The Centre of Excellence for Equity in Higher Education and the UNESCO Chair in Equity, Social Justice and Higher Education.

Submission in response to the Australian Universities Accord Discussion Paper, April 2023

The Universities Accord has invited a broad assessment of the trajectory of Australian higher education and an imagining of the institutions we need to educate coming generations. This kind of reflection is welcome, even while many of the egregious impacts of the current Job-Ready Graduates fee and funding framework needs immediate redress.

The Centre of Excellence for Equity in Higher Education (CEEHE) is well placed to inform the work of the Universities Accord and we are committed to active participation in the process to ensure that equity is at the fore of a reimagined higher education landscape.

Professor Penny Jane Burke, Director of the CEEHE has recently been awarded a UNESCO Chair in Equity, Social Justice and Higher Education, connecting the work of the CEEHE to global discussions that are of utmost relevance to this process. We invite the Accord Panel to review the UNESCO Chair keynote, which addresses matters of the Accord.

UNESCO (2022) calls for "higher education institutions and their stakeholders to systematically rethink their role in society and their key missions, and reflect on how they can serve as catalysts for a rapid, urgently needed and fair transition towards sustainability".

Our empirical research, encompassing years of extensive survey and interview data with students from underrepresented backgrounds, gives voice to students who are often excluded from policy debates. This research includes work funded through the National Priority Pool scheme with the aim of informing the National equity project.

The Accord discussion paper notes that despite expansion of University participation, the targets to increase representation from previously excluded communities have never been met (AUADP 2023, p.11). For students in the most precarious situations, the toll of financial insecurity and sense of not-belonging increases the chance of attrition. Students who do not have financial backing from their families are likely to struggle with balancing income, living expenses and study. These result in a combination of overwork, student poverty and an inadequate amount of time for study. Redressing these inequities will require a fundamental rethink of the trajectory and purpose of higher education, as invited by the Universities Accord.

Key recommendations
Responding to the opportunity for the Universities Accord to "build a visionary plan for Australia's universities and higher education sector", we present seven key overarching recommendations. These fundamental principles, once in place, would allow for more detailed discussion about the importance of nuanced equity and social justice focussed work.

As Professor Mary O'Kane states, if "we can't reform our own system than what can we do?" (Lunchtime Address, Universities Australia).

1. **Secure, Stabilise, and Grow equity funding and expertise.**
   Genuine transformation of universities is needed to deliver high quality educational opportunity by shifting entrenched cultures and structures that continue to stratify Australian higher education and exclude those from underrepresented communities. This will require securing, stabilising, and growing public equity funding and expertise to identify and challenge the multiple dimensions of inequality

producing historical underrepresentation. Funding the development of equity expertise will help to challenge deficit models and imaginaries (see recommendation 2 below) which are deeply embedded and directly disrupt sector goals. It is funding equity expertise that makes change possible, including developing research-informed, community based and relationship-driven avenues of new educational opportunities to counter decades of institutionally entrenched inequities.

2. **Overturn Deficit Models and Imaginaries**

   The way 'the problem' of equity is represented has important implications for the efficacy of equity initiatives. A key finding of a recent Australian Government funded *International Literature Review of Equity in Higher Education* is that equity is regularly misrepresented through 'deficit imaginaries'. Despite wide-spread acceptance that the drivers of student inequity are entrenched in structures of social inequality, deficit imaginaries sustain the deeply flawed assumption that inequity is rooted in the perceived deficiencies of individuals from underrepresented backgrounds. Deficit imaginaries make flawed connections, such as the notion that material poverty leads to impoverished aspiration. Overall deficit imaginaries presume individuals who have experienced disadvantage lack potential, aspiration, confidence, capability and/or resilience. This 'deficit model' must be overturned in favour of challenging social inequities and generating strategies for institutional change. If deficit models remain there is unlikely to be progress made in line with sector wide aims to create a more equitable Australian higher education system.

