



Lifting the bar for Australian universities: global ambitions
Response to the Australian Universities Accord Discussion Paper
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1. Australian universities and the grand challenges of our times

The Accord Discussion Paper (DP) states that “Australia needs the expertise, innovation and combined impact of higher education providers to help lead efforts to ameliorate and collectively adapt to climate change and the development of more resilient and sustainable solutions” (p11). This ambition is both bold in intent and essential to human survival. Yet there are no overt questions posed on these matters in the DP. Furthermore, the overall focus is at the level of national ambition, neglecting the global grand challenges that can be addressed by higher education. Australian universities should not ignore these global challenges, for at least three reasons. First, as the DP makes clear, Australian universities must help address the wicked problems and grand challenges of our times. Second (see below), it would be an international embarrassment to deliver an Accord that is entirely national-centric in its ambition. Third, Australian universities already deliver in this respect, with global leadership, demonstrated through established measures and global assessment. But if these matters are not prominent in the Accord between Universities and the Australian people then there is the risk that they will be neglected by other priorities.

I am the Pro Vice-Chancellor for Research at Western Sydney University. For eight years I have been responsible for global rankings, and I have especially followed the Times Higher Education (THE) Impact rankings. The Impact rankings measure university performances to achieve the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and I draw on data from those rankings in this submission. Western Sydney University performed very well in these rankings (top 20 since the ranking inception), and it may be said that this submission has a vested interest in proclaiming the virtues of these measures. However, Western is very proud of our performance in these rankings, as it reflects the strategic mission of the University, underpinned by our act of establishment



which mandates that Western be a global university for its region (1997; 8[2a;3a]). Western Sydney University asserts (see submission to Accord) that Australian Universities ought be assessed and resourced according to the extent to which they fulfill their public mission.

2. A global Accord: beyond national insularity

Australian universities are strong international collaborators. The DP reports that 61% of Australian scholarly publications involved an international co-authorship in 2022. This was higher than the EU (46%) and the US (39%) (p.20). This global orientation underpins the strong quality of Australian scholarship, as well as its impactful nature. In teaching and learning, and in research, Australian Universities have delivered social and environmental justice.

In March 2023, the Asia-Pacific Association for International Education conference was held in Bangkok (Field, *CMM*, 22.03.23). This teaching and learning forum has a focus on the Sustainable Development Goals in the context of transnational education (TNE). Australian universities, notably Griffith University, are prominent in the organisation of this event, partnering and networking throughout our region. And the event is supported by Austrade and other agencies within the Australian federal government. Western Sydney University reported on our partnership with the University of Economics Ho Chi Minh City (UEH) and IIE International since 2019 to enrol and educate displaced students from Myanmar. As Clair Field noted: “The Vietnamese government issues the students with visas and WSU and its partner of 15 years, UEH, provide students with a WSU degree on the university’s Vietnam campus” (Field, *CMM*, 22.03.23).

Australia is fulfilling an important leadership role with these TNE endeavours. Australian TNE must be more than a rapacious focus on student recruitment. Recent campus developments in India and Indonesia offer the prospect for a more rounded international engagement. In March, Western Sydney University offered masterclasses to senior Indonesian university staff on driving the sustainability agenda, and engaging with the THE Impact rankings. The Indonesian Government have encouraged their universities to focus upon social and climate justice, and to establish SDG Centres. For example, in Surabaya there is the SDG Center established at Universitas Airlangga in 2022 (<https://sdgscenter.unair.ac.id/>). It would be regrettable if the Accord between



Australian universities and our government and public partners neglected this emerging global commitment by universities to social and climate justice.

It could be argued that Australia university commitment to social and climate justice is particularly important in the South Pacific. Again, there is little in the Accord about the role that universities must take in capacity building with our neighbouring states in the Pacific. The Australian Government is a principal donor to the University of the South Pacific Grants Commission (close to \$10M annually), and yet there is little by way of corresponding policy or programs to leverage that investment. Australian Universities should be deeply involved in this important capacity building. The Accord makes no reference to what agreements are needed to steer universities towards that interest.

In 2022, the discontinuation of the scheduled 2024 round of the Engagement and Impact (EI) research assessment was announced. The format and role of this assessment of university impact is now a matter for consideration by the current ARC Review. There is no clarity as to how impact will be assessed. Research Impact continues to be kept separate from Research Excellence. This segregation is harmful to the Impact agenda. It would be better to embed impact within research quality assessment, such as the trend in the UK research assessment. The research impact agenda in Australia is both without a plan and is rudderless. Measurement of universities against the UN SDGs offers one way forward.

