

# SUBMISSION

## AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITIES ACCORD: DISCUSSION PAPER

April 2023

### Executive Summary & Recommendations

The University of South Australia (UniSA) welcomes this opportunity to provide a response to the Australian Universities Accord Discussion Paper. The University has also contributed to, and endorses, the submissions made by Universities Australia and, in particular, the Australian Technology Network of Universities (ATN).

Given the extent of its involvement in the preparation of the submissions from the ATN and Universities Australia, this submission does not traverse all the ground of the higher education sector and the opportunities that present themselves. Rather it focuses on nine significant and key recommendations which particularly align to the mission and aspirations of UniSA.

The recommendations advanced in this submission are:

- 1. By 2050, Australia should aspire to have the highest base levels of education in its population of all OECD countries, with new measures of participation and attainment based at the unit credit level to encompass life-long learning.*
- 2. All Australians who demonstrate the potential and commitment to be successful learners should be supported equally through CGS, with all credit bearing units supported by HECs, to widen participation in higher education. Every Australian learner should be entitled to an equitably given level of learning support.*
- 3. All Aboriginal students should be provided with a funded student place under the Commonwealth Grants Scheme.*
- 4. A learner's experience across the post-secondary education system should be viewed as one journey.*
- 5. A national framework for work integrated learning with incentives for learners and partners should be in place by 2030.*
- 6. Research in national priority areas to establish sovereign capability should be fully funded – with a target of 3% of GDP – and provided on a block grant basis over an extended period.*
- 7. The sector should be provided with stable base teaching and research funding.*
- 8. Australian Universities should each have one simplified and focused multiannual agreement with the Australian government which outlines its relationship to the Accord and funding.*

9. *Conduct a review of TEQSA as it relates to the higher education sector and its need for agility in responding to workforce needs.*

## Introduction and background

As indicated in its submission on priority issues for the Accord process, UniSA is proud of its history as a child of the Dawkins Reforms of the late 1980s. UniSA has aspired to meet the challenges laid out for higher education over that time, including an increased focus on diversity and equity of access, engagement with industry, and an expanded international outlook. Similarly, UniSA remains committed to the reform agenda of the Bradley review and its focus on participation targets for our nation's higher education system.

UniSA views the Accord process as a unique opportunity to revisit and restate the foundation principles of the Australian higher education system and its contribution to our society and economy. It can lead a national recommitment to a set of clear principles and objectives for the sector. The University is pleased that the Accord panel has specifically sought bold ideas and has a clear intent to focus on the major strategic issues that will shape our future.

This submission outlines a set of ideas which are regarded as priorities for consideration and are based around five key areas of strategic focus which reflect the core responsibilities of Australian Universities:

- defining the nature and purpose of higher education
- providing opportunity - access and equity
- building skills and capability - teaching and learning
- building and strengthening the economy and society – research and industry engagement
- delivering a sustainable world leading system.

## Defining the nature and purpose of Australian higher education

1. **By 2050, Australia should aspire to have the highest base levels of education in its population of all OECD countries, with new measures of participation and attainment based at the unit credit level to encompass life-long learning.**

**At the same time, the current student learning entitlement cap is a restriction that should be reviewed based on experience to date with the intention to raise the threshold to continue to incentivise learning outcomes while balancing the need for sustainable funding.**

The need for our nation to invest in increased skills and knowledge is well documented with most of the jobs of the future requiring tertiary, or at least post-secondary, levels of education. To meet these requirements and to develop a more flexible system that can be responsive to the changing workforce, industry and productivity needs, a more nuanced approach to participation and attainment targets is required.

Currently targets are primarily defined by completion of a bachelor's degree, and success or failure is measured around this credential. Increasingly, however, over time, the three-year degree model is

likely to be superseded by microcredentials, short courses and all other sub-bachelor and postgraduate coursework qualifications, as well as variations in modes of study and duration over the course of a professional career. This is particularly the case for large corporations that are creating and funding shorter professional development options then later seeking university recognition and qualifications.

The future learner will increasingly pursue life-long learning, as has been a policy objective for some decades, and their learning journey will be a mix of stackable qualifications through different providers over an extended period. This will allow for greater responsiveness to labour market demands if learners are able to attain, and continually build skills and knowledge to ensure better employment outcomes. The current participation targets are increasingly not fit for defining the needs of the future workforce or measuring the contribution of higher education providers.

Participation targets should be aligned to specific AQF qualification levels in the population and in this way, we can decouple education attainment from the current restrictions of 'degrees'. By recognising, for example, the value of postgraduate coursework and microcredential offerings as equally as the traditional bachelor's degree, the real extent of education attainment can be more accurately identified – and supported. **Funding and education attainment can be directed to, and defined as, base level unit credit at a course or microcredential level. Such a refocus would recognise a student journey at all levels of learning and throughout the post-secondary system.**

This refocus would also enable more sophisticated participation targets for postgraduate studies as well as bridging courses, enabling programs, and for levels of attainment and success in specific discipline areas according to specialist need.

