

## Australian Universities Accord

### IRU submission – April 2023

#### **Executive Summary**

The Innovative Research Universities (IRU) warmly welcomes the Review of Australia's Higher Education System as the first step towards a new Australian Universities Accord.

The Universities Accord discussion paper released in February 2023 poses important questions about the future of the higher education system. We agree that the central purpose of the Accord should be to maximise alignment between the higher education system and national needs in the decades ahead. We submit that the Accord should focus on targeted evidence-based reforms to ensure that Australia's public university system can deliver the maximum public value.

Through successive waves of policy reform and investment, the Australian university system has expanded and developed an international reputation for quality and impact. The system is not broken, however if current trends continue, it will become less diverse and less representative of the community. The Accord is a critical opportunity to set the system up for the decades ahead, to better serve the Australian people. Evidence shows that investing in education and research now will deliver significant economic returns as well as significant social benefits, including reduced inequality, improved social cohesion and wellbeing, and reduced reliance on government support.

In line with our IRU Strategy and our initial response on the Accord Terms of Reference, we focus in our submission on five key areas for reform. Specific recommendations under each of these five priorities are summarised on the following pages.

The Accord should focus on delivering:

1. A more equitable higher education system, to improve social cohesion and provide opportunity for all.
2. A more balanced research system, to deliver the sovereign capabilities that Australia will need for the future and to maximise the translation of knowledge for the public good.
3. Indigenous self-determination, with higher education and research playing a central role in building community capacity and supporting the next generation of Indigenous leaders.
4. A confident approach to engagement with the nations of the Indo-Pacific, strengthened through long-term education and research partnerships.
5. A system that fosters innovation and diversity, with each university focusing on its distinct mission and community.

We look forward to working closely with the Panel and Australian Government throughout 2023 to contribute to an Accord that will deliver a more equitable and innovative future for all Australians.

## IRU recommendations

The IRU recommends that the Australian Government and universities partner through **new institution-specific mission-based Accord agreements**, which would provide greater flexibility for universities to address the specific needs of their communities. To make progress on equity, significant **reform of the Job-Ready Graduates (JRG) policy** package will also be required, for a system that is simpler, fairer and set up to meet growing demand. **Transition arrangements will be needed** to provide stability for students and universities as we move to this new system.

The Accord should also include a **new whole-of-government agreement with universities on research**, to ensure that knowledge and sovereign capabilities are developed across the country to meet future needs, and to better support the careers of young researchers. This should revitalise the dual funding system for the 21<sup>st</sup> century and **broaden the focus on research commercialisation to include collaboration with the public and community sectors**.

It should also include **additional support for Indigenous-led research** and for a **stronger Indigenous voice in the higher education system**. New programs should be established to **better support Indigenous student success** and to ensure that Indigenous knowledges inform the curriculum and research innovation across all fields.

The Accord should include a focus on the role of universities in building stronger ties with our region, with a new **strategy for education and research partnerships across the Indo-Pacific** and the development of Indo-Pacific capabilities at home. The value of international education to Australia, and the connection with future skills needs and migration, should be clarified.

To underpin these reforms and set up the system for the next 20-30 years, policy, funding and regulation should maximise innovation and diversity. A **new investment fund for university infrastructure should be linked to sustainability targets** to support the energy transition across the country. Governments and universities should build upon mission-based Accord agreements for a **new place-based approach to economic and social development**, driving innovation and partnerships across the education and training system and with industry and communities.

### 1. Recommendations for a more equitable higher education system:

- Government and universities should address equity through institution-specific mission-based Accord agreements that are tailored to community needs and population dynamics. Funding should be attached to these agreements, consolidating existing programs and increasing allocations where required to meet need, with universities reporting publicly on outcomes and given greater flexibility to allocate funding to need within an agreed envelope.
- Through the Higher Education Standards, all universities should be required to have plans for improving equity (which would include access, progression, completion and outcomes).
- The National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE) should lead work across the system, in partnership with universities, to improve data and evidence on equity and to share best practice from the evaluation of student support programs.
- The JRG should be replaced with a funding system for domestic student places that is simpler, fairer, evidence-based and set up to meet growing demand for university-level education in the years ahead.

- Any further expansion of higher education should be primarily funded through public (government) contributions, rather than increasing private (student) contributions. The balance between the two should not exceed the current 50:50 ratio. This reflects the significant public benefits that are delivered by public investment in higher education.
- The current JRG system should be replaced with a simpler two-tier student contribution rate and a three-tier government contribution rate, with a commitment that no current student will be worse off as a result of the changes.
- Transition funding should be extended through 2024 or until the new system is in place, to provide stability.
- The 50% pass rule should be abolished, with universities reporting on equity, progression and completion through Accord agreements.
- Commonwealth-supported places should be uncapped for all Indigenous students, regardless of where they live.
- Government should review the balance of investment in public and private education, ensuring that allocation of funding to schools is equitable and needs-based, and aligned with the allocation of support for equity in post-secondary education and training.
- Undertake a comprehensive review of all student income/support programs to ensure that they are adequate to deal with inflation and cost of living pressures.
- Agreement between Federal and State/Territory governments to ensure that students are paid for compulsory work placements in all fields.

## **2. Recommendations for a more balanced research system:**

- The research block grant should be increased to cover the research mission of all universities, linked to the total research funding provided by the Education portfolio at a rate of at least 50 cents to the dollar. A portion of the research block grant should be connected to institution-specific mission-based Accord agreements, to support specialisation and the maintenance of essential national capabilities across the country.
- University research programs funded by other Australian Government portfolios (such as health, defence, agriculture, etc.) should have an agreed rate of support for indirect costs built in, to avoid further erosion of the dual funding system, and remove requirements for cash contributions from universities.
- Funding for university-industry collaboration and research commercialisation should be balanced with funding for engagement and collaboration with the public and community sectors, to ensure the broadest possible translation of university knowledge and expertise. The existing Research Commercialisation programs should be broadened in this way.
- As part of research block grant reform, explore options for increasing PhD stipends and creating more stable career pathways for early-career researchers.
- Government and universities should work together to build a new capability for system-wide analysis of key issues for research and innovation, including Indigenous knowledge, equity, open access, research impact and global trends.

### **3. Recommendations to support Indigenous self-determination:**

- Government should create a new fund for innovation and partnerships to improve outcomes for Indigenous students, which could include experimentation with new approaches such as fee-free foundation programs for Indigenous students, targeted scholarships, providing courses online so that students can study in their communities and partnerships with the VET sector and with State and Territory Governments.
- The ARC should set a target of at least 5% of its total research funding going to Indigenous researchers (through new programs where needed) to match the 5% target set for the Medical Research Endowment Account.
- A new National Indigenous Teaching and Learning Institute should be established to bring together and support the work being done by individual academics and institutions on the ways in which Indigenous knowledges can inform curriculum and pedagogy.
- Government should reinstate a 50:50 funding split with universities for Indigenous traineeships, to help build employment pathways and pipeline for the future.
- Future governance arrangements for higher education should ensure a strong voice for Indigenous Australians, guiding the development of clear long-term national priorities and goals for Indigenous higher education, and the evidence-base needed to report on progress.