3. Australian universities and the SDGs

There is too little reference in the DP to the research priorities relevant to living sustainably. The Accord should foreground the role of universities in preparing for living in a carbon neutral world, and for enhanced socio-economic, gender and racial justice. The globally established means and measures for advancing these are the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The 17 SDGs, approved by the UN on 25 September 2015, replaced the previous Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The SDGs aim to end global poverty, hunger and inequality, take action on climate change and the environment, improve access to health and education and build strong institutions and partnerships. But the SDGs purposefully pushed responsibility to all corners of the globe, moving away from the MDG emphasis on the



development challenges faced by the majority world. This includes the industrialised world and universities.

Four years ago, the Times Higher Education (THE) undertook to generate SDG measures related to University operations, engagement, research and teaching and learning. The ranking involves over 240 data points. THE demonstrated great foresight and courage to develop what are called the 'Impact rankings', and to spotlight the role for Universities. This was very much in the spirit and intent of the SDGs. And, these rankings are inspiring real action globally.

The THE Impact ranking is a mechanism through which Australian university's global responsibilities could be tracked. Australian universities have done remarkably well in the THE Impact rankings. This is linked to Australia's leading rate of international collaboration, and a culture of contributing to the public good. In a presentation to Australasian Research Management Society (ARMS) in June 2022, Duncan Ross from THE, characterised Australian and New Zealand (ANZ) universities as having had an "exceptional performance" in the THE Impact Rankings. Of the thirty-three ANZ universities participating, 24 had received a top 100 ranking (72.7%). This was the best continental and national performance relative to participation. North American universities were the next best continent at 33%, followed by northern European universities at 29% (see Figures 1 and 2).

Australian universities were the best in the world on three of the specific SDGs. Western Sydney university was first for SDG6 Clean Water and Sanitation, the University of Canberra was first for SDG10 Reduced Inequalities, and the University of Tasmania was first for SDG13 Climate Action. There were 16 instances of Australian universities being ranked in the top 5 in the world, including Australian Catholic University being second for SDG 3 Good Health and Wellbeing. Fourteen Australian universities were among the world top 100 in SDGs 10 (Reduced Inequality) and 15 (Life on Land), and there were 16 Australian universities in the top 100 for SDG 11 Sustainable Cities and Consumption. Between one in six, and one seven, of the World's best performing universities on social and climate justice are Australian.

Australian universities' contributions to the UN SDGs is a mechanism to enhance global responsibility and eschew a nation-centric insularity in setting our research and teaching ambitions. They are an obvious mechanism to track and encourage Australian university commitment, and when measured, such



as though the THE Impact ranking, Australia fares well. The Accord would do well to adopt these measures to track university commitment to the public good.

Figures 1 & 2: Australian university performance in THE Impact ranking, relative to other continents, 2022

