

TORRENS GLOBAL EDUCATION

Friday, 16 December 2022

Dear Accord Panel,

It is with great pleasure that Torrens Global Education provides this initial submission outlining our priorities for the Australian Universities Accord. We have prepared key themes and recommendations in response to the seven priorities provided by the Accord panel, with an overview below:

Key themes	Key recommendations
<p>1.</p> <p>The Accord must be future focused, and this current process should redesign and rethink Australian Higher Education</p>	<p>1.1 A genuine system mapping process will enhance reciprocity between all players and ensure the greater cumulative impact of Australian Higher Education, ultimately informing sector design, access, resourcing, and impact</p> <p>1.2 The Accord should recognise the drastic change that is occurring globally and position Australian Higher education to be truly open and poised for continuous growth</p> <p>1.3 The process of forming the Accord is also an opportunity to facilitate intentional conversation and purposeful collaboration and debate</p> <p>1.4 Student voice must be further amplified through the process and in the design of the final Accord</p> <p>1.5 Acknowledge that Australian Higher Education is not starting from scratch, but instead building on engagement with previous reviews and their recommendations</p>
<p>2.</p> <p>Bolster competition, choice, innovation and differentiation, to ensure relevance and future impact</p>	<p>2.1 Work with all stakeholders to agree on a national strategy for the whole of Australian tertiary education that is more strengths based and tailored to the distinctive missions of specific institutions, to encourage greater diversity and differentiation in providers</p> <p>2.2 Extend ARC grant eligibility to the Independent HE to support quality research, increase institutional equity and improve the efficiency of the tertiary system through greater competition.</p> <p>2.3 Move beyond league tables and investigate models that will better ensure impact and progress for all institutions</p> <p>2.4 Question the assumptions behind the 'cookie cutter model' of what defines an Australian university and investigate how universities may differentiate in their design and remit, whilst still being aligned to the national interests by defining impact that advances Australian society</p> <p>2.5 To increase access and opportunity, there must be explicit acknowledgement of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A strong diversity of providers – including those which provide higher education access to students who the traditional higher education system excludes • Success must be measured beyond international league tables and prestige – outcomes should include employability outcomes, student

	<p>satisfaction (impacting student happiness, retention, completion, and employability outcomes)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Competition and co-opetition is vital for the sector driving growth, productivity, accessibility, and innovation. • A sense that not every university needs the same management and governance model – and this should go hand in hand with a strong sense of purpose, impact and stakeholders <p>2.6 From a regulatory and policy perspective, Torrens University advocates for uniform regulation/ recognition of the role private universities also play in enhancing competition, developing higher education capacity (including staff & students), driving and contributing to sectoral and economic growth, productivity, innovation – and importantly education delivered to suit students – personalised, small classes and attention to detail</p> <p>2.7 An explicit statement that in the public interest Australian public universities are enhanced and supported by strong, high-quality, independent private providers</p>
<p>3. Implement Higher VET and elevate the conversation about vocational education</p>	<p>3.1 Rebrand vocational education in Australia to be competitive globally by diminishing the stigma and elevating the impact of vocational education</p> <p>3.2 Investigate accredited pathways for applied learning at Mastery and expert level and look towards countries that have done this well – such as the German VET system</p> <p>3.3 Expand accredited qualifications with VET sector that allows students to mix and match their subjects across universities, vocational education and practical industry/community experience</p>
<p>4. Make Australian Higher education fundamentally more accessible, more affordable and more aligned to the future of work</p>	<p>4.1 Incentivise institutions to experiment with disruptive distribution models such as Sophia, to disrupt Australian Higher Education by thinking genuinely about affordability, impact and scale</p> <p>4.2 Focus on openness and access for students and ask does Australian Higher Education have inclusive processes of opening entrance opportunities followed by a purpose driven support environment aiming to ensure successful graduates prepare to contribute to society</p> <p>4.3 Incentivise pilots and policy settings that can advance the delivery of Australian Higher Education degrees online offshore at scale</p>
<p>5. Recognise there is an opportunity to partner with industry and employers to advance Australian Higher Education</p>	<p>5.1 Investigate models such as Workforce Edge as case studies to build micro-credentials and training for employees and to fund the model through incentives that will appeal to industry</p>

Our background - Torrens Global Education as an innovative, entrepreneurial, and purpose-driven model.

