Re: Universities Accord Terms of Reference

Dear Panel,

I write to you with a personal response regarding the call for submissions in responses to the Terms of Reference for the Universities Accord. The views expressed in this submission reflect my personal views and not the views of organisations I am involved in.

By way of background and introduction I completed my Bachelor of Commerce and Bachelor of Arts degrees at UNSW. Since then I have worked at the student organisation Arc@UNSW for nearly a decade, and I am currently completing my Masters of Business Administration at UNSW. I also sit on the Board of Directors for the national cooperative called the Student Experience Network (SEN) and serve as the Postgraduate Coursework representative on the UNSW Academic Board.

Whilst I support the 7 general themes summarised by Terms of Reference, I have concerns which are of material interest to the panel.

Panel Composition

With 1.5 million Australians currently at university the panel composition does not sufficiently represent the voice of students. Its contrary to the considerable work done at many universities to implement “Students as Partners” (1) frameworks into their decision-making. The panel composition does not reflect the inclusive principles of “nothing about us without us” and continues the concerning practice of tacitly excluding students from decision-making.

* Recommendation 1: That the panel invites, trains, remunerates and meaningfully empowers at least 2 current students.
* Recommendation 2: That the panel implements a student reference committee that captures a diversity of student perspectives on all issues raised by the Accord.
* Recommendation 3: That the panel utilises best-practice principles of consultation to seek student feedback for their report. This includes student-friendly mechanisms like social media promotion, in-person workshops and detailed user-interviews.

Mental Health

Young people have the poorest mental health in Australia and they are particularly at risk if the have compounding factors like being lower-SES, queer or being a person of colour (2). Universities have a vital pastoral care role to play in building resilient, empathetic future generations. There are strong examples across the country of programs that improve the mental health of students which the panel should consider as part of its review.

* Recommendation 4: The panel should explicitly reference mental health in the Terms of Reference.
* Recommendation 5: The panel should take an open-minded, blue-sky approach to improved the mental health outcomes of young people.

Student Experience

Against a backdrop of university corporatisation (3) and intensification of the higher education experience, the co-curricular and extra-curricular aspects of student life are increasingly de-prioritised. Anecdotally we know that these out-of-classroom activities constitute some of the most formative experiences of peoples’ lives. They constitute a critical part of students’ feelings of belonging at university as a key driver of satisfaction, retention and long-term civil participation (4) (5).

* Recommendation 6: That the centrality of student experience is reflected in the Terms of Reference.
* Recommendation 7: That the depth and breadth of student experiences is considered in the University Accord.
* Recommendation 8: That the Panel actively seeks, solicits and synthesises contributions from students, staff and student organisations.

Thank you for your consideration and please reach out to discuss any of these items further.

Kind regards,

Mitchell McBurnie

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References

(1) <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/62415312110300085c00fd44>

(2) <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-08-05/youth-mental-health-crisis-time-to-respond/101295194>

(3) <https://documents.uow.edu.au/~bmartin/dissent/documents/sau/sau12.pdf>

(4) <https://studentsuccessjournal.org/article/view/2264>

(5) <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/0309877X.2021.1955844>