SHAPE Futures EMCR Network

Response to University Accord Discussion Paper

Precis

Over the next two to three decades, it is imperative for Australia to shape a Higher Education system that facilitates universal access to education and fosters research with social and cultural benefit to the nation, and beyond. It will no longer be enough to receive an education that simply prepares graduates to productively contribute to the economy; universities will also need to become a place where ethical and empathetic global citizens are formed.

To achieve this aim, fundamental shifts in the way Social Sciences, Humanities and the Arts are represented and valued in both the teaching and research sides of the Higher Education sector need to occur.

Universities need to be able to invest research efforts into strategic long term research projects. Funding stability is central to solving Australia's most 'wicked' problems. Universities need to be sustainably funded so that they are not subject to the short-term variability that changes in governments and culture wars can cause. A more stable funding structure will ensure long term resilience.

This submission has been developed by the SHAPE Futures EMCR Network, a national representative body for early- and mid-career researchers in Social Sciences, Humanities and Arts for People and the Environment (SHAPE) disciplines. The voices of these researchers are paramount in designing the future of the Australian Higher Education sector. As members of the sector with the longest potential impact, they are uniquely positioned to influence its trajectory.

Teaching and Learning Structures

It is time to level the academic playing field and create a Higher Education sector in which SHAPE and STEM disciplines are on parity. This requires a rethinking of the place of SHAPE disciplines in the Higher Education sector to drive a cultural shift in perceptions of their value.

SHAPE disciplines are essential components of a well-rounded education, and are central to the future of the Australian higher education sector for the following reasons:

1. **SHAPE disciplines train students to develop critical thinking and analytical skills through engagement with complex texts, ideas, and concepts.** Critical thinking and analytical skills are essential across all industries and are therefore integral to a prosperous economy. In the tech workplace and beyond, SHAPE-inspired skills are becoming increasingly valued (James & Midford, 2019). Specifically, SHAPE skills of analysis, interpretation, creation,

communication and collaboration, encourage a deep and broad understanding of issues, and promote capacities to think critically, creatively and laterally. Together, these skills promote a better understanding of problems and, it follows, more effective solutions. Ultimately, SHAPE graduates are valuable to industry because the skills they possess 'lead to business success' (Deloitte, 2018).

2. **SHAPE disciplines foster empathy and understanding**. By focussing on the human perspective of an issue, social structures, and cultural differences, students develop ethical and empathic approaches to knowledge, which can be used to shape a more socially just future. This aligns with the UNESCO position paper on the future of education '[Reimagining our futures together: a new social contract for education](#)' (2021), which outlines that in a post-pandemic world, it is essential that education be 'a public endeavour and a common good' that ensures a universal sustainable future. The essential role of the Humanities to achieving this goal is outlined in the paper, which contends that 'finding new ways to connect and reconnect education to the humanities is … tremendously important for the future of democracy', and that without SHAPE disciplines, the 'futures literacy' of students, is compromised and young people will not be empowered to prepare, recover, and invent in the face of change.

3. **SHAPE disciplines prepare students for a rapidly changing job market.** As technology continues to transform the economy, many employers are looking for graduates who can think creatively, communicate effectively, and adapt to change. Humanities and social sciences courses develop these skills in ways that Artificial Intelligence is not yet able to replicate, ensuring the long-term value of these skills. Employers are increasingly touting the value of Humanities and Social Sciences skill sets because they are transferrable, adaptable and have real value across industries. The Deloitte Access Economics 'Soft skills for business success' (2017) report projects that 63% of the workforce will need to be in transferrable-skill-intensive employment: those trained in SHAPE skill sets.

4. **SHAPE disciplines contribute to a versatile and multifaceted education.** Higher education should be more than just preparation for a career. It should also develop a broad range of skills and knowledge that can enrich one's life. This empowers people to be productive and engaged citizens working towards a common good. Accepting the [value of SHAPE skills in the modern workplace](#) is not the same as saying SHAPE amounts to vocational training (though in some instances this will be the case). Rather, this demonstrates that pure research and critical thinking have far-reaching and perhaps unexpected value across the social, cultural and economic world.

The Australian university of the future should acknowledge the value of SHAPE disciplines and the panel should consider including Humanities and Social Sciences subjects as a core part of all Australian University qualifications.

We propose that at least 20% of all qualifications from diplomas to masters degrees be dedicated to the study of SHAPE discipline subjects. This may be a series of electives or a SHAPE discipline major. What is important is that all graduates should be expected to have developed the transferrable, adaptable and innovative skill sets that SHAPE disciplines teach. Taking this measure will lead to all Australian graduates, regardless of their qualification, having the skills to solve the complex problems that will challenge future generations, ensuring that cultural and social impacts, as well as economic factors, are considered across all industries. This measure will drive innovation and restore the role of universities to

institutions for the public good by shaping socially responsible and ethically trained citizens, who are also vocationally trained graduates capable of driving a strong future focussed Australian economy.