Torrens University is a fully private university with an Australian Governing board, executive, and an American-based NASDAQ listed owner Strategic Education Inc. Proudly the only university in Southeast Asia to be a certified B Corporation, Torrens was founded with a fundamental belief that private enterprise can and should deliver significant public good in higher education. Our vision 'to connect the world for good,' summarises our philosophical belief that when our students succeed countries prosper, and societies benefit. Torrens Global Education also manages Think Education (a vocational provider in Australia) and the Media Design School (Asia Pacific's leading animation and creative school, based in Auckland, New Zealand.) Torrens University is owned by Strategic Education, a private education network that promotes economic mobility through education globally.

We're proud of our story and our growth from 164 students in 2014 to 21k+ students today. Our impact as a private business has already made a \$2.6+ billion economic impact on the Australian economy since 2015. Importantly, Torrens has purposefully designed its programs and structures to be focused on delivering student happiness by focusing on distinct differentiators:

- **Industry's University:** everything we do is connected to industry. In practice, we have accelerated our industry connections and boldly developed a plan for all curricula to be industry-endorsed. Already we have industry partners such as Telstra, IBM, Amazon Web Services, Ovolo Hotels, Xero, Kathmandu, Beyond Blue, the International Youth Foundation, Opal Health, and Canva. A promise we make is 'every student goes to work,' meaning our campuses are industry immersed. We are home to colleges such as the Blue Mountains International Hotel Management School with its working hotel and industry connections, our real-life operational health and wellbeing clinic The Practice, Billy Blue College of Design with its design industry-centred campus, and our Social Enterprise Hub, connecting purpose businesses to students and staff.
- **Designed with you:** deliver a personalised and flexible experience to meet the diverse needs of all our students. We do this by genuinely invest in future thinking, technology, and digital smarts. This has seen an increase of investment in state-of-the-art virtual reality, education in the metaverse and micro-credentials. It has also seen us invest in new campuses in Surry Hills, next to Tech Central, Flinders Street next to Fed Square, and a bold campus in the Wynyard Quarter in Auckland. Most importantly, it has required a mindset shift – Torrens University is now a 24/7 university with student support and services available 24 hours a day to reflect our global reach and with learning hubs established in international locations to support offshore online students.
- **Education without Borders:** expand access to quality education globally, enabling our students to become global citizens. Rather than focusing narrowly on international recruitment from the largest student markets, Torrens has set out to ensure a truly international experience for its students and to recruit based on diversity - the University now has over 11k+ international students from 118+ countries. It also boasts 110+ international staff, across 30+ nationalities, located in 20+ cities worldwide. During the pandemic, we accelerated our capability to deliver offshore online at scale. This is in lockstep with the government's international higher education strategy.

Through our global ownership Strategic Education Inc (SEI), we have the unique position of being an Australian governed and managed university and part of a network of 120k+ students across three universities (including Strayer University and Capella University) and 100+ campuses plus online programs including Hackbright Academy and the Jack Welch Management Institution. When SEI bought Torrens in 2020, the aim was for SEI to expand its reach into the Asia Pacific and globally. A key focus is from Australia to lead global growth for the entire business. This means Torrens is poised for significant global expansion, which should be positive for Australia's trade and international engagement.

We are proud to play our part in advancing Australian Higher Education and appreciate the support and advocacy of successive federal governments and the SA government, who have supported our ground-breaking model.

The trust placed in Torrens is paramount, particularly as the only investor-funded university in Australia. That is why we have been steadfast in our core focus on being genuinely purpose-driven and impactful. It is from this background that we make this submission to serve the public interest to the Accord panel.

Key themes and recommendations in response to the seven priorities provided by the Accord panel.

1. The Accord must be future focused, and this current process should redesign and rethink Australian Higher Education.

Torrens advocates bold visionary thinking and genuine debate that will enable all players to address the significant opportunities and challenges facing Australian Higher Education. But the Accord process should not just be a 'talk fest,' and fundamentally should not reinforce the status quo. The opportunity before us is to rethink and redesign our models for the future. We strongly urge the Accord process to stay true to design and remit, and to respectfully move the conversation on from any myopic matters concerned with fixing today and tomorrow's immediate challenges, and instead, to truly position Australian Higher Education to be relevant and impactful, locally and globally, decades beyond now.

