Australian Universities Accord Discussion Paper

Murdoch University response

Office of the Vice Chancellor

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Murdoch University's purpose is to change lives and society for the better through accessible education and research, contributing to the solution of societal and environmental challenges and providing an inclusive, caring community in which everyone can realise their potential.

Since its foundation in 1974, Murdoch has demonstrated a deep commitment to the environment and conservation, social justice and inclusion, and providing more pathways into education for more people. As a result, Murdoch now has the highest proportion of Aboriginal students at any Western Australian university with an improving success rate that now approaches our non-Aboriginal cohort. Murdoch is also renowned for its strong global and local industry, business and government connections and collaborations, and for our progressive research in areas of focus and strength - namely food, health and the environment.

Murdoch University has participated in the development of and supports the responses to the Discussion Paper submitted by the Innovative Research Universities and Universities Australia.

Key Areas of Focus

1) **Refocus on societal benefit of research-led teaching and innovation**, away from a competitive sector centred on job readiness of graduates.

2) **Implement a regulatory, quality assurance and funding framework that increases institutional autonomy**, including enhanced block grant funding of research and a teaching support framework that recognises pedagogical alignment to cohort needs.

3) **Bring State Governments explicitly into the Accord process** to facilitate funding discussions, particularly around infrastructure, and to ensure effective links with VET and the school system.

4) **Establish individual agreements between the Commonwealth, State and institution** based on individually negotiated performance measures and targets, following defined principles and parameters.

5) **Regulatory flexibility** to be provided through the Higher Education Standards to enable universities to change the way they teach to match their student cohort – **'non-traditional students call for non-traditional teaching'**.

6) JRG student and Commonwealth contributions to be **recalibrated to be evidence-based, simpler and fairer**, and **programmatic funding consolidated** to facilitate institutional autonomy and differentiation.

7) **Reporting, performance, and compliance requirements to be streamlined** through university agreements and consolidation of quality assurance by TEQSA.

1. Sector structure

1.1. A university is a community of scholars whose purpose is to train graduates and to try to solve global problems. In doing so universities model good citizenry and a better society.

1.2. Universities add value to society by showing government and industry where the future can be and what jobs there will be in that future. This contrasts the 'job-ready' focus of current expectations of universities. **Murdoch rejects a market-led, highly competitive approach to higher education**.

1.3. Through engaging multiple disciplines, universities innovate to solve complex global problems in a way that models a better future and provides people with the skills needed for that future.

1.4. Utilise institutional agreements (see below and section 3) to support discipline specialisation within states to ensure critical skills are not lost and facilitate streamlining of offerings by universities.

1.5. State and Commonwealth cooperation is critical to building teaching and research capacity in higher education. University sector in WA has limited capacity because of population, especially under the current funding model, making State support more important.

    1.5.1. State support helps build long-term capacity, particularly through coordinating and providing ongoing support for critical infrastructure, eg Food Innovation Precinct.

    1.5.2. Captures links to TAFE and school sector that are crucial to preparation for tertiary options and meeting national skills needs.

Murdoch recommends that:

1) The Commonwealth refocus on societal benefit of university's research-led teaching and innovation, away from a competitive university sector centred on job readiness of graduates
2) Interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary teaching and research be explicitly facilitated through the Higher Education Standards (HES) and research funding models
3) State Governments are brought explicitly into the Accord process to facilitate funding discussions, particularly around infrastructure, and to ensure effective links with VET and the school system
4) ***Tripartite*** agreements be established between the Commonwealth, State and institution (see section 3).

These recommendations address questions 5, 19, 32, 33, 37 and 46.

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2. Teaching and Pedagogy

2.1. The unified university system is historically predicated on a model in which a Year 12 school leaver completes a three-year degree and moves into a job or further education. This is no longer representative of the student population. **The diversity of experiences students bring as well as the range of desired outcomes must be reflected in the Accord**.

2.2. As the demographics of the sector change, universities need to change their strategies/products to meet the needs of the market.
These **changes need to be facilitated by funding models, including individually negotiated transitional funding** that might be needed to enable the shift to new strategies/products at a whole of institution level.

2.3. HES to have sufficient regulatory flexibility to enable universities to change the way they teach to match their student cohort.
Requires that institutions are 'radically teaching focused' and have robust quality assurance processes.

2.4. **Defining learning outcomes and ensuring that they are met by all cohorts** defines student success on graduation. Student outcomes must capture a suite of skills, including problem solving and dealing with complexity, that shape students' mindsets for the future.

