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Professor Mary O’Kane AC
Chair, Australian Universities Accord Panel
C/- online submission portal

Western Sydney University welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Terms of Reference consultation phase of the Australian Universities Accord. I am responding on behalf of the University.

We view the Accord as a critical opportunity to optimise Australia’s higher education system in the national interest and are thoroughly committed to supporting the Panel in that task.

As a starting point, Western Sydney University suggests the Panel consider immediate reform of the following aspects of the *Jobs-Ready Graduates* package:

- a)** Remove the Student Learning Entitlement limit of seven years study in a Commonwealth supported place (or part-time equivalent). This measure unfairly penalises lowSES students who can take longer to complete studies typically due to external, rather than scholarly factors.
- b)** Revise changes to funding clusters and student contribution bands to achieve a more equitable division of costs and benefits for all stakeholders. The Innovative Research Universities (IRU) have proposed a model that addresses equity and labour market supply concerns via consistent, clear, and longer-term evidence frameworks.
- c)** Abandon Low Completion Rate measures which withdraw Commonwealth support for students with a fail rate of more than 50 percent of the units they have attempted after eight or more units have been undertaken. Western Sydney University has seen few students reach this threshold due to our strong, proactive early intervention mechanisms which identify students at risk, counsels them on their study plan, supports them in their learning and provides access to supports to enable them to succeed or to take up an alternate study or work path. The 50 percent rule impacts lowSES students more than other cohorts, and would be better replaced with positive steps to provide vulnerable students proven support.
- d)** Removal of the Performance-based Funding provisions.



A bold statement

From a broader standpoint, Western Sydney University urges the Panel to consider a bolder statement on the role and purpose of higher education in Australia; one that emphasises its centrality to the nation's wider social, economic, and cultural interests through the prism of both immediate and long-range priorities.

A mission-based approach to universities that accounted for the full range of respective institutional alignments with broader regional, national, and international priorities would better apply the sector's strengths to broader social, economic, and cultural objectives. Moving from annual funding agreements based entirely on student load to five-yearly mission-based funding would transform the sector from reactive short-term responses to load perturbations, to considered longer-term planning and responses aligned with national interests.

A bold position from the Panel would also illustrate how lifting higher education access and opportunity for people with ability brings substantial economic gain as well as addressing equity imperatives. Such an approach would seek to align equity interventions with wider government strategies to build labour market diversity, participation, and competitiveness.

Recent public health measures, globally, have affirmed the importance of sovereign capacity, particularly in advanced manufacturing, health, agri-tech, energy, defence, and digital technology. Western Sydney University encourages the Panel to reflect on the importance of better targeted, incentivised and scaled approaches to driving university-industry partnered research and research infrastructure investment in these areas.

The Panel is also asked to consider the proven soft-diplomacy, trade, cultural and wider benefits of international education. This is an incredibly competitive dimension of Australia's higher education system and one that warrants a more sophisticated and nuanced addressing of, and progression from, current challenges related to cross-subsidisation, market concentration.

A focus on access and equity

The Panel may wish to consider how a mission-based framework, grounded in evidence, would assist in the address of a series of additional priorities for Australia's higher education system. This could include:

- e) a set of agreed principles to guide practical access and participation measures, that focussed on investing in developing ability as well as redressing inequity; and



- f) more targeted and resourced programs to foster aspiration towards higher education among school aged children from socioeconomically disadvantaged areas.

These higher-level approaches could be pursued in concert with more immediate, thematically aligned modifications, such as:

- g) a significant re-investment in programs, starting in primary school and extending throughout high school, which ensure all those who have the potential for higher education have the awareness of those opportunities, and the developmental support to fully participate in those opportunities. These programs should focus on all those who suffer educational disadvantage or barriers to participation, wherever they live;
- h) recognition that students with educational disadvantage, especially those with intersectionality of factors of disadvantage, require more support whilst at university. Increased funding for these students would reflect the increased challenge these students face to complete their studies;
- i) the removal of caps on Commonwealth supported university places for Indigenous students regardless of location or other circumstances; and
- j) access to Commonwealth supported university places for asylum seekers and refugees. Western Sydney University has a proud history of providing support for refugees and asylum seekers. Our success in innovative programs of support is exemplary for the sector. The potential contribution to our economy and society by those who have sought refuge in Australia is enormous and must not be wasted.

A focus on innovation

Finally, it is critical the Accord process is fuelled by a consciousness of the imperative to innovate. Australia's higher education system must be equipped to lead in both provoking and responding to increasingly rapid change and innovation. The approaches set out in this submission provide a foundation from which that can occur. Equally, embracing a range of additional areas of focus will be critical, including:

- k) the development of new innovative and disruptive models of education, such as the NSW TAFE Institutes of Applied Technology initiative, the New Education and Training Model (NETM), and the NUW Alliance's 'Engineering Plus' program;
- l) the infusion of microcredentials into the wider qualifications framework, from sub-bachelor, bachelor and through to postgraduate levels;



- m)** more immersive industry-based and partnered training;
- n)** retaining the National Priority Industry Linkage Funds (NPILF) program but with simplified administration to increase the impact of these funds;
- o)** full flexibility in use of Commonwealth supported places from sub-bachelor through to postgraduate training; and
- p)** increased Research Training Funding stipends for our up-and-coming researchers to ensure a pipeline of new researchers in Australia for our long-term success.

To succeed, many of these innovations would require the intersection of various state and federal regulatory and funding systems, particularly those that seek a symbiosis of vocational and university models. This will require an 'It's time' approach to cooperative federalism that promotes synergy and collective interest ahead of blunt jurisdictional constraints. Moments for this type of reform are rare and should not be missed when the opportunity arises, particularly in an area of undisputed national priority like higher education.

In closing, Western Sydney University affirms its strong support for the Panel and the Accord process. Where useful, further detail and evidence can be provided to support the positions promoted in this submission. Our sincere thanks for the opportunity to be a part of this initial phase of ongoing consultation.

Sincerely

Professor Clare Pollock
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