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Dear Professor O’Kane,

## Response to the Australian Universities Accord Discussion Paper

The Association of Heads of Independent Schools of Australia (AHISA) appreciates the opportunity to respond to the Australian Universities Accord Panel’s discussion paper.

In this submission we offer comment on the Job-ready Graduates (JRG) package (Section 3.9.3 of the discussion paper) and on Section 3.2.5, Lifelong Learning, in regard to the role of universities within the wider education context.

We propose under the umbrella theme of Lifelong Learning that the Accord Panel factor into its deliberations the continuum of education in Australia – from early learning, through schooling and into the myriad post-school learning pathways and opportunities which engage Australians throughout their adult life.

We appreciate that the focus of the Panel’s work is on the tertiary sector and that universities’ interactions with other post-school providers – including the VET sector – and with research bodies and industry are therefore largely discussed on what may be described as a horizontal plane. We suggest, however, that in envisioning the future of universities and their contribution to Australia’s national wellbeing, consideration must also be given to what may be described as the vertical plane, that is, universities’ interactions with education providers – and education seekers – at all points on the education continuum.

The Panel has called for ‘big, bold, and radical’ ideas<sup>1</sup> in response to rapid changes in education demand and delivery. It is our view that a 360-degree or multi-dimensional view of education provision, allied to a well-articulated understanding of the purposes of education at each point on the education continuum are prerequisites for the generation of such ideas.

AHISA welcomes any inquiries the Panel may have about this submission. These may be directed to me at telephone (02) 6247 7300, or via email at [ceo@ahisa.edu.au](mailto:ceo@ahisa.edu.au).

Yours faithfully,

**Dr Chris Duncan**

AHISA Chief Executive Officer

## ABOUT AHISA

AHISA Ltd is a professional association for Heads of independent schools.

The primary object of AHISA is to optimise the opportunity for the education and welfare of Australia's young people through the maintenance of collegiality and high standards of professional practice and conduct amongst its members.

AHISA's 460 members lead schools that collectively account for over 450,000 students, representing 70 per cent of Australia's independent sector enrolments and over 11 per cent of total Australian school enrolments. AHISA members' schools also educate a significant proportion of senior secondary students: 20 per cent of Australia's Year 12 students attend AHISA members' schools.

AHISA's members lead a collective workforce of over 44,000 teaching staff and almost 30,000 support staff.

The socio-economic profile of AHISA members' schools is diverse. Over 20 per cent of members lead schools serving low- to very low-SES communities. The geographic spread of members' schools is also diverse, with schools located in major city, inner regional, outer regional, remote and very remote areas. School size varies from less than 200 students to over 3,000 students, with most members' schools falling within the range 600 to 1400 students.

AHISA believes that a high-quality schooling system in Australia depends on:

- Parents having the freedom to exercise their rights and responsibilities regarding the education of their children
- Students and their families having the freedom to choose among diverse schooling options
- Schools having the autonomy to exercise educational leadership as they respond to the emerging needs of their communities in a rapidly changing society.

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## 1. THE JOB-READY GRADUATES PACKAGE

### Section 3.9.3

#### Q49 Which aspects of the JRG package should be altered, and which should be retained?

In 2020, AHISA contributed to the then Department of Education, Skills and Employment consultation on draft legislation for the JRG package<sup>2</sup> and to a Senate Education and Employment Legislation Committee review of the enabling Bill.<sup>3</sup>

AHISA's submissions discussed actual and potential adverse outcomes of elements in the proposed legislation, including:

- Disruption to the further education and/or career plans of school students enrolled in Years 10 to 12 in 2020
- Inequity in raising the student contributions of some courses to offset higher Commonwealth contributions in other courses
- Devaluation of the importance of the Humanities disciplines and their contribution to Australia's economic and social wellbeing
- Potential perverse effects on Australia's teacher workforce
- Potential adverse effects on women and equity groups aspiring to a tertiary education.

In 2020 AHISA also engaged directly with then Minister for Education, the Hon Dan Tehan and parliamentarians to advocate that the proposed increase in the number of Commonwealth Supported Places (CSPs) be brought forward to meet the increase in students' demand for places in 2021. We presented evidence from a research study undertaken by the Centre for Economic Studies (CES) at Ludwigs-Maximilians University<sup>4</sup> on the impact of recession on school leavers, which took into account business cycle fluctuations across birth cohorts for 28 developed countries.

The CES research found that 'bad economic conditions at high-school graduation increase college enrolment and graduation'. The research also found that economic downturns affect the outcomes of school leavers in later life, increasing cognitive skills and improving labour-market success. Critically, the research found that these positive outcomes are affected 'only by the economic conditions at high-school graduation, but not by those during earlier or later years'.

