Australian Universities Accord

**Increasing participation of working age adults in higher education**

This response to the discussion paper focuses on the skill formation and future education/development of working age Australians. As the discussion paper indicates more needs to be done to include a greater percentage of these Australian adults in higher education. It is clear from data such as that provided through the Program of International Assessment for Adult Competence (PIAAC) that all kinds and classifications of Australian workers need to engage in nonroutine problem-solving as part of their regular work (Billett 2015). This kind of problem-solving is that often associated with the outcomes of higher education programs and the highest level of that requirement is reported by workers classified as technicians, not the professions. Whether all of these kinds and classifications of Australian workers need to participate in higher education is an open question, but it indicates the degree by which work requirements (reported in discussion paper (3.2.1) and ABS 2011 and 12) indicate that the majority of these workers require the kinds of learning that have been associated with higher education.

But, more broadly, there are good reasons to be more inclusive of working age Australians for reasons of:

access and equity – making more accessible and relevant higher education experiences for these Australians;

need for employability – as the report indicates, those in the contemporary workforce require levels of occupational knowledge commensurate with higher education outcomes to maintain their employability, including their advancement;

sovereign capacity – given the challenges Australia faces in being more self-reliant is provisions of goods and services, developing further the capacities of working age is essential to address national sovereign risk; and

employers – those will employ increasingly want workers of that kind as indicated in the discussion paper

Yet, as the discussion paper and current ABS data indicates, adult Australians as they age are increasingly less likely to engage in formalised educational provisions such as those provided through universities, preferring non-accredited educational provisions – 5 million compared to 21.1 participating in programs covered by the AQF (ABS 2021). Of those, 91% report engaging in these studies for improving the skills they need for their job, as opposed to 5% who nominated undertaking that education to secure employment. Noteworthy is that these adults’ participation in university programs has declined and at 60% (this discussion paper) those in coursework masters represent the lowest level of participation against overseas students of the three categories of degrees discussed in this paper. Coursework masters could be seen as the most likely professional development degree. The concerns here are that:

* these adults are not engaging with the expertise and resources available in and through Australian universities;
* the cost and duration of these courses may inhibit participation in university programs, particular for part-time students;
* tertiary education institutions may not be offering the kinds of courses that these adults want to support their employability;
* higher education provisions may not be well aligned with the demands of these adults who balance work, family, community and education commitments;
* key reasons for not participating are lack of time and cost (ABS 2021) and
* higher education provisions do not optimally acknowledge or accommodate the occupational learning that occurs in and across these adults working lives.

Some suggestions here are as follows:

* Consider the reintroduction of one year full-time masters (i.e. two years part-time) that were previously popular and redress the calamity caused by changing these degrees to 2 years thereby making them twice as expensive and longer thereby reducing participation;

Case study – Griffith used to have a 1 year Master of Training and Development degree, which was popular in Australia and Singapore as a 2 year part-time degree for working age adults in that sector. However, when changes to the AQF occurred it was required to be 2 year full-time equivalent, which doubled the cost and duration and led to it being withdrawn because of decline in enrolments.

* Consider reducing the cost of degrees associated with professional development/advancement, particularly those not leading to professional registration, as there is limited financial incentive to engage in these degrees, and individuals will only do so out of personal commitment.
* Take a critical perspective on micro-credentialling, most working age adults I have surveys want a qualification of some kind and so nested approaches – grad cert to (shorter) masters programs might be worth considering.
* Hybrid provisions of adults’ professional development programs (i.e., mixture of f2f and online increasing be is preferred in terms of accessibility and effectiveness) as the evidence indicates that adults have become familiar with electronically mediated educational provisions (Billett et al 2021).
* University provisions (i.e., modes, timetabling, activities and interactions) might be more aligned to the needs of working adults (e.g. weekend intensives, on-line engagements during courses.
* Those provisions shaped by concept of ‘time jealous’ students who want relevant programs, so optimising time and having assessments related to their work practices are options.

**References**

Billett, S (2015) Work, discretion and learning: Processes of learning and development at work, International Journal of Training Research 13 (3): 214-230

Billett, S., Leow, A., Chua, S & Le, H A (2022) Changing attitudes about online continuing education and training: A Singapore case study, *Journal of Adult and Continuing Education*.