**At the same time, the current student learning entitlement cap is a restriction that should be reviewed based on experience to date with the intention to raise the threshold to continue to incentivise learning outcomes while balancing the need for sustainable funding.**

In this context it would also be reasonable to pose that the establishment of a single national higher education admissions system, with a free application process, might enable more significant shifts in admission policy and administration and provide the broader population with more opportunity to participate in higher education.

Establishing a clear set of national objectives in this way will also enable greater differentiation within the sector with individual institutions more able to establish individual student and course profiles and negotiate, and receive funding for, distinct outcomes.

Some research by UniSA into the impact on workers during the closure of the automotive industry is relevant. It was generally found that because of uneven access to income support for retraining, a focus amongst employment agencies on finding 'any job' and the perception that occupations requiring a greater skillset were beyond their reach, the less skilled workers tended to be down-skilled post redundancy, compared to the highly skilled workers who more easily upskilled and switched industries. A system that fosters and supports a broader definition of attainment and values, as well as stackable credentials, an improved ability to move between programs and providers may support more equitable outcomes for workforce transitions. This is particularly important in the context of the transition to a net zero economy, where less skilled workers are particularly vulnerable to redundancy and by learning from the automotive experience disproportionate disadvantage to those lower skilled cohorts can potentially be avoided, or at least mitigated.

## Providing opportunity – access and equity

- 2. All Australians who demonstrate the potential and commitment to be successful learners should be supported equally through CGS, with all credit bearing units supported by HECs, to widen participation in higher education. Every Australian learner should be entitled to an equitably given level of learning support.**

The Australian higher education system has achieved success over the past decades in increasing the education attainment levels of the population. However, many attainment levels for certain equity groups have not been achieved. We need a more universal system that recognises the mutual benefit accrued through participation and attainment and more equally supports all Australians to participate in and benefit from higher education.

The current focus on admission to bachelor's degrees, largely by ATAR, presents a particular barrier to participation for some non-traditional learners. Social and economic barriers that prevent attainment of a high-enough ATAR prevent increased engagement for these learners with the university system; conversely, achievement of a strong ATAR by some students may drive behaviours whereby high-ATAR programs are selected at the expense of their true passions or vocational aspirations, leading to increased rates of program transfer and accrual of HECS-HELP debt. This ultimately also limits and homogenises cohorts of graduates entering employment including in many areas of critical workforce needs.

We require an inclusive and transparent system that recognises the multiple pathways and modes of study to achieving learning success, such as a common first year university experience. The focus should shift to the individual learner and all Australian learners should be entitled to an equal quantum of commonwealth grant support.

Enabling programs, bridging courses, microcredits as well as courses in traditional degree structures should be recognised and funded equally through universal CGS provision, and sustained via the HECs system, as a principle of public investment in a learner's participation in higher education. These shorter forms of learning are key to meeting the skills shortage and enabling workers to build on their fields of expertise to transfer between industries as the national needs evolve. Every Australian learner should be entitled to an equal and given level of learning support to be applied to any level of credit bearing study.

The income dependent deferred loan schemes, e.g. HECS, preferably with (an upward) revised repayment threshold and with interest costs minimised, would therefore become the balancing variable to meet the total costs of education. HECS would be available for any HE credit bearing offering across the AQF standards. HECS bands, which should be few in number, should be based on a robust assessment of the full economic (actual) cost of delivery of the offering and the differentiated outcome for the student of benefits of the qualification.

**3. All Aboriginal students should be provided with a funded student place under the Commonwealth Grants Scheme.**

The University of South Australia Act explicitly outlines the role of the University in advancing higher education for Aboriginal People, and the University has been a leader in providing access and opportunity. Taking a lead from its predecessor institutions, it was one of the first to embed aboriginal knowledges in its curriculum at a university wide level, and to release a Statement of Reconciliation and subsequently establish a Reconciliation Action Plan. Within its strategic plan, Enterprise25, UniSA has the ambition to be the Aboriginal University of Choice.

And while presently the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students studying at UniSA is increasing, more can be done.

In keeping with the commitment to 'Close the Gap' and to foster their access to and participation in education and employment, we should ensure that a place is available in post-school education for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and that the students are well supported during their studies.

## Building skills and capability – teaching and learning

**4. A learner's experience across the post-secondary education system should be viewed as one journey.**

We need a post-secondary school education system which recognises that many students will traverse through universities, the VET sector and other learning organisations at different times during the course of their professional career. We can make efforts to recognise the multiple pathways students take and improve efficiency. Currently a student who does not complete a higher education degree, but moves to the VET sector, or visa versa, may be viewed in one part of the system as 'attrition'. Enhancing the use of a learner identifier for a student and managing this across institutions would give greater clarity to the actual student lifecycle and attainment levels and develop and support the potential development of more varied personalised learning plans.

In this context the development of national credit minimums and maximums for VET/TAFE studies and articulation into university studies would be a step towards bringing the sector together and making the student's journey seamless. Similarly, the AQF should describe the equivalency of level of learning between VET and HE awards and also describe the differences between the outcomes of the two branches of education.

