

SUBMISSION

PRIORITY ISSUES FOR THE UNIVERSITIES ACCORD

The University of South Australia welcomes the opportunity to make a submission on its priority issues for the Universities Accord. The University has also contributed to, and endorses, the submissions made by the Australian Technology Network of Universities and Universities Australia.

Introduction and background

UniSA was one of a number of Australian Universities established following the Dawkins reforms in the late 1980s. These reforms centred on quality, diversity and equity of access, and engagement with industry and were built into UniSA's Act of Establishment. Our mission and values as a university also chart the recommendations of the Bradley Review with its similarly strong focus on equity and participation.

As a consequence of this heritage, UniSA sees the Accord process as a once in a generation opportunity for an engaged and transformational discussion about the role and purpose of higher education in our future economy and society. While there are important near-term issues which can dominate current policy discussions, UniSA encourages the panel through this process to lay markers for the Australian community on the long term and enduring importance of higher education and the objective outcomes that it should pursue to maximise its contribution.

The University is conscious of the time constraints placed on the Accord process and the practical limitations of national consultation, but we would encourage the Panel to undertake a wide and engaged conversation that leads to clear statement of both purpose and aspirations for the sector. Such a statement would shape the future conversations between universities and their industry and community partners, and guide government investment.

UniSA is also conscious that it is a child of previous reforms, and through the confluence of local State government policy, the Accord process comes at a time when two South Australian universities are exploring the creation of a new university. Indeed, the Australia Government has indicated in the *Statement of Cooperation* entered into by the two Universities and the State and Australian Government, that it “*will also consider the potential model proposed for the operation of the university of the future in the context of the Australian Universities Accord process...*”. To that end, the *university of the future* that is being considered has the potential to be a leading and immediate model and exemplar for the aspirations and ambitions that the Accord process might establish. It also has the potential to inform a future regulatory framework which could underpin similar future endeavours nationally.

Based on current University structures, a new *university for the future* in South Australia would be the largest educator of domestic students in Australia and dedicated to advancing social cohesion through addressing educational inequality and the delivery of future making research of relevance, scale and focus. If established, this University's foundational Act is also intended to be based on UniSA's Act, with its focus on the provision of education to people who have experienced some form of educational disadvantage, and of programs that meet the needs of Aboriginal Peoples. The vision for this new

university has already been described as a unique model of bringing together excellence and equity in contemporary curricula, research and community engagement.

The University of South Australia appreciates the opportunity to engage with the Accord process as a real-time opportunity for policy and regulatory exploration and innovation.

Accord Priorities - Summary

In addition to clear statements of purpose and ambition for the sector, the University of South Australia seeks the opportunity for policy consideration and enhancement in key areas aligned to the terms of reference and nominated areas of interest.

In summary and reflecting on the Accord's terms of reference, and in alignment with the ATN's own submission, UniSA seeks an opportunity for:

- Restatement of clear targets and flexible policy frameworks for a renewed emphasis on access to, and successful outcomes for, those from under-represented groups including Aboriginal, low socio-economic and first-in-family students. This must also cover the supports, including enabling funding, provided to a student cohort that is not only comprised of the traditional school leaver.
- Recognition that participation in and of itself is not success.
- Review of the current funding HE model to provide true and demonstrable equity in the distribution of Commonwealth Government support, while allowing for institutional differentiation of offerings and market choice through the Higher Education Contribution Scheme.
- Consideration of the applicability and linking of CGS and HECS to facilitate life-long learning for all Australians through our HE institutions – not only through registration in traditional AQF defined programs.
- Review of the true cost of delivery of teaching, cognisant of the infrastructure requirements for same.
- Consideration of examination of the fitness for purpose of the continued coupling of teaching and research investment as manifested in the traditional '40/40/20' academic workload allocation.
- Commitment to mechanisms for meeting the full (true) cost of the conduct of research and the dedication of 'research overhead' supports to meet the indirect costs of delivery.
- Advancing a roadmap for the differentiation of higher education institutions in Australia over an agreed timeframe – allowing for the evolution of greater specialisation in the provision of offerings and higher quality outcomes for learners and partners.
- Examination of the impact of professional accreditation on curriculum innovation and recommendations to enable the latter to occur while preserving the integrity of the former.
- Establishment of national targets for expenditure on research and development as a % of GDP which consider investment levels in those economies against which Australia aspires to be benchmarked, and the advancement of developing nations with which Australia collaborates.
- Endorsement of the current regulatory environment but consideration of the potential to streamline accreditation and compliance across the post-secondary education sector.
- Examination of credit harmonisation and interoperability across the post-secondary education sector, reflecting the emergence of microcredentials and other modes and structures of delivery.
- Renewal of a whole-of-nation approach to international student (destination) marketing.

