

Universities Accord consultation March 2023

Q1 What is needed to overcome limitations in the current approach to Australian higher education?

I will ensure that most of this submission addresses the instruction in the discussion paper to “Be bold. Think big and think beyond the immediate challenges”. However I will just note at the beginning that for many academic staff in universities the immediate challenges are very serious (job satisfaction, job security, research funding, empowerment to be part of decisions about teaching quality and research directions). For some academic staff at the frontline of teaching and research it is hard to dream big when they are weighed down by what they see as the brokenness of the current system. Some feel that it is hard to build on a cracked foundation. I welcome this Accord consultation in the spirit that it is being promoted, a chance for all stakeholders to come together and discuss the path ahead in higher education. If this approach can be maintained in Australia then I think we will see people working together to deliver a sustainable higher education sector that addresses many different needs, locally, nationally and internationally.

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

As discussed in my previous submission in December 2022, a lot has changed in university governance since the Bradley review in 2008. While these changes were introduced with the best of intentions to try and bring a more corporate balance to decision making, the pendulum has swung too far. In considering the membership of university governing bodies (board, senate or council), it is important to think about what the purposes are of a university (education and research) and align the expertise with these purposes. The discussion paper mentions sector expertise and I agree that this should be an important criterion. This does not mean that the members should all be representatives from staff, students and alumni belonging to that institution. It is better to look more broadly for people with contemporary experience in higher education, tertiary education, research and innovation, perhaps from other states so as to build in a more national focus. I recommend that there be more government oversight of university governance and that the ideal make-up of university governing bodies should be (in addition to a Chancellor and Vice Chancellor):

- About 1/3 members from the university, including representatives from staff, students and alumni
- About 1/3 people with significant experience in the practice of teaching and research in higher education from outside that particular university, perhaps from other states
- About 1/3 people from other sectors, preferably with experience in engaging with universities (in education, research and innovation)

Accountability: Universities need to be accountable to a range of stakeholders. There needs to be a stronger connection through legislation with a more public oversight authority. One suggestion is that universities need to report to state government in a transparent and fulsome manner that allows parliament to engage in a dialogue about the direction and achievements of a university.

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

As mentioned above, decision making and thought leadership in universities would benefit from greater discussions across local and state boundaries. I recommend that there could be more national networks of university leaders at different levels that feed into national representation and

discussion. For example, there could be a regular (annual) meeting of the Presidents of Dean's Councils with the Federal Education Minister (or appropriate delegate). (And of course, there should continue to be meetings of VCs, DVCs, COOs, CIOs, each in their own network.)

Again, I commend this Accord process for adopting a very collegial approach to looking at higher education. If this can be maintained, then discussions between the Department of Education and university leaders at all different levels could lead to greater information sharing in both directions.

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

The discussion paper raises a fundamental question of how to sustainably fund teaching, research, engagement and other activities. I will focus here on some big ideas to fund research and innovation. I strongly support the provision of government funding for research through the ARC and NHMRC, the recently introduced industry fellowships and industry PhD program, and the commercialisation action plan. In terms of general flexibility for universities to fund other research, this has become increasingly difficult. Block grant funding has not kept up with research demands, and the Job Ready Graduates Package (discussed below) has had unintended consequences in terms of the funding available within universities to support research. One could (and should!) argue that more government funding should be allocated to all of these schemes to ensure that Australia maintains its good track record in terms of advancement of knowledge and innovation. However, it is critical that we also look at other sources of funding. So how do we fund research in a sustainable way in the future?

Some big ideas:

47.1 Make the cross-subsidy of research explicit, transparent and expected: By being upfront in university advertising and government agreements, we can create a societal expectation that student fees and commonwealth grant scheme (cgs) funding are legitimately used to support research. Decisions about the cross-subsidy should be transparent and supported by stakeholders. Universities could report on how and why cross-subsidies have been made.

47.2 Establish a National Research Endowment Fund: The Medical Research Future Fund has allowed a significant growth in medical research across Australia. It has brought teams of researchers together to focus on big challenges in health. An analogous fund is needed for non-medical research to stimulate and inspire researchers to address the future needs of Australia. This would be a permanent fund that would provide ongoing support to universities in Australia. It could be funded from a range of sources including government, private donations and investment income. Various examples already exist of institutional-based research endowment funds in Australia that service specific areas of research, but there are none with a comprehensive national focus.

47.3 Create an extra tax incentive for endowed chairs: One of the major costs for research is the salary of the researcher. Creating an extra tax incentive (above and beyond the normal tax deductibility) would encourage private donors and businesses to invest in endowed chairs which would provide long-term and continued research leadership in universities.

47.4 Set a target for the number of Industry professors and Academics in industry: The recent introduction of industry fellowships (administered through the ARC) has set the right direction for building industry partnerships. Some universities in Australia already have 'industry professors', people in the university who have a particular focus on working with industry. These schemes should

be supported and expanded. Encouraging greater mobility between industry and universities will lead to better sharing of information and culture, and will help to build the basis for long-term sustainable partnerships. The government could set a target (perhaps 5%) of academic staff in the STEM area that should have spent a reasonable amount of time (perhaps more than one year) in industry.

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

There were probably good reasons for introducing the JRG, but it has nevertheless had unintended consequences in terms of the flexibility of funds to support research. The JRG reduced the cgs funding for science and engineering by 15% yet teaching and research are inextricably linked in these disciplines. Science in particular encompasses not only a body of knowledge but also an evidence-based process of discovery and it is critical that students learn about and experience both. A reduction in cgs funding has created unforeseen pressures on researchers in these disciplines, yet together science and engineering account for the majority of competitive research funds provided by the ARC. Because of this relationship it is very difficult to assess the JRG in isolation from considerations of appropriate funding for research and other activities in universities. It does not appear that the JRG has made any difference to students in choosing courses of study so there is an argument for abandoning it altogether. If it is to be retained in any form, then at the very least flexible funding for research needs to be restored in STEM.

The Accord discussion paper has raised many other important issues in higher education and I have had the opportunity to contribute to other submissions that address these issues. I thank the panel for their very consultative approach. Best wishes,

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