### **4. Recommendations for confident engagement with the Indo-Pacific:**

- Government and universities should work together to set a positive long-term vision for the role of education and research in building stronger two-way partnerships across the Indo-Pacific, including a new funding program for knowledge partnerships with key countries and regions such as the Pacific Islands.

### **5. Recommendations for a more innovative and diverse university system:**

- Institution-specific mission-based Accord agreements should be the primary basis for allocating public funding to universities in line with agreed priorities, with universities reporting publicly on outcomes and impact.
- That government initiate a systematic review of university regulation and reporting that covers the requirements of both Federal and State/Territory governments, with the aim of simplifying the existing regime and reducing duplication.
- The Accord considers the most effective governance model for the future of the Australian university system, with a dedicated body to provide leadership and oversight and provide independent advice to government.
- That government consider a new place-based program to fund innovation in tackling disadvantage. The program would require partnerships between universities and other parts of the education and training system, as well as with the relevant levels of government and partners in industry and the community, to enhance equity, meet skills needs and drive economic and social development.
- Government should introduce a new investment fund for university infrastructure to underpin the next generation of education, research and innovation, linked to sustainability targets to support Australia's energy transition and distributed equitably across the country.

## Context for the Accord

The Australian Universities Accord builds upon significant previous reforms in the higher education system and comes at an important moment for the future of the nation.

Up until the Second World War, Australia only had six universities. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, there was a deliberate expansion of the university system, to bring the benefits of higher education and research to growing communities across Australia. Universities in the IRU trace their origins to this moment in Australian history, characterised by bipartisan consensus on the value of expanding the system. The Dawkins reforms of the late 1980s and early 1990s saw the further development and expansion of the university system. And the Bradley Review in 2008 set national targets for lifting the rate of attainment of degree qualifications and for improving equity of access to higher education.

In 2023, Australia can celebrate the building of an expanded, unified national university system that delivers major social and economic benefits.

- Access to higher education has been expanded, exceeding the Bradley Review target of 40% of 25- to 34-year-olds with a university degree. This has been achieved with high graduate outcomes and high levels of student and employer satisfaction. Today, IRU universities teach 223,000 students across the country across all levels, with 21% of our students coming from low- socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds and 50% the first in their family to attend university.
- This is matched by attainment across the larger tertiary education system – pre-COVID analysis by the IRU showed that almost 80% of young Australians had completed either a university degree or vocational education and training (VET) qualification or both, with a fairly even split between universities and VET.
- At the same time, universities have increased research quality and productivity. Another significant development over the last twenty years has been the introduction of global university rankings systems and Australian universities perform strongly by global standards.
- While lifting research performance, universities have also increased engagement with partners outside academia – for example, IRU universities have increased their collaboration with industry by 260% over the last decade.
- Over the last twenty years, Australia has also developed one of the most internationalised university systems in the world, with high levels of international education and international research collaboration. This has improved quality and impact and delivered significant social, cultural and economic benefits to Australia and its partners, particularly in our region. The IRU is characterised by a diverse international student cohort and by successful offshore delivery of international education.

These are not signs of a system that is broken. However, since the Bradley Review, significant changes have occurred in Australian universities. We identify three trends that, if left to continue unchecked, will lead to a higher education system that is less diverse and less representative of the community:

- **Unfinished business on equity:** across the system, while participation rates have grown, previous targets (eg. 20% of students from low-SES backgrounds) have not been met and

progression and completion rates for key groups of students (eg. Indigenous students) remain flat. Expansion of access has not yet adequately addressed entrenched disadvantage in Australian society, with current policy and funding settings exacerbating inequalities.

- **From expansion to concentration:** a key feature of the Australian university system is now the dominance of a small number of capital-city metropolitan universities that attract a larger and larger share of student numbers (both domestic and international) and research funding. This is distorting the system and undermining the ability of universities across the country to deliver comprehensive and high-quality education and research aligned with the needs of their communities.
- **Privatisation of public goods:** recent policy and funding for universities has also prioritised the private benefits of education and research over the broader public benefits. The Job-Ready Graduates (JRG) package reduced the government contribution to the cost of higher education and shifted more onto individual students. In research, universities are increasingly incentivised to partner with the private sector and to measure their impact with indicators such as patents and commercialisation. This misses the broader economic and social spillovers from university teaching, knowledge and intellectual property.

These trends within the Australian higher education system must also be seen in light of larger demographic, technological and geopolitical shifts. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the ways in which these will have significant impacts on the operation of Australian universities over the next 10, 20 and 30 years.

- Growing demand for higher education over the coming decade (ABS data shows expected growth of 19.8% in the school-leaver population of 17-18 year-olds between 2020 and 2030).
- Post-pandemic skills shortages and structural adjustment in key industry sectors.
- COVID accelerating the use of new technologies in changing patterns of learning and work.
- Global investment in R&D is growing (total global investment has tripled since the early 2000s) and shifting (with future growth to be driven by countries in the Indo-Pacific).
- International education and research increasingly caught up in rising geopolitical tension.

These significant shifts in the landscape for Australian universities create both challenges and opportunities for higher education and research policy. In its recent 5-year study *Advancing Prosperity* (March 2023), the Productivity Commission notes the “demographic pressures on the sector, which are insufficiently factored into planned funding growth”. The Commission also notes that “almost all new jobs over the next five years will require tertiary education” and that shifts in the economy and structural adjustment in key industry sectors will require significant “upskilling and re-skilling”.

Significantly, the Commission finds that Australia has not yet “reached the point where the cost of education for additional students outweighs the benefit to them and society”, pointing to the need for an ongoing commitment to enhancing access and equity. The Commission also cites international evidence to show that investments in higher education and research deliver both economic and social returns to the nation, through reduced inequality, improved social cohesion, increased diffusion of innovation, improved outcomes in health and wellbeing, and reduced reliance on government support payments.

Public investment now in education and research will set Australia up for the decades ahead. In the sections that follow, we offer specific ideas and recommendations for policy and funding for universities that will help to deliver: a more equitable higher education system; a more balanced research system; support for Indigenous self-determination; more confident engagement with the Indo-Pacific region; and a more innovative and diverse university system, with each institution focusing on its distinct mission and on meeting the needs of its community.

## 1. A more equitable higher education system, to improve social cohesion and provide opportunity for all

[addresses Accord terms of reference 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5]

As a group of universities that were founded to expand access to higher education for under-served communities in Australian society, the IRU strongly supports equity as the first priority for the Universities Accord.