2.5. **Institutional self-accreditation processes can accommodate developing pedagogies**, with quality oversight by TEQSA (see section 7).

2.6. **Admissions standards** managed through the HES Admission Transparency rules must **allow universities to develop entry criteria that recognise the potential of students from non-traditional backgrounds**. This ensures universities understand their cohort and are able to identify different scaffolding, support and pedagogical needs.

2.7. Microcredentials have the capacity to make a major shift in the skills base of the Australian workforce.

2.7.1. Their shorter duration and focus allow for rapid response to areas of need in industry. Institutional capability and appetite for providing relevant microcredentials can be ascertained quickly and units can be established and offered fairly rapidly.

2.7.2. Options for stacking credentials provide an important pathway into study that helps expand the applicant pool for university.

2.8. **Different funding models need to apply to microcredentials and other short course studies**.

2.8.1. 'Stackable' credentials will be Commonwealth-supported, as part of university's funded load.

2.8.2. Microcredentials that are explicitly not linked to formal qualifications should fall outside Commonwealth supported places, either privately funded or with funding provided through access to FEE-HELP within a lifetime funding limit.

2.9. Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning, particularly **Large Language Models, need to be incorporated into how universities teach and assess students**. Universities need to have the flexibility to do so in a way that aligns with a range of pedagogies and cohorts.

Murdoch recommends that:

5) Regulatory flexibility be provided through the Higher Education Standards to enable universities to change the way they teach to match their student cohort – 'non-traditional students call for non-traditional teaching'
6) Defining learning outcomes and ensuring that they are met by all cohorts defines student success on graduation
7) Admissions standards managed through the HES Admission Transparency rules allow universities to develop entry criteria that recognise the potential of students from non-traditional backgrounds
8) Different funding models apply to microcredentials and other short course studies, with Commonwealth support only for 'stackable' credentials.

These recommendations address questions 9, 10, 22, and 32.

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3. Size and funding

3.1. Current unified system doesn't support relatively small but necessary universities serving state and regional communities.

3.1.1. **Current funding model relies on economies of scale for institutions to generate operational surpluses to make strategic investments** in their future.

3.1.2. University sector in WA has limited capacity because of population, especially under the current funding model. Equally, regional universities are limited in their capacity to conduct teaching and research that meets the needs of their communities.

3.2. **Murdoch supports establishing individual agreements between the Commonwealth, State and institution**, using the Compact and Funding Agreements structures, based on individually negotiated performance measures and targets, following agreed principles and parameters.

3.3. **Quality and effectiveness of programs should be an internal responsibility**, with oversight through standard TEQSA QA processes (see section 7).

3.4. **Revision of JRG contribution rates for the Commonwealth and students is critical** to ensure that they are evidence-based, simpler and fairer. Refer to the IRU Submission for a detailed proposal for changes to student and Commonwealth contributions.

3.5. **Re-incorporate identified funding pools**, such as NPILF and IRLSAF, **into core funding arrangements**. This provides a more stable funding base that facilitates institutional autonomy and sustainability and encourages strategic diversity.

3.6. **Transition funding to be maintained** for all universities in 2024 to enable academic profile planning and ensure a smooth transition into the funding regime of the Universities Accord.

Murdoch recommends that:

9) Individual agreements be established between the Commonwealth, State and institution based on individually negotiated performance measures and targets, following defined principles and parameters

10) JRG student and Commonwealth contributions be recalibrated to be evidence-based, simpler and fairer. Refer to the IRU Submission for a detailed proposal for changes to student and Commonwealth contributions

11) Identified funding pools, such as NPILF and IRLSAF, be reincorporated into core funding arrangements

12) Transition funding be maintained for all universities in 2024.

These recommendations address questions 33, 45, 47, and 49.

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4. Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion

4.1. Self-determination of First Nations peoples must be acknowledged and facilitated through regulatory, structural and funding mechanisms.

4.2. The **Accord must provide a mechanism for a separate Indigenous review** that builds from the outcomes of the Accord but specifically addresses the needs of First Nations peoples.

4.3. **Non-traditional communities are an untapped resource of cultural and economic value**. Providing resources to these communities allows them to leverage their expertise / understanding for teaching, research and innovation.

4.3.1. University funding should be negotiated in the context of a comprehensive agreement, with that funding consolidated into a block grant available to meet institutional priorities and strategies.

4.4. In addition to identified cohorts – First Nations, Low SES, regional and remote, and students with a disability –**cohorts such as international**

students and refugees must be recognised as non-traditional cohorts in the context of the most effective pedagogy.

