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Feedback – Discussion paper on the proposed Australian Universities Accord

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Disclaimer: The views below are mine and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Swinburne University of Technology.

General statement

Less is More

Higher education in Java La Grande Australia (hereafter “J.L.G. Australia”) is a complex system that can be governed only through swarm intelligence and emergent properties. The Commonwealth is advised to relinquish its 20th century approach to regulation and gravitate towards the principle of subsidiarity and focusing the role of higher education on ‘downstream’ commercialisation and innovation. Examples of such approach can be gleaned and transferred to J.L.G. Australia through collaboration with Scandinavia and Aotearoa New Zealand.

Q1 How should an Accord be structured and focused to meet the challenges facing Australia’s higher education system? What is needed to overcome limitations in the current approach to Australian higher education?

The proposed J.L.G. Australia accord should be based on the principle of subsidiarity, where decision making is devolved to the lowest competent level of government. Improving the performance of the Australian higher education sector requires a greater say by academics, industry, and communities (local government) in the governance of universities, as opposed to an aggregation of decision-making at the national level.

Q2 How can the diverse missions of Australian higher education providers be supported, taking into account their different operating contexts and communities they serve (for example regional universities)?

By moving away from a one-size-fits-all approach. This requires tailoring the objectives of higher education to the specific needs of the lowest level of governance in Australia: local government areas (LGA). Each LGA, together with input from community and industry identifies the priorities that they need to meet in partnership with the sector and higher levels of government, even through partnerships with international organizations.

Q3 What should the long-term target/s be for Australia's higher education attainment by 2030 and 2040, and how should these be set and adjusted over time?

The main difficulty with improving the wellbeing of Australians today is the very low level of complexity of the Australian economy. Today, Australia is ranked 74, between Oman and Albania, while Aotearoa New Zealand is at 46, Canada at 29, United Kingdom at 13 and the United States at 9. See <https://oec.world/en/rankings/eci/hs6/hs96> . Higher education needs to enhance the commercialization of research output to increase the need for our graduates.

Q4 Looking from now to 2030 and 2040, what major national challenges and opportunities should Australian higher education be focused on meeting?

This question is misleading. The major challenges and opportunities should not be identified in a top-down process with an aggregation at the national level. Instead, these challenges and opportunities should aggregate through a bottom-up approach. Each local government area will have its own priorities. Once these are identified, aggregation will reveal major trends that form a common denominator of challenges and opportunities at the national level. The critical point is that such priorities are dynamic and continually changing. Any accord must have the same level of dynamic accommodation of the changing priorities and international environment.

Q5 How do the current structures of institutions, regulation and funding in higher education help or hinder Australia's ability to meet these challenges? What needs to change?

The current approach to higher education is mainly a top-down approach. Instead, we need to base the proposed approach on the principle of subsidiarity, where the national and State governments are subsidiary to the needs of local governments.

Q6 What are the best ways to achieve and sustain future growth in Australian higher education, given the changing needs of the population and the current pressures on public funding?

Growth in higher education is inevitably linked to the financial sustainability of the sector, and hence, by reducing reliance on tuition fees or on grants, and towards enhancing the role of the sector in the entrepreneurial innovation that can lead to commercialization and thus to growing the Australian economy.

Q7 How should the mix of providers evolve, considering the size and location of existing institutions and the future needs of communities?

Again, no one-size-fits-all. This is an emergent property, that changes from one local government area to another. The Commonwealth should be able to accommodate the needs of communities as they arise, not through a priori, top-to-bottom approach.

Q8 What reforms are needed to promote a quality learning environment and to ensure graduates are entering the labour market with the skills and knowledge they need?

The governance of universities should be democratic, similar to an Oxford-like congregation. The Commonwealth should then be willing to listen to what reform signals are identified by universities. See <https://www.ox.ac.uk/about/organisation/governance>. The key point is to move away from a top-bottom approach to identifying labour market needs. These will emerge at the local government level and can then aggregate to the State and national levels.