### **Equity and diversity**

- Equity in higher education will remain unfinished business until participation and completion rates match population parity. The scale of the challenge will require concerted effort and partnership between universities and government. For example, IRU modelling shows that to meet the Bradley Review target of 20% of university students coming from low-socioeconomic (low-SES) backgrounds, the system will need to support an additional 58,000 low-SES students by 2030. This will require significant shifts in current practice, policy and funding.
- A focus on equity highlights the existing diversity across the Australian higher education system, with different institutions making different contributions – for example, fifteen universities educate almost 60% of all students from low-SES backgrounds and eleven universities educate almost 60% of students from regional and rural backgrounds. It also highlights the inter-connectedness of the system, with what one institution does having implications for others.
- The evidence shows that a one-size-fits-all approach to equity in higher education will not succeed – institutions should play to their strengths and build on what works. Institutional approaches should also be tailored to the needs and population demographics of their communities. All universities should be required to focus on equity, but how they do it will necessarily differ.
- In its 2023 report, the Productivity Commission finds that “improving completion for equity groups continues to be important” but that existing funding through the HEPPP program is insufficient. The PC also notes that “each university operates in a unique context”.
- There is a growing body of evidence to show that supporting different student cohorts in different locations comes with different costs, but the focus should not be on cost as this reinforces a deficit model of the capabilities of students from under-represented backgrounds. Government and universities should instead partner to invest in priority areas for social and economic inclusion.
- Addressing unfinished business in equity in higher education is the right thing to do and will also help to address skills shortages needs across the country, by expanding opportunity for more students and equipping them with the education and training needed for their careers, for lifelong learning and to play an active role in Australian society.
- This will also have positive impacts for social and economic development at State/Territory level, helping to meet the challenges of structural adjustment (eg. from the energy transition) across the country and ensuring a more equitable distribution of opportunity from new industries.



- Innovative approaches to education such as microcredentials can reduce barriers to access and participation, and be an important part of broader strategies to improve opportunities for post-secondary education and training for all members of society. Government support should be targeted to those people least able to take advantage of the current “user pays” approach.
- Where national equity targets are set, these should be implemented through institution-specific mission-based agreements rather than through a national formula (see Section 5 below for more detail on mission- and place-based agreements). Within these agreements, funding from multiple existing programs (eg. HEPPP, IRLSAF, NPILF, short courses and additional places) should be consolidated and increased where required to meet need. Universities should also have greater flexibility within an agreed envelope to allocate places and resourcing to meet demonstrated need – for example, greater flexibility with the use of Commonwealth-supported places for enabling programs. Greater flexibility would also create space for more innovative partnerships between universities and VET institutions to meet the skills and knowledge needs of their communities. Universities would then be publicly accountable for deliver on agreed objectives and targets.
- To underpin progress on equity across the system, improvements are also needed in the evaluation of the effectiveness of student support programs and in the data on “equity group” students. In 2008, the Bradley Review recommended an overhauling of the classification of data on students from equity groups, but much of this has still not been implemented. The National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE) should be empowered to make recommendations to government to inform the development of improved equity measures and targets. This should include work on intersectionality and compounded disadvantage in certain populations and regions. NCSEHE should also invest in partnerships with universities/university groups to evaluate student support programs and share evidence and examples to foster best practice and innovation.

#### **Recommendations:**

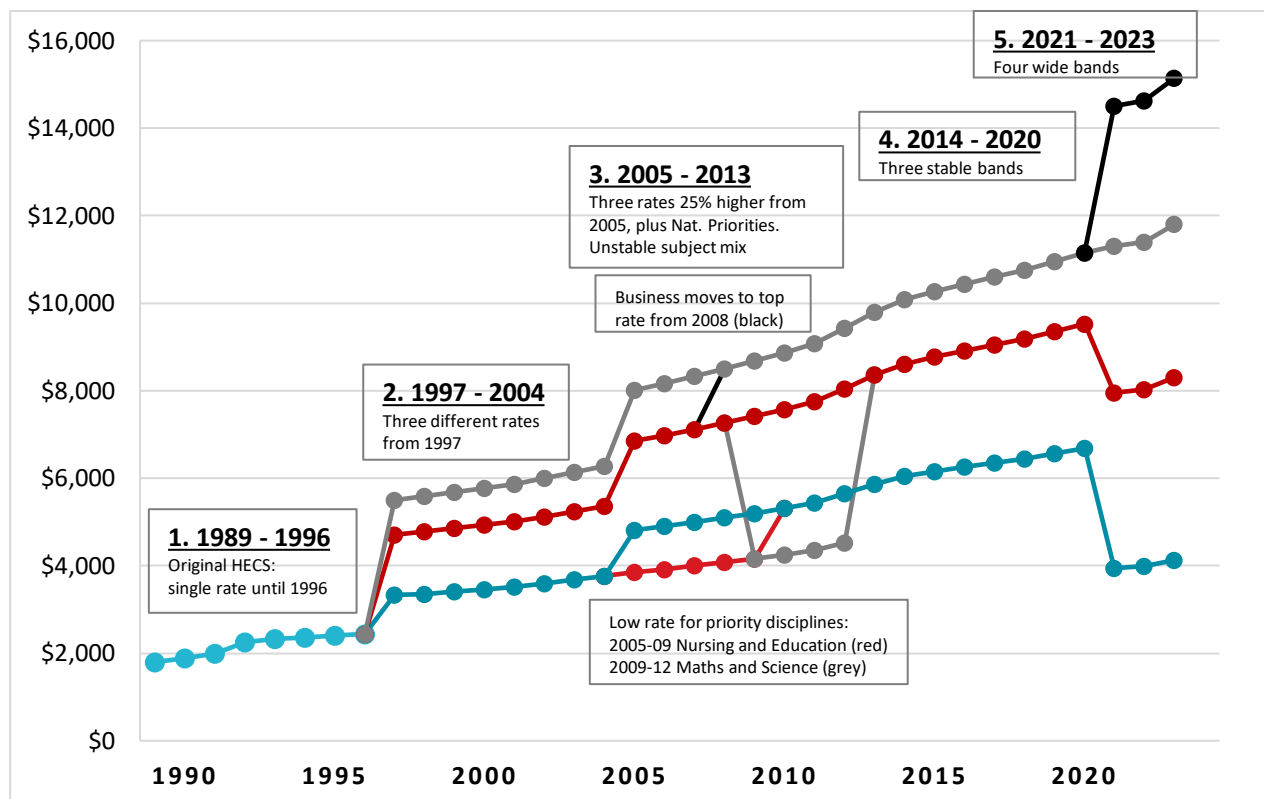
- Government and universities should address equity through institution-specific mission-based Accord agreements that are tailored to community needs and population dynamics. Funding should be attached to these agreements, consolidating existing programs and increasing allocations where required to meet need, with universities reporting publicly on outcomes and given greater flexibility to allocate funding to need within an agreed envelope.
- Through the Higher Education Standards, all universities should be required to have plans for improving equity (which would include access, progression, completion and outcomes).
- The National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE) should lead work across the system, in partnership with universities, to improve data and evidence on equity and to share best practice from the evaluation of student support programs.

#### **Fixing JRG**

- In order to make progress on equity, it is also necessary to urgently address the flaws of the Job-Ready Graduates (JRG) policy package, which was introduced in 2020 to take effect from the beginning of 2021.

- The overall effect of the JRG package was to reduce the contribution of government to the cost of higher education (by about 15% per student), shift costs to individual student contributions and widen the range of student contributions in an attempt to incentivise students to choose courses in areas of national skills shortage.
- IRU analysis has shown that the JRG package makes the system more complex and exacerbates inequalities between different groups of students, in particular disadvantaging female and Indigenous students.
- In 2008, the Bradley Review noted that the trend over the preceding decade had been to increase the level of private contributions and concluded that there was “no general case” for funding further expansion of higher education through further increases to student contributions.
- The introduction of JRG shifted the balance of public and private contributions to the cost of higher education even further, with reduced public funding and more cost for students. The ratio of public to private contributions is now close to 50:50.
- The JRG also increased the number of bands for student contributions (see Figure 1 below), making the system more complicated and exacerbating inequalities between different groups of students. Analysis by the Productivity Commission sets out three reasons why the JRG package is flawed, concluding that “skills shortages are a poor basis for setting subsidies” for higher education.