4.5. **Gender diversity remains a critical consideration across institutional activities**, for example in academic hiring, course enrolment profiles, or curriculum design. Gender targets across university activities should be incorporated into institutional agreements, with Athena SWAN accreditation providing evidence of effective outcomes.

4.6. **Local context needs to be captured in performance and funding measures**. This can be achieved through a comprehensive agreement that recognises critical sectoral needs at the State and local level.

   4.6.1. First Nations: very limited numbers of WA students able to accept Demand Driven places because the overwhelming majority of ATSI students reside in metropolitan or inner regional areas.

   4.6.2. Regional and Remote: in WA universities, government, and industry don't access remote and regional areas in the same way as other states. There are no large regional centres where university campuses are viable, and the costs of recruiting and enrolling students are very high.

4.7. A mechanism must be provided for a separate **review of school system structures, testing and incentives in the context of preparation for tertiary options**. National testing, NAPLAN and others, have had an impact on the pathways through education of First Nations students as well as CALD cohorts.

Murdoch recommends that:

13) The Accord provide a mechanism for a separate Indigenous review that builds from the outcomes of the Accord but specifically addresses the needs of First Nations peoples

14) Non-traditional cohorts be widely defined in relation to admissions, support, and pedagogy, for example including international students or refugees as well as CALD/Low SES/regional

15) Quality assurance recognises new and innovative teaching and research models, as well as non-traditional expertise and ways of thinking, particularly the incorporation of First Nations knowledges

16) Gender diversity targets be implemented as part of the development of individual university agreements.

These recommendations address questions 8, 10, 28, 30, 32, and 33.

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5. Research, Innovation and Industry Engagement

5.1. **Implement full cost recovery for all Category 1 research grants** to end the vicious cycle of funding for institutions.

5.1.1. Maintain the indexed value of block grants.

5.1.2. Reverse the removal of the 'research component' of CGS funding that was incorporated into JRG.

5.2. Depth and scale of research must be considered in overall funding profile of the ARC, NHMRC and other Commonwealth research schemes (including infrastructure schemes).

5.2.1. Processes need to ensure that ARC and other competitive grant funding supports research excellence no matter where it occurs.

5.2.2. Important not to have systems that concentrate research into a small number of institutions to maintain the scope for innovation, to facilitate research with government and industry at a local level, and to maintain the inherent nature of a university with research-led teaching.

5.3. In line with the IRU submission to the ARC Review, **research environment should be removed as a component of ARC applications** to increase the research base and 'level the playing field' for researchers. This would allow smaller universities where research is excellent, and budget is available, to be more competitive.

5.4. **Support from State and Commonwealth for infrastructure development and capital costs for research to be included in development of tripartite institutional agreements**.

5.4.1. State support helps build long-term capacity, particularly through coordinating and providing ongoing support for critical infrastructure. Collocation with State or Federal agencies, for example Food Innovation Precinct, builds national research capacity.

5.5. Systematic research engagement with an organisation allows universities to build other opportunities in teaching (WIL, work experience in industry, curriculum design), and research (network opportunities, contract research).

5.5.1. **Specific research funding to be implemented to support long-term engagement with industry** by all universities.

5.6. **Microcredentials provide an effective tool in building community capacity in areas of emerging need**, sustainability provides a particularly salient example with courses in carbon accounting, for instance, helping build industry expertise to meet ECG reporting requirements.

5.6.1. Microcredentials have a short-term focus that allows for rapid response to areas of need in industry.

5.6.2. Allow universities to capture the value of their intellectual property in areas of interest externally where they have expertise but don't have coursework programs.

5.6.3. As per Section 1, microcredentials not explicitly linked to formal qualifications should be funded privately or through FEE-HELP within a lifetime funding limit.

Murdoch recommends that:

17) Full cost recovery be implemented for all Category 1 research grants
18) Research environment be removed as a component of ARC applications to supports research excellence no matter where it occurs
19) Support from State and Commonwealth for infrastructure development and capital costs for research be included in development of tripartite institutional agreements
20) Specific research funding be implemented to support long-term engagement with industry.

These recommendations address questions 24, 26, 27, and 41.

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6. International

6.1. International education provides important cultural capital and diversity as well as income able to be used to cross-subsidise institutional activities, particularly research.