Critical to the argument is delivering an authentic and inclusive 'whole of system' mapping approach to:

- Include all sectors, public and private, and define the relationship with VET as an integral capacity to develop human capital for the future of the envisioned development profile of the Australian society.
- Be inclusive in engaging key players, sectors, industry, and community – but this must go further and more profound into unlikely and disruptive territories such as voices that are not traditionally engaged in a process such as this.
- Map previous reviews such as Bradley and Coaldrake reviews – what worked, what was missed, and why.
- Map interdependencies between systems and structures – state and federal, vocational and higher ed, industry needs, and students' needs and desires.
- Identify and map the best systems in the world now. Test our systems mapping alongside the best of the best globally.
- Don't just work in the "education system as we know it" but acknowledge that the disruption in learning and education is sometimes being led by rather untraditional players and models - and build such innovation/disruption into the mapping.

Recommendation 1.1 -

A genuine system mapping process will enhance reciprocity between all players. Such an approach could enhance reciprocity between all players and ensure the greater cumulative impact of Australian Higher Education, ultimately informing sector design, access, resourcing, and impact.

History shows that the higher education sector has always served various purposes - from serving the parochial interests of particular groups in society to propping up particular ideologies. However, most of these drivers caused it to be limited in its readiness and commitment to play an integrated role in society. An explicit example of the impact on higher education is the Dearing report in the UK in the 1980s which asked why it should be funded because it is not visible or apparent what value it adds. Acknowledging the potential value of higher education, increasing new knowledge and preparing people with the required knowledge and skills for their role in industry and society inevitably prepares the way for consideration to more open access to higher education. In this context, rapid change in technology and increased competition in a continually globalising world means that higher education must be innovative, disruptive and relevant - and must be prepared to impact more people with knowledge and skills and be more relevant to the future of work.

Currently, higher education is going through a drastic change. The understanding of learning moving away from behavioural explanations to include cognitive, social, constructivist and connective perspectives is a significant development. The modes of delivery and values guiding higher education activities, linked to the various types of institutions, all create the drive to present greater and more diverse opportunities.

Recommendation 1.2 -

The Accord should recognise the drastic change that is occurring globally and position Australian Higher education to be truly open and poised for continuous growth.

Over these coming eighteen months, as we collectively discuss, debate and collaborate through the Universities Accord, we should also make time and space to ask more significant questions and to facilitate within our respective

institutions and across the silos. In other words, not just an exercise of academics talking to academics or universities talking to universities, or sectors talking to sectors, but to aim for something bigger. Questions that the Accord should pose:

- *how does the nation should measure the ultimate impact of a university?*
- *How should we define (and design) university for the future?*
- *How may we bring more competition and purposeful differentiation into Australian Higher Education?*

The opportunity here is to link the perspective and connection between all key players, meaning respective individual institutions, their stakeholders, the broader systems of education and government, industry, and students. Torrens has committed itself to facilitating and leading conversations internally with staff and students and externally with our stakeholders to further the Accord process.

Recommendation 1.3 -

The process of forming the Accord is also an opportunity to facilitate intentional conversation and purposeful collaboration and debate.

Torrens University for instance, has had significant success with hackathon activities, such as the Gov Hack events, hosting design challenges on multiple campuses bringing together government, industry, students, staff, and data in an innovative format. Another example is our Virtual Careers Festival format which had all universities on the same platform at the same time, delivering a simultaneous virtual careers festival for 20k secondary school students. The Accord process should find similar points of innovation and disruption to foster greater collaboration and openness.

The Accord process should amplify the student voice and the voice of young people and not just be centred on traditional mechanisms and well-rehearsed positions from the usual suspects. We applaud the addition of several student voices, but it's not enough. Our provocation to the panel is don't centre this conversation on the past and present but genuinely provide a voice at the table for students at every point of the Accord process.

Recommendation 1.4-

Student voice must be further amplified through the process and in the design of the final Accord by innovative engagement means.

Torrens University has had tremendous success partnering with International Youth Foundation, the Foundation for Young Australians and Beyond Blue. Other great youth platforms include the ABC's Heywire initiative, Rural Inspire, and NASCA first nations youth. The principle should be that if a Vice Chancellor speaks, so should a 17-year-old. The opportunity is to create a moment that tests ideas and opens debates with current and future students about their needs, aspirations and hopes for education. It would be positive if more young people became engaged in the fundamentals of higher education and its future direction.

Finally, Torrens believes we must also go back to previous reviews, such as the Bradley review, the Coaldrake review – and understand what has changed since these reviews and what remains to be addressed. It's thus essential to see the process as a logical continuation of the previous reports and consolidation of the gains made during this period. Careful consideration of the context is critical because a Universities Accord should take a view ten to fifteen years ahead but should also take stock and understand the current reality.