This evidence indicated that if 2020's school leavers were to gain a 'bounce' from the economic challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, every effort had to be made to meet the demand for course places in 2021.

We are grateful that the Minister acted on this evidence.

There are two fundamental learnings to draw from implementation of the JRG package:

- Timing of proposed changes to the number of CSPs and to the mix of Commonwealth/student contributions to courses – setting aside the equity issues raised by the package – must account for students in Years 10, 11 and 12 at the time changes are announced such that introduction of the changes does not disadvantage them.
- While we no longer face the exceptional circumstances of 2020, Australia's experience of the pandemic illustrates that governments must allow for flexibility in their arrangements

- for CSPs so that universities can readily respond to fluctuations in student demand for places within and across disciplines, and that governments must themselves be prepared to respond with agility to conditions that drive demand. In 2020 those conditions were primarily economic, but technological disruption allied to social change as well as global geo-political and economic shifts are creating a volatile operating environment in education that are as much a challenge for policymakers and politicians as they are for education providers.

A key concern expressed in AHISA's 2020 submissions was the 'robbing Peter to pay Paul' approach to student contributions for CSPs in the JRG package. AHISA members judged the raising of student contributions to some courses to offset higher Commonwealth contributions in other courses as inequitable. Further, AHISA members (many of whom are credentialed in Humanities disciplines) expressed concern that the Government's proposals not only ignored the importance of the Humanities, Law and Economics and Management and Commerce to Australia's social and economic wellbeing but were shaped in a way that devalued those disciplines.

It is our hope that governments choosing to incentivise student choice of particular courses or pathways will adopt approaches that do not at the same time depend on punitive measures for students in other courses or following other pathways.

The actual and potential impact of the JGR package on schools and their students also demonstrates that when developing policies and funding arrangements for the tertiary sector governments cannot consider post-school education and training pathways as entirely disembodied from the pre-tertiary pathways of students. We discuss the interaction between the schooling and tertiary sectors further in the following section.

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## 2. LIFELONG LEARNING

### Section 3.2.5

Q15 What changes are needed to grow a culture of lifelong learning in Australia?

Q16 What practical barriers are inhibiting lifelong learning, and how can they be fixed?

AHISA supports the Universities Accord Panel's call for 'big ideas' for the future of Australia's universities. School education providers are similarly challenged to re-examine and re-vision the purposes of education.

In the introduction to this submission we suggested that the Accord Panel factor into its deliberations the continuum of education in Australia, in which 'lifelong learning' is understood as encompassing early learning, schooling, and post-school education and training throughout adulthood.

School leaders are very aware of the influence of universities on schooling in critical areas, including:

- On what schools teach and how it is assessed – for example, through curriculum development and senior secondary credentialling via the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR)
- On how the curriculum is taught and who teaches it – through initial teacher education (ITE) and certification
- On how the process of education is perceived, through academic research.

Schools also build relationships with universities through the practical experience placements of ITE students. Increasingly, these relationships are becoming highly developed partnerships in the training of teachers.

This interaction and flow of influence is two-way: schools are a major conduit for student aspiration for and entrance to a university education. From as early as Year 10, students at many AHISA members' schools undertake 'taster' courses at university or enrol in first-year courses for extension studies.<sup>5</sup>

Universities similarly influence curriculum and pedagogy in early learning settings, and are increasingly interacting with the VET and professional learning sectors as credentialling and certification options become more diverse and new demands for upskilling of the workforce emerge.

In short, the influence of universities on Australian education, and therefore on the lifelong learning of Australians is pervasive and must be taken into account if 'big, bold, and radical' ideas about the future of universities are to be generated and realised. Any vision of the future of universities is inextricably bound to a vision for Australian education as a whole, just as we in the schools sector must take account of early learning and post-school educational provision in the visions, goals and strategies we generate.

In 2010, when referring to his book, *Education Nation: Six leading edges of innovation in our schools*, Milton Chen wrote that making the USA an 'education nation' would require "bringing

the many ‘islands of excellence’ . . . to the centre of this nation, moving the edges of change to the middle”.<sup>6</sup>

The Accord Panel’s discussion paper is a valuable record of ‘the edges of change’ in Australian post-school education. In the spirit of boldness invited by the Panel, AHISA suggests that at this stage of its deliberations, the Accord Panel might consider bringing together innovators and visionaries from all education sectors and from those sectors with which they interact for a series of workshops to generate ideas, identify goals and frame the first steps that might lead to Australia indeed becoming an ‘education nation’, thereby helping to reshape the education landscape while ‘moving the edges of change to the middle’.

