

Professor Mary O'Kane
Chair, Australian Universities Accord Panel
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Dear Professor O'Kane,

Victoria University (VU) is a public purpose, taxpayer-endowed institution and is proud of that fact. Our belief is that a single, unified tertiary system is the best way to optimise public investment in both Vocational Education and Higher Education - and the nation-forging research that underpins it. Above all, a single combined 'dual sector' system will yield significant benefits to industry, to skills formation and to career employment.

Specifically, we propose:

- The six current dual-sector universities be empowered to self-accredit all of their offerings - from micro-credentials to PhDs - to demonstrate the efficiency and value-yield of this innovative approach.
- The ambit of TEQSA be extended to facilitate this 'unified dual sector' approach.
- Equity funding for diverse groups of student applicants should be specially reserved and denominated on the basis of head-count rather than EFTSL.
- The AQF be reformed to enable and fast-track the above.
- There should be a single online National Tertiary Admission Centre (NTAC) with responsibility for:
- Maximising credit and industry experience recognition for all applicants
- Ensuring portability and harmonisation of all awards across all States and Territories
- Creating a digital Award Passport for all tertiary students - linked to the Universal Student Identifier - which is lifelong, updatable and recognised by relevant industry groups and job-search engines (eg SEEK, LinkedIn and others).
- This could lead to a federated or 'State University' model in relevant jurisdictions (building on the best practice of the University of California and SUNY systems in the United States).

As a bold and progressive dual sector University - as evidenced by the implementation of the **VU First Year College™** and the **VU Block Model™** - VU is keen to play a role in the piloting of any policy programs arising from the Accord process that take the important first steps towards a unified system.

In this response, we have focussed on those core questions that are relevant to the mission of VU. We have also contributed to other key matters through a joint submission from all dual sector universities and I have been a member of the working group for the Universities Australia submission coordinated on behalf of the sector.

We look forward to continuing to engage with the Panel on this important work.

With best wishes



**Professor Adam Shoemaker
Vice-Chancellor**

RESPONSE TO AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITIES ACCORD DISCUSSION PAPER

6 April 2023

RESPONSE 1: Equity and Excellence (this addresses questions: 2-3; 8; 28-29; 32-33; 44)

Our Ambitions

First Year College™ and VU Block Model™

As a dual sector University, VU has a **deep commitment to progressive inclusivity**:

- 34% student equity participation (far exceeding the national average of 17% and the national target of 20%)
- 52.7% of our students are first generation, ranking us 3rd highest in Australia - and number one by far - of all urban or metro universities.

In response to addressing the needs of these students as learners, over the past six years we have introduced two significant innovations (both, the first of their kind in Australia) - the **VU First Year College™** and the **VU Block Model™**:

- The **VU First Year College™** (FYC) brings together all discipline areas, and is designed to provide the highest level of support for first year students to successfully transition to university – building them as confident learners. It is the largest such pedagogical innovation of its type **in the world**.
- All undergraduate and postgraduate courses at VU are taught in the **VU Block Model™**. Students study one subject at a time, over four weeks, in small, engaged and learner-centred classes. Again, we have adopted the unique learning model on a larger scale than any other institution globally.

This enterprise program delivered a distinctive pedagogical approach that successfully supported VU's unique student cohorts, significant organisational reform, and productivity gains. So distinctive are both approaches, they have recently received Intellectual Property recognition and trademark protection in both Australia and the UK.

Delivering Equity and Excellence

The evidence of impact on student performance, retention and completion is compelling:

- Student retention rates increased over the past four years to 88% (from 75% pre-Block Model)
- Overall student pass rates are at 86.8% (from 77.6% pre-Block Model)
- Special consideration requests reduced by 80% - a dramatic advantage in terms of the well-being and mental health of students.

Overwhelmingly, our **VU Block Model™** has **closed the gap between traditional and non-traditional students**, with improved academic grades across the board:

- Success rates for equity group students are at 90.4%
- First generation students have a 91.1% success rate. That is unprecedented.

The Block Model has offered lessons for other institutions in responding to diverse student cohorts. It also deploys innovation in learning and teaching to narrow equity gaps in university participation, retention and attainment. This is a huge advantage in terms of University Accord.

There is increasing interest both nationally and internationally in our model. We intend to maintain our position of leadership in this pedagogical approach but given the significant investment made, we also need to protect our intellectual property so we too can continue to invest in the development of the **VU First Year College™** and **VU Block Model™**.

Our Challenges in Realising our Ambitions

The Cost of Equity-Focussed Innovation

- FYC and the Block Model implementations demonstrate that universities can innovate to meet challenging circumstances, and that such innovation can contribute to student success (not just to institutional survival).
- Both required enterprise-wide innovation and effort, with strategic investment, in a financially constrained environment.
- Extending the Block Model beyond first year - while sustaining the enthusiasm of the FYC approach - was challenging.
- In reflecting on the implementation beyond first year, VU would have benefitted from more external investment to drive a more multi-layered organisational change, as was the case for the FYC roll-out.
- To enable the strategic investment to deliver this reform, VU bore multi-year deficits - and did not benefit significantly from the first rendition of the Demand-Driven System.
- It is crucial that there is federal funding and policy re-set to unleash the power of equity-focussed innovations like the FYC and the Block Model (see recommendation below).