Recommendation 1.5 -

Acknowledge that Australian Higher Education is not starting from scratch, but instead building on previous reviews and their recommendations.

2. Bolster competition, choice, innovation and differentiation, to ensure relevance and future impact

The 'one size fits all' definition of a university in Australia is no longer sufficient or in the public interest. Robust standards and rigorous accreditation are paramount; however, our provocation is that a bolder framework could allow universities to identify the areas most important to their remit, design and purpose. For instance, Torrens University is proud of how we have built our research program, but we will never be a research-intensive university like our GO8 colleagues. Instead, our primary measure of success is our engagement with industry and our laser-sharp focus on student employability and success, which addresses significant national concerns. This means policy

must acknowledge that each institution has traditional strengths; for instance, some universities are excellent at working with rural and remote communities, others are exceptional at research, some are best at being student experience focused, and others are more vocational and about retraining and upskilling the workforce. Education policy should ensure these differences are enhanced and capitalised upon to ensure the entire Australian Higher Education sector thrives, and the broad spectrum of society served.

If each university could better define a key public good impact, regional engagement may be a critical measure for some institutions, as one example. To be regionally engaged is a worthy measure of success in the nation's interest. Another university might focus on skills and access to ensure more significant equity in higher education, for instance, the most robust frameworks to support first in family and students coming from non-traditional backgrounds into higher education. Another might be best in class in first nations engagement, governance, curriculum, research, and engagement – with a leading approach in embedding first nations knowledge and perspectives authentically into all aspects of higher education.

Research is a fundamental differentiator for universities in Australia, and Torrens is wholeheartedly in support that Australia should be more innovative in producing world-class research, especially in the application of new technologies. However, the current 'one size fits all cookie cutter' approach /expectation around research can also create mediocrity because not all universities are best placed to be focused on delivering world class research. Therefore, we remain supporters of the Russell approach in the UK, which has provided a more differentiated university sector that still achieves the standards but creates a diversity of expertise amongst different providers.

Torrens University is in full agreement with IHEA who has cited the Productivity Commission's view that "Across both VET and higher education, funding is often allocated to providers based on historical grant allocations, rather than contestable arrangements." We note this key point from IHEA:

"To illustrate, only universities receive direct project or block government funding for research, despite broader sectoral participation in the production of research, research commercialisation and innovation. Current funding structures inequitably exclude quality providers from gaining research funding highlight bias in Government funding policy which disincentivises capable providers from contributing to Australia's productivity. Further, the lack of access to PhD student funding disincentivises Higher Degree Research students from enrolling in the non-university entities, which is a form of government- market control and anti-competitive.

To illustrate, Australian Research Council (ARC) grants are fiercely contested and a major indicator of an institution's research standing. However, at present, most of the independent HE sector (other than Table B providers) are excluded from applying for ARC grants, even if they have academic staff and research facilities on par with many universities. In the past, ARC funding was limited to universities on the basis that private providers lack the research infrastructure to support major projects. However, this concern is now dealt with through the substantial weight given to the research environment in ARC grant assessment criteria (although we note the current ARC review)." IHEA Submission to Universities Accord process.

Recommendation 2.1 -

Work with all stakeholders to agree on a national strategy for the whole of Australian tertiary education that is more strengths based and tailored to the distinctive missions of specific institutions, to encourage greater diversity and differentiation in providers.

Recommendation 2.2 -

Extend ARC grant eligibility to the Independent HE to support quality research, increase institutional equity and improve the efficiency of the tertiary system through greater competition.

Underlying this approach is the recognition that undue emphasis has been placed on international league tables and prestige, as they don't often consider the whole picture. For instance, we note the success of our colleagues at Bond University, a private institution with an extraordinary reputation for student engagement and student and alumni satisfaction. Bond regularly outperforms all Australian universities on this front, and indeed as a competitor of Bond, we set out not just to replicate (but to respectfully) do better. Bond's success makes each institution want to do better regarding student satisfaction. League tables are often limited in what is reported and what is considered the key measures of success, so although Bond University is the gold standard for student satisfaction by its students and alumni, this success does not always reflect in the published local and global league tables.

Recommendation 2.3 -

Move beyond league tables and Investigate models that will better ensure impact and progress for all institutions.