**Figure 1. Changes to student contributions for higher education, 1989 to 2024 (actual year dollars)**



- IRU principles for JRG reform are that:
  - Funding for student places in higher education should continue to be a mix of public and private contributions, with student contributions supported by an effective and equitable HECS-HELP income-contingent loan scheme.
  - Given variation in the cost of delivery for different courses/institutions, and in graduate employment outcomes for students, there should continue to be a system of differentiated government and student contributions rather than one flat rate.
  - Student contributions should be aligned with graduate employability and government contributions aligned with the cost of delivery, with universities funded for the total cost of teaching each course, including supporting the research mission.
- Aligned with these principles, the simplest and fairest system would be for a two-tier student contribution and a three-tier government contribution that would broadly restore funding to pre-JRG levels.
- Transition to a new system should be managed to provide stability for students, staff and universities. No current student should be made worse off by the transition.
- Other aspects of the JRG package that have disproportionate impacts on equity groups, such as the 50% pass rule, should be abolished.

#### **Recommendations:**

- The JRG should be replaced with a funding system for domestic student places that is simpler, fairer, evidence-based and set up to meet growing demand for university-level education in the years ahead.
- Any further expansion of higher education should be primarily funded through public (government) contributions, rather than increasing private (student) contributions. The balance between the two should not exceed the current 50:50 ratio. This reflects the significant public benefits that are delivered by public investment in higher education.
- The current JRG system should be replaced with a simpler two-tier student contribution rate and a three-tier government contribution rate, with a commitment that no current student will be worse off as a result of the changes.
- Transition funding should be extended through 2024 or until the new system is in place, to provide stability.
- The 50% pass rule should be abolished, with universities reporting on equity, progression and completion through Accord agreements.
- Commonwealth-supported places should be uncapped for all Indigenous students, regardless of where they live (see also Section 3 below).

#### **Equity beyond universities**

- Equity in universities cannot be seen in isolation from the rest of the education and training system and from broader social forces, including cost of living issues.

- Choices made by students about post-secondary education are influenced by their experiences in school and by factors such as the streaming of students in high school and study/careers advising.
- IRU analysis shows that trends in investment have shifted resources away from the public system towards private education. This has seen increasing amounts of government funding shifting from public to private schools and also between different levels of the education system – for example, as a share of the total Australian Government spend on education and training, the 2022 Budget papers show that funding for universities declines in the period 2016-2026 (from 28% to 22%), while funding for private schools increases (from 32% to 37%). Under the current system, fully funding all Commonwealth-supported places in higher education (ie. removing the need for student contributions) would cost approximately an additional \$6 billion per year, but this is less than half of what the Australian Government currently contributes to private schools.
- The ability of students to participate in higher education – and in related programs such as internships, work-integrated-learning and compulsory work placements (for qualifications such as nursing and teaching) depends on a range of factors, including time, income, accommodation and caring responsibilities. Government support programs for students and the services offered by universities should ensure that, as much as possible, these factors outside university are not getting in the way of participation and student success. This should include the broad range of relevant government programs, from Youth Allowance to support for travel/relocation and access to affordable childcare.
- Government should explore innovative approaches to help students – particularly those from equity group backgrounds – deal with cost of living pressures. For students who have family, caring and work responsibilities, this could include access to a HECS-style loan to help cover the cost of living and reducing work hours in order to complete their studies, which would then be repaid later.
- Some students from under-represented backgrounds take longer on average to complete their studies and that should be supported, requiring changes to Centrelink student support programs and re-distribution of funding for enabling places and bridging programs.

**Recommendations:**

- Government should review the balance of investment in public and private education, ensuring that allocation of funding to schools is equitable and needs-based, and aligned with the allocation of support for equity in post-secondary education and training.
- Undertake a comprehensive review of all student income/support programs (including for higher degree by research students) to ensure that they are adequate to deal with inflation and cost of living pressures.
- Agreement between Federal and State/Territory governments to ensure that students are paid for compulsory work placements in all fields.

## 2. A more balanced research system, to deliver the sovereign capabilities that Australia will need for the future and to maximise the translation of knowledge for the public good

[addresses Accord terms of reference 1, 2, 4, 6 and 7]

Compared to other advanced nations, Australia’s universities undertake a disproportionately large share of the total research and development (R&D) within the innovation system (37% in 2020). In recent years, most of the growth in total Australian R&D investment has been driven by universities, with investment by government and by industry flat. Total R&D investment as a percentage of GDP is in decline and Australia’s share of global R&D is also slipping.

With the expansion of the Australian higher education system, this research effort is now spread across the nation, delivering significant economic, social and cultural benefits to a wide range of communities. The Accord discussion paper is right to point out the critical role of universities in “the intellectual, cultural, community and economic development of the nation”.

At a time of rapid technological and geopolitical change, it is more important than ever to invest in the foundation of knowledge and innovation that will underpin Australia’s future prosperity, social cohesion, health and wellbeing, security and resilience in the face of environmental change. This will require the full range of research disciplines and effective collaboration with partners outside academia, with communities right across the country.

Innovative, inter-disciplinary approaches will be required in both education and research to address future challenges such as the energy transition, the application of artificial intelligence, and social cohesion. This requires stability, flexibility and the ability to plan long-term.

In its recent five-year report, the Productivity Commission finds that the changing nature of the Australian economy will require new kinds of knowledge and skills. Innovation and productivity will not just be driven by STEM skills or high-tech R&D, but will increasingly be driven by the integration of diverse kinds of knowledge.