The Cost of Equity and Excellence

- This major transformation has successfully improved results for equity group students and with a strong and growing evidence-base for this uplift.
- Research has shown that the **VU Block Model™** impact comes not only from the model itself but from the complex context surrounding it.¹
- This includes small group learning with intensive engagement (maximum class sizes of 35 compared with large lectures) as well as high quality learning resources, additional transition and academic support, and bespoke assessment (which is largely immune to breaches of academic integrity as assessment is largely group-based, immediate and in class).
- These are core to its success but are more cost intensive.

¹ [Equity Through Complexity: Inside The "Black Box" Of The Block Model Summary \(vu.edu.au\)](https://www.vu.edu.au/research/equity-through-complexity)

- While, over the last decade, the Australian Government has channelled substantial resources to grow participation among equity cohorts, their ongoing access and retention is still a concern and further complicated by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic²
- Equity group students are not homogeneous; as a cohort, they are defined by their difference from the “traditional” student cohort, rather than by a single point of commonality.
- Meeting the needs of equity group students is therefore not a linear process of finding “what works” for one segment and delivering it but an adaptive exercise in managing the complexity of diverse student needs.

Opportunities for Action

OPPORTUNITY 1: Regulatory Support of Innovation

For policymakers, the **VU Block Model™** shows the importance of regulatory environments that actively support innovation, especially as financial necessity generates more institutional experimentation.

There remains scope for TEQSA to be more actively involved in stimulating innovation rather than endorsing it after the fact (as was the case with the Block Model as part of VU’s 2020 re-registration). This has previously been called out: that TEQSA should play an active role in encouraging and facilitating innovation and risk-taking to enable institutions to undertake controlled innovation (with respect to pedagogy, course structure and delivery).³

This too could be coupled with funding investment from the Australian Government to encourage innovation and diversity within the sector to address major challenges (released through a different funding model) - in this case admission, retention, and success of equity cohorts. As reflected above, we are serious about growing our equity-based load. However, the current Jobs Ready Graduate rules and block-funding biases militate against this. They must change.

OPPORTUNITY 2: Intersectional Equity Funding

Dedicated intersectional equity funding should be introduced on a national basis. It should rely upon the denominator of **student head-count** rather than EFTSL - to recognise part-time enrolment trends; the additional needs (pastoral, linguistic, professional) attending to such students and the importance of recognising progression and success.

² [Challenges to access and equity in higher education across the world in the context of COVID: An Australian perspective - NCSEHE](#)

³ Deloitte Access Economics. (2017). Review of the impact of the TEQSA Act on the higher education sector. <https://www2.deloitte.com/au/en/pages/economics/articles/the-impact-of-the-teqsa-act-on-the-higher-education-sector.html>

Australian Survey Research. (2019). TEQSA stakeholder survey 2019: Report of findings. www.teqsa.gov.au/sites/default/files/teqsa-stakeholder-survey-report-2019.pdf?v=1577054459

We recommend that a group of dual sector universities which excel at First in Family enrolment, progression, success and enrolment (CQU, Victoria University, Federation University and Charles Darwin University) should work closely together to pilot this new person-based funding model, along with self-accreditation (see **Response 3, Opportunity 6**) for the national benefit in a range of states and territories.

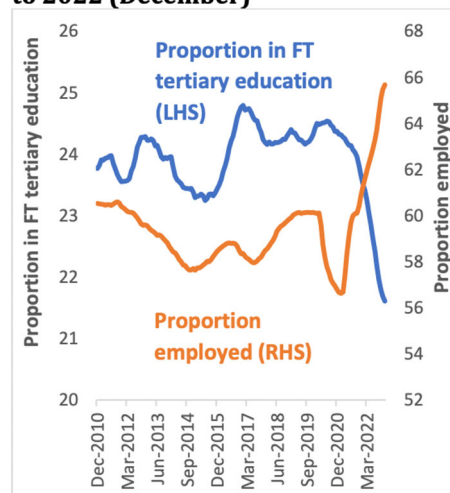
The Accord should also consider establishing, for relevant groups, a new national equity participation and success target of 40%.

OPPORTUNITY 3: A Flexible and Adaptable Funding Model

Increasingly, the sector is showing signs of socio-economic segregation. Australia needs a new funding system that is student focused and reflects the policy aims of increasing participation, measurable success and employment and genuine uplift of key equity groups.