The remainder of this submission addresses individual accord priorities in detail.

Access, opportunity and success

The University is pleased to see that both the Accord terms of reference, and guidance from Minister Clare, prioritise equity and access. This is central to UniSA's mission as a university.

In 2021, UniSA had more than 15,000 equity students. 593 of these students identified as Aboriginal. UniSA has an NPILF target of 61% of students in core STEM programs being from equity groups, a figure that is high relative to the sector. UniSA has an extensive range of pathway programs designed for applicants who would not normally gain entry to university programs. Several of these have cohorts typically comprising 75%+ equity group students. A number of these received funding for additional places in the Government's *20,000 Places Funding Scheme*.

However, as a sector, and despite the best efforts of all involved, the Bradley target of 20% of enrolments being from low SES background remains unmet. This situation is particularly acute in certain areas of the country and of note within South Australia. Mechanisms for facilitating targeted interventions must be a prime area of consideration for the Accord.

Investment and affordability

Steadily decreasing Federal Government funding has made it more and more difficult for universities to fund research and teaching activities. Hence the reliance on international students. The COVID pandemic has shown how vulnerable Australian universities are to a drop in international student enrolments and the revenue they generate. The Accord Panel should consider whether current funding models are sustainable. For example, the inevitability of teaching cross funding research is a clear matter to be addressed. There is ample evidence to suggest that Government fund the true cost of research rather than the current 30-50%.

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

- The Accord Panel should consider the distinction between knowledge and skills, and the role higher education as a generator of new knowledge which complements the application of ongoing skill development for professional and occupational endeavour.
- In the context of the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF), harmonisation of credit across post-secondary schooling and the emergence of micro credentials is an important matter for consideration. The AQF as a fundamental mechanism of the higher education sector needs to reflect the changing needs and characteristics of the contemporary learner. Lifelong learning is no longer only a traditional linear, chronological progression from school to post-secondary study to entry into the workforce. Contemporary learners have increasingly diverse needs, both in the timing and mode of access they will choose to undertake university education.
- In recent years there has been a focus nationally and internationally on the importance of STEM skills. Many recent Federal Government funding schemes (e.g. NPILF, 20,000 Places, Microcredentials Pilot) have had a STEM focus. There is value in reviewing this focus and acknowledging that most of the big problems and opportunities we face nationally and internationally will be addressed by teams made of people with skills from the humanities as well as the sciences, and from diverse backgrounds.

Governance and accountability

It is pleasing to see that the Accord terms of reference cover governance and accountability. This affords the opportunity to consider whether the TEQSA Act still serves the sector as well as it did when first drafted. The Act enforces a compliance-heavy burden both on TEQSA as the regulator, and providers. There is considerable scope to simplify regulation and allow TEQSA to adopt a more risk-based and data-driven approach.

