



Submission on the Universities
Accord Discussion Paper

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11 April 2023

Prof. Mary O'Kane
Chair
Universities Accord Panel
C/- Department of Education
GPO Box 9880
Canberra ACT 2601

Dear Professor O'Kane,

Open Universities Australia Pty Ltd submission on the Universities Accord Discussion Paper.

Open Universities Australia (OUA) is excited to contribute to the Australian Universities Accord Review, which shares our dedication to enhancing the quality, accessibility, affordability, and sustainability of higher education for the long-term security and prosperity of the nation. We agree that a dynamic approach to higher education policymaking is essential for the betterment of the nation. With disruptions and changes expected to persist and intensify in Australia's economy, society, and environment over the next few decades, OUA's response on the Australian Universities Accord - Discussion Paper prioritises two opportunities that we believe will enhance both the equity and sustainability of tertiary education for all Australians:

1. Return to Demand Driven Funding for all underrepresented groups; and
2. Support students to navigate complexity and make informed choices.

Funding constraints associated with the reintroduction of caps to Commonwealth Supported Places in 2017 have impacted our ability to support participation rates of underrepresented students on behalf of our participating partners. As we aim to rapidly evolve the skills of our workforce and meet societal needs, we must support access to lifelong learning for all Australians. Reducing financial barriers of access to education and ensuring providers are resourced to serve all underrepresented student groups will be important features of a more inclusive Australian education system.

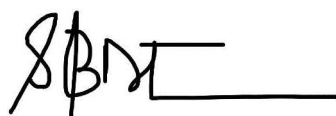
We also see an opportunity to further support students in navigating the complexity of choice which currently exists as a significant barrier across the tertiary sector. We believe a national, impartial service will support student needs for assistance in making informed decisions, facilitate access to funding and successful enrolment. This could be a valuable contributor in meeting Australia's current and future skills needs.

Thank you for the opportunity to participate in this important process.

Sincerely,



Stuart Elmslie
Chief Executive Officer



Professor S. Bruce Dowton
Chairman

1. Return to Demand Driven Funding for all underrepresented groups

Q28 What is needed to increase the number of people from under-represented groups applying to and prepared for higher education, both from school and from other pathways?

The reintroduction of caps on Commonwealth Supported Places as part of the Higher Education Support Legislation Amendment (A More Sustainable, Responsive and Transparent Higher Education System) Bill 2017 had a direct impact on OUA's ability to support participation and attainment rates of underrepresented students across Australia. When faced with the challenge of how to allocate limited Commonwealth Supported Places (CSP) across various student admission channels, a number of OUA's providers either restricted or withdrew entirely the availability of CSP places for OUA students that would have otherwise been eligible.

OUA plays a crucial role in providing access to higher education for underrepresented groups across Australia, with on average 37% of student commencements from equity groups (Aboriginal, Disability, Regional, Remote, Low SES). Single subject pathways allow Australians to enrol in university-level studies, reducing barriers in terms of eligibility and affordability. This enables students to quickly ascertain whether university is the best fit for them, or whether to transition to another field of education or other forms of tertiary study. The combination of national reach and single subject pathways have enabled access ratios among equity groups that are above the national averages and is a valuable contribution to greater access of equity on behalf of our participating partners (see Appendix: Table 1, Equity student commencements).

Under CSP agency relationships in place with several university partners, students that successfully complete between 2 and 4 units of study become eligible for admission into a CSP place. Those that take up these opportunities then go on and achieve similar pass and attainment rates in line with the broader university averages. Of the students that successfully progress from single subject pathways into a CSP place, approximately 42% of students are from equity groups, with CSP availability often a critical factor in these students' ongoing participation and attainment.

It is well documented that the introduction of demand driven funding was pivotal in driving participation rates across Australia. While it is acknowledged that financial constraints may impact the feasibility of a return to demand driven funding across the board, it is the expectation of OUA that a return of demand-driven funding for underrepresented groups at a minimum would expand the availability of CSP places for all eligible students supported by OUA. By removing the uncertainty of CSP place availability, underrepresented groups will have the confidence of ongoing funding support for their educational journey and drive increased participation across the sector.

2. Support students to navigate complexity and make informed choices

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

A potentially significant opportunity for reimagining tertiary over the next 30 years is in how the sector improves and supports the ability of students to access the information and services they require to explore, choose, and enrol into tertiary education nationally that is right for them. The expectation that all potential students have the capability and capacity to effectively navigate the plethora of tertiary choice and funding complexity on their own is unrealistic and itself is a significant barrier to enabling lifelong learning. The challenges in this respect are often most aggravated for underrepresented student groups and non-traditional learners.

Progress achieved by the sector in recent years to improve the availability of resources to inform better student decision-making after the findings of the Higher Education Standards Panel (the panel) in their Improving the Transparency of Higher Education Admissions report released in October 2016 have been positive. However, low utilisation of some initiatives implemented (based on publicly available indicators of website visitation) suggests that student needs for transparency and guidance have not yet been fully addressed, and that the current models lack the necessary utility to drive engagement.

For most people, tertiary education is a high consideration investment decision. The difficulties associated with comparing options, significant financial commitment, the inability to experience the service prior to commencement, and the uncertainty of outcomes make it a complex and deeply personal decision. To make well-informed choices, students need to gather data and insight from a variety of sources, including educators, industry, and the experience of their peers in a manner that can be parsed against their individual preferences and circumstances.