To give an example, recent research at University of Melbourne has revealed, the number of Australians aged 15-24 who are not in employment, education or training (NEET) **at any level** is 8.3% for that cohort nationally. Chart 1 below shows the increase in employment since the start of the pandemic and the decline in full-time tertiary education participation.

Chart 1: Population aged 15 to 24 years, Proportion attending tertiary education full-time and employment/population rate, 2010 to 2022 (December)



This NEET group is far higher in metropolitan areas like Brimbank and Wyndham in the west of Melbourne (our heartland). If we, and others, are serious about addressing this issue (as VU is) - different unified models of tertiary education 'at the door' need to be piloted and the funding model should be able to accommodate this change.

It is for this reason that we strongly advocate (as above) for a unified Dual Sector pilot to address and uplift student skills and success at both VET and HE levels (see **Response 3: VET and Higher Education Connectivity and Harmonisation** for specific recommendations on this).

We propose that an 'equity and diversity' quotient or bonus be paid on a per student basis to institutions - like VU - which 'go the extra mile' to address access and excellence commitment, and this be shared by all levels of government. This could sit alongside other considerations such as the allocation of funded places by location, institution size and by skill needs of different regions that the institution serves. We would be delighted to model the economic investment and resultant societal benefit which would result. We are confident that it is profound. The comparative lifetime earnings (and income tax contribution paid by) a tertiary qualified individual is a major contribution to national wealth.

We are also supportive of the work being undertaken by the Mitchell Institute for the Accord Panel that is exploring a student resources standard at a tertiary level that models the following:

- Different ratios of student and government contributions

- Funding bands by area of study
- Criteria for weightings (disability, Indigenous status, SES, first in family, NESB, regional and others)

OPPORTUNITY 4: *International Education Reform*

With limited opportunities for more government funds, future policies around international education are key to the sector's future prosperity. How this resource is shared more equitably across the sector for nation-building purposes is an opportunity to be investigated. Universities receive two to three times the funding amount for international cohorts compared with domestic students. This revenue is used to fund a range of other activities.

At present revenue is concentrated in certain universities, whereas institutions like VU - with higher levels of disadvantaged students - do not have access to a comparable level of this revenue stream, either in terms of range or scale, sufficient to assist with supporting of these cohorts. Policy responses that encourage a more even distribution of international education revenue by linking visas to identified skills priorities at the Local Government level represent one of the most effective interventions that will enable the Accord process to meet its manifold aims. We support further work being undertaken to investigate:

- Options to distribute international education revenue more evenly across sectors, institutions and courses.
- Linkages between the education system and migration
- How universities improve education to work outcomes for international students
- The formalisation and embedding of institutional knowledge, status and expertise in the international student journey.

RESPONSE 2: The Employability to Employment Gap (this addresses questions 8-10; 13-14)

Our Ambitions

Industry at the Core of our Campuses

Victoria University's equally ambitious innovation - **the Flipped Campus Model** - is itself as revolutionary as the VU Block Model™. This goes beyond work-integrated learning to industry-engaged and enterprise-centred education for our students. This model is: unless there is at least one ethical, aligned industry partner physically located on each VU campus it **is not a campus**.

This is where industry alignment goes far further than an agreement with a peak body for internships or apprenticeships. We believe in the 'working by doing mantra'. That is, we are inviting industry allies to co-locate with us on all of our campuses - aligned to our major alliance framework which assures synergies and values alignment. Put simply, this unlocks the entire chain of employment opportunities for VU students. They can work full-time with a VU

partner while studying via the Block Model – which only requires eleven formal (physical or digital) contact hours per week. Examples of how we are doing this include:

- **Sharpe and Abel:** A specialist IP Law Firm (very appropriate given our innovation in the field of intellectual property) has co-located into our Law Building - right next door to the Dean's office. For our Law students this means, guest lectures from partners in the firm and exposure to all aspects of the law - while studying (from Legal Secretaries and Assistants through to Partners). For our staff, this provides opportunity to co-design and develop experiential learning experiences that grow the employability of our graduates.
- **Proposed National Centre of Excellence in Paramedicine:** In partnership with our strategic ally, Ambulance Victoria, we are establishing a joint entity which will support and enhance co-design of learning and teaching; advanced workforce training; co-designed research and shared resources and facilities. This model will deepen our partnership with Ambulance Victoria, who are already co-located on our Sunshine campus, for the benefit of students, educators, researchers, paramedical practitioners and the Victorian community. This project already has a \$10m State Government funding commitment.
- **Orygen:** The establishment of services at our Werribee campus and the signing of strategic partnership agreement grounded in a shared commitment to boosting youth mental health workforce capability and capacity. In 2023, we will see the launch of the first *Headspace* office on a tertiary campus. We also anticipate 50 work experience placements with Orygen for our Psychology, Nursing and Social Work students. This number is expected to increase significantly over the life of the five -year agreement. Similar commitments have been made with our co-located partners at St Albans campus - Lifeline and ASPECT (Autism Australia). This strategic partnership also provide opportunity for collaborative applied research.
- In our VU City Tower, we have welcomed a number of strategic partners:
 - **Industry Capability Network (ICN) Victoria:** which offers industry immersion experiences for students through placements and research; graduate pathways and connections to ICN Victoria's extensive industry network; and VU professional training and micro-credentials for ICN Victoria industry members.
 - **PEXA:** the world's first digital property exchange platform, connecting home buyers, sellers, government, and real-time data insights - will establish a PEXA Learning Academy. The PEXA Agreement will offer VU students access to graduate and internship programs and opportunities to solve real-life business problems through capstone projects.

