19 December 2022

Australian Universities Accord Panel

Australian Government Department of Education

Dear Accord Panel

**Accord Terms of Reference**

National Seniors Australia welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Accord Terms of Reference of the Review of Australia’s Higher Education System, and to indicate our priorities for the outcomes of the Review.

As the leading organisation representing the interests of older Australians, we would like to highlight the importance of older Australians continuing to learn throughout life. It is vitally important Australia’s tertiary education system supports lifelong learning to enhance social, economic, and cultural outcomes. We regard the Accord as a step in Australia’s path towards becoming a just, learning society.

While we regard the Accord’s Terms of Reference as appropriate, we are concerned at the absence of any reference to the demographic changes Australia is currently experiencing with an ageing population in what has been termed the “era of the hundred-year life”.

It is not clear from the Terms of Reference what role higher education plays in promoting lifelong learning.

This contrasts with the situation in Europe where the Bergen Communique from the Bologna process, for example, is directed at embedding lifelong leaning in higher education. The absence of such objectives in Australia is perhaps the result of the weakness of lifelong learning policy in Australia, which is reflected in the low participation of vulnerable groups in tertiary education.

The stronger position of lifelong learning in European universities, is also reflected in such documents as the European University Charter on Lifelong Learning. The consequence is that Europe has Lifelong Learning Universities, as well as Lifelong Learning embedded within universities to drive innovation in adapting to changing socio-economic conditions.

While Australian universities generally welcome older students, the reality is many older Australians exclude themselves from higher education in later life because of cultural and other barriers. These ageist barriers need to be addressed.

As a result, participation by older Australians in tertiary education is low and should be improved. OECD data shows that at most three per cent of 40- to 64-year-olds are enrolled in formal tertiary education in Australia, much the same as other OECD countries such as Greece, Iceland, and Turkey.

It is widely recognised by international universities, such as Stanford, MIT and Oxford, that demographic change impacts society more broadly – in what is commonly termed a longevity society. Australia is currently confronted by the issues thrown up by an emerging longevity society, so the Review is particularly timely. It provides an opportunity to rethink the roles and relationships of the institutions comprising Australia’s tertiary education system in this context.

National Seniors hopes the Accord will lead to greater access to TAFE and higher education institutions among older Australians. We hope the Accord will lead to a better understanding of demographic change, facilitating stronger intergenerational connections and better understanding of the contribution of older Australians to our society.

The Accord should lead to innovations enabling access to tertiary education in ways that enhance both the employability and quality of life and well-being of older Australians and other underrepresented groups. In this regard, we recognise the growing role of digital platforms in offering new ways to facilitate access and opportunity.

TOR 5 is a key aspect of the Accord. Progress will be needed to enhance access and opportunities for older Australians, and other under-represented groups. The present weak integration between TAFE and higher education reflects the history and dominant concept of each sector.

However, the need exists for bold action as occurred following the Kangan Commission, which developed the concept of connecting technical and further education in new institutional ways. A similar innovative vision is needed now to connect TAFE and higher education.

It is helpful, we believe, to look at developments in other countries that are more advanced than Australia in addressing the social and cultural implications of ageing populations. This is particularly the case in leading East Asian countries such as Japan, China, Singapore, Republic of Korea, and Taiwan.

The President of China, for example, recently announced that China is developing a network of Elderly Universities connected to the Open University of China. We give this as an example of the kind of innovation that we hope will happen in Australia as an outcome of the Accord and will comment on such options in a later submission.

Yours sincerely



**John McCallum**

**Chief Executive Officer**