6.2. As per our submission to the *Inquiry into Australia's tourism and international education sectors*, Murdoch wishes to highlight the critical importance of **strengthening the social licence for international students.** They should be seen as valuable contributors to the social wellbeing of their institution as well as the broader community. In this way, there will be greater acceptance of those students seeking permanent migration as genuine members of the communities in which they live.

6.3. **State and Commonwealth support is needed ensure policy settings support a growing and diversifying onshore international student market**.

6.4. As indicated in Section 2, it is important that the regulatory framework, including ESOS, allows universities to match their pedagogy to their international cohort while assuring quality standards are met.

6.5. Transnational education provides an important income stream and reflects Australia's broader soft power in the region. It serves a growing cohort of students who want an Australian degree but don't want to or can't afford to travel to and live in Australia.

6.5.1. **Assistance through Austrade to help establish facilities offshore** to facilitate expansion of this important market segment.

6.5.2. **Administrative and financial support from Austrade to build lab facilities to encourage expansion into the STEM market** will

provide a strong return for government in both financial and foreign relations terms.

6.6. In negotiating institutional agreements, state and Commonwealth governments need to acknowledge the link between research profile and international student enrolments and potential price.

6.7. A pathway to Permanent Resident (PR) status to be defined for all international students. This must reflect the positive contribution to Australia that graduates can make over an extended period of time.

Murdoch recommends that:

21) State and Commonwealth support be coordinated to ensure policy settings support a growing and diversifying onshore international student market

22) Administrative and financial support from Austrade be made available to establish transnational education facilities offshore, including building lab facilities to encourage expansion into the STEM market.

These recommendations address questions 27, 43, 44, and 47.

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7. Regulation

7.1. The sector is currently overregulated, both from an academic quality assurance (QA) as well as a funding perspective.

7.2. Current prescriptive regulation constrains innovation and creativity, leading to emulation rather than innovation across the sector.

7.3. Over-regulation requires a sector-wide response that builds on a broad understanding of the university model, including the changing nature of the student population and the interplay between funding streams.

7.4. A **limited number of key targets** (eg load, equity measures) **should be identified**, **with monitoring by DoE *or* TEQSA using standard data** (TCSI, Financial reporting).

7.5. **Quality and effectiveness of programs should be an internal responsibility**, with oversight through standard TEQSA QA processes.

7.6. Incentives for VET and Higher Education collaboration and integration to be reviewed in a consolidated way to best leverage State and Commonwealth investment in TAFE.

7.6.1. **Cooperation arrangements between VET and HE at the sector level should provide for more seamless movement across sectors to allow students to capture the benefits of each sector for their specific career path**.

7.7. **Quality assurance through agencies such as TEQSA needs to recognise capacity for new and innovative teaching and research**

models, as well as non-traditional expertise and ways of thinking, particularly the incorporation of First Nations knowledges.

7.7.1. New and innovative ways of teaching require regulatory flexibility to define academic success, particularly based on defined course outcomes.

7.8. Murdoch considers that TEQSA regulation is onerous and duplicative of Department of Education reporting and compliance.
Recommends that **QA be consolidated within the TEQSA framework** to removes the need for measures, such as PBF or any proposed teaching satisfaction model, to drive QA.

7.8.1. **TEQSA to work with universities and external accrediting bodies** to help accommodate institutional autonomy/flexibility in teaching, with an outcomes-focus rather than defined inputs.

7.9. **The Accord must streamline various reporting, performance, and compliance requirements**.

7.9.1. Murdoch is of the view that these should be largely removed as dedicated funding pools are consolidated into a stable funding base. This would include PBF, NPILF, IRLSAF, Short Courses, and National Priority and Equity Places.

7.9.2. Reporting against external programs, such as Foreign Interference or Cyber Security, should be reduced and consolidated into short, exception reporting where possible.

7.10. Good research is international. **Regulatory frameworks need to be structured to allow international cooperation, acknowledging the potential for foreign interference but taking a managed risk approach** to ensure that the full value of research is effectively captured.

Murdoch recommends that:

23) The Accord streamline various reporting, performance, and compliance requirements

24) A limited number of key targets be identified, with monitoring by DoE **or** TEQSA using standard data

25) Quality and effectiveness of programs be an internal responsibility, with oversight through standard TEQSA QA processes

26) Cooperation arrangements between VET and HE at the sector level provide for more seamless movement across sectors to allow students to capture the benefits of each sector for their specific career path

27) Quality assurance be consolidated within TEQSA framework, removing PBF or any other teaching satisfaction model.

These recommendations address questions 33, 36, 37, and 47.