



AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITIES ACCORD DISCUSSION PAPER RESPONSE

*Prepared in accordance with ToR of the Department of Education's
Australian Universities Accord Panel Discussion Paper*

April 2023

About OES

OES is pleased to provide a formal response to the Australian Universities Accord Panel consultation process. We appreciate the opportunity to offer insights into how quality online education can be harnessed to solve the skills and employment challenges found in Australia today and into the future.

OES formed as a partnership between global digital employment platform SEEK and Swinburne University of Technology. OES has been providing high-quality online enablement across the entire scope of services and value chain for more than 10 years, including the delivery of one-hundred-plus quality online bachelor degree and postgraduate education programs in collaboration with Monash University, Queensland University of Technology, Swinburne University, Western Sydney University and Federation University, as well as bespoke services to another 30 partners.

We have supported more than 40,000 students globally. Currently, students studying with our largest partner, Swinburne, rank their overall experience at 88.5 per cent, which is well above the national average¹. In addition, employment outcomes greatly exceed the national average, showcasing a commitment to quality-driven online pedagogy.

OES welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the White Paper public consultation process, with three key recommendations for the panel's initial consideration.

Summary of Recommendations:

- **OES recommends the Federal Government partners with industry and educational stakeholders to establish robust minimum standards for online education delivery and assessment. This would prevent the proliferation of low-quality providers and maintain the quality and prestige of the Australian education sector.**
- **To promote access and equity in bridging the education-to-employment gap through work-integrated learning, it is recommended that the Australian Government adopt a funding model similar to Government of Canada's Student Work Placement Program ([Student Work Placement Program - Canada.ca](https://www.studentworkplacement.ca)). Adopting and financially supporting this approach will facilitate collaboration between government, universities, industry partners, and students, enabling the growth of a robust knowledge economy.**

¹ QILT data, 2021

[https://www.qilt.edu.au/surveys/student-experience-survey-\(ses\)](https://www.qilt.edu.au/surveys/student-experience-survey-(ses))

- **Recognise the crucial role that quality online learning plays in closing skills shortages and providing pathways to employment for underrepresented groups that include those living rural and regionally, low SES people, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. In doing so, ensure sufficient funding for these cohorts who often require a higher level of coaching and support across the student lifecycle as they navigate and balance study commitments alongside work, family and carer responsibilities.**

THEMES FOR DISCUSSION

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

The Accord Consultation provides a welcome opportunity for the sector to reflect on the efficacy and cost efficiency of current educational delivery models, and to consider the future needs of our society, economy and the evolving learning preferences of our next generation of students.

Australia is currently experiencing the impact of widespread skills shortages, with the most recent Skills Priority List indicating that more than 19 per cent of assessed occupations, across a range of skill levels, are experiencing a structural shortage².

With established professions experiencing long-term skills shortages and employers reporting significant challenges finding suitability skilled staff in fast-growing technology-driven sectors, it is clear that more needs to be done to reduce labour market friction and improve and streamline education-into-employment pathways.

OES believes the increased use of emerging technologies – artificial intelligence, virtual reality, advanced analytics, cyber, automation and robotics technologies, among others – will transform the structure and operations of many industries, including higher education.

The adoption of these new technologies will have wide-ranging impacts across the labour market, including disrupting current industry practices and standards. The expected displacement of many roles that will come with the removal of manual and repetitive tasks, will create entirely new classes of high-skilled positions which will facilitate and drive greater productivity, efficiency, consistency and safety across the Australian economy.

However, the ability of our society to attain these benefits is predicated on our organisations being able to ensure they can develop and maintain a skilled workforce. This will give rise to economy-wide workforce reskilling and upskilling challenges on a scale not previously seen in Australia. (In 2020, the World Economic Forum estimated that 50 per cent of all employees will need reskilling by 2025 due to adopting new technologies within their jobs.³)

² National Skills Commission (2022). 2022 Skills Priority List. Australian Government, October 2022. <https://www.nationalskillscommission.gov.au/reports/2022-skills-priority-list-key-findings-report>

³ Schwab, K., & Zahidi, S. (2020). The future of jobs report 2020. World Economic Forum, October 2020. https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_Future_of_Jobs_2020.pdf.