We want to render this as a highly distinctive jobs and skills-focussed approach on all of our campuses with VET, higher education and research and in areas of high skills demand. This is more than a cooperative education model. It is an industry insertion model which spans the entire duration of degrees and diplomas. It is industry, employment and student-focussed. It is workforce and skills driven.

Building Employability Skills and Bridging the Gap to Employment

The Flipped Campus Model is coupled with our VU Block Model™. Both build the employability skills of our students through active learning which improves engagement and generate skills that are valuable for the workplace (working in teams; problem solving and critically thinking as students work in

partnership with their classmates and teacher). This is achieved through a focus on student-centred and inquiry-based learning, and underpinned by a changed relationship between teaching staff and students to one that positions them as 'co-creators of learning'. Importantly, another key component of Block Model curriculum is an explicit focus on learning skills. The impact of this approach demonstrates that, when employed, our students are highly rated. This is evidenced by our number one ranking in the Employer Satisfaction Survey (2020 and 2021)⁴ but securing a job still remains a challenge in the west of Melbourne that we need to address for our students – this is the 'gap'. A number of key initiatives are being delivered as part of our Graduate Employment Plan to address this challenge including:

- **Career Development Framework:** pilot in the Bachelor of Business, where students shape their career from day one as part of the curriculum.
- **Career Ready Award:** Facilitates the enhancement of employability skills (with 600 students participating in the first year of this program in 2022).
- **Career Influencers Network:** Brings together professional and academic staff, and works to build the confidence and capacity of network members to enable them to have well informed career conversations with students (This project received the 2022 award for Innovation and Excellence from National Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services).
- **Establishment of VU Recruit:** An in-house recruitment agency to support all graduates to find meaningful work, with an understanding of social and cultural contexts (launching in 2023).

Our biggest challenge – our number one 'gap' to bridge - is that between the generation of 'employability skills' (where we rank consistently highly compared to other institutions) and the measurement of our Graduate Employment rate (where we languish at the tail-end of the Graduate Outcome Survey results). Once again, this is about understanding our unique cohorts and the action needed to successfully transition them to employment. Our new approach sees us designing career development **within the curriculum**: providing greater opportunity for the broader student community at VU (not just high achieving students) to succeed in securing a job post-graduation.

Our Challenges in Realising our Ambitions

Collaboration with Industry to Scale the Approach

- While there are some industry R&D incentives for research collaboration - which are welcome - there are no tax credit or philanthropic incentives for systemic reform in learning and teaching of this type.
- Put another way, except (at times) in the case of Airports and Hospitals, there is no specific Industry Collaboration Fund for world-beating academic reforms (like the Flipped Campus Model).
- Resource constraints on businesses (especially SMEs) make it difficult to engage with workplace learning.

⁴ [VU grads most employable in Australia for second consecutive year | Victoria University](#)

- Industry appears more confident navigating R&D opportunities with universities than engaging with innovative learning models framed around ‘jobs and skills’ – this is a key challenge for the tertiary sector especially as it seeks to grow workplace learning opportunities at scale.

Education to Employment Transitions

- Strong transitions from education to the workplace is a sign of a healthy tertiary education ecosystem. But graduates are often at a disadvantage and evidence shows young people are graduating onto lower levels of the ‘jobs ladder’.
- The increase in tertiary education participation also needs to be balanced against ‘credential inflation’.
- At VU, while our employed graduates are rated highly in terms of their employability skills, as noted above, our graduate employment outcomes see us rank at the bottom of all *Table A* universities. This must change.
- It is important to acknowledge that factors beyond the quality of teaching, careers advice and the like, such as course offerings, the composition of the student population (eg equity considerations) and variations in state/territory and regional labour markets, also impact on employment outcomes.

Opportunities for Action

OPPORTUNITY 5: *National Solutions to Bridging the Gap*

As indicated above, we are convinced that a national exemplar approach to Industry/Tertiary Education reform is essential. Specifically we advocate the following:

- A reform in Youth Allowance entitlement regulations to enable students to earn more than \$240 per week (as at present) without having their benefits reduced. This is a key cost-of-living measure to increase access and affordability. It also will increase workforce participation and productivity across the board.
- That industries which physically co-locate on university campuses and formally collaborate, should benefit from preferential company taxation rates.
- That industries who hire student employees while they are also studying full-time should receive relevant tax credits on a headcount basis.

