



University of
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Professor Mary O'Kane AC
Chair
Australian Universities Accord

Dear Professor O'Kane

Universities Accord priorities

Thank you for the 25 November email via Assistant Secretary Kate Chipperfield, in which you invite submissions to identify priorities for the Accord in the context of the Terms for Reference.

I am pleased to attach a submission from the University of Southern Queensland.

I look forward to meeting you with colleague Vice-Chancellors when you are in Brisbane early in the new year.

Kind regards and best wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'G. Mackenzie'.

Professor Geraldine Mackenzie

Vice-Chancellor

FEEDBACK ON PRIORITIES FOR THE REVIEW PROCESS

The University of Southern Queensland (UniSQ) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the priorities for the process for the review of Australia's higher education system via the Australian Universities Accord. The University supports the views expressed in the Regional Universities Network (RUN) submission. There are additional points the University wishes to make and these are outlined below.

With a strong focus on access and equity, the new Accord calls for universities to reinvent themselves to better meet Australia's knowledge and skills needs and to boost enrolments for our First Nations peoples, people with disabilities and rural and regional students. The call for a review of the funding model (in particular, the Job-ready Graduates program), a review of current workplace relations, and a third review of the connection between TAFEs and universities, are also significant.

Universities are foundational to local and regional economies and are able to invest and directly support that part of the economy that is focussed on productive enterprises and social capital. In this context, it is important to prioritise an education system that supports universities as agents of change and transformation in their future communities. The University of Southern Queensland, like other regionally headquartered universities, is a significant part of our regional and peri-urban community. A large and valued employer, we have strong, productive relationships not only with local government, businesses and their associations, industry and community organisations, but also, importantly, with primary and secondary schools and, through them, their families, - key influencers for pathways to further study.

It is also important to consider the role of university curriculum in tackling the existential issues of our time. It is well known that universities contribute to the public good in a range of ways including the supply of graduates each year to a broad range of professions. What may be less evident is how universities tackle issues such as climate change, world poverty and degradation, war, social dislocation, and environmental destruction. Whilst no one would suggest that deep suffering and deprivation should be considered learning opportunities, these serious issues should nonetheless be at the very heart of our higher education system. Such matters are relevant to the question of the role of universities and how an engaged Universities Accord might reimagine the role of universities with the idea of public purpose at its heart.

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

The importance of this ambition is acknowledged, although our observation is that this key issue would seem to be an outcome of the Accord, rather than a priority. It is suggested this be recast as a desired outcome that follows implementation of recommendations.

2. Access and opportunity
3. Investment and affordability

The commitment to review the Job-ready Graduates (JRG) program is timely. The program undertook to create up to 30,000 new university places and 50,000 new short course places, and to provide additional support for students in regional and remote Australia. Strict eligibility requirements constrained UniSQ to the award of a very limited number of these additional places.

In general, the JRG program has effectively generated less income than previously for resource-intensive fields of education such as health and sciences. Evidence has shown that the program has not only failed to deliver intended outcomes in areas of need, but it has had the effect of applying downward pressure on disciplines such as Arts and Law, effectively creating a system that is socially engineered to encourage individuals to pursue careers in certain fields while dissuading them from others. Such a strategy is at odds with our shared ambition for a system that supports access and participation for all, leaving students on the margins of underrepresented backgrounds with difficult choices around affordability and preference.

We echo the views of the Regional Universities Network (RUN) that the mechanism by which student funding is largely determined by equivalent full-time student load (EFTSL) places at a disadvantage those institutions unable to operate at scale, and particularly in the case of regional universities that support a notably diverse cohort of students who also tend to study clusters associated with lower student contributions. The higher education system needs to take into account not only funding and affordability, but also the impact of regionality on those cohorts that choose to study in those regions. Given the accepted fact that students who study in the regions tend to stay in the regions, this aspect should not be ignored.