Given the size of the skills gaps and training deficits we presently experience, Australia must consider the question: Do we have the investment, capacity and infrastructure across our education sector to scale up to meet the coming reskilling and upskilling challenges?

Online and technology-driven education will play an integral part in answering this question. OES believes the extended exposure to online learning technologies, methodologies and platforms during COVID-19 accelerated the digital transformation of education. This permanently changed student preferences with respect to upskilling, reskilling, and engaging with education as a mature-aged student. A group, which will continue to make up a key cohort that OES supports on behalf of our partner universities.

To meet the growing needs of students and industry, it is important to acknowledge that in-person and online teaching are fundamentally different and require fundamentally different pedagogical approaches. Quality online education requires the design, development and deployment of high-quality online-specific learning materials that focus on the active engagement of the learner – it is insufficient to simply record and broadcast a lecture. In the future, it can be expected that students will seek to have their theoretical skills and knowledge validated through exercises using experiential learning technologies such as virtual reality.

All forms of higher education, including quality online courses, need to be structured to assist students to achieve positive post-program employment outcomes. Furthermore, relevant work-integrated learning opportunities, up-to-date industry content, and workplace skills development can help support strong employment outcomes. Quality online education also requires providers to re-conceptualise student engagement and support services.

While a new pedagogical approach is needed, much of this work has already been conducted by leading Australian online providers. This valuable body of work should not be ignored as we reshape our understanding of how education can best support upskilling Australians in areas of current and predicted skills shortages.

Recommendation:

- **OES recommends the Federal Government partners with industry and educational stakeholders to establish robust minimum standards for online education delivery and assessment. This would prevent the proliferation of low-quality providers, and maintain the quality and prestige of the Australian education sector.**

2. Collaboration with Industry

OES notes that multiple submissions to the Consultation on the Accord Terms of Reference highlighted the potential of expanding Work Integrated Learning (WIL) policies and programs as a priority strategy to improve the employability of students and the higher education sector's responsiveness to future skills needs, and boost industry engagement and knowledge exchange.

Increasingly, post-graduation employment outcomes and the ease of the education-into-employment transition drive the enrolment choice of prospective students. However, as the Discussion Paper acknowledges, despite the prestige and quality of the Australian higher education sector, collaborative

relationships between higher education and industry have the potential to be enhanced to help improve graduate employment outcomes and job readiness.

OES believes there is merit in exploring policies and programs which seek to expand the scale and scope of WIL programs in Australia as part of the Accord process.

WIL placements and practica provide unique opportunities for students to gain exposure to the workplace, establish professional networks, build a work history relevant to their field of study, and make it easier for the student to transition into skilled employment upon graduation. WIL programs also enable potential employers to assess a student's skills, attitude, motivation and cultural fit and suitability for an offer of ongoing employment.

Embedding WIL requirements and other employability-conscious elements into course curriculum design also increases the likelihood that the skills developed in academic settings can be validated and extended through exposure to practical workplace experiences, and that course curricula remain responsive and reflective of current industry trends and employer needs.

A number of current OES programs contain WIL placements and practica, and generate excellent post-completion employment outcomes for participating students. Of the more than 30,000 students who have completed a WIL placement through our programs, 40 per cent were employed directly by their host companies after the placement, and 92 per cent of WIL-participating students were employed within six months of graduation.

Although the potential benefits of WIL activities are well documented, Universities Australia⁴, among others, has recognised the current dichotomy: the potential benefits of WIL are flowing least to the students with the most to gain from participation in WIL activities. Non-traditional students who commonly commence study with less social capital than their peers are often constrained from fully participating in WIL (particularly unpaid placements) due to time, location, family and financial obligations.

The WIL participation figures from a 2017 Universities Australia member survey reveal this dynamic in stark detail. The participations rate gaps included: for indigenous students (31.1 per cent) compared to non-indigenous students (37.3 per cent); students from low-SES backgrounds (27.8 per cent) compared to high-SES students (48.6 per cent); students from metropolitan areas (37.7 per cent) compared to students from regional (34.1 per cent) and remote areas (27.2 per cent)⁵.

