I am currently employed at The Australian National University, where I have worked for the last 12.5 years supporting current students’ transition and succeed at university. I am also a social researcher, investigating the experiences of traditionally underrepresented students at elite institutions, and the impact of participating in orientation programs on an individual’s sense of belonging and academic outcomes. The below submission is based on both my experience in the workforce, and my research.

Q1: How should an Accord be structured and focused to meet the challenges facing Australia’s higher education system? What is needed to overcome limitations in the current approach to Australian higher education? The sector is disjointed across Australia, and there are not clear ways for secondary schools, teachers and students, to clearly understand the range of options and pathways that are open to students. As an example, we had a student who went to secondary school in South Australia. Their teachers were only aware of universities within South Australia and how to support students applying through SATAC. This means that the students in that school missed out on even considering attending university elsewhere, many didn’t know that it was an option, and with our student when they did know where they wanted to apply their school wasn’t equipped to support them. There should be not just consistent processes for applying to university, but support provided to schools so that they can appropriate support their students consider all of their options. This is particularly relevant when considering students from traditionally underrepresented backgrounds.

Q3: What should the long-term target/s be for Australia’s higher education attainment by 2030 and 2040, and how should these be set and adjusted over time? These targets need to not just be about the number of participants, but ensuring diversity of those attending and achieving through higher education. It might not mean that we need the numbers to go up, but that we need the diversity of the cohorts to expand. If we don’t have clear visibility over that, we’ll continue to congratulate ourselves as a sector for meeting our target when it continues to be traditional students who are attending. There also needs to be recognition that not everyone needs to attend higher education, so how do we acknowledge the importance and validity of other forms of education so people don’t feel less than because they have undertaken a role or career that doesn’t require higher education.

Q5: How do the current structures of institutions, regulation and funding in higher education help or hinder Australia’s ability to meet these challenges? What needs to change? While the current breakdown of HECS bands claims that it’s to encourage more people to undertake study in fields where there are employability needs it is incredibly elitist because it often results in those from low-SES backgrounds to shy away from high-paying and high influence degrees because they are the ones with the biggest debt attached. These are the places where we need to encourage a diversity of voices and experiences, but the way it is currently set up we’re diminishing it and will ultimately stifle our potential for innovation and societal change.

Q6: What are the best ways to achieve and sustain future growth in Australian higher education, given the changing needs of the population and the current pressures on public funding? By making higher education accessible to all and compelling to attend, then individuals will want to go. This includes universities and government organisations working to ensure housing, tuition and cost of living needs are met for diverse students so they can attend university without missing out on the key outside of the classroom engagement which has inside the classroom impacts. This also includes ensuring the student experience we provide on campus can rival that of the experience in places like the US where there is a sense of community, school pride, and an appreciation for the various ways students can connect with each other and their university community. Make attending university such a positive experience with clear and achievable benefits that individuals will want to attend.

Q7: How should the mix of providers evolve, considering the size and location of existing institutions and the future needs of communities? Consideration of the community college approach of both offering a shorter degree that still supports higher education, and providing opportunities for students to skill build before transferring into a longer and potentially more complicated degree. Some universities have partnerships that offer these opportunities, but a greater commitment to this type of system with universities collaborating and partnering with community college style education could increase the number of students who feel they are ready to succeed at university. This is something that is likely to benefit those who are traditionally underrepresented in university, the way it does in the US.

Q8: What reforms are needed to promote a quality learning environment and to ensure graduates are entering the labour market with the skills and knowledge they need? A key element missing from this is the quality professional staff who also influence and impact on the learning experience inside and out of the classroom. This is not only about teachers and academics, but about uplifting the knowledge and experience of staff across the sector to understand the foundational building blocks which influence students during their time at university. Citing back to the US, higher education professional staff have a competent understanding across theories on student retention, engagement, and development as they implement, run and evaluate programs related to this. In order to actually ensure we full support the quality learning at university, and prepare students for their future careers, the focus cannot only be on what happens inside the classroom. There is a reason high impact programs (Kuh, 2008) discusses programs and experiences outside of the classroom, as well as ones that see academics and professional staff collaborating to share their knowledge and experience for the benefit of students. Research has demonstrated that the non-academic aspects of campus can positively influence students’ lives including their engagement with various areas of the University (for example: Astin, 1993; Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005; Kift, 2009; Krause and Coates, 2008), intention to persist (for example: Tinto, 1993; Walton and Cohen , 2007 and 2011; Strayhorn, 2018; Kift, 2009; Krause and Coates, 2008), academic outcomes (for example: Kuh, 2008; Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005; Walton and Cohen , 2007 and 2011; Strayhorn, 2018), and wellbeing (for example: Henchy; Hurtado and Carter, 1997). Given the potential impact these programs and activities can have, further support for staff involved is required. Another consideration is the merit of the liberal arts based education system, where all students are taught key skills that are applicable to careers across the board. This includes cross-disciplinary firstyear courses that embed skills to develop higher level writing, critical thinking and reflecting, team work, and cross-disciplinary collaboration. This is often done as a first-year seminar course and has demonstrated significant benefits for students (Berry, 2014). This would assist students with key skills, assist them in transitioning into the university environment (often these courses are taught during first semester as a way to embed transition pedagogy into the curriculum), and facilitate their social connections which research has shown supports student retention and academic outcomes.

Q17: How should better alignment and connection across Australia’s tertiary education system be achieved? This might sound minor but having an active professional staff association of VET and HE with sector wide events, workshops, training, conferences, etc. will ensure that staff at a range of levels connect together to share ideas, collaborate, encourage each other and discuss best practice. This is outside of the organisations aimed at managers and senior leaders, the general focus of existing higher education associations (for example: ATEM). It’s often a lot of effort to try and find the right people at other institutions to connect with when you want to ask questions about how they do something, to compare best practice or ask for feedback. If we facilitate opportunities for this to occur regularly, the connections between institutions will be strengthened because the staff doing the day-to-day work will have each other to share ideas with, instead of relying on senior managers and executives to connect institutions together.