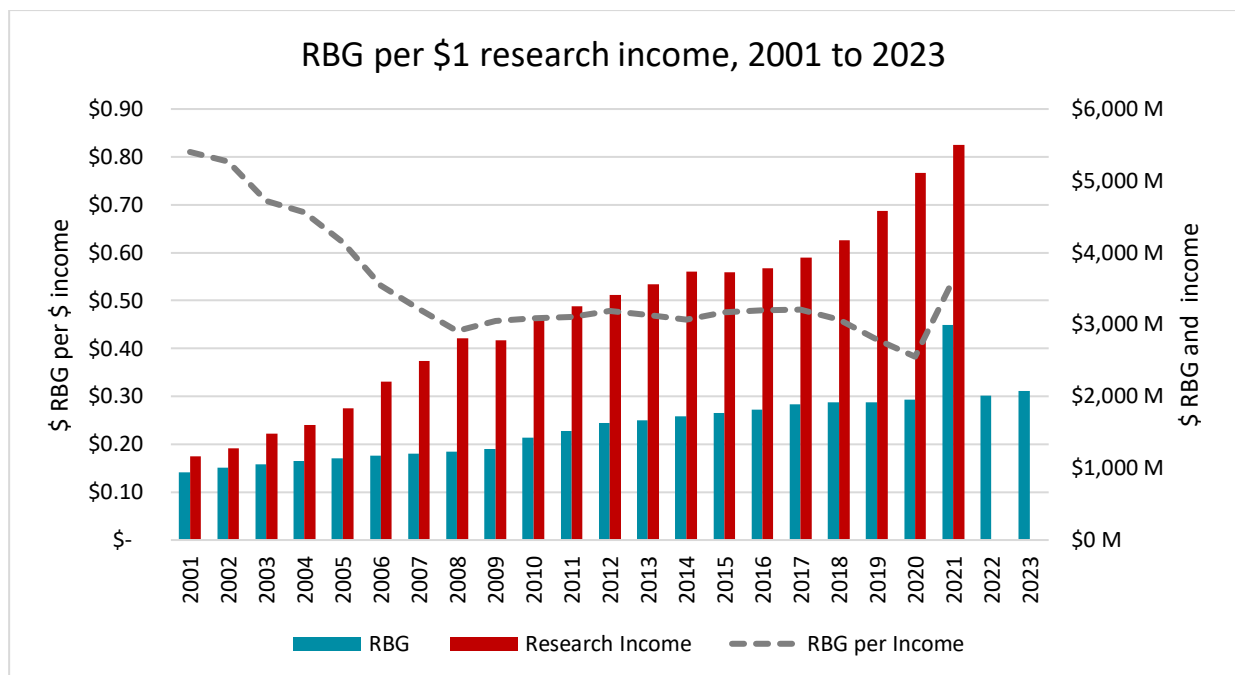
A focus on equity in higher education should also inform our thinking about the future of university research and its role in meeting future national needs. A priority for the Accord should be to enhance equity in research, both in terms of the allocation of resources (who gets to do research and where) and also in terms of the broader impacts of research in society. Australia should learn from developments in other leading nations, such as the new program from the US National Science Foundation which specifically targets research funding to under-served institutions and communities.

### **Major shifts in the research system**

- Over the last twenty years, overall growth in research income and expenditure in Australian universities – increasingly financed from university funds including revenue from international education – has masked significant shifts in the balance of investment across different kinds of research and different institutions.
- If these trends continue unchecked, the research system will be unbalanced and incapable of delivering the sovereign capabilities and innovation that Australian communities will require in the coming decades.

- Recent years have seen the erosion of the longstanding “dual funding system” for university research, where funding for competitive grants is matched by the research block grant. Block grant funding supports activity essential to the missions of universities as public institutions, including research infrastructure, career development and work with communities that does not generate an immediate financial return. IRU analysis shows that the ratio of the block grant to total research income has been cut in half over the last twenty years.

**Figure 2. Research Block Grant (RBG) funding and total research income to all universities**



- Over the same period, applied research and development in universities has grown, from just under half of the total research effort in the early 2000s to 63% in 2020. This shift away from basic research has been particularly prominent in outer metropolitan and regional universities.
- Significant new government funding programs have also prioritised collaboration with the private sector and research commercialisation. The Productivity Commission recently found that these programs are “too narrow in their scope” and privilege commercialisation at the expense of other important pathways to knowledge transfer and research impact.

### Covering the full cost of research

- University research is funded through a number of different kinds of income, none of which covers the full cost of projects, people and infrastructure. Australian Government research granting programs (such as those administered by the ARC, NHMRC and MRFF) do not provide the full project cost – eg. in 2021, the ARC provided 71% of the funding requested for successful Discovery projects. In addition, government programs and agencies (such as the

Trailblazer initiative and agricultural/rural R&D corporations) now also require up-front cash contributions from participating universities, which disadvantages smaller institutions. Industry funding for research projects does not cover the full cost either, unlike standard practice in countries such as the United States. Smaller companies are less able to cover the full costs of research than larger companies and often rely on university co-investment, as do partner organisations in the community and public sectors.

- This means that universities that are increasingly able to cross-subsidise research with other revenue (for example from investments or international education) are more successful in attracting funding, which is then reinforced by the funding formula for the block grant. This is leading to the increasing concentration of university research in a small number of institutions. The Accord discussion paper notes that universities with lower levels of revenue from international students are “less able to invest in innovation and infrastructure”.
- To ensure that research capability is more equitably distributed across the nation and that the spillovers from university research and IP benefit all communities and industries, the Accord should focus on long-term reforms that will support sustainable, high-quality research – both basic and applied – in all universities. This will require whole-of-government coordination and strategy given the role of numerous government portfolios in research and innovation.

#### **Recommendations:**

- The research block grant should be increased to cover the research mission of all universities, linked to the total research funding provided by the Education portfolio at a rate of at least 50 cents to the dollar. A portion of the research block grant should be connected to institution-specific mission-based Accord agreements, to support specialisation and the maintenance of essential national capabilities across the country.
- University research programs funded by other Australian Government portfolios (such as health, defence, agriculture, etc.) should have an agreed rate of support for indirect costs built in, to avoid further erosion of the dual funding system, and remove requirements for cash contributions from universities.
- Funding for university-industry collaboration and research commercialisation should be balanced with funding for engagement and collaboration with the public and community sectors, to ensure the broadest possible translation of university knowledge and expertise. The existing Research Commercialisation programs should be broadened in this way.

#### **Research careers and workforce**

- The major issues in the current Australian academic career structure lie at the lower levels of the academic hierarchy. The stipends provided for PhD candidates are in some cases below the poverty line. Research funding success rates for early-career researchers are low (for example 85% of ARC DECRA applications and 95% of applications to the MRFF early-mid career researcher initiative are unsuccessful) and early-career academics are more likely to be on casual contracts.
- Prospective PhD candidates should enroll at the university best able to support their research topic and timely completion. Instead, candidates must balance decisions about pursuing their research with financial considerations about the availability of top-up

scholarships or supplemental employment. This has led to non-transparent competition between universities for PhD candidates.

- Government and universities should work together to explore options for increasing PhD stipends to ensure that they are above the poverty line and minimum wage. These could include increasing the Research Training Program budget or piloting new models such as embedding employment within the PhD. Embedding one day per week of fixed-term employment at the base academic pay rate into PhDs would better support candidates, align with current programs designed to improve internship/work experience opportunities and reduce the need for ad hoc casual employment in universities.
- Reforms of research block grant funding (see above) should include options to increase security and career pathways for early-career researchers. These could include re-introducing dedicated postdoctoral funding and re-distributing funding from competitive programs into block funding for universities, to support stable careers in areas of distinctive institutional strength and community need.

#### **Recommendations:**

- As part of research block grant reform, explore options for increasing PhD stipends and creating more stable career pathways for early-career researchers.

#### **A more systematic approach to research and innovation**

- Australia currently lacks an institution at a national level (such as UKRI or the Tri-Council in Canada) to take a system-wide view of university research and innovation and to support informed analysis and collaboration across different parts of government.
- In the IRU submission to the ARC Review, we highlighted a number of areas across the research system that require a coordinated approach, such as Indigenous knowledge (see Section 3 below), equity, diversity and inclusion in the research workforce, open access and the evaluation of research quality and impact. These are areas where the ARC could play a valuable leadership role across the broader research system, but if this is not implemented and funded through the ARC Review, we recommend that the Accord take up these issues.
- The IRU believes that universities and government should continue to work together on research impact, to better understand and measure the wide range of positive impacts in the economy and society. This should be incorporated into the ways in which universities are funded through a focus on mission- and place-based agreements (see Section 5 below), with capability in government to assemble a national picture across the system as a whole. Australian programs should incentivise and support university researchers to consider potential pathways to impact at the outset of their research projects, similar to funding for research impact in the UK and for knowledge mobilization in Canada.
- Finally, Australian research and innovation exist within a rapidly changing global landscape. The Australian Government should work with universities to develop a new national capability to map Australian research strengths against national needs and global trends. An open-source evidence-base would improve decisions made by governments, universities and companies and better link universities to the work of the National Reconstruction Fund, Jobs and Skills Australia and other government agencies and priorities.