Structural challenges also prevent other key stakeholders from fully realising the potential benefits of WIL. Many potential industry participants, such as Not For Profits, often lack the certainty of funding to contribute to WIL activities beyond an ad hoc, discrete project basis. While universities recognise the importance of WIL in improving student employability, skills and outcomes, they commonly cannot allocate sufficient funding to adequately operate such programs at scale across multiple degree disciplines.

⁴ [WIL-in-universities-final-report-April-2019.pdf \(universitiesaustralia.edu.au\)](#)

⁵ <https://www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/200917-HE-Facts-and-Figures-2020.pdf>

For these reasons, we must consider how a direct role by government in funding WIL programs can improve student outcomes and establish better collaboration between higher education and industry to deliver Australia's future employment needs.

OES believe the development of a WIL agenda in Canada in recent years stands as a template for what is possible if the Australian Government, through the Accord process, is willing to reconceptualise the role of government in supporting WIL placements throughout the economy.

The Government of Canada's Student Work Placement Program provides organisations that offer full-time Canadian post-secondary students WIL placement opportunities of between 12-16 weeks access to a salary rebate (with increased rebates for students hired from under-represented groups) and an additional payment for students subsequently hired through the WIL placement.

The Program is administered by recognised industry peak bodies and stakeholder associations who act as Employer Delivery Partners working with stakeholders to create partnerships, source placements and recruit students.

In considering the key questions the Accord Discussion Paper raises about how to drive increased collaboration with industry, OES believes the key priorities for the Accord should be to:

- Evaluate how WIL programs are being integrated and leveraged into degree courses in higher education systems of comparable countries
- Expand the scale and scope of access to WIL opportunities within higher education programs, particularly for underrepresented and non-traditional student cohorts
- Review recognised impediments for underrepresented and non-traditional student cohorts students to participate in WIL, and devise strategies to improve participation
- Use technology to enhance WIL program experiences, and extend access to virtual and remote WIL activities to students in regional, rural and remote areas
- Develop a strategy to engage potential WIL employers and stakeholders, considering the potential for innovative WIL partnership and experience development models.

Recommendation:

- **To promote access and equity in bridging the education-to-employment gap through work-integrated learning, it is recommended that the Australian Government adopt a funding model similar to the Government of Canada's Student Work Placement Program. Adopting and financially supporting this approach will facilitate collaboration between government, universities, industry partners, and students, enabling the growth of a robust knowledge economy.**

3. Access and opportunity

OES plays a leading role in facilitating higher education participation among underrepresented and non-traditional student cohorts, including low SES, regional, rural and remote, mature-age, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, supporting students to improve their educational attainment and employability prospects.

Online education has proven to be an excellent means to facilitate upskilling for underrepresented and non-traditional student cohorts. Due to family, financial or geographical reasons, without the delivery flexibility online education programs provide, many students would struggle to access and attain quality higher education qualification.

Our current student demographics across five Australian partner universities showcase how quality-driven online education provides pathways to upskilling and employment for disadvantaged Australians.

- We support a mature-aged cohort, with 34.1 per cent of students in their 30s and 24.24 per cent over the age of 40 (17-19yr's makes up less than .5% of the student cohort across our partnerships).
- 78.4 per cent of students are women, many of whom are mid-career, returning to study during or after raising children.
- 19.8 per cent of students live in regional areas, and 15.3 per cent are from a low socio-economic background.
- 1.62 per cent of students identify as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander.

Students from these cohorts are often first in family and have a range of risk factors for attrition due to studying part time, employment needs and family responsibilities. To improve future equity in access to higher education, OES believes we need to fund appropriate levels of support for these students and ensure our current higher education funding model doesn't penalise institutions who are committed to improving access and equity outcomes for underrepresented students. This would include recognising the higher risk factors that these students have when applying performance metrics, and may include consideration towards the delivery of sub-bachelor entry pathways for mature students that recognise work and life experiences.

Recommendation:

- **Recognise the crucial role that quality online learning plays in closing skills shortages and providing pathways to employment for underrepresented groups that include, those living rural and regionally, low SES people, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. In doing so, ensure sufficient funding for these cohorts who often require a higher level of coaching and support across the student lifecycle as they navigate and balance study commitments alongside work, family and carer responsibilities.**

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