Torrens University is proud to be a Certified B Corporation and consider B Corp status as one model of certification worth investigating further in Australian Higher Education. Through a range of principles and standards, the B Corp Recertification model measures a company's positive social and economic impact through independent analysis and robust reporting. We consider it fair and transparent, without the need for 'B Corp League Tables.' There is no competition to be the world's best B Corp, instead built into the certification framework is an accountable process where each B Corp determines what elements are to be measured from their business objectives.

Recommendation 2.4 -

Question the assumptions behind the 'cookie cutter model' of what defines an Australian university and investigate how universities may differentiate in their design and remit, whilst still being aligned to the national interests by defining impact that advances Australian society.

To meet this requirement policies should be clear, specific and understandable. Systems, processes and services should be predictable and reliable. Conditions should be fair and reasonable and should enable and not exclude based on prejudice or unfair preference.

Competition and diversity are paramount to the success of Australian Higher education.

Choice, competition and co-opetition improve the student experience fundamentally because students have a choice. We know, for instance, many domestic and international students have chosen Torrens University because we don't have traditional lectures and lecture theatres and because our curriculum is co-designed with industry and has scaffolded relevant industry experience and perspective within. This approach works for the students who come to Torrens, but the power of choice is that there are also other robust options in the market – and students are empowered to seek out what will work best for their needs. Through choice, students should feel there is an option that will best serve their current learning needs and future aspirations. The Accord should recognise competition provides a diversity of providers and, ultimately, a diversity of students and graduates.

One way to enhance competition is to elevate VET/Vocational, so it is no longer seen as being lesser than Higher Education, but instead, each is strong and different, ultimately tailored towards individuals' needs and strengths. Enable universities to be specific about their impact and the ultimate public good. Ensure flexibility in our regulation processes, so new providers can enter the market to innovate further. Remove the unnecessary replication between institutions and systems – meaning competition should mean the points of difference between institutions are apparent and celebrated. It should be fundamental that Australian Higher Education is open to new players ready to help ensure it remains relevant and future focused. The bar should be set high if one wishes to establish a university, but it should also be achievable. Our position as a greenfield private institution and Australia's first new university in twenty years in 2014, offers a sound case study and unique perspective for the benefits of providing a pathway to university status for private investors and alternative models.

But also, Australia should not hold onto broken systems for the sake of history, heritage and mythology. Instead, the nation should genuinely value and advance the diversity of governance and management models to further fuel innovation in strategy and differentiation in business approaches. Torrens reflecting global (e.g., NASDAQ listed) and local (ANZ governance) as well as combining business and focused academic priorities (separating the role of President/CEO and Vice Chancellor) is one example of an innovative model that has yielded success. Institutions should feel bold enough to implement new models supporting innovation, growth, and impact. This would also mean inviting experts from outside of Australian Higher education into the fold – which is why we applaud the recent work of the University Chancellors Council to recognise that the Chancellors role must be elevated in public policy conversations and with the government. Another recent development which we found impressive was the appointment of preeminent public thought leader Mark Scott as the new Vice Chancellor of Sydney University. This is an example of an exceptional business and policy leader well equipped to take on the challenge of higher education. We encourage more innovation and disruption such as this.

Recommendation 2.5 -

To increase access and opportunity, there must be an explicit acknowledgement of the following:

- A substantial diversity of providers – including those which provide higher education access to students who the traditional higher education system would exclude.

- Success must be measured beyond international league tables and prestige – outcomes should include employability outcomes, student satisfaction (impacting student happiness, retention, completion, and employability outcomes).
- Choice, competition and co-opetition is vital for the sector driving growth, productivity, accessibility, and innovation.
- A sense that not every university needs the same management and governance model – and this should go hand in hand with a strong sense of purpose, impact, and stakeholders.

Private investment can deliver public good and cannot be excluded from considerations about investment and affordability in Australian Higher Education.

The process of examining funding and contribution arrangements should consider the structure of higher education (broadly) to ensure that it meets the capacity requirements and focus to address the country's development agenda. (For example, types of institutions, research positions, teaching institutions etc.) We believe it's essential to note private universities are not just able to deliver quality education per se but also:

- Rank highly in delivery, and student satisfaction, while providing access and equity.
- Deliver on employability outcomes.
- Provide/contribute longer-term investments to meet national higher education priorities, including world-class impactful research output.
- Play an important role in enhancing competition, driving growth, productivity and innovation.