To achieve this outcome, the sector needs to emphasise the compatibility and interdependence of SHAPE and STEM disciplines in the future Australian economy. In the words of Microsoft President Brad Smith, and Executive Vice President of AI and Research Harry Shum:

> *As computers behave more like humans, the social sciences and humanities will become even more important. Languages, art, history, economics, ethics, philosophy, psychology and human development courses can teach critical, philosophical and ethics-based skills that will be instrumental in the development and management of AI solutions.*

There needs to be a reconsideration of the value that SHAPE disciplines contribute to the Australian labour market and economy. **Prioritising economic growth is important, but central to this priority should be how social and cultural improvements can drive this growth towards better outcomes for those who inhabit any future Australian society.** The Humanities and Social Sciences should be built into the foundations of learning at Australian Universities going forward. All students should be exposed to the valuable transferable skill sets SHAPE disciplines foster, including critical thinking and analysis, problem solving, and effective communication. Multidisciplinary training that includes SHAPE disciplines will ensure social and cultural priorities remain at the heart of policy development, industrial progress, and innovative solutions to unforeseen challenges.

SHAPE disciplines need to remain an integrated component of the University structure, rather than being siloed into elite institutions like some international examples. All students should benefit from learning about humanity and society. We should see the development of social knowledge, problem solving skills and critical thinking in our communities as an essential part of all education, not some for the privileged few with time and resources to dedicate to such learning.

Key to the success of this approach is universal participation in the university sector. This means no student should be excluded based on their age, ethnicity, social circumstances or geographic location. Students should also never be priced out of pursuing any university degree. Doing so would limit the range and breadth of voices trained to shape the future from diverse perspectives. If the Australian economy is to prosper as a result of its multicultural citizenry, the university sector needs to actively avoid perpetuating the same voices being heard within individual disciplines by diversifying students and staff in their institutions.

Research structures

Job security is at the forefront of every study of the experiences of EMCRs. An excellent study of 658 EMCRs in STEM by Katherine Christian, et al. (2021) found that many in the cohort were contemplating leaving academia in the face of job insecurity, lack of support and poor workplace culture. Similarly, in a 2016 Study, the Australian Academy of the Science's EMCR

Forum found that while most postdoctoral researchers aimed to continue in academia, the majority of respondents did not think this was possible due to structural challenges including inadequate job security, lack of funding and family responsibilities (Hardie, Carter and Bowden, 2016). Since 2016, this situation has only worsened, particularly in SHAPE disciplines. The 2021 Australian Historical Association ECR survey found that 'many are anxious, frustrated, and concerned about the state of the sector and the difficulties of finding sustained and meaningful employment.' Casualisation, fixed-term contracts and unemployment were also significant issues, with only 13% of those surveyed in some form of continuing position. **Central to any restructure of the Higher Education system in Australia should be addressing the high incidence of precarious employment**; nurturing and retaining the teaching and research talent in the sector so it can prosper.

EMCRs represent the future of both tertiary education and Australia's research agenda. The significant uncertainty in job prospects is creating an increasing skills deficit, limiting our capacity to train future generations in a broad range of disciplines. Addressing this is of immediate concern, directly impacting the future sustainability of not only tertiary education within the next two to three decades, but the sustainability of the economy itself. To achieve this aim, **there needs to be true post-doctoral pathways for recent PhD graduates to pursue academic careers and the casualisation of academic workforces needs to stop**. To keep Australia's brightest researchers in the country, working for an improved Australian culture, economy and future, secure employment, accessible funding and reasonable work conditions are essential.

Within this framework, we must also consider the need for expanding the range of perspectives and voices contributing to the formation of future generations of professionals and industry leaders. The adage 'you can't be what you can't see' is worthy of note here; to have a sustainable social, economic, and environmental framework over the long term requires that we begin thinking differently to the way we have thought before. To achieve this, we need to embrace different perspectives to begin to cultivate and promote novel approaches to big questions. This means **actively diversifying the academic workforce so that Indigenous, ethnically diverse, gender diverse and differently abled scholars and teachers stop being the minority and start being represented in line with their presence in the greater population**.

Participation

A key component to expanding the perspectives and voices within our teaching and research frameworks is also to **increase currently underrepresented demographic groups undertaking university study**. Everyone who wants to undertake study ought to be able to do so in the field of their choosing. To achieve this, financial support that ensures all degree qualifications are equally accessible to all needs to be made available. Those hoping to enrol in SHAPE qualifications are currently disadvantaged under the Job Ready Graduates Package, which marginalises demographic groups including women and Indigenous Australians who not only enrol in these disciplines at higher rates but also encounter greater financial barriers than other cohorts. **The SHAPE Futures Network encourages the University Accord Panel to immediately reverse the inequitable and unsustainable fee structures introduced as part of the Job Ready Graduates Package and equitably price all university courses** so that students

can train in the skillsets for which they have aptitude and passion, as well as those prioritised by the Australian government.