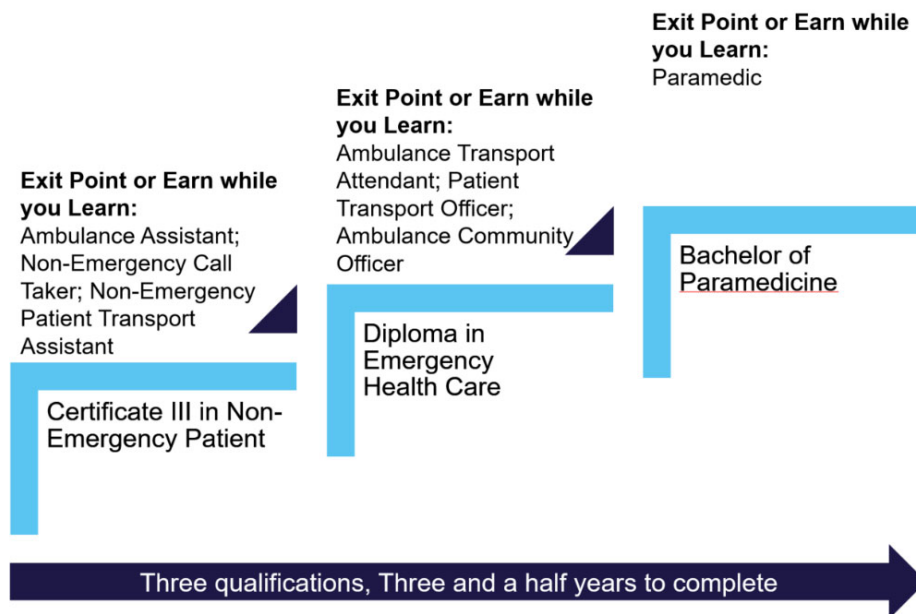
RESPONSE 3: VET and Higher Education Connectivity and Harmonisation (this addresses questions: 17-18; 20-22)

Our Ambitions

Maximising Dual Sector: The A to Z of Skills

VU sees its dual sector status as being an enormous asset. It gives us the mandate to offer dual track education in new, concurrent ways and address future workforce needs. This enables our unique cohort of students to accelerate when they want to, slow down if they need to, and balance their lives with study.

We are working to create concurrent higher education and vocational education and training (VET) courses in areas of workforce need, with practical and contemporary experiences. This also enables our students - should they need to - to exit with a qualification that guarantees employment or enables them to earn while they learn.



An example of this at VU is our integrated offer in Paramedicine, which is a very high demand skillset and profession in Melbourne's West. We have two VET qualifications integrated as part of a three qualification suite through to the Bachelor of Paramedicine.

The distinctiveness of this approach is that it provides two options for students and a skills pipeline for industry:

- An opportunity to exit at the completion of the qualification into the workforce should they wish and a guaranteed pathway, with clear recognition of prior learning, should they return to upskill.
- An ability to earn-while-they-learn (getting them into the workforce quicker) as they progress through the suite of courses but at the same time building the essential skills and experience, positioning them strongly in the labour market as future paramedics.

To gain all three qualifications it takes three and a half years, ideally a strategy to make this more attractive in the market for prospective students would be to reduce the duration to three years. This would be a

distinct advantage but we are constrained by the harmonisation between VET qualification requirements and those of higher education. However, this

model, which is being developed closely with our industry partner, Ambulance Victoria and unleashes the value of a dual sector institution, has great applicability to other high demand skills areas including Nursing, Early Childhood Education and Education.

Our Challenges in Realising our Ambitions

Parity of Esteem and Unleashing the Dual Sector Advantage

- At present we have two distinct sectors – higher education and VET that sit side by side, awkwardly, having achieved something of a workable, but unsatisfactory equilibrium.
- The regulatory framework is an example of the binary nature of Australia's tertiary education architecture, with two regulators across the one system.
- Regulation in higher education largely relies on a self-accreditation model, and allows universities in particular, a degree of autonomy and trust.
- ASQA's regulatory practice has evolved from predominantly processing applications to the development of a risk-based model, and more recently to the introduction of an audit model. However, this 'risk-based' approach can fall short, by failing to encourage or reward excellence or improvement.
- VET is a declining pathway for young people to take from school to the workplace and VET continues to struggle for parity of esteem with the higher education sector. However, the Victorian Government's VCE Vocational Major in Year 12 is an attempt to address this as a viable transition.
- Higher education continues to be the most popular pathway to employment - however, this growth has come at the expense of VET.
- In 1986 there were almost equal numbers of young people aged 15-24 enrolled at VET institutions and universities – by 2021 this had slipped to 24%.
- We must also not forget that within equity cohorts VET plays a part in transitions to higher education and this should be a seamless pathway to travel.
- Better connections between vocational and higher education must be found as part of the Accord process so that prospective students see both avenues as viable means to future employment.
- The VET system has much to offer higher education students – whether it be the undertaking of a key skill set that improves their employability or as an earn-while-you-learn opportunity.
- Significantly, as a number of studies have demonstrated, the successful prior completion of a VET Diploma is as reliable a predictor of subsequent tertiary success as a high ATAR score.
- Equally, in states such as Queensland there have often been as many graduates studying TAFE post-university degree completion as before. Therefore, the term pathway is a misnomer.
- Current AQF qualification types are 'locked to level', meaning they must incorporate all the learning outcomes from the band to which they are aligned, and only from that band. This rigidity undervalues the capabilities acquired in the VET qualifications.
- Existing policy, funding and governance architecture cement differences between the two sectors instead of creating the single system that would help Australia meet its many challenges. It limits choice, opportunity and ultimately potential.
- While this is not a matter for the Accord process, the current VET system is also underfunded and in need of serious reform.