Q9 How should Australia ensure enough students are studying courses that align with the changing needs of the economy and society?

First, the alignment has to come from devolving the identification of these needs to the lowest competent level of government, local government areas (LGA). Second, these LGAs, in partnership with the Commonwealth, States, and industry would be able to provide tailored incentives for each need. The key point, again, is that there is no one-size-fits all.

Q10 What role should higher education play in helping to develop high quality general learning capabilities across all age groups and industries?

Higher education should focus on enhancing the wellbeing of all Australians by enhancing the complexity of the Australian economy. General learning capabilities should be the focus area of other sectors to allow higher education to focus on commercialization and innovation.

Q11 How should Australia boost demand from people to study in the higher education system?

The demand should be boosted indirectly, through increasing the employment opportunities in the Australia economy. The demand should be pull-driven rather than push-driven. This can be done by decentralising the sector so that it is driven by partnerships between the community and industry at the local government level.

Q12 How should an adequate supply of CSPs be sustained and funded, as population and demand increase?

By adding more funding options to the mix, including State and local government funding, funding from communities, and from industry. Transfers from international student tuition to such funding opportunities should also be entertained. In essence, each international student will be paying the tuition for two or three local students. Ideally, the aggregation of these transfers should be at the State or even LGA level.

Q13 How could an Accord support cooperation between providers, accreditation bodies, government and industry to ensure graduates have relevant skills for the workforce?

Again, there is no one-size-fits-all. The role of the accord is to facilitate the application of the subsidiarity principle so that the relevant decision is taken by LGAs in collaboration with providers, communities, and industry.

Q14 How should placement arrangements and work-integrated learning (WIL) in higher education change in the decades ahead?

The emphasis should be on universities commercialisation and innovation efforts. Students would then secure employment in university-owned-enterprises or in entities where the provider of higher education has large investments.

Q15 What changes are needed to grow a culture of lifelong learning in Australia?

This question reveals in a way the psychological basis of learning, which is especially true for higher education. Usually, this kind of culture should be engrained in people at a very young age. In classic work from the 1970s, Cropley explains how changes to the curriculum can result in growing a culture of lifelong learning. The key point is that education is a form of play with less rigidities such as regulations and policies and measurable outcomes. See A.J. CROPLEY, LIFELONG EDUCATION: A PSYCHOLOGICAL ANALYSIS 117-123 (1977).

I know that Scandinavian countries have a very strong culture of lifelong learning. Maybe Australia should benchmark some of the practices they have in relation to their education system and higher education in particular.

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

Cropley, see answer to Q15, discusses students' perpetual dependence on the establishment. In a psychological sense, due to vested interests, we are dumbing down student to remain children even during their journey through higher education. More empowerment, and hence less intervention by government and education providers, would help in this regard. See pages 156-157.

Q17 How should better alignment and connection across Australia's tertiary education system be achieved?

First, I need to point out the myth that there is one education system. There is need to focus. The focus of the higher education system is very different from that of other parts of the education ecology. Higher education is first and for most about commercialisation and innovation to boost the complexity of the economy and hence create more jobs, which universities can fill out by tailored courses for these jobs. See, for example, I. Altman, Higher Education and Psychology in the Millennium 51 AM. PSYCHOL. 371 (1996) <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.51.4.371>;

Helen Crompton, Matthew Bernacki & Jeffrey A Greene, Psychological Foundations of Emerging Technologies for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, 36 CURRENT OPINION PSYCHOL. 101 (2020) <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2020.04.011>.

Second, for a complex system such as the higher education system, alignment is an emergent property. See Kristen Eshleman, Emergent EDU: Complexity and Innovation in Higher Ed, EDUCAUSE REV. 56 (2018) <https://er.educause.edu/articles/2018/5/emergent-edu-complexity-and-innovation-in-higher-ed>.