3. **Do not entertain competitive or contested equity schemes.**

   Competition for students does not widen participation, nor produce equity. Any approaches to reaching equity targets must not lead to the potentially destructive outcome of universities competing to enrol students from underrepresented backgrounds. Student enrolments must be paired with long-term commitments to community engagement and notions of success that are developed from the perspective of the student being enrolled. Narrow constructions of graduate outcomes that only adhere to job-ready graduate impoverish the possibility of higher education and directly undermine the important goals of organisations such as UNESCO who advocate Universities becoming catalysts for urgently required fair transitions towards sustainability amidst global intersecting crises. Greater facilitation of collaborative approaches to equity initiatives and programs both within and between universities will improve equity outcomes more than competitive approaches.

4. **Legislate for Sustainably Resourced Enabling Programs**

   Recognise the critical role of enabling pathways in the Australian education landscape by enshrining enabling pathways in legislation. Over decades, many Universities developed enabling pathways in response to local and regional community contexts, providing hundreds of thousands of students across our nation access to higher education. For nearly half a century, the University of Newcastle Open Foundation has supported community members towards university education. Enabling has been demonstrated to improve student participation, retention and success, providing a crucial platform for becoming meaningfully prepared for higher education study. The success of Open Foundation and its related programs (including Yapug, for Indigenous students) lies in a Lifelong Learning ethos, a depth of curriculum rather than a narrow competency or skills-based approach, providing a foundation from which students experience parity of participation as they move through their studies and a long-term commitment to continuous improvement through evidence-based pedagogy and research-informed practice. To deliver on a commitment to equity, our higher education system needs to sustain accessible, high-quality educational opportunities such as Open Foundation, to counter the deeply exclusive pattern of narrow pathways. Expanding the fund for enabling so that any and all universities can establish these programs would have a profound impact on producing equitable higher education.

5. **Provide more robust living expense support**

The material basis for learning and thriving is not secured for students from low-income backgrounds, or whose families and communities are unwilling or unable to provide financial support. Students who are not able to prove themselves financially independent for the purposes of Centrelink are only eligible for the most minimal financial support, even if their families are in no position to provide for them. Even for those who are eligible for Centrelink, these payments are not sufficient and leave many living below the poverty line. Scholarships are a useful mechanism to support students facing disadvantage but cannot replace publicly funded higher education, additionally supported by a well-designed income support system. In practice students who are forced to take on large work hours to support their education struggle to fully participate in their studies and are significantly more vulnerable to attrition. The success of these students can often hinge on the flexibility of their employers and those in paid employment in which the importance of their education was disregarded put students in the difficult and financially precarious situation of having to choose between their degrees or their employment (Burke et al, 2017). Universal provision of adequate financial supports is urgently needed to redress these inequities.

6. **Reduce private funding of studies through an increase in public funding**
   Australia has moved rapidly from public towards private funding since the late 1980s, and there are many negative impacts associated with this shift. The doubling of student fees for humanities under the jobs ready graduate package is a direct attack on equitable higher education policy. It will result in life-long debts for many Indigenous students and women, who are overrepresented in these subjects but whose life-time earnings remain lower than other students. Economically similar nations retain a much higher proportion of public funding through progressive taxation. Moving in this direction is essential for Australian higher education to engage broader segments of the Australian population and play a role in eroding class stratification rather than entrenching it.

7. **Lower student/staff ratios to ensure resources for student engagement and support.**
   For many students from non-traditional backgrounds, relationships with tutors and course coordinators are central to their capacity to succeed and thrive in their studies. However, many teaching staff, particularly casuals or those with very large teaching loads, are not paid to offer this level of support and interaction with their students. The incredible proliferation of casualisation has become a hallmark Australian higher education. Casualisation not only has a detrimental impact on the working conditions of all higher education staff (including those with ostensibly permanent positions who experience the 'race to the bottom' of work intensification), but it also negatively impacts the experience of higher education for students from underrepresented backgrounds.