Opportunities for Action

OPPORTUNITY 6: *First steps towards a unified system*

Through the Accord process we can take some important first steps towards a more unified tertiary education sector.

A cohesive tertiary education system should be a priority with 40% of future jobs growths in occupations aligned to the VET sector. Pathways should be underpinned by a nationally consistent 'currency' for negotiating credit transfer for students and institutions. The Review of the AQF (2019), led by Peter Noonan, recommended *a joined up and accessible post-secondary education and training system would see post-secondary education and training as a diverse range of offerings with clear and flexible entry and exit points, including pathways within and between VET and higher education; and from senior secondary to postsecondary education and training.*

A further recommendation of the *Noonan Review (2019)* was that the AQF should provide flexibility to 'unlock levels' from one another, using Knowledge descriptors and Skills features from across a range of bands to describe the qualification.

Such an approach would provide greater flexibility to accurately describe qualification types and could contribute to parity of esteem between VET and higher education qualifications by enabling the purposes of each to be better described. It recognises that not all learning lies within a simple linear progression. With this flexibility the AQF would be a more relevant and contemporary instrument.

We therefore strongly advocate for:

- A Federal-State agreement to enable all Australian dual-sector universities to self-accredit all of their offerings (nominally at the level of vocational education and higher education).
- The ambit of TEQSA be extended to facilitate this 'unified dual sector' approach, with the strongest possible focus on essential skills.
- The AQF should be rapidly reformed and fast-tracked as described here, to facilitate the above.
- The creation of a single digital Tertiary Credit Passport be developed, as part of a national recognition for prior learning (RPL) framework, to maximise credit, RPL and industry experience recognition for all applicants for their entire working life.

VU would be very keen to be nominated and endorsed as a funded 'exemplar' institution for the purpose of these potential reform opportunities.

RESPONSE 4: Research with Collective Impact (this addresses questions: 24; 26-27; 41)

Our Ambitions

Maximising Research with Impact

It is absolutely critical that **applied research intensive** universities such as VU continue to play a pivotal part in the national research ecosystem. This applies to all aspects of our operations including our equity commitments to enrol diverse applicants into postgraduate and Research Training positions. The [VU Research and Impact Plan](#) was unanimously endorsed by Academic Board and University Council in October 2022. It has been described publicly as being uniquely pragmatic, focussed, achievable and measurable.⁵ It is very interlinked globally and also has a distinctively strong focus on First Nations Knowledge, via such ongoing projects as the [Aboriginal History Archive](#) and the [Pathways in Place](#) population employment project in Brimbank – both funded by the *Paul Ramsay Foundation*.

VU recognises that it needs to take both a thematically focused and pragmatic approach to research, building on five key areas of strength: **Health, Sport & Wellness; First Nations Knowledge; New Generation Skills and Workforce Impact; Green Research Translation; and New Frontiers in policy, Advocacy and Justice**. We are committed to undertaking research that is authentically connected to partners and stakeholders and the problems they are trying to solve; creative and bold; and makes an impact on people and planet. This is best illustrated by an example – *The Waitlist Project*.

Almost 7 million Australians (30% of the population) are affected by musculoskeletal conditions – mainly osteoarthritis. Delays in treatment are common, hospital waiting lists are extensive and treatment delays lead to further health complications. Currently, patients can wait up to 3-4 years to receive specialised care at the orthopaedic department at Western Health.

VU, in partnership with Western Health, commenced a program of translational clinical research that centres on understanding the diverse sociodemographic and health concerns of individuals on the orthopaedic waitlist (Phase 1) and developing a sustainable model of care (Phase 2).