**Recommendations:**

- Government and universities should work together to build a new capability for system-wide analysis of key issues for research and innovation, including Indigenous knowledge, equity, open access, research impact and global trends.

### 3. Indigenous self-determination, with higher education and research playing a central role in building community capacity and supporting the next generation of Indigenous leaders

[addresses Accord terms of reference 1, 2, 3, 4 and 7]

In 2023, the Australian Government has committed to a referendum on enshrining an Indigenous Voice to Parliament in the Constitution. This is an important opportunity for a more proactive and coordinated approach to the inclusion of Indigenous knowledges across the Australian higher education and research systems.

IRU universities are committed to supporting Indigenous self-determination. Universities have a distinct role through education, research and community engagement in building capacity and the next generation of Indigenous leaders.

This should be a key nation-building priority for Australia for the next 20-30 years. Increasing the capacity of Indigenous people and learning from Indigenous knowledges will deliver significant social, cultural, economic and health/wellbeing benefits to communities across the country.

It will also deliver major benefits to universities through the significant contribution of Indigenous-led teaching and research to quality, impact and innovation in the sector.

In order to deliver on these goals, government and universities should work together to implement specific recommendations for Indigenous higher education and research through mission-based and place-based agreements. Evidence shows that continuing with current policy and funding settings will not shift the dial for Indigenous advancement and that a one-size-fits-all approach will not work.

#### **Supporting Indigenous student success:**

- There has been growth over the last decade in Indigenous student enrolments, but ongoing focus is needed to improve progression and completion rates. Funding for programs focused on Indigenous students (eg. ISSP) has not kept up with the increasing number of Indigenous students in higher education. New approaches should build upon evidence of what works, but additional funding is required for innovative approaches to meet Closing the Gap targets.
- Commonwealth-supported places should be uncapped for all Indigenous students, regardless of where they live (see Section 1 above).
- Indigenous students experience particular issues with accommodation and food security (amid broader cost of living pressures) at higher rates than the total student cohort, as well as additional pressure from compulsory unpaid work placements.
- Rather than focusing targets on population parity at a national level, plans for Indigenous students and staff should take account of significant variation across the country in population demographics. Student support programs should have the flexibility to be tailored to the distinct needs of the local community.
- The review of student income/cost of living support recommended above should include a particular focus on Abstudy and the needs of Indigenous students. Support payments for should be available at the same level to all Indigenous students.

- As recommended above, the JRG package should be reformed, paying particular attention to inequities experienced by Indigenous students in the current system. The 50% pass rule should be abolished.

**Recommendations:**

- Government should create a new fund for innovation and partnerships to improve outcomes for Indigenous students, which could include experimentation with new approaches such as fee-free foundation programs for Indigenous students, targeted scholarships, providing courses online so that students can study in their communities and partnerships with the VET sector and with State and Territory Governments.

**Indigenous-led research:**

- A focus on student equity should also extend to equity in research. This will require additional investment into the future in Indigenous-led research including both grants/projects and the development of the research workforce.
- Current PhD stipends are too low and in some cases below the poverty line. Universities with more resources are offering higher stipends which is driving unfair competition across the sector. A number of universities now offer stipends for Indigenous students at \$50k – this should be guaranteed for all Indigenous PhD students to reduce competition and support higher completion rates.
- Indigenous early-career researchers are given additional responsibilities (with growing evidence of the “cultural load” placed on Indigenous staff) and need additional support to develop their research track records and careers. A new Indigenous Researchers Development Scheme should be introduced, with small grants that build success for early-career researchers to apply to larger programs. A specific DECRA program for Indigenous researchers should also be introduced by the ARC.
- The review of National Science and Research Priorities currently underway (led by the Chief Scientist) includes a focus on strengthening the recognition of the importance of Indigenous knowledge across all government programs. The refreshed priorities should include a clear statement of the contribution of science and research to Indigenous self-determination.

**Recommendations:**

- The ARC should set a target of at least 5% of its total research funding going to Indigenous researchers (through new programs where needed) to match the 5% target set for the Medical Research Endowment Account.

**Indigenous knowledges:**

- Indigenous knowledges should inform curriculum, pedagogy and research innovation across all fields and disciplines.
- This is a major undertaking and should be a focus across universities over the next 20-30 years. The goal should be for all university staff and students to be competent at the cultural interface. This will require new forms of collaboration between Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff and build upon existing good practice and existing AITSL standards and TEQSA requirements.

- Universities and government should also work together to further develop national guidelines on safeguarding and protecting Indigenous interests and knowledges in research, building upon existing AIATSIS guidelines, work by IP Australia, emerging State-based legislation and the work of academics on data sovereignty. This could lead to the establishment of a new administrative centre to provide national coordination for the documentation of Indigenous knowledges and best practice guidance on intellectual property and data access, use, storage and retrieval protocols.

**Recommendations:**

- A new National Indigenous Teaching and Learning Institute should be established to bring together and support the work being done by individual academics and institutions on the ways in which Indigenous knowledges can inform curriculum and pedagogy.

**Indigenous employment, governance and leadership:**

- To deliver on the goals set in mission-based agreements, there will need to be increased Indigenous employment across the university sector. This will also deliver improvements in the curriculum and innovative research.
- Government programs should recognise the importance of academic and professional roles across all levels in universities and require an Indigenous leadership structure rather than a single senior Indigenous staff member.
- With goals and targets set by universities in light of the distinct needs of their local communities, there will also need to be enhanced capability to gather, analyse and disseminate system-wide data on progress towards national goals. An improved and transparent national repository of data on Indigenous higher education and research would then allow individual programs to focus their reporting on specific program goals, reducing administrative overlap and duplication.
- The Behrendt Review in 2012 – a national review focused on Indigenous higher education – was an outcome of the Bradley Review in 2008 and there is value in another national review to provide the platform for future goals and programs.

**Recommendations:**

- Government should reinstate a 50:50 funding split with universities for Indigenous traineeships, to help build employment pathways and pipeline for the future.
- Future governance arrangements for higher education should ensure a strong voice for Indigenous Australians, guiding the development of clear long-term national priorities and goals for Indigenous higher education, and the evidence-base needed to report on progress.

#### 4. A confident approach to engagement with the nations of the Indo-Pacific, strengthened through long-term education and research partnerships

[addresses Accord terms of reference 1, 3, 4, 6 and 7]

Over the last thirty years, the Australian university system has developed into one of the most internationalised in the world, with an excellent international reputation for quality and collaboration. International education and research deliver major social, cultural and economic benefits to communities right across Australia.