Therefore, examination of investment and affordability must be the whole system engaged and must include a genuine openness to different models that don't already exist in Australia, such as the pioneering private model of Torrens, to deliver high returns on investment and enhance Australia's capacity to be productive and innovative.

An essential point for Torrens University remains - access and opportunity are non-negotiable. Economic growth must not occur in isolation from critical social reform, particularly when it comes to ensuring access and equity for all Australian citizens. As a private university, we treat our social responsibility with the utmost care, and our model proves that private investment can serve the public interest and deliver public good in the context of an Australian University.

Recommendation 2.6 -

From a regulatory and policy perspective, Torrens University advocates for uniform regulation/ recognition of the role private universities also play in enhancing competition, developing higher education capacity (including staff & students), driving and contributing to sectoral and economic growth, productivity, innovation – and importantly education delivered to suit students – personalised, small classes and attention to detail.

Torrens prefers no one gold standard of what constitutes a university. What we want to see is a truly universal Accord inclusive of private universities that will:

- Allow for greater choice, competition and co-opetition and mix of players.
- Allow for greater diversity & specialisation.
- Supporting and widening access promoting aspiration, participation, and inclusion – is all about choice.

We firmly believe that Australian public universities are enhanced and supported by strong, high-quality, independent private providers. This ecology contributes significant public good and energy that should fuel our national responses to workforce challenges, ensure more significant research innovation, or secure future economic prosperity in Australia. But more importantly, the diversity (the breadth and width of providers and programs within this ecology) fundamentally serves students' interests. It allows students to find the right provider, the right course, and the right delivery model at each stage of their learning journey. The fact that Australia has a range of high-quality public and private providers should be proud and celebrated in the Universities Accord. The question should then be how to foster the best conditions for the entire ecology and broker better collaboration to ensure the Universities Accord articulates this extraordinary story.

Recommendation 2.7-

An explicit statement that in the public interest Australian public universities are enhanced and supported by strong, high-quality, independent private providers.

We believe the Accord Panel must recognise some essential principles in this conversation; for instance, it is unsustainable to expect governments to fund education fully. Private enterprises and markets should be encouraged to invest and create new business models that promote productivity and quality and meet the market demand more innovatively. This does not diminish the need for substantial public education investment, but it acknowledges that the responsibility should not only sit on the government. There is a need to amplify free trade agreements and other economic stimuli to encourage more equal playing fields between public and private investment in Australian Higher Education and foster joint venture opportunities that expand and achieve government and industry objectives.

Recommendation 2.6-

Consider economic stimulus, policy and other mechanisms (such as free trade agreements) to bolster further joint venture opportunities and initiatives that encourage more public and private investment in Australian Higher Education.

3. Implement Higher VET and elevate the conversation about vocational education.

Despite significant work to improve VET/Vocational Education in Australia, a two-class system still places higher education as superior in many instances. Torrens doesn't believe in ranking and categorising our learners – and we see equal strength in vocational training and higher education. However, the heart of the issue is in how we organise, fund and govern education and skills. The federation approach impacts VET and vocational training. It creates a messy, bureaucratic system with far too much unnecessary replication and stifles genuine innovation. Along this structure, a national mindset exists that separates Skills and Education into two portfolios and distinct ideas. Yet this is also flawed. At a time when we know higher education is meeting the skills gap, and vice versa, there is Mastery that can and should be achieved in vocational, the current approach of VET/Vocational will never produce state-of-the-art innovation. Peter Dawkins recently articulated the need for career paths into master trades and pathways from VET into higher education and we applaud this thinking. Joint qualifications are a model Torrens University is ready and willing to explore.

Recommendation 3.1 -

Rebrand vocational education in Australia to be competitive globally by diminishing the stigma and elevating the impact of vocational education.

There must be recognition that the false hierarchy between higher education and VET is utter nonsense and not fit for purpose. When one considers future workforce need, there must be urgent recognition that we must elevate VET/Vocational. Our fear is this is a conversation that has been had many times nationally, and yet the problem remains. The Accord is our best national chance to reconcile these conversations and lead meaningful change.

Recommendation 3.2 -

Investigate accredited pathways for applied learning at Mastery and expert level and look towards countries that have done this well – such as the German VET system.