SHAPE graduates, who can think laterally, critically and creatively, make up a large proportion of people working for Indigenous organisations as teachers, social workers, anthropologists, historians, archaeologists and government officials. In embedding inequity within the funding frameworks for tertiary education, this work is not only curtailed, but will also directly disadvantage women, who make up between 60%-70% of SHAPE students, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and people from non-traditional education backgrounds who use SHAPE degrees as pathways into universities (Workplace Gender and Equality Agency, 2021).

Increased participation within tertiary education not only directly impacts those studying for the qualification but also those within their broader family networks and communities (World Bank, 2021). Therefore, providing **support to these social networks** will have a positive impact on greater participation by individuals who may normally not consider themselves on the path for tertiary education.

Greater participation can also be supported through the provision of **skills support** both before and during a student's time within the university. In the post-Covid world, student isolation is becoming an increasing challenge and one that it is important that the tertiary education sector work to meet. Students are entering our disciplines feeling ill-prepared for the transition into tertiary education. Further we are seeing far greater numbers of people retraining to either diversify their skillset or to retrain into an alternative discipline after the pandemic (White and Rittie, 2022; Ferguson, 2023; VOCED, 2020). Some of these students may not have been within the tertiary education sector for many years and require specialised support to effectively engage with the course content and achieve the learning outcomes.

Accessibility to learning is also a significant contemporary issue and one that will continue to be a focus of tertiary education over the next two to three decades. Increased capacity for online learning, facilitating remote and flexible approaches to skills acquisition, needs to be considered in the development of future course content. Remote delivery of training programmes will also increase the capacity for underrepresented demographics to participate within the tertiary education sector. Excellent examples are the potential for First Nations Australians to gain tertiary qualifications while remaining on Country, and workers transitioning into a new industry to retrain while also maintaining their existing work.

Sectoral Changes

A critical issue linked to the sustainability of the tertiary education sector over the next two to three decades is that of **funding**. We argue that students should not be faced with course costs based on the beliefs of the government of the day. As already discussed, fees should be equitable for students regardless of the type of qualification that they are pursuing. This also means that students can plan their career paths with more certainty. From students still at school deciding on their electives, to adult learners beginning their tertiary education journey and those who chose to retrain later in life, being able to plan ahead knowing that the 'goal posts' will not shift with a change of government.

A system which promotes the **long-term stability of research funding** also promotes the ability to strategically plan long-term projects whilst withstanding short term variability. This system ought to sit outside the political agenda of successive governments, particularly given that the National Interest Test remains a constant component, linking research to the benefit of broader Australia, rather than political motivations. Long-term stability of research and higher education funding will also lead to more stable employment for higher education staff, ensuring that the sector remains sustainable against future short-term fluctuations.

To support the changes which the future economy will present, we must reconsider our current **HECs/HELP structures**. One proposal that could be considered is the development of a system of credits for school leavers based on means testing that allows those who need financial assistance access to a certain level of education for free or at a discounted or subsidised rate. These credits could be spent on degrees, or VET up to the value of one undergraduate degree (or capped at the equivalent). While deferred payments would need to remain, we ought to consider measures to mitigate those who take parental leave or who must work part time for medical or caring reasons from ending up debt-bound for longer.

A further important point to consider when looking ahead to the coming decades is that **Universities should not be aimed at school leavers alone**. We need to better consider ways to cater for lifelong learning. One idea is to offer those returning to study/retrain later in their careers tax incentives to encourage participation and mitigate the financial repercussions of taking time out of full time employment. Other incentives for those who upskill later in life could include government subsidies for participation. One way to do this would be to offer study credits for the equivalent of a certificate or diploma qualification to all Australians every 5 years that could be used on upskilling or retraining. We might further consider increasing the flexibility of HECs so that payment for smaller components of courses and micro credentials could be delayed, with Centrelink-style support where needed. This is especially important for those who need to retrain because their skill set has become redundant. The current systems are designed to support degree-level qualifications, but it might only be necessary to take a short course or micro credential to pivot in one's career. Universities can support this retraining if government support mechanisms can be reconceived.

Conclusions

Over the next two to three decades, **Australia must develop a Higher Education system that facilitates universal access to education and fosters research with social and cultural benefit to all Australians**. Disciplines within the Social Sciences, Humanities and Arts, linked to outcomes for both people and the environment, are critical to ensuring this goal is met. Twenty-first century science, business and society need an integration of SHAPE and STEM fields of expertise. We must make sure that funding structures reflect that SHAPE disciplines are central to Australia's future economy. **STEM and SHAPE can not continue to be discussed as opposing ends of an academic spectrum.** They need to be measured on their own merits and metrics that accurately reflect the value of research output or impact relative to each discipline. Finally, it is essential that STEM and SHAPE disciplines are funded equitably. In doling so, we begin to remove the false narrative that SHAPE disciplines do not actively

contribute to the betterment of society, and we begin to explore and highlight the many ways that the Social Sciences, Humanities and Arts do, and will continue, to contribute to our long-term sustainability and resilience.

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