Perhaps the first order of business is to explain what the Accord is meant to be. The Labor Party policy simply states that there will be an Australian Universities Accord. The Departmental information states that “The Accord is a review…of Australia’s higher education system”. There is no definition of “accord” which includes reference to some type of inquiry. It is more likely that an accord (“a formal agreement”) will be one of the outcomes of the review that has been instituted. Is it an accord with each individual university or with all Australian universities as a group? Why are non-university providers not included? If non-university providers are included, why is it called an Australian Universities Accord? How is the Accord different to the Educational Profiles of the 1990s or the University Compacts of more recent times? If you wish informed comment, there needs to be a clear rationale for the review, with its scope – and its limitations - identified. Otherwise, it just looks like a fishing expedition with no clear understanding of its objectives. There have been 38 reviews and significant policy consultations on Australian higher education issues conducted over the past 14 years. Given that much of the material covered in these reviews and consultations are relevant to the terms of reference, their consideration would provide valuable perspectives for the panel. While some of the issues which these reviews and consultations have identified may have been addressed, it is useful to understand how they have been addressed (and how successful that has been) and, of course, some of the issues will not have been addressed at all and will still be important. It is difficult to see where you are going if you don’t understand your starting point. This is even more important as some members of the panel have no, or no recent, experience of the higher education system. The last order of business is to provide clarity and precision to the terms of reference (ToRs) so that priorities are more easily identified. This is a matter for the Panel in consultation with government, not to be a subject of discussion with stakeholders. The ToRs as presented read as platitudinous at best. At their worst they present as though an inexperienced policy officer has regurgitated a jar full of buzz words. 1. The ToRs propose that universities will be the main mechanism for meeting “the needs of students across all stages of lifelong learning” as well as the principal means for developing “the skills needed now, and in the future”. When did universities become responsible for primary and secondary education? They are key stages of lifelong learning. How does this intersect with employers’ responsibilities for in-house training and with the vocational education and training (VET) sector’s role? What is the rationale for universities assuming the dominant role in lifelong learning rather than the VET sector? 2. Is there a problem with access to higher education? How does that problem manifest itself? Is there evidence that the stated groups are underrepresented? If they are, can the solutions by delivered universities in isolation or will it require the cooperation of all stakeholders? If solutions can’t be delivered by universities in isolation, how – by what mechanisms - will other stakeholders be required to participate? 3. This is aimed at finding a solution to the problems – and complaints about – the Job-Ready Graduates reforms implemented by the previous government. However, the issues are more foundational. There needs to be a clear statement on the basis of shared funding between the government (taxpayers) and the student. What are the expectations of both parties? What is the philosophy which underpins the financial burden placed on students and taxpayers? Is it that the cost will be apportioned to the student based on their projected earning potential over their working life (the value-added approach)? Alternatively, is the cost to be apportioned based on the cost of delivery (the cost recovery approach)? Are there moderating factors like occupational/professional shortages, future need or benefit to society as a whole? 4. Will there be a clear statement of the obligations of universities to their staff and students? Conversely, will there be a clear statement of the obligations of staff and students to their university? Without these, an examination of policy settings has no framework against which to assess efficacy. What are the key deliverables from exploring the contribution that higher education makes to the Australian community, national security, and sovereign capability? This ToR does not provide any indication of a rationale for the exploration nor the objectives that the current contributions could be assessed against. 5. What alignment at system-level is being referred to here? There is clear connectivity (and appropriate credit transfer) between VET and higher education qualifications. This has been developed over decades of government and sectoral examination. If this is a university accord why should VET providers be excluded, particularly if the objective is better alignment between the two sectors? 6. Why is this examination focused solely on COVID-19 impacts? How can taxpayers be assured that there are no other current or emerging impacts from other sources which require operational or strategic changes? Why is this examination focused solely on students and staff? What about the challenges encountered by institutions such as over-reliance on international student revenue? What is the rationale for a competitive, rather than a cooperative, international education sector? The idea that competition breeds quality has not been apparent in the operation and outcomes of the non-university international education sector, it has simply resulted in a fragmented approach involving high overheads for individual institutions. 7. What is rationale for three reviews focused on research (this review, the National Research Infrastructure Advisory Group and the ARC Review)? Not all research can be – or should be – commercialised. How can non-commercial research be best supported (acknowledging that all research contributes in some manner to our society)? How can research commercialisation be undertaken in a manner which does not see the profits from commercialisation – and the intellectual property – being sent overseas? In summary, the ToRs do not provide clarity – they simply raise further questions which need to be addressed before the work of the Panel begins. The Panel should, as a priority: • Clarify the objectives for the review • Consider and assess the existing work completed in the areas under review • Identify and test the presumptions contained in the terms of reference • Develop a better work plan If the overarching aim of this exercise is to establish a re-invigorated policy framework for Australian higher education then the Panel – and the Government – will find widespread support. If the Panel pursues an ad hoc or platonic approach to its review, it will find ongoing criticism of its efforts and the results.