The universities in the IRU have a strong commitment to international engagement, with a particular focus on the Indo-Pacific region. Our members were pioneers in the 1970s in establishing multi-disciplinary centres for Asia-Pacific studies in Australian universities and this focus continues in the present day. IRU universities have above-average rates of student satisfaction among international students and also higher than average levels of offshore delivery, with successful examples of high-quality transnational education.

Australian universities are experiencing major shifts in the operating environment for international education and research – not least the COVID-19 pandemic, but also global shifts in demographics and geopolitics and major changes in the distribution of the production of knowledge. Since the early 2000s, total global investment has tripled to over \$2.2 trillion per annum, with growth increasingly located in the Indo-Pacific. The share of global R&D of the traditional powers in the northern hemisphere is declining. International education and research are also increasingly seen through the lens of geopolitical competition and national security concerns.

Within the Australian system, international revenue is increasingly concentrated in a small number of large universities in inner metropolitan capital cities (most prominently in Sydney and Melbourne). The Accord discussion paper notes that “universities with lower revenue from international students are less able to invest in innovation and infrastructure”.

##### **New models of international education**

- Feedback from international students indicates that there is still strong demand for in-person on-campus delivery. On-campus engagement is a valued part of the Australian education experience for international students and it will remain a key focus for universities. International students also enrich the university experience for domestic students and contribute in many ways to local communities.
- There is potential to build upon the experience and success of Australian universities with transnational education to explore new opportunities. New models of transnational education can include programs where students spend time in both countries and could also take advantage of new technologies (and lessons learned from hybrid and online delivery during COVID) to provide new forms of synchronous classroom experience for groups of students in different countries studying together. The current experience of online delivery is still largely focused on asynchronous delivery (with recorded lectures) but there is an opportunity to develop new models with a rich student experience through technology-enabled universities. Australia has a particular advantage over international competitor countries in higher education with its position in the Indo-Pacific and time zone advantage for synchronous classes. Adequate investment in university infrastructure, both physical and

digital (see recommendation in Section 5 below) will be essential to realise these opportunities.

### **Indo-Pacific knowledge and capabilities**

- Into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Australia's knowledge of, and engagement with, the societies of the Indo-Pacific region will be a major determinant of national prosperity, cohesion and security. Deep knowledge of the countries in our region should be seen as a sovereign capability every bit as important as key industry sectors and should be included in government priority-setting. This includes the teaching of Indo-Pacific languages – work is urgently needed to update the mapping of language capabilities to ensure that students in all parts of the country have the opportunity to study them.
- In recent years, the focus in discussions between government and universities about international engagement has been on the risks arising from the changing geopolitical landscape. The collaborative model established in the University Foreign Interference Taskforce (UFIT) is well-respected internationally and has matured to the point where it is now possible to streamline regulation and reporting (see Section 5 below). The aim of government regulation of international engagement by universities should be to support as much open engagement as possible, while putting in place targeted measures, proportionate to risk, to ensure that students, staff and systems are protected.
- More emphasis should now be placed on the benefits to Australia of active engagement with the Indo-Pacific. The opportunity for Australian students to spend time immersed in the societies in our region is a critical part of developing the capabilities that Australia will need in the decades ahead. Building on the success of the New Colombo Plan, government and universities should work together to identify any gaps in existing programs for outbound student mobility and to create opportunities for these to be extended to PhD students over time. In line with other recommendations above, a particular focus should be on equity and on opportunities for under-represented groups, including Indigenous students.
- International cooperation improves the quality and impact of research undertaken by Australian universities. At present, a number of small programs across government support research and innovation collaboration with a range of countries, but there is no coordinated strategy for building connections and capability at scale for Australia's future. In addition, the valuable Endeavour program of scholarships and fellowships was cut. We need to ensure that we are developing long-lasting, reciprocal knowledge partnerships with the countries of our region, to strengthen Australia's innovative capacity, resilience and security for the decades ahead. This should be informed by an improved evidence-base (see Section 2 above) to map Australian research capabilities/strengths against global trends.

### **Recommendations:**

- Government and universities should work together to set a positive long-term vision for the role of education and research in building stronger two-way partnerships across the Indo-Pacific, including a new funding program for knowledge partnerships with key countries and regions such as the Pacific Islands.

### **International education, skills and migration**

- As Australia emerges from the COVID-19 pandemic, there is heightened awareness of national skills shortages in key areas and the important role of international students in the workforce.
- However international education delivers much broader social and cultural benefits for communities across Australia and this should be a focus of the Accord.
- This is an area where ongoing policy reform is required and the IRU supports the recommendations in the submission by Universities Australia to the Australian Government review of the migration system currently underway.
- In particular, greater clarity is needed about the Genuine Temporary Entrant (GTE) requirement and how it relates to international students and the relationship between higher education and migration. In respect to student visas, there should be a more refined “genuine student” approach.

## 5. A system that fosters innovation and diversity, with each university focusing on its distinct mission and community

[addresses Accord terms of reference 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7]

IRU universities were established in two waves in the late 1960s/early 1970s and then in the late 1980s/early 1990s as part of a deliberate government commitment to diversifying and expanding the higher education system. Rather than increasing the size of existing universities, new institutions were created to open up access and develop innovative approaches to teaching and research.

In 2023, innovative and inter-disciplinary approaches are more important than ever – in both education and research – to address future challenges such as the energy transition, the emergence of new technologies such as artificial intelligence, and social cohesion and trust.

Our vision for the Universities Accord is for a system with greater equity in both education and research. Meeting the future needs of the nation will require drawing on the broadest possible range of people, knowledges and ideas from right across Australia. The Productivity Commission’s analysis clearly shows that the changing nature of the Australian economy will require new kinds of innovation, with productivity driven not just by STEM skills and high-tech R&D, but by the integration of diverse kinds of knowledge.

This requires a re-thinking of our current approach to public policy and funding for higher education and research. This will also require new kinds of partnerships between universities, schools and VET institutions.

Under the existing Higher Education Standards Framework, all Australian universities are required to conduct research, provide research-informed teaching and engage in community service. Current Commonwealth funding barely covers the direct costs of teaching domestic students and does not cover the full cost of research. Universities have successfully filled the gap through other sources of revenue such as increased collaboration with industry and increasing numbers of international students.

However this is leading to increased concentration in the system with the dominance of a small number of large metropolitan universities that attract an increasing share of student enrolments and research investment. This trend has been exacerbated by the growing influence of the global rankings systems which were introduced twenty years ago.

This trend runs counter to the principles of equity, balance, diversity and innovation which inform IRU recommendations to the Accord. Reforms to the current system should support sustainable, high-quality public universities across the country that can meet the needs and priorities of their communities.

### **Mission-based Accord agreements between universities and government**

- Under the current requirements of the Higher Education Support Act (2003), universities must enter into a mission-based compact with the Commonwealth, which provides a “strategic framework” for the relationship between government and the university. However university operations are then driven by a range of different government programs and funding formulas across multiple portfolios.