**5. A national framework for work integrated learning with incentives for learners and partners should be in place by 2030.**

A key element of the student experience and the learning pathway for many students is undertaking work integrated learning, or placements in professional organisations and settings. This is an experience that is both beneficial to the student and the professional organisation. Currently there are limitations however in critical industries, such as health, for student placements and many organisations

and industries do not have processes for efficiently managing and supporting students on placement. Students themselves often face a financial burden as they need to take time off from work to attend full-time placements over several weeks, or cover travel and accommodation costs for placements in non-metropolitan settings – and not all students are entitled to income support during this time.

A new learning contract needs to be found between universities and professional and employer groups to support work integrated learning and recognise the mutual benefits that accrue to the student and the organisation. This could be underpinned by legislative frameworks and principles through the Fair Work Act. Government has a potential role here to establish greater incentives for organisations to support students during placements, potentially through tax credits, or creation of more graduate apprenticeships. Such a mechanism may also provide for students to be paid during their work placement experience.

For regional and rural workers, or those undertaking placements in regional areas, the provision of income support for placements is also an important aid to overcoming participation. This could be augmented support to enable metropolitan students to undertake regional placements, regional students to undertake metropolitan placements, and include mechanisms for possible HECS debt reduction should graduates accept employment with providers in regional areas at the conclusion of placements.

It should be noted that this issue also applies to higher degree by research internships where the current levels of stipend and programs such as the proposed National Industry PhD program which is a new competitive scheme, work against the creation of a robust industry-university partnership.

## Building and strengthening the economy and society – research and industry engagement

### **6. Research in national priority areas to establish sovereign capability should be fully funded – with a target of 3% of GDP - and provided on a block grant basis over an extended period.**

The University notes that the Accord discussion paper is particularly focused on the education agenda in higher education, but it does present a significant opportunity to resolve some long-established limitations in the nation's approach to building its sovereign research capability. It also tends to minimise the intersection between research and teaching and the benefits that brings to our economy and society as well as building a sustainable sector.

The national funding system for research is disjointed, fragmented and does not facilitate investment and continuity of important research. Short term funding grants and key staff on short term funding contracts create an instability in our research ecosystem, place inordinate pressure of early and mid-career researchers, and reduce the nation's capabilities in the context of an international competition for talent. The sustainable funding of higher degree research funding should also be considered.

Building our sovereign capability and increasing the connection between industry and universities to foster and generate innovation requires investment in people. The current funding system discourages longer term investment in early career researchers and related partnerships with key industries. Fluctuating funding which does not recognise the full cost of research delivery and is reliant on cross subsidisation restricts the capacity for universities to deliver on the nation's research agenda.

The nation would benefit from clearly establishing the goal of having an enterprise system which matches the successes of research excellence achieved already. A review of the larger scale research funding systems to ensure coverage of research and enterprise (translation, commercialisation) would be welcome, alongside the pull of industry innovations as well as the push of research excellence from universities outwards. There is an opportunity to achieve a better match between the strengthening and diversification of the economy with the research funding available

Moving to a greater portion of research funding by block funding for agreed contribution to national priorities and outputs and establishing a target for funding such as 3% of GDP, would be one way to enable universities to more clearly define their individual areas of focus and forge agreement with the Australian government on outcomes.

## Delivering a world-leading higher education system

### **7. The sector should be provided with stable base teaching and research funding.**

Stability and planning certainty should also be brought to the system by replacing the current annual fixed MBGA (maximum basis grant amount) with a five-year *minimum* base funding guarantee – an amount agreed through mission aligned local accord agreements with each higher education provider. A similar approach could be applied to research funding.

### **8. Australian Universities should each have one simplified and focused multiannual agreement with the Australian government which outlines its relationship to the Accord and funding.**

Currently a university has a funding agreement and a compact with the Australian Government. The Accord process should enable development of local accord agreements with aligned funding. This would bring the articulate of mission, objectives and performance indicators together with the resource conversation required for their delivery.

### **9. Conduct a review of TEQSA as it relates to the higher education sector and its need for agility in responding to workforce needs.**

The introduction of TEQSA post the Bradley review and the associated ESOS requirements and higher education standards have provided a framework for supporting a high-quality higher education system and presenting this on an international stage. The development of these frameworks during a period of rapid expansion of higher education and especially internationally have served the sector and community well.

It would be beneficial to now consider whether these frameworks serve the sector equally well in the context of rapid changes, the need for increased partnering between universities and other education partners and effective use of limited resources. TEQSA itself was established at a time when for example university amalgamations was less likely to be considered – and now at least two States are exploring this option and TEQSA will be placed in the situation of evaluating registration in a new context.

Similarly, the national need for rapid development of specific skills and capabilities would best be served by effective partnership and collaboration between universities.

## Further Information

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the Accord Discussion Paper. The University of South Australia would be pleased to provide further information on elements of this submission if that is desired.

For further information, please contact the University through Mr Alan Brideson, Chief of Staff, Office of the Vice Chancellor.

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