The Panel might also consider whether the TEQSA Act provides TEQSA with appropriate powers to pursue those who facilitate cheating. In recent years there has been a significant increase in the number of contract cheating services being aggressively marketed to students. At the same time, we have seen artificial intelligence being used to assist with and in some cases to write assessments for students. The results are often of a high standard and are difficult to detect. UniSA suggests that the Accord Panel give consideration to this developing trend as it consults with the sector, and that it consider recommending the development of sector-wide commons or norms to provide guidance to providers. A useful example to consider might be the National Academic Integrity Network jointly established by Quality and Qualifications Ireland and higher education institutions provides a nationally agreed lexicon and reporting process.

The connection between the vocational education and training and higher education systems

The Accord must acknowledge all forms of post-school education and recognise that university is not necessarily the best option for everyone, or the best option at different points in people's lives. But there is enormous opportunity for continued work on the harmonisation of credit and fostering linkage between the levels of education attainment.

Delivering new knowledge, innovation and capability

UniSA is pleased that the review will consider the whole research system, from basic and translational research through to commercialisation. UniSA suggests the following as key areas that the Panel should consider.

- It is important that the Accord consider how the fundamental purposes of education, research and community inter-relate and support each other. Both Australia's economic transformation, and global reputation, will inevitably depend upon universities ensuring that cutting edge research is integrated into and shapes education curricula.
- The *University of South Australia Act 1990* mandates Aboriginal engagement, and the University would like the Accord to focus on ways to support and increase the number of Aboriginal graduates and the quantum of Aboriginal research.
- The University encourages the Panel to consider ways to advance diversity and inclusion in research, encompassing Aboriginal leadership, gender, disciplines, and culture. There is considerable research to show that more diverse teams achieve superior innovation outcomes.
- It is important that research productivity be given due focus in the Accord, ensuring that ROI across different activities is clear and understood. Expanded support for research upskilling for critical sectors such as health and education will help to deliver the economic transitions sought.

- Noting that there is overlap between the Accord and ARC review processes, the University encourages the Panel to consider ways to provide targeted seed investment in digital and system-level innovations. Together with collaborative approaches to researcher upskilling in commercialisation, this will accelerate tangible investment outcomes. UniSA would also like to see strategic investment in a broader range of disciplines, particularly those connected to the largest components of the Australian workforce, such as education, nursing, and business.
- The Accord should consider how the university sector works with industry, community and government partners to develop nationally significant digital and physical infrastructure. This infrastructure is fundamental in supporting leading-edge research and it drives innovation and growth in the priority sectors of the Australian economy.
- The Accord should consider ways to ensure the sustainability of HDR Research. This is often considered to be the ‘engine room’ of research, particularly in the sciences. It is also a pathway for future researchers and therefore critical to Australia’s future. Despite this, stipends do not generally cover cost-of-living expenses.

State vs National focus

The Accord process is being driven at a National level, however most universities are governed by State Acts and are very much engaged in the issues of their respective State and the local communities they serve. The Accord Panel might consider the balance of this National perspective with local imperatives. A one-size-fits-all approach will not serve all providers. For example, South Australia (36%) sits below the national average (40%) of its population aged 25-34 holding a Bachelor Degree or higher. Different solutions are needed to improve this in SA than those in jurisdictions with higher attainment levels such as ACT (56%) and Victoria (45%). The Accord must lay the groundwork and provide the funding for universities to meet nationally agreed standards but also provide the flexibility to meet the particular needs of their States and local communities.

International education

The role of international education in furthering national objectives and providing a rich learning environment has been identified. There is an opportunity however for the Accord Panel to consider the support that is provided to the sector to project its quality internationally in an increasingly competitive environment – for both student recruitment but also staff recruitment and research linkages. It is many years since a detailed review of international marketing of a government level was undertaken and the role of various government departments – in the context of previous models of IDP or ‘Australian Education International’ would be a timely consideration.

Conclusion

The Universities Accord provides an opportunity to drive lasting reform in Australia’s higher education system. Thank you for the opportunity to provide input towards the priority issues that the Accord process will consider.