AHISA would be happy to identify and suggest innovators and change leaders from among our members as possible candidates for these interactions.

It is important to recognise that in entering into bold conversations about the future of education, Australia already has in place valuable infrastructure in the form of agreed national frameworks for several important elements of lifelong learning, including the National Quality Framework and its two learning frameworks<sup>7</sup> for the early learning and childcare sector, and the Australian Qualifications Framework<sup>8</sup>, which acts as the national policy guide for regulated qualifications in the Australian education and training system.

Frameworks allow for a shared language and help map areas of greatest congruity and identify the ground from which fruitful divergence or new collaborations can grow. Of special importance, frameworks also help governments identify areas where policy development is required.

Just as educational institutions are adapting to the demand for constant renewal and regeneration, so must government policymaking adapt if it is to support change. For example, in the schools sector, AHISA has been advocating for some time that the Australian Government adopt a strengths-based approach to policymaking for schools.<sup>9</sup> Deficit-model thinking in policymaking has failed to recognise schools’ capacity for innovation and therefore failed to promote and accelerate the transformation already underway, driven by schools themselves.

New models for policymaking and policy implementation are emerging. For example, in the most recent edition of *The Bridge*<sup>10</sup>, a policy research brief issued by the Australian and New Zealand School of Government (ANZSOG), editor Maria Katsonis notes a draft paper by Sir Geoff Mulgan CBE, Professor of Collective Intelligence, Public Policy and Social Innovation at University College London, which “outlines the tools governments can use to achieve cross-cutting goals and how they link to innovation strategy” and offers steps “to bridge the gap between rhetoric and aspirations on the one hand, and practical realities”.

As the education sector forges a new vision and a way forward in an age of uncertainty and rapidly evolving demands, it is imperative that governments must also engage in the revisioning process. If education is to change and transform successfully, so must government systems. ■

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Betts M & O’Kane M (2023) Where are the Uni Accord’s big ideas that will change higher ed for good? *Campus Review*, 6 March 2023. Accessed at <https://www.campusreview.com.au/2023/03/where-are-the-uni-accords-big-ideas-that-will-change-higher-ed-for-good-opinion/>.

<sup>2</sup> AHISA’s submission is posted at [https://www.ahisa.edu.au/AHISA/Advocacy/Submission\\_Resources/Submissions\\_2020/Job-ready\\_Graduates\\_Package\\_draft\\_legislation.aspx](https://www.ahisa.edu.au/AHISA/Advocacy/Submission_Resources/Submissions_2020/Job-ready_Graduates_Package_draft_legislation.aspx).

<sup>3</sup> AHISA’s submission is posted at [https://www.ahisa.edu.au/AHISA/Advocacy/Submission\\_Resources/Submissions\\_2020/Job-ready\\_Graduates\\_Package\\_Senate\\_Inquiry.aspx](https://www.ahisa.edu.au/AHISA/Advocacy/Submission_Resources/Submissions_2020/Job-ready_Graduates_Package_Senate_Inquiry.aspx)

<sup>4</sup> Hampf F, Piopiunik M & Widerhold S (2020) The effects of graduating from high school in a recession: College investments, skill formation, and labor-market outcomes. *CESifo Working Papers*, No 8252, April 2020; available at <https://www.cesifo.org/en/publikationen/2020/working-paper/effects-graduating-high-school-recession-college-investments-skill>.

<sup>5</sup> Wilson L (2014) From school to university: The education continuum. *Independence*, 39(1), May 2014. Accessed at <https://independence.partica.online/independence/independence-vol-39-no-1-may-2014/flipbook/18/>.

<sup>6</sup> Chen M (2010) Imagine an education nation: Six leading edges. *Edutopia*, 14 July 2010. George Lucas Educational Foundation. Accessed at <https://www.edutopia.org/blog/education-nation-milton-chen>.

<sup>7</sup> The frameworks are posted at <https://www.acecqa.gov.au/nqf/national-law-regulations/approved-learning-frameworks>.

<sup>8</sup> The Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) website is found at <https://www.aqf.edu.au/>.

<sup>9</sup> AHISA’s policy document, *National education policymaking and the transformation of Australian school education*, published in June 2022, is linked on AHISA’s website home page at [www.ahisa.edu.au](http://www.ahisa.edu.au).

<sup>10</sup> Katzonis M (2023) How should governments organise for cross-cutting goals? *The Bridge*, edition 73, 29 March 2023. ANZSOG. Accessed at <https://anzsog.edu.au/research-insights-and-resources/research-projects/the-bridge/>. The paper by Professor Mulgan mentioned in the brief is found at <https://www.geoffmulgan.com/post/whole-of-government-innovation>.