- By making greater use of mission-based agreements, government and universities in partnership can increase stability in the system, reduce unproductive competition and create room for additional innovation and diversification. Evidence shows that a one-size-fits-all approach will not be effective in making progress on key equity targets, delivering the skills needed for the future or driving innovation.
- This approach would build upon the existing National Institutes Funding program, under which mission-based funding is provided to the ANU, University of Melbourne, University of Tasmania and Batchelor Institute.
- Multiple smaller government funding programs should be combined into a larger pool to be allocated through the mission-based agreement process. For example, the HEPPP, IRLSAF and NPILF programs (all of which have different reporting requirements) could be combined into mission-based agreements to support goals for access, equity, student success and employability. Elements of the research block grant should also be incorporated to place more emphasis on distinct missions and research profiles and less on national funding formulas.
- Rather than setting a Maximum Basic Grant Amount (MBGA) for each university as is done in the current system, mission-based agreements should set a minimum base funding amount for a five-year period, to provide greater certainty for student places and planning stability against agreed goals. Universities could then bid for negotiated additional funding for growth places as needed (which could be returned if not used).
- Institution- and community-specific agreements with a more stable basis would create room for increased flexibility (eg. for the allocation of student places) within an agreed accountability framework. This would mean for example that a university could move Commonwealth-supported places to meet emerging need, for example allocating more of its resources to places for enabling programs. It would also create more flexibility for innovative partnerships with the VET sector.

#### **Recommendations:**

- Institution-specific mission-based Accord agreements should be the primary basis for allocating public funding to universities in line with agreed priorities, with universities reporting publicly on outcomes and impact.

#### **Governance, accountability and regulation**

- IRU universities are all established under State and Territory legislation, with legislation and regulation at the national level also increasingly governing their operations. Following the Bradley Review, TEQSA was established in 2011 as the single national quality assurance and regulatory agency for higher education.
- In recent years there has been a proliferation of regulation and reporting required by government, which often cuts across the Federal and State/Territory responsibilities of universities. For example, the management of new risks in international engagement by universities is covered by the UFIT guidelines, the requirements of the Foreign Interference Transparency Scheme, the requirements of the Foreign Arrangements Scheme and reporting to multiple government departments and agencies including Home Affairs, Education and TEQSA.

- This creates an unfunded and disproportionate compliance burden on universities, with the same regulation and reporting applying to all universities regardless of their size or profile.
- Increased use of institution-specific mission-based Accord agreements has the potential to drive a more effective approach to university governance, regulation and reporting. Universities would be accountable to the public and to all levels of government for setting and delivering on a clear five-year plan. At a national level, there would still be a need to ensure that diverse mission-based agreements add up to a unified system. This would require an analytical capability to identify and review cross-cutting system issues, which would then inform government negotiations with universities.

#### **Recommendations:**

- That government initiate a systematic review of university regulation and reporting that covers the requirements of both Federal and State/Territory governments, with the aim of simplifying the existing regime and reducing duplication.
- The Accord considers the most effective governance model for the future of the Australian university system, with a dedicated body to provide leadership and oversight and provide independent advice to government.

#### **Place-based partnerships**

- Community engagement is an important priority for the universities in the IRU. While increasing collaboration with industry over the last decade by 260%, IRU members have also maintained high levels of collaboration with partners in the public and community sectors. The founding legislation of all IRU universities includes a strong focus on serving the community.
- The Higher Education Standards Framework (criterion 13) requires an Australian university to demonstrate “strong civic leadership, engagement with its local and regional communities and a commitment to social responsibility”. The Bradley Review considered the question of whether there should be a “third stream” of government funding to support the community service mission of universities. It concluded that community engagement should be built into all education and research and that public funding for these two activities should be increased. However subsequent policy decisions (such as the JRG and the reduction of the research block grant) have eroded this commitment.
- Universities undertake a wide range of activities in addition to teaching and research that serve their communities, such as making sports facilities accessible, maintaining cultural collections and protecting endangered species through their property management. Deepening community engagement improves access and equity for students and the quality and impact of research through knowledge transfer for the public good.
- The development of institution-specific mission-based Accord agreements should explicitly include the role of each university in civic leadership and community engagement. This would provide an opportunity for universities to engage with government on strategies for delivering on the distinct needs of their community.
- A place-based approach also goes beyond the mission of the individual university to its role in the education and training ecosystem. Increased focus on place and community will drive

innovation in collaboration between universities and between universities and vocational education and training (VET) institutions. Rather than breaking qualifications and funding up into smaller and smaller pieces, a focus on place-based needs creates a larger sense of shared opportunity.

- A place-based approach should focus in the first instance on the education and skills needs of communities and regions, while also drawing in university research as needed. It should include the relevant levels of government, as well as industry and community groups.
- Place-based funding should be targeted in the first instance to geographical areas of greatest need, to strengthen a systematic response to tackling equity and entrenched disadvantage.

#### **Recommendations:**

- That government consider a new place-based program to fund innovation in tackling disadvantage. The program would require partnerships between universities and other parts of the education and training system, as well as with the relevant levels of government and partners in industry and the community, to enhance equity, meet skills needs and drive economic and social development.

#### **Infrastructure for the future**

- Building upon the success of the NCRIS program for research infrastructure, there is an opportunity to extend this approach to new kinds of physical and digital infrastructure in universities to underpin the next generation of education, research and innovation. For example, supporting new models of international education through synchronous online and hybrid teaching and learning with partners in the Indo-Pacific region (see Section 4 above).
- There is a role for government to address market failures in innovation and to ensure that infrastructure and opportunity are distributed equitably across the country. To support action on climate change and Australia's energy transition, government could provide the initial investment (with revenue from existing energy exports) for a pool of funds for university infrastructure to help drive nation-wide change. By requiring bids for infrastructure funding to demonstrate cutting-edge sustainability features and partnerships across levels of government, industry and community groups, universities across the country could catalyse community-level responses.

#### **Recommendations:**

- Government should introduce a new investment fund for university infrastructure to underpin the next generation of education, research and innovation, linked to sustainability targets to support Australia's energy transition and distributed equitably across the country.

#### **Improving data and analysis to underpin ongoing reform**

- Finally, the Accord should also make recommendations about areas where existing data, evidence and analytical capabilities are insufficient to support ongoing reform in areas of priority. Throughout our submission, we have highlighted a number of areas where existing data on Australia's higher education and research system is inadequate:
  - Better evidence/evaluation of what works in supporting students from under-represented backgrounds.

- Improving definitions of equity groups, to better account for intersectionality and compounded disadvantage.
- Better (place-based) data on future student demand and skills needs.
- Capacity for system-wide analysis of Australian research and innovation, informed by better data on key national sovereign capabilities in global context.
- Encouraging innovation in evidence and evaluation that go beyond current targets and rankings systems to include non-economic and public good impacts.

## About the IRU

The IRU comprises seven public research-intensive universities across Australia. The history of our member universities goes back to the late 1960s and early 1970s when, under both Liberal and Labor governments, there was an expansion of new forms of higher education and research to meet the needs of the nation. As capital cities and regional centres grew, new universities and Colleges of Advanced Education were established to open up opportunities for under-served communities.

From their founding, IRU members pioneered new forms of inter-disciplinary teaching and research, for example in environmental and Asian studies. Today, our members are multi-campus universities with a continued commitment to sustainability. Our shared focus is inclusive education and innovative research that delivers impact for our communities.

The Australian Universities Accord is another important moment for innovation in higher education and research, and for partnership between universities and government. The IRU is committed to constructive and evidence-based policy engagement and provides the ideal test-bed for trialling new approaches.