An overhaul of the national approach to vocational education, in a similar manner to the German System, would provide a stronger signal to employers of skills and commitment to a career path or trajectory than a tertiary degree. The very mission of Torrens University – focused on employability and industry engagement – means that we fundamentally believe students should be able to mix and match their subjects across universities and vocational education and that graduates should have critical thinking skills. Still, they should also have skills and qualifications that lead to their desired jobs. Torrens University programs continue to produce champions of their professions. However, our graduates have limited avenues to extend and deepen their professionalisation within the vocational system. Expanding accredited qualifications within the VET sector and apprenticeships to higher qualification levels would provide the necessary market conditions to deliver higher apprenticeships successfully in Australia. We note the submission from IHEA, which we fully support:

“IHEA supports a bipartisan vision for stackable degrees (such as Micro-Credentials) that traverse both VET and HE sectors. Such a holistic approach to education and training would ensure that the independent HE sector continues contributing to the availability of a skilled workforce that can meet industry demand and promote productivity gains. Dual regulatory impact and burden should also be duly considered in the development of a cohesive and connected tertiary system, as a means of removing barriers to innovation. “

Recommendation 3.3 -

Expand accredited qualifications with VET sector that allows students to mix and match their subjects across universities, vocational education and practical industry/community experience.

4. Make Australian Higher education fundamentally more accessible, more affordable and more aligned to the future of work.

Imagine if institutions like Torrens University could drive down the price of higher education and make it more accessible to more people globally. This is what we believe. We want Australian Higher Ed to be more affordable globally and we believe in growth and expansion for all players in Australian Higher Education. If so, micro creds and online offshore become even more crucial to scale and do right. This is also directly connected to questions of VET, access and equity etc.

In our ownership model with Strategic Education Inc, we have a tool called Sophia Learning that provides high-quality online courses for US college-level credit at an affordable cost of \$99 per month. This makes professional advancement affordable and accessible to students at every stage of their educational careers. It's like a gym membership, and learners can opt in and opt out, build their skills, work at their own pace and have a genuine and affordable way to earn college-level credit. Already Sophia has achieved 195,000+ course completions and is now providing pathways into US colleges for learners who traditionally do not attend college.

Recommendation 4.1 -

Incentivise institutions to experiment with disruptive models such as Sophia, to disrupt Australian Higher Education by thinking genuinely about affordability, impact and scale.

Accessibility and open access rest on the fundamental principle that higher education should allow as many people as possible to access its capacity and services to develop their full potential. Such openness depends on the democratisation of societies and, with it, information and knowledge. In the language of Amartya Sen: development is freedom, which depends on and grows access to services and opportunities that enhance meaningful and quality living. The Australian Higher Education sector should carefully consider its purpose and role and design its focus and activities with sensitivity to the changing context. In contrast, participation in its activities should be democratic and enabling to allow people sufficient choice to benefit from it. This will determine its future role and contribution.

Openness and flexibility, therefore, serve to bring people into the higher education environment and enable them to exercise choice in accessing specific services and opportunities, meeting their personal circumstances, learning and individual support needs and aspirations. By focusing on openness and flexibility, the Accord process should uncover case studies and examples that:

- Allow students to access services in a timeframe convenient to their circumstances. This implies service delivery which enables people to choose between different types or modes of access and delivery to enable appropriate flexibility.
- Radically reimagine the choice around the physical presence or learning from a different geographical location, enabling capacity such as technology and services being designed to facilitate learning remotely. This should enable synchronous or asynchronous activity based on the choice of students.
- Acknowledge the full spectrum of support services required by an inclusive learning environment. It should represent the flexibility for students to access services based on their needs in creative ways.

It is essential to understand that openness does not refer to normlessness or having no boundaries. It refers to enabling values and mechanisms to direct and regulate enhanced effectivity and efficiency.

The approach to enabling entrance through single determinants (such as the ATAR) is under pressure. Allowing inclusive entry more flexibly requires shifting from an input orientation to an output focus. This requires intelligent systems and processes to understand students' profiles and learning needs and systematic support and monitoring of progress throughout the learning lifecycle of the student.

Recommendation 4.2 -

Amplify case studies, and examples of innovation focused on openness and access for students that ask does Australian Higher Education have inclusive processes of opening entrance opportunities followed by a purpose-driven support environment to ensure successful graduates prepare to contribute to society.

Maximise the impact of microcredentials and tech to make Australian Higher Education truly accessible and affordable globally.

Advances in technology provide significant enabling capacity to open Australian Higher Education further and opportunities for flexible participation. What is required is that institutional strategies, methods, policy environments and curricula should adapt to facilitate that flexibility, providing choice and the ability to be agile and innovative. Concepts like hybridity, blended learning, and creative approaches to time and space to optimise the opportunity for student/student, student/content, and student learning facilitator relationships are indicative of key institutional considerations required to determine strategic and institutional capacity in an open-access paradigm.