Q18 What role should reform of the AQF play in creating this alignment?

The AQF should be simplified, with emphasis on direct adoption of international standards in higher education. As you state in [3.3] of the discussion paper (page 30), the objective is to enhance the performance of the higher education complex system through a "non-hierarchical and flexibly applied" AQF. See, for example, the UNESCO Global Convention on Higher Education <https://www.unesco.org/en/higher-education/global-convention>. There is no need to inefficiently re-invent the wheel, but to tweak at the local government level to suit specific community and industry needs.

Q19 What would a more effective and collaborative national governance approach to tertiary education look like?

It would look like a minimal system focused mainly on the adoption of state-of-the-art international standards, and on underwriting the financial position of a consolidated higher

education system, through the merger and abolition of less efficient universities, especially in urban areas.

Q20 How can pathways between VET and higher education be improved, and how can students be helped to navigate these pathways?

By decoupling VET from higher education by abolishing all dual sector universities. These are complex systems part of the larger education ecology and allowing them to function independently would lead to better results in each system. The alignment emerges from allowing each system to adopt and adapt to local needs at the local government area level.

What is critical is that higher education must focus on one objective: increasing the complexity of the Australian economy through the channels of commercialisation and innovation.

Burdening higher education with social objectives will only dilute its ability to drive the wellbeing of all Australians through commercialisation and innovation.

Q21 How can current examples of successful linkages between VET and higher education be integrated across the tertiary education system?

See answer to Question 21 above. We need to acknowledge the differentiation in objectives between the VET system and higher education, and hence, the need for different approaches for each system. Increasing the quality of VET does not necessarily require input from universities. Creating more integration will diffuse the focus on a small set of strategies to achieve specific objectives such as commercialisation and innovation.

Q22 What role do tertiary entrance and admissions systems play in matching learners to pathways and supporting a sustained increase in participation and tertiary success?

This question is a prime example of the complexity that is created by integration of very different parts of the education ecology. Your questions reveal a clear inclination to create jobs (bureaucracy) around the proposed integration, when such alignment must emerge organically from the interaction of these independent systems. You still espouse a 20th century approach to designing these systems.

Q23 How should an Accord help Australia increase collaboration between industry, government and universities to solve big challenges?

The accord should use the principle of subsidiarity to devolve the incentives of such collaboration to local government areas (LGAs) and provide financing for identified opportunities. Some needs

will aggregate to represent objectives at higher levels: State, Commonwealth and at the international scale.

Q24 What reforms will enable Australian research institutions to achieve excellence, scale and impact in particular fields?

The reform is implementing the principle of subsidiarity. Hence, research institutions should form a separate system from higher education in the ecology of education. Through collaboration with local government, these “Crown institutions” would then collaborate with universities towards commercialisation and innovation. See, for example, the model used in New Zealand: Crown Research Institutions <https://www.mbie.govt.nz/science-and-technology/science-and-innovation/agencies-policies-and-budget-initiatives/research-organisations/cri/>

All university research institutes, centres etc. should be divested off so that each forms an independent Crown Research Institute (CRI). Why? Again, the objective is focus, so that universities focus on down-stream opportunities in commercialisation and innovation.

Q25 How should Australia leverage its research capacity overall and use it more effectively to develop new capabilities and solve wicked problems?

By mapping the different systems forming the education ecology in Australia. Each system, such as higher education must focus on a very small set of objectives, which are the dynamic outcome rather than the static input to the proposed Accord. With subsidiarity and focus, the Commonwealth and State governments will have to underwrite public-private partnerships to secure the financial position of universities to enable them to become angel investors in new enterprises and hence secure a cash stream not based on tuition fees or grants.

Q26 How can Australia stimulate greater industry investment in research and more effective collaboration?

By transitioning towards a public-private partnership model for funding and governing Australian universities. The same model would be necessary for Crown Research Institutes (CRIs).