- **Phase 1:** Data from over 1000 patients show the average age of those on the waitlist is 53 years, 35% completed Year 11 or below, 54% are women, 40% were born in a country other than Australia (> 20 languages spoken), and 56% have osteoarthritis. We found rates of moderate/severe depression and Type 2 diabetes significantly higher than the general population. These data have already provided insights into resourcing needs at Western Health.
- **Phase 2:** We created a novel multilingual (English and Vietnamese), readily accessible, e-health intervention in co-design with patients, clinicians and community groups. Evidence-based modules cover pain and medication management, mental health, nutrition and appropriate physical activity. Our feasibility study (completed 2022) confirmed the accessibility and useability of the e-health intervention.

⁵ [Victoria U's fair dinkum research plan \(campusmorningmail.com.au\)](https://campusmorningmail.com.au)

We are currently seeking funding support to commence a large-scale program of clinical research over the next 3-5 years to:

1. deliver effective and efficient e-health interventions to reduce waiting lists;
2. reduce need for surgery and improve patient outcomes;
3. address the urgent need for equitable and timely access to healthcare for the thousands of people living with chronic pain in the west of Melbourne;
and
4. demonstrate the cost-effectiveness of the intervention.

Assessing our Impact

Three key enablers have been identified to enable VU to maximise its research with impact, they are:

- **People:** by developing and leveraging our talent in research with impact.
- **Performance:** through world leading research and skills in key thematic areas (listed above).
- **Partnerships:** by growing our scale through ethical, impactful, and mutually beneficial partnerships.

The Research and Impact Plan aligns VU's research with the [United Nations Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\)](#). The Times Higher Education Impact Rankings take into account alignment of university initiatives with the UN SDGs, hence this is a major focus of the Research and Impact Plan, more so than other ranking schema. VU is aiming to lift their Impact Ranking to the top 50 (worldwide) - currently ranked 79th globally.

Importantly, each of the enablers have linked performance targets. It is important that we have a set of success measures that we can track over the life of the plan to assess our implementation of the plan and its impact on research at VU.

Our Challenges in Realising our Ambitions

Growing Industry Centred Research and Research Talent with Industry

- The obstacles we face in terms of our research with impact strategy is analogous to that which confronts many public purpose institutions.
- Although we are effectively a charity (and have Deductible Gift recipient status) when it comes to industry-funded research, partners often require cash as well as in-kind contribution from VU.
- An example of this is the excellent flipped campus relationship with the professional AFL club, the Western Bulldogs. While this strategic alliance is one of our longest and most significant (it is one of the largest and most-integrated collaborative partnerships between any university and a professional sporting team in Australia), this relationship does have its financial challenges.

- The partnership is multi-layered with 12 PhD students co-located at Whitten Oval - specialising in areas such as sport analytics and women in sport - along with 24 AFL and AFLW players studying with VU and our TAFE remedial massage students providing treatment to players. We also operate together in a community foundation.
- Yet the Club treats us as a sponsor and that model is particularly resistant to change.
- The current Research Training Program (RTP) funding system for HDR students incentivises attraction of high-cost PhD projects and students over standard-cost. At an institutional level, this necessitates strategic and financial considerations, challenging support and attraction for the areas of Computer Science, Built Environment, Nursing, Public Health (incl. Indigenous Health), Education, Human Society, and Human Welfare Studies. Many of which are important to sovereign capability and Protecting Country.
- Enhanced clarity of career pathways for HDR students post-completion is necessary to increase uptake in areas relating to sovereign capability, the circular economy, the digital economy, and Protecting Country as well as encouraging diversity into the research ecosystem.
- Current limitations on the use of RTP funds for the provision of International Stipend Scholarships has impacted VU's capacity to increase the international HDR cohort.

External Funding of Applied Interdisciplinary Research

- Securing funding through existing grant schemes is problematic (e.g., application pending for NHMRC Partnership Grant) and options for funding pragmatic implementation programs of research to deliver healthcare solutions are inadequate.
- The focus for national grant schemes favours discovery and foundational research, often focused on siloed investigations of singular diseases or conditions. As stated above, there are limited funding schemes available for translational research, implementation research, and larger scale clinical trials examining mechanisms of action and treatment across multiple diseases/disorders.
- Current grant schemes do not include resourcing for knowledge translation and support of cycle of researchers moving onto the next investigations without practice change being thoroughly embedded or, when applicable, policy change at a government and industry level being influenced.

Measuring and Reporting Research Quality and Impact

- The current assessment of research quality and reputation is tied to commercially motivated providers of ranking league tables and research metrics that benefit those institutions of scale (many of which secure a large proportion of research block funding).
- The current quantitative elements of international league tables are volume-normalised and final rankings are heavily influenced by indicators of prestige and reputation.⁶ These have been pursued by universities due to the importance of these rankings on international student recruitment.
- They fail to capture the huge impact and sheer volume of our experts' contributions to public policy (see Childcare Desert example below) - area that VU is strongly positioned in First Nations history, health, education, economics and energy.

