



Australian  
National  
University

# ANU Academic Board

Submission to the Australian Universities  
Accord Panel

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Academic Board

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In the review of the higher education sector which seeks to establish the University Accord process, the Commonwealth sets out “*key areas for review.*” While the review seeks to explore the breadth of the higher education system, the key area most significant to the activity of the Board relates to section 3.6 Governance, accountability and community (see p. 26 and p. 41 of the discussion paper) and within that section, 3.6.2 Regulation and Governance.

The Review Panel encourages respondents to “be bold. Think big and think beyond the immediate challenges, and help us articulate the role the higher education sector should play in Australia’s development, what the system should look like in 30 years’ time, and how we get there.” With that in mind the Academic Board offers below its reflections on the following specific questions posed within the discussion paper (p. 27):

**Q36 What regulatory and governance reforms would enable the higher education sector to better meet contemporary demands?**

- A regulatory framework that values, rather than constrains, variation in Australia's tertiary sector, underpinned by measures of *quality* as a basis for funding, rather than perverse incentives that favour quantity.
- Universities are hamstrung by a rigid 3 year research funding model – funding needs to match the scale and timelines of individual research projects. A range of funding schemes are needed to cater to short - medium term projects as well as longer horizon research.
- A more enabling framework is needed to facilitate timely responses to contemporary demands in research and education. The efficiency of internal processes is often limited by overlapping (and contradictory) layers of external regulation. For example, domestic course (ANU Program) approvals can take up to 2 years, with International collaborations taking up to 3 - 4 years. This presents universities with a significant challenge when rapid action is required, i.e. TEQSAs approval of the Undergraduate Certificate (AQF qualification) as a temporary measure to address urgent skills shortages and employment demands during the COVID 19 pandemic.
- Re-assessment of criteria for higher education provider categories to align with funding models. Issues that affect a University's funding should follow through to regulation and criteria for registration.

**Q37 How could a more coherent and dynamic national governance system for higher education be achieved?**

- Top down framing of governance and regulation that undercuts university autonomy is a concern. Individual institutions that were built around a mandate for a specific purpose, such as ANU, must have the means to preserve their unique identity and mission.
- The history, role, and goals of the ANU demand a different governance structure to others across the sector. The Board expressed concern that a one-size-fits-all approach won't work because of the variation in types of universities within Australia. Governing a research intensive institution on the world stage is very different to governing a university whose purpose is to provide higher education opportunities to students from regional and remote areas within Australia. A more nuanced approach to regulation and governance is needed, rather than an increase in uniformity.

Section 3.7 Quality and sustainability seeks feedback relative to student experience and research quality, areas of significant interest to the Board (p. 31):

**Q39 What reforms are needed to ensure that all students have a quality student experience?**

- The sector needs to rethink incentivisation for Universities to place more value on quality student experience. Institutions are measured by their research output, but incentives for funding are based on student numbers. The funding model for universities need to decouple student recruitment and retention from research output.

**Q41 How should research quality be prioritised and supported most effectively over the next decade?**

- Research output, and therefore outcomes, are beholden to a 3 year funding cycle that is disruptive to the research process and impacts research quality - not all research initiatives are the same so applying a standard funding model will benefit some and greatly hinder others. Recognition of the value of longer-term research that can cut across disciplines, and options for more stable funding of long-term initiatives (5-15 years) will afford higher quality outcomes.
- Research Block Grants - Current funding relevant to scale does not accommodate smaller research-intensive universities.