The issue is not a simple matter of funding insofar as that impacts students and universities. Some of the so-called student protection measures also disproportionately disadvantage those students that the Accord process is aiming to support. Many non-traditional students have multiple compounding equity factors (i.e. could be regional or remote *and* from a low socio-economic background *and* be Indigenous) and are more than likely to be first in their family to go on to post-secondary study. Previous studies have shown that these students - because of their background factors - face a more challenging, complex and elongated process of transition to university.. Notwithstanding the one-off research bonus, the reduction of total funding to universities without a commensurate increase in funding for research has significantly disadvantaged students and disciplines alike.

The JRG has effectively served to combine 'other grant' funding into a single fund but with varied conditions that act effectively as performance based funding in addition to the component of funding that is Performance Based. Although funding for placements in the critical fields of Health and Education has been ostensibly incorporated, its whereabouts is somewhat opaque. The end result for universities that are largely more dependent on learning and teaching revenue and inevitably have fewer resources than their metropolitan counterparts is that the additional resources needed to support the successful participation of equity group students compounds when these are the very students who are already participating at lower rates than their metropolitan peers.

Funding agreements have become increasingly complex and are more challenging for regional universities to navigate due to their relatively smaller resource bases. The inclusion of a range of components, each with their own sets of criteria, sets out a model that doesn't readily provide incentivisation in the constrained financial environment in which universities are operating.

4. Governance, accountability and community

We welcome the notion of an accord process with multiple stakeholders that includes the Department of Education as well as universities. In addition, renewed focus on implementation of the key recommendations from the review of the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) would enable better connections and a more sustainable system.

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

What is lacking in Australia is a unified approach to guide those who are interested in further education. Such a unified approach would allow objective comparisons of the options available to

interested people and enable longer term benefits for students, particularly in respect of employment and social factors). This information is currently bifurcated, unhelpfully blurring investment and accountabilities across state-based vocational education and federally funded higher education – a distinction which is clearly important when considering transferability. This inevitably leads to confusion for prospective students who may be considering pathways.

The Accord might consider what sort of agency might break down these barriers. New Zealand's Tertiary Education Commission provides a useful exemplar¹ in this respect. This single body oversees investment and development of the tertiary system and manages the Government's relationship with the entire tertiary sector, but without a regulatory role.

6. Quality and sustainability

We would suggest that quality and sustainability should have a national rather than an embedded focus, perhaps through an independent agency. The work of the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education² is an example of the type of effort that could perhaps be aggregated at a national level to focus research, application and leadership in improving the participation and success of students from an equity perspective. In addition, strengthening the national leadership role of the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) through additional resourcing would serve to better insulate universities from threats to academic and research integrity.

We would argue that further refinement is need around the AQF and the schema for qualifications. By way of example, the Microcredentials in Higher Education Pilot³ currently being undertaken by the Department of Education contains inconsistencies with the Department's own schema for microcredentials and with advice provided earlier by Universities Australia⁴. Inclusion of microcredentials within the AQF would provide clarity and coherence as well as assure the quality of these sub-unit credentials.

Consideration needs to be given to how the university system in Australia can be sustained in the face of the growing number of credentials on offer by non-credentialed providers (e.g. Google), making it challenging for students to assess how non-credentialed offerings compare with those of certified organisations. This has the potential not only to threaten quality and sustainability but also risks a completely disaggregated higher education system.

¹ Tertiary Education Commission website - <https://www.tec.govt.nz/>

² National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education - <https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/>

³ Microcredentials in Higher Education Pilot <https://www.education.gov.au/microcredentials-pilot-higher-education#:~:text=Under%20the%20Microcredentials%20Pilot%20in,Quality%20Standards%20Agency%20Act%202011.>

⁴ Guidance for Portability of Australian Microcredentials (Universities Australia, September 2021) <https://www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/210929-Guidance-for-portability-of-Australian-microcredentials-UA.pdf>