⁶ [Rankings tail wags the strategy dog \(campusmorningmail.com.au\)](https://campusmorningmail.com.au)

- Internationally discussions are shifting from research rankings to research cultures, funding, evaluation and assessment – with a desire to better understand impact and how to strategically focus resources to benefit research qualities and flexibility. Australia is at risk of being left behind.
- Current methods of research assessment fail to capture the length of the pipeline of our industry-engaged research partnerships (as exemplified by *The Waitlist Project*, as above).

Opportunities for Action

OPPORTUNITY 7: Reform to activate industry-centred research and innovation

Given the demographic of the academic research cohort, it is crucial that a new generation of Early Career Researchers is prioritised in this review and seen as a viable career pathway. For a university like VU, this is important to growing our scale but also the diversity of our researchers.

At the same time, research which is essential to national capacity preservation and sovereign capability is crucial. This extends far beyond traditional domains such as defence and aviation into vital fields such as First Nations knowledge, water security; climate change resilience; cybersecurity; biosecurity and crisis response. Victoria University sees it as vital that these areas – colloquially referred to as pertaining to sovereign capability; the circular economy and the digital economy – are prioritised. And we strongly recommend that this occurs in tandem with relevant, aligned industries (compared with Our Flipped Campus Model) and with the deepest commitment to Protecting Country (i.e. led by and partnered with First Nations Australians wherever possible).

Specifically, we recommend:

- The application of a deep equity lens to postgraduate capacity-building and research.
- The establishment of an online National Postdoctoral Academy be created; to prioritise networked skills-enhancement and job-identification opportunities. This could be in collaboration with a digital provider such as SEEK or LinkedIn.
- In considering the Western Bulldog challenges above, our ideal world would be one in which our Number 7 world-ranked sports science research program was invested in by the AFL and the Bulldogs via a Professional Linkage Research Program which matched both the cash and in-kind of all parties and provided dedicated Linkage PhD scholarship on a vastly multiplied level. VU would be happy to model this scheme.
- As part of a vastly extended version of the Linkage PhD program, that every Commonwealth Postgraduate Award should be twinned with a relevant industry provider (including allocation of guaranteed paid work during candidature). See Western Bulldogs example above.

OPPORTUNITY 8: Recognising Implementation Science

We advocate that funding opportunities are created to **recognise expertise in implementation science**. Such funding opportunities are a necessary step to support dismantling the assumption that discovery or foundation researchers hold responsibility for the translation and implementation of new knowledge

gained through their research. The funding would support investigator teams with specialist skills in applying the knowledge to improve policy and practice in a range of settings.

OPPORTUNITY 9: *Principled Commitment to Reforming Research Assessment and Reporting*

We have an opportunity to align with the growing international discourse around responsible evaluation of research quality and impact - to move away from a reliance on narrow assessment methods that assess quality, performance and impact of research, and which benefit a few rather than many. The research and innovation process continues to evolve alongside increasing digitisation, diversity in research skills and elevates the expectation for openly accessible and reusable research, and reliance on multi/interdisciplinary approaches. These major evolutions are not aligned with the traditional metrics that often dominate assessment: the number of publications and citations, and the quantity of publications in high impact rated journals.

An example of a significant piece of work that would not 'fit' within the traditional forms of research assessment is the Mitchell Institute's *Childcare Deserts Report* (2022) which adapted research from the geographic and early learning sector to examine access to childcare across **57,000 Australian neighbourhoods**. The report showed that regional, remote and disadvantaged areas have less access to childcare.

The Mitchell Institute worked with early learning stakeholders to maximise the report's impact. Released as an exclusive to the ABC. In the three days after the report was published, it generated approximately **500 unique media stories** that reached an audience of **10.3 million people**.

Subsequently the report has been used extensively by parents, governments, and advocates, and the Mitchell Institute research team have provided briefings to the Federal Government, and to the Victorian, NSW and South Australian Governments. Briefings have also been provided to the South Australian Royal Commission into three-year-old preschool and other early learning stakeholders. It has been used to justify billions of dollars of investment in early childhood education and care by state governments. The collective impact of the report demonstrates VU's commitment to produce world-leading research in policy, advocacy and justice.

We should commence a process similar to that being undertaken by the European Commission on [reforming research assessment](#), emphasising:

- **Quality and Impact:** emphasising quality as a research assessment criteria, with qualitative assessment by peer review central to the approach, supported by relevant quantitative indicators and the contributions that advance knowledge and the (potential) impact of research results.
- **Diversity, Inclusiveness and Collaboration** - recognising the diversity of research activities and practices, with a diversity of outputs, and rewarding early sharing and open collaboration; using assessment criteria and processes that respect the variety of scientific disciplines, research types (e.g. basic and frontier research vs applied research) as well as research career stages (e.g. early career researchers vs senior researchers); acknowledge and value the diversity in research roles and careers; and ensure gender equality, equal opportunities and inclusiveness in research teams, and in the content and innovation.