Helping students make informed study choices across the sector is also challenged by the ability of students to move in and out of tertiary throughout their lifelong learning journey. Our experience, despite a portfolio offering from universities only, is that prospective students do not always pre-identify with being in consideration for university level study only. Rather, learners are typically assessing a range of tertiary learning opportunities to help them achieve skills attainment or reach their desired career outcomes. Divisions in terms of how the sector is currently organised and a lack of connectedness create frictions in terms of student experience and ability to easily assess their study and funding options.

The OUA marketplace attracts over ~5 million website sessions annually, ~300,000 searches performed on site, and ~50,000 prospective learners utilising the course find and compare tools on site each month. However, in addition to this breadth of digital support, greater assistance is often required. Of the ~35,000 students that enrol via OUA annually, ~76% of commencing students utilise assisted advisory services to help facilitate the process of exploring and comparing options, managing course and funding applications and enrolments into study. Over ~50% of continuing students also utilise these assisted support services throughout their study journey. This model of enhanced support for students to navigate complexity and act on informed choices is valued by learners (student Net Promoter Scores average 40+) and is particularly leveraged by non-traditional learners.

In addition, qualitative research and experience confirms ~72% of prospective learners find it difficult to know what a course will be like until they start studying. Many students seek authentic feedback from other students to inform their choices and enhance preparedness to study. This voice of customer and visibility of customer experience feedback are cornerstones of many thriving sectors in modern digital economies. Across Australia's tertiary landscape, the voice of student and the transparency of customer experiences as market signals could be stronger.

The current norm of managing the visibility of student voice on customer experience via the publishing of survey results lacks the raw signal that modern consumers have become increasingly accustomed to, and reliant upon. Therefore, opportunities to elevate the signal of direct student voice and their experiences with courses and providers at the point of student decision-making has the potential to build trust and in turn align the interests, incentives, and outcomes of all stakeholders across the sector.

Our experience indicates there is opportunity to nationally scale an impartial service to support students to explore their tertiary course options, helping to make informed study decisions that are right for them, and assisting through the processes of funding and enrolment. This offers potential to reduce the barriers of navigating complexity and support the drive to increase participation in lifelong learning.

Appendix

Table 1: Domestic Student Commencements, Equity Groups, enrolled via OUA, 2018-2022.

		Domestic Student Commencements: Enrol via OUA				
		2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
INDIGENOUS	% SHARE	3.00%	3.20%	3.30%	3.70%	4.10%
	STUDENT COMMENCEMENTS	1075	1146	1275	1276	1258
DISABILITY	% SHARE	8.70%	9.20%	9.90%	10.90%	13.20%
	STUDENT COMMENCEMENTS	3074	3334	3816	3818	4095
LOW SES	% SHARE	15.30%	15.70%	14.80%	15.60%	16.30%
	STUDENT COMMENCEMENTS	5293	5560	5565	5332	4961
REGIONAL & REMOTE	% REGIONAL	20.70%	21.30%	20.90%	21.90%	22.80%
	% REMOTE	1.30%	1.40%	1.40%	1.40%	1.60%
	SUM	22.00%	22.70%	22.30%	23.30%	24.40%

Source: OUA enrolment data

About Open Universities Australia (OUA)



OUA exists to empower learners, regardless of geographic location, academic background or life stage, to access the education that's right for them.

Our mission is to remove barriers, enhancing access to quality education for all Australians – irrespective of age, location, or life circumstance.

For the past 30 years, we've been delivering on this mission by providing access to education for close to 500,000 students, connecting them with Australian universities across the country.

Equity of access for all Australian students

We serve a different kind of student to the traditional on-campus learner.

Students enrolled through OUA are most likely to be an adult learner, working part or full-time. They choose to study online because it helps to reduce some of the barriers they face in starting or continuing their study journey. These are typically people looking to begin, advance or change their careers.

OUA serves a nationally representative student cohort, with an average of 77% of students enrolled via OUA being based outside their chosen Universities' primary home state. As a ratio of overall student enrolments, students who enrol through OUA are more likely to be within an equity group when compared to sector norms. This reflects OUA's commitment to deliver access for all Australians.

Enabling choice and informed decision making

OUA is a marketplace for online higher education, enabling thousands of students to access education annually, and receive impartial guidance to make informed decisions on the study choices that are right for them. Since formation as part of the Open Learning Initiative via the Keating Government in 1993, access to higher education has been facilitated for ~500,000 students, enabling diverse student cohorts across the country to start or continue their higher education journey.

Today, owned by 7 University Shareholders, OUA services ~35,000 students nationally through partnership with 27 universities, providing choice of over 950 courses and 2,700 single subjects across all broad fields of education. The OUA brand is the most recognised brand in online education, and is most known as the place to search and compare study options ¹. Nearly 9 in 10 Australians looking for tertiary education have heard of OUA, and more than 48% of people who are actively looking to study have visited open.edu.au in 2022.

Through provision of access to single subjects with no entry requirements, thousands of learners are supported annually to directly enrol and start their university journey regardless of prior academic attainment. OUA is uniquely positioned - with process, capability, and experience in enabling diverse student cohorts to access education nationally, navigating complex decisions and funding support, while representing populations across all regions of Australia and throughout all life stages and academic backgrounds.

¹ Dec 2022, Open Universities Australia Brand Tracker, Flood & Partners, commissioned research.

OUA equity group student numbers as a % of total student numbers 2022

16.3%	Low SES
22.8%	Regional
1.6%	Remote
4.1%	Indigenous
13.2%	Disability



Our Partners