Q27 How can we improve research training in Australia including improving pathways for researchers to gain experience and develop high-impact careers in government and industry?

By benchmarking and collaborating with Scandinavian countries. We need international networks, for example, with Scandinavian universities. See, for example, https://www.must.ac.ug/must_collaboration/chalmers-university-of-technology/ Australia need to create a Nordic-Australian research network for early career researchers. Why Scandinavia? Because they have a balanced approach for public-private governance of organisations, including universities.

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

I will answer this question with specific reference to the Javanese (Java La Grande or Australia's) First Nations. The issue is one of scale. The under representation is a result of their low population numbers relative to the general population. Only by increasing their numbers to at least 25% of the population, will there be a real change in their representation in higher education. I suggest consultation on this point with Aotearoa New Zealand in relation to Maoridom.

Q29 What changes in provider practices and offerings are necessary to ensure all potential students can succeed in their chosen area of study?

Again, the question misses the point. Higher education is a complex system. Such changes are emergent properties. They are the output from the proposed J.L.G. Australia Accord rather than an input to the Accord. You need to create the right conditions for this emergence through the subsidiarity principle, namely, devolving the decisions-making to local government areas in collaboration with communities, industry, and the higher education sector. Universities in this complexity-verse are governed through congregations similar to Oxford University.

Q30 How can governments, institutions and employers assist students, widen opportunities and remove barriers to higher education?

This is again the wrong question. Ask instead: how can students be empowered to optimize their contribution to the wellbeing of J.L.G. Australia. Stop thinking of students as retarded people in need of continuous guidance even at the stage of higher education.

Q31 How can the costs of participation, including living expenses, be most effectively alleviated?

Again, this is emergent from specific needs in specific local areas. The complexity of higher education inheres at every level. You should not assume away this complexity by looking for imaginary homogeneity of such effectiveness. The whole approach is a 20th century oblivion of what we now know about complexity and complex systems.

Q32 How can best practice learning and teaching for students from under-represented groups be embedded across the higher education system, including the use of remote learning?

These strategies are not homogenous and need to be tailored at the local government level (LGAs) in collaboration with the private sector and higher education providers.

Q33 What changes to funding and regulatory settings would enable providers to better support students from under-represented groups in higher education?

By adopting the principle of subsidiarity. Leave the diversity of responses, and hence achieving optimality of such support, emerge at the local level.

Q34 How should the contribution of higher education providers to community engagement be encouraged and promoted?

By devolving the identification of community needs to local government, in collaboration with the private sector, and by underwriting the financial position of universities through focusing their efforts on commercialisation and innovation (downstream).

Q35 Where providers make a distinctive contribution to national objectives through community, location-based or specialised economic development, how should this contribution be identified and invested in?

No. Again, the question is based on a false premise: “national objectives”. This is so 20th century! The investment is a priori. There must be a modicum of trust to allow subsidiarity to work. The approach in J.L.G. Australia to higher education should be to underwrite the local government collaboration with higher education providers and the public sector regardless of spurious so-called “national objectives”. Emphasis is on proven increase in the complexity of the Australian economy.

Q36 What regulatory and governance reforms would enable the higher education sector to better meet contemporary demands?

Less regulation and empower decision at the local level.

Q37 How could a more coherent and dynamic national governance system for higher education be achieved?

Again, the premise is false: “national governance”. What is needed instead is ‘national underwriting’. We need to support decisions taken at the local scale, but local government areas (LGAs) and higher education providers.

Q38 How can the Accord support higher education providers to adopt sector-leading employment practices?

By applying the principle of subsidiarity. In particular, by transitioning the governance of J.L.G. Australian universities to Oxford-like congregations. See <https://governance.admin.ox.ac.uk/congregation>. The expert knowledge of academics is the best way to ensure optimal approaches to best employment practices.

Q39 What reforms are needed to ensure that all students have a quality student experience?

