuine opportunity to learn – see the previous section. The reasons for online learning are quite disingenuous because it evades the real issues young people are facing in our society. My final point of online learning is that if all these issues are dealt with, and a student does not wish to engage in their education fully,

then maybe they need to re-evaluate why they enrolled and whether their heart is truly in it to learn because nobody can teach the unwilling.

The biggest issue we face on quality learning is that universities are increasingly straying into vocational education with industry-based learning and ensuring students demonstrate competency with 'technical skills'. These are all valuable technical knowledge but belong to the TAFE and vocational system. There is no sense in converting technical colleges to universities decades ago only to turn universities into the new technical college – we call this shifting the goalposts.

Universities are the place to think of new ideas based on the technical skills acquired, and actively researching and teaching academics should be central to ensuring the quality of university education. Input from the industry is welcomed; their input makes more logical sense in TAFE and vocational study, where technical skills are lacking, but the lack of innovation is the deficiency of universities failing to develop the skill of 'how to think'.

The key measurements for quality of education often refer to the student experience, employability and employer's perception of both soft and technical graduate skills. These measurements are taken from participants still enrolled at the university, but we should be asking the questions after they graduate or drop out. The questions are based on respondents' self-awareness, whether they have reconciled with the ups and downs of their career and gauging satisfaction and confidence with their career trajectory.

Some questions we really should know:

- Is your current career path in the same direction as your degree?
 - If no, why and was it a difficult transition? Did your degree still benefit the transition?
- Are you happy with your career path?
- With the skills you developed in your degree, do you feel could easily transition into a different career if you wanted to? If so, why?
- If you quit your degree early, why? And did you learn anything that you still use in your employment today?
- Do you sometimes question the effectiveness of pre-existing procedures at work?
- Do you feel safe and compelled to raise concerns at work on how things can be done better?

These questions could be short answers or ratings of 1-5, strongly agree to disagree strongly, but fundamentally address the one symptom of an excellent educational experience: feeling empowered to adapt to new work conditions and thinking independently to address challenges in the workplace.

On sustainability, our reliance on international students as our fourth largest export is not something Australia should necessarily be proud over. We are likely the only country that can boast this, even though Canada UK and the US are our direct competitors in this market. Nor should we be proud to be in a rat race with countries that are also increasingly exploiting international students and their staff.

Whilst we claim international students come to Australia for a world-class education, the elephant in the room is that many want an overseas degree for competitiveness or see this as a pathway to migration. We accept more students as temporary migrants than we offer positions for permanent residency. Many international students I know only realise this tightening bottleneck after they enrol and arrive in Australia. To have the fourth largest export built on exploiting international students is not something we should be proud of. In fact, we should consider how much innovation is lost when we do not educate our citizens well to maintain our market share of international students. How many potential industries are we missing out on being world leaders just because we do not train our students well enough to capitalise on these opportunities? The sustainability of higher education comes from dividends paid from the successes our graduates go on to achieve.

Finally, I'd address public funds leakage to sustain competitiveness within the sector. It should not have become so hyper-competitive that universities spend millions on advertisements to promote themselves. Could you imagine a public hospital or public schools advertising people to choose them over others? The number of university executives and new buildings needed to cover every inch of the market to maximise competitiveness tells how this market environment has raised the underlying costs.

Recommendations:

21. Universities should be strongly encouraged to return to in-person teaching per pre-covid conditions.

22. That quality of education instead be measured by surveying a graduate's optimism, confidence, ability to self-reflect and willingness to question norms.

Delivering new knowledge, innovation and capability

This section partly intersects with matters raised in the ARC Act, but from my perspective, academics are adults that never lost their childlike curiosity, making them great unbiased voices in public discourses. Innovation comes naturally and should not be forced with 'financial incentives'. That is how we found ourselves in the corporate culture in the first place, and it often feels like this has sterilised our ability to enjoy what we do and truly innovate.