Q28: What is needed to increase the number of people from under-represented groups applying to and prepared for higher education, both from school and from other pathways? There isn’t a one size fits all answer for this, it depends on the individual’s circumstances, the community, their education, everything. What is needed is authentic collaborations with communities to determine their needs, who can add value, and co-design the intervention to support this. There would be a series of shared resources that could be created for schools, students and their families, for them to understand what participating in higher education means, alongside checklists that make sure they consider the various aspects of undertaking the study, and selecting the right institution.

Q29: What changes in provider practices and offerings are necessary to ensure all potential students can succeed in their chosen area of study? Similar to above, this is institution based. It depends on their current student community breakdown, how they market themselves, where they put effort, etc. Considering G08 institutions, we could put in places pre-commencement programs such as summer bridging programs to support those students who may need additional support to be academically successful. These programs would need to be at no cost to the student, and might actually need the institution to pay for them so the student participants when they’re missing out on earning the income they need to live during the school year. Students who leave university are most likely to do so within their first year of study (Upcraft et al., 2005), and the transition period is when there is the greatest opportunity for positive impact on students and their experience ensuring they are set up for success (for example: Burgette & Magun-Jackson, 2008; Della-Piana et al., 2001; Williford et al., 2001; Wischusen & Wischusen, 2019).

Q30: How can governments, institutions and employers assist students, widen opportunities and remove barriers to higher education? In addition to money, which will be addressed below, highlighting the value to a truly diverse university campus and ensuring all students feel wanted and welcomed. Ensure we move away from a deficit language which places the burden on traditionally underrepresented students, and focus on the various strengths and capital that students bring with them (Yosso, 2005). This also means ensuring that the university communities are, in fact, ones that authentically welcome the diversity of students (Hurtado and Carter, 1997). Educating staff and those students who don’t come from traditionally underrepresented backgrounds, facility opportunities for students to connect, and engage across all socioeconomic levels for the benefit of the whole community (Ostrove and Long, 2007), most especially for those from low-socioeconomic backgrounds (Álvarez-Rivadulla et al., 2022). Also, ensuring families and communities are involved, so the decision and information is not solely with the student, but involves the whole family supporting and encouraging them. It’s been demonstrated that particularly undergraduate students will still rely on their family members for information and advice, even when those family members have had no experience in university themselves. Institutions should include, support and equip those families in order to continue acting as a support network. This should also reduce the challenge that students sometimes feel pressured to leave university because their family does not understand the value and pushes back on their attendance (Morton, 2019). Q31: How can the costs of participation, including living expenses, be most effectively alleviated? Increase Centrelink payments such as Youth Allowance so that students are able to study with minimal need to work as this is often the burden falling on low-SES students who then miss out on key engagement which would benefit their academic, social, and career outcomes. Maybe try something like the Ser Pilo Paga in Columbia where the government provided 10,000 forgivable loans per year for the 4 years the program ran to support low-SES students participate in university where they weren’t able to previously (Álvarez-Rivadulla et al., 2022). Another option is to work with communities to organise community based living options with intergenerational housing. This has been done in a number of location and range of ways from being privatised and mainly left to the individuals to find each other with rent still exchanged (https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/2022/07/15/multigenerational-housing-roommates-nesterly-senior/) to organised via a community centre with rent being free in exchange for community engagement and sharing (https://theconversation.com/heres-why-some-dutchuniversity-students-are-living-in-nursing-homes-68253)

Q32: How can best practice learning and teaching for students from under-represented groups be embedded across the higher education system, including the use of remote learning? Maybe we need to consider Australian wide support, research, best practice, etc. that can coordinate centralised support for students from traditionally underrepresented students no matter how or where they are studying. This could include ensuring that there are scholarships or grants to support those students obtain the resources (computers, internet, etc.) they need to undertake remote study. This could be similar to the Office for Students in the UK, which advocates and supports students without being affiliated or biased towards one particular institution. Additionally, centralised or sector wide training so academics and professional staff understand the experience, know what engagement and support is effective, and have best practice guides in order to implement and evaluate appropriate supports. While there exist organisations like EPHEA, and new degrees to support additional learning, it is still a difficult space to access and understand. Added to that, general staff often have less capacity in order to focus on undertaking this type of training. Essentially, putting in place some sector wide information and sharing will support the visibility and utilisation of best practice, as well as encourage staff to innovate off of current best practice (this tied in with a professionalization of professional staff could really help everyone as staff would be able to utilise the building blocks of theories, alongside an understanding of students and best practice, to innovate in an intentional and useful manner).

Q39: What reforms are needed to ensure that all students have a quality student experience? A professionalization of the workforce to ensure staff have the understanding of the student experience, as well as the skills to evaluate and innovate to ensure a quality one is delivered regardless of what institution someone is at. Staff are missing the skills to research, evaluate and improve upon what they are doing at the same level that their US counterparts are able to undertake. They need the context, and theory on various student life related topics, in order to innovate change, have true ownership over programs, and contribute to the research and increase our knowledge as a sector. There is a missed opportunity for Australia to be making a concentrated and active contribution to the sector. This requires a commitment of time and effort from the entire sector, including the Government, to ensure this is accessible and achievable for all professional staff.

Q40: What changes are needed to ensure all students are physically and culturally safe while studying? A professional body that advocates for students, supports staff with training and development, and showcases best practice for visibility and further utilisation.