None. Quality is an emergent property from meeting the objective of commercialisation and innovation. Remember: Less is more.

Q40 What changes are needed to ensure all students are physically and culturally safe while studying?

Again. Allow such changes to emerge by allowing for subsidiarity at the local government level, with collaboration from the private sector and communities. Stop looking for one-size-fits-all intervention at the national level. The role of the Commonwealth is to shield these collaboration efforts from the vagaries of financial pressures by underwriting the financial position of Australian universities, while consolidating the higher education sector to ensure eliminating less efficient (worst loss-making) universities.

Q41 How should research quality be prioritised and supported most effectively over the next decade?

Research quality requires a focused approach. In other words, each part of the education ecology needs to be focused on specific objectives. Hence, the current research institutes and centres 'hiding' inside universities should be divested off. They should become stand-alone, national, Crown Research Institutes (CRIs) similar to the approach in Aotearoa New Zealand. See <https://www.mbie.govt.nz/science-and-technology/science-and-innovation/agencies-policies-and-budget-initiatives/research-organisations/cri/>

Q42 What settings are needed to ensure academic integrity, and how can new technologies and innovative assessment practices be leveraged to improve academic integrity?

Again, another emergent property. You should focus instead on empowering universities to follow best practice, but enabling international collaboration, e.g. with Scandinavia countries, and by underwriting the financial position of universities so that they are not at the mercy of tuition fees and grants.

Q43 How should the current recovery in international education be managed to increase the resilience and sustainability of Australia's higher education system, including through diversification of student enrolments from source countries?

Again, there is no need for an aggregated national approach. Leave the decision to be optimized to respond to requirements at the local level. The Commonwealth should focus on shielding the higher education providers from the vagaries of tuition fees and grants.

Q44 How can the benefits of international education be shared broadly across the system, including in regional areas, and what level of reporting should there be?

There has to be transfers where the Commonwealth distributes the excess tuition fees from international students (over and above domestic levels) across all higher education providers, on the level of local government areas (LGAs), or potentially at the State and territory level.

Q45 How should the contribution of different institutions and providers to key national objectives specific to their location, specialist expertise or community focus be appropriately financed?

There is a need to, first, abolish the worst performers in the higher education sector, on the level of local government areas, and second, to underwrite the performance of the remaining universities. This 'natural selection' needs to be repeated every decade or so. This is with the understanding that all research institutions and centres will come under the direct supervision of the Commonwealth as per the model of Crown Research Institutes (CRIs) in Aotearoa New Zealand, or Commonwealth Research Institutes in J.L.G. Australia.

Q46 How can infrastructure development for higher education be financed, especially in regional and outer urban locations?

Through general transfers to local government areas (LGAs), and not as a separate transfer. These LGAs will then prioritize the use of these funds, including for higher education, in collaboration with the communities and the private sector. The general transfers should be indexed to population density in each LGA.

Q47 What structure of Commonwealth funding is needed for the higher education sector for the system to be sustainable over the next two decades?

That is the idea of underwriting the financial position of universities after eliminating the most efficient ones (especially in urban LGAs). Then the Commonwealth will monitor their performance on commercialisation and innovation. The KPI is the increase in revenue from investments as opposed to tuition and grants. The 'natural selection' process is repeated every decade.

Q48 What principles should underpin the setting of student contributions and Higher Education Loan Program arrangements?

The principle of subsidiarity. Why? Because of the complexity of the higher education system, that is, the diverse needs at the local level. Move away from national regulation, and more towards supporting the objectives identified at the local level.

Q49 Which aspects of the JRG package should be altered, and which should be retained?

The issue with the current JRG is its aggregation at the national level. Again, no one-size-fits-all. Need to interpret this objective as an emergent property from the requirements of local government areas. The Commonwealth should only play a subsidiary role to financially underwrite partnerships with communities across J.L.G. Australia and with the private sector.