Capacity building at universities begins with reviving the feeling of academic freedom and intellectual curiosity at university institutions. Currently, funds are scarce for 'trying' new ideas without engaging in a lengthy bureaucratic process for explaining the purpose, commercial application and the project risk level. The fundamental academic question is, is it still actual research if these questions can be answered thoroughly and the outcome is known? I refer to the start of this submission, where I mentioned discovering 'new knowledge'.

The other consideration is whether academics should spend upwards of 100-120 hours preparing research proposals for a 9-14% chance of success. These hours are redundantly wasted that could be used for teaching, administrative work and supporting students in research. Instead, grant applications should be shorter, 2-3 pages in the early stages of screening, followed by a more substantial and detailed application after being shortlisted. Besides a desperate need for more research funding, another consideration is whether there should be smaller grants spread over a more significant number of recipients which would encourage more collaboration between groups to pair up their smaller funds to achieve larger objectives. This would significantly assist early career researchers, often competing on an uneven playing field against established academics.

Our ability to innovate and build capacity will depend on the Government's appetite and commitment to transform the sector. Firstly, the state governments should look to amending the governance structures of the university acts of their respective states/territories. This will readjust the university council and academic board for greater transparency and accountability to its community on how funds are allocated. As mentioned earlier, the

Tasmanian Parliament has investigated the University of Tasmania. The Greens are looking to move a similar inquiry in Victoria, and other states should follow suit.

Secondly, the Job-Ready Graduates needs to be reversed as the price changes to tuition fees are presently distorting how many places universities offer in some disciplines. Some universities like the Swinburne University of Technology that intend to focus on STEM courses are effectively punished for their strategic direction. The numbers also suggest that the lowered government contribution also lowers the tuition fees where smaller classes where engagement occurs are no longer financially feasible. This needs to be reversed.

Thirdly, additional research funding must be injected into the university research system. There are three primary public funding sources: Commonwealth supported places (CSP), Research Block Fund (RTP & RSP) and competitive grants via the ARC and NHMRC. Of the latter two, block funding provides the most flexible fund for the university to allocate research initiatives. However, without proper governance or transparency, those funds may not necessarily translate to hiring relevant researchers who need to build their research teams. The ARC and NHMRC grants represent the biggest funding pool and give lead investigators the autonomy to hire postdoctoral and PhD student researchers for their research teams.

I've considered the two major sticking points: the trade-off between providing greater funding flexibility at the discretion of the university management in the RSP or more autonomy to researchers to build their teams through research grants. Both avenues favour the Group of Eight universities, but overwhelmingly so for the ARC and NHMRC grants. Thus I see the benefit in spreading additional funding between more avenues assuming that the governance of universities is overhauled to provide more transparency with democratic decision-making and that the ARC can provide smaller and less competitive discovery and seed funding grants.

Recommendations:

23. The bureaucratic processes of grant writing are reduced to increase the productivity of academics.
24. That the changes to the Job-Ready Graduates be reversed.
25. That funding is disseminated more broadly through the research community in smaller quantities to allow sufficient funding to collaborate.

26. That funding for research be increased in both the block funding and competitive grants (ARC and NHMRC).

Final words:

The education policies implemented over the years have changed the way universities operate. Whilst it is more accessible today than it was decades earlier, it has become an instrument for social mobility with the expectation of better employment opportunities. Universities can still serve this purpose if their efforts are refocused on guiding students on their journey of self-discovery. Self-guided learning is one of the most powerful skills students can develop from their experience at universities and will be essential for the dynamic workforces we expect in the future. However, to achieve this level of quality and excellence, we must address the competing agendas plaguing the universities, that is, the corporate culture that has slowly prioritised commercial interest over academic interest.

I have entwined my personal story and life experience as a student, a representative, a teacher and an Australian in this submission. Hopefully, the reader will find some of these insights valuable in transforming Australian universities for the next generation.