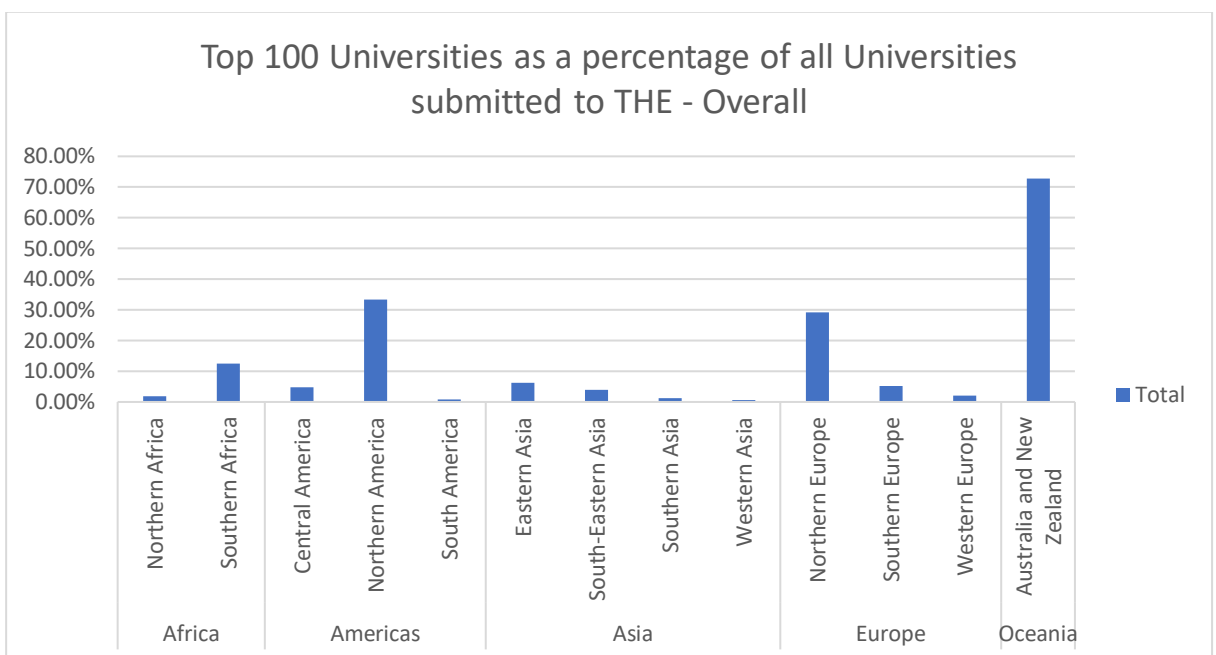
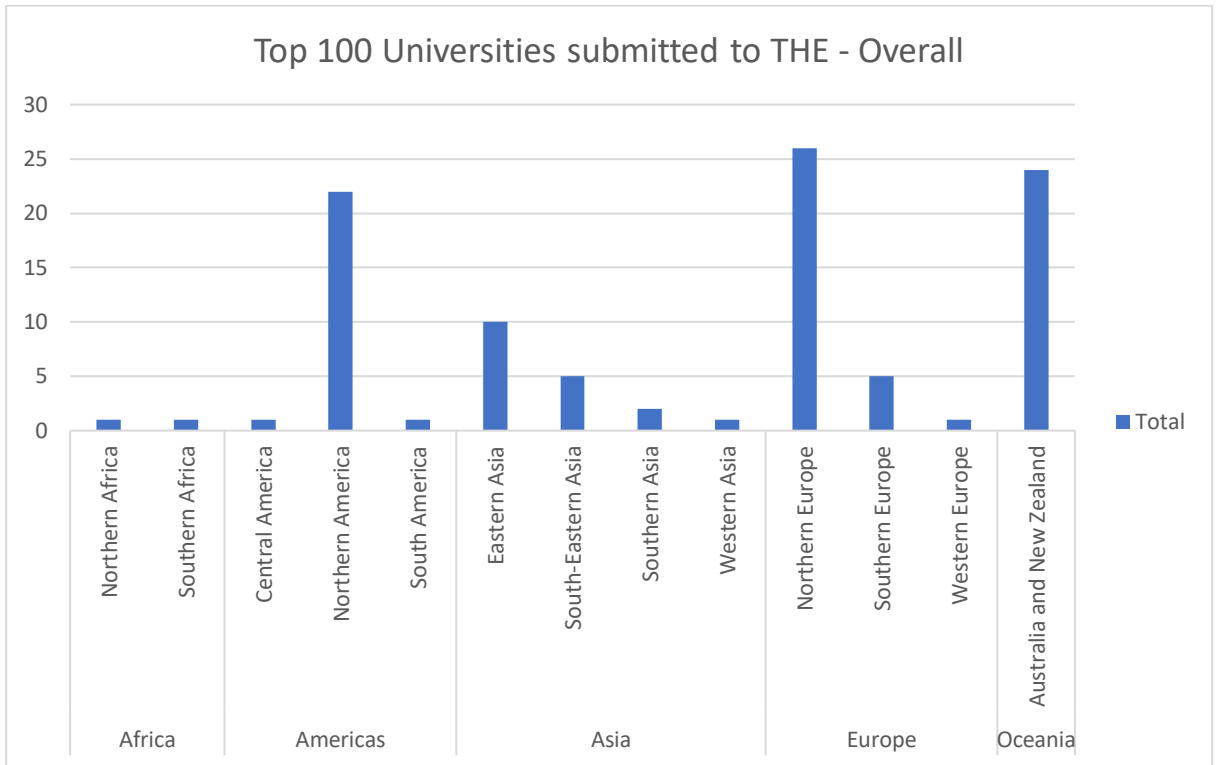




Table 1: Australian universities in top ranks, by SDGs, 2022

	SDG	Number 1	Top 5	Top 20	Top 100
1	No Poverty			1	3
2	Zero Hunger				5
3	Good Health and Wellbeing		3	6	13
4	Quality Education			1	4
5	Gender Equality		1	3	10
6	Clean Water and Sanitation	1	3	7	12
7	Affordable and Clean Energy			3	11
8	Decent Work & Economic Growth		1	4	11
9	Industry, Innov. & Infrastructure				4
10	Reduced Inequalities	1	3	3	14
11	Sustainable Cities & Communities			3	16
12	Responsible Consumption & Prod		2	2	9
13	Climate Action	1	1	3	10
14	Life Below Water			5	12
15	Life on Land			3	14
16	Peace, Justice & Strong Institutions			1	7
17	Partnerships for the Goals		2	3	16
	Overall	1			
	All SDGs	3	16	48	171