When we ask what affordability in higher education can and should mean, we immediately question why the quality of education is so intrinsically linked to high prices. Bold questions the Accord process can ask are what would happen if this wasn't the case? What if providers could deliver high quality and low cost? This would genuinely revolutionise Australian and global higher education. Australian accredited qualifications can and should be delivered at scale globally, in online and hybrid models. Furthermore, such an approach activates three critical areas - new international markets and revenue streams, growth of student numbers and, most importantly, affordability because it will allow students to study at different price points. To scale globally, competitors must be recognised as not just traditional education players but ultimately IBM, Google, Udemy, YouTube, TikTok and others.

The critical issue and strength for Torrens University is that the accredited university degree still matters. An Australian degree has high value. The opportunity for Torrens and for other Australian Higher Education providers is to provide highly reputable, affordable online learning globally. But to achieve this, there needs to be a willingness to consider price entry points for degrees to reach scale and to consider what incentives the Australian government would be willing to back to support skilled migration and migratory pathways – for instance, two years of a four-year degree are delivered offshore online at a much cheaper in country price point, and two years in person in the country. Other examples are affordable micro-credentials delivered at scale offshore online that lead to an Australian degree. There needs to be a mindset change from both providers and from the policy position of immigration to incentivise different pathways into Australian Higher education for international students, that also understand their desires to work and to be in the country and consider the opportunities of technology and what we have learnt during the Covid 19 pandemic of delivering offshore online.

Recommendation 4.3-

Incentivise pilots and policy settings that can advance the delivery of Australian Higher Education degrees online offshore at scale.

5. Recognise there is an opportunity to partner with industry and employers to advance Australian Higher Education.

There is a push in Australia for businesses to step up and take the initiative to fund the education and training of their employees. There is an opportunity to put the cost on employers to help support this and to give employers leverage to determine how to best resource this to align with their employee engagement, retention and upskilling strategies.

What is needed is policy frameworks to make this more appealing to industry, such as incentives for companies to fund their employees' participation in education and training. For example, in the United States, an employer can deduct up to \$5250 per year per person from taxable income if it funds an employee's continuing education. What we know is US Employers spend \$177B+ annually on formal education and training, and 56% of US companies offer undergraduate or graduate tuition assistance.

We have worked with Strategic Education, Inc. to develop Workforce Edge. On this free platform, employers can manage their tuition reimbursement and training programs and employees can choose from 19 different US universities to study with. Workforce Edge is a free online platform that makes it easy to manage an organisation's education benefit processes. It offers preferred pricing at leading universities, allowing employees to learn at any university they choose. Employees can choose from 19 universities in the US to study with. This not only gives these employees a choice, but it also lets the universities expand access to students who might not otherwise be able to afford higher education. Currently, over 400k+ US employees are eligible to use the platform.

What we would like to see are frameworks that incentivise on demand and on time skills building and micro credentials, delivered in partnership with industry and delivered in workplaces nationally. Meaning the Australia workforce is constantly upskilling and working towards new accredited qualifications through bite sized learning. Take the cost away the taxpayer and the individual and place it on the employer.

Recommendation 5.1 -

Investigate models such as Workforce Edge as case studies to build micro-credentials and training for employees and to fund the model through incentives that will appeal to industry.

Conclusion - Australia should be unafraid of amplifying higher education's connection to economic growth and future prosperity.

At the core of the frameworks and policies that underpin Australian Higher Education should be a belief that we must continually improve Australia's capacity to be a productive and innovative country. In turn, Australian Higher Education must address the skills shortage, engage with business, and ensure our higher education sector is tied further to our international trade partners and broader trends from international higher education.

Therefore, Torrens Global Education would like to see the Australian Universities Accord define a common purpose for Australian Higher Education that truly responds to this extraordinary moment in time for global higher education. We will strongly advocate for an outward-looking Accord that is developed through having the whole system engaged and represented. We want to see an Accord that is visionary in ensuring a future in which Australian Higher Education thrives and is a world leader. We are on standby to be contribute wholeheartedly to this process and are passionately committed to serving the public interest and delivering public good.

For more information, please contact our Vice President Public Affairs Bryce Ives on [REDACTED] or [REDACTED]

Regards

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