***TOWARDS AN ETHICAL NETWORKED UNIVERSITY***

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The current review of Australia’s higher education sector seeks ’to drive lasting and transformative reform in Australia’s higher education system’.

The terms of reference for the review call for a higher education system that meets Australia’s needs for knowledge, now and in the future, while attending to access and opportunity, affordability, accountable governance and community concerns, and articulation with vocational education, quality, and sustainability, while delivering innovation and capability.

We offer the view that to meet several terms of reference, it will be necessary to explore ethical dimensions inherent in them. For example, to develop a system that answers questions of access, which is currently very uneven, requires serious reflection on the ethic of equity. This is clearly visible in relation to the recruitment of overseas students: are we serving them and their home countries ethically if the primary purpose of having them in Australia is to generate university income? Similarly, accountability cannot be achieved unless there is strong commitment to honesty in governance and transparency.

We also assert that it will be critically important, as information technology progressively overcomes the tyranny of distance, to consider the best configuring for universities of the future and assess what is the optimal balance between centralised and decentralised models. Decentralised models have the advantage of opening higher education to students remote from large cities and reducing the need for extensive travel and the size of the institutional footprint.

To address these matters, we offer a hypothetical – a network of university elements, geographically disperse, multidisciplinary in nature, founded on adherence to ethical principles and responsive to community needs. We imagine how such an institution might operate, viewing it from the standpoint of students, academics including vice-chancellors, managers, and support staff. We explore its political appearance and conclude with an assessment of its likely costs.

**The ethical university**

The hypothetical ethical university would not only ensure that the practices of their staff and students are ethical with regard to their interactions and research integrity, but that its organisations are also following ethical principles. These principles would be based on the four pillars commonly supporting the resolution of ethical concerns in healthcare: do good, do no harm, respect autonomy, and pursue justice[[1]](#endnote-1).

**The distributed university**

The distributed (networked) university would ensure that education is provided close to where it is needed, reducing local and global inequalities in access[[2]](#endnote-2). It would avoid the limitations of a highly centralised university in which capital investment and operations are concentrated on a central campus. It would emphasise local relevance and foster the distribution of knowledge creation.

Virtual or physical hubs distributed over long distances would improve opportunities for regional and international access. It would allow for changes in learning needs over the life that are locally relevant. It would have a low impact on the environment. It would emphasise the distribution of trust in place of managerialism, and of collaboration in place of competition. It would progressively pivot to online learning. Its focus on distributing education online, would enable it to adapt to the changes in the ways we work and learn today, to take advantage of the Fourth Industrial Revolution[[3]](#endnote-3).

Let’s see how the ethical distributed university suits the needs of various stakeholders.

*The student:*

“In order to respect the principle of autonomy, I can choose the courses for my interests and future career options[[4]](#endnote-4). I can choose the timescale over which I take the courses[[5]](#endnote-5). I can live and work anywhere while accessing courses.

“For my university experience to do no harm, I appreciate the move towards a low carbon footprint.

”For my university to pursue justice, as I live in a rural town, I can continue to access most of my courses online, and attend a regional hub for those activities which require face to face contact[[6]](#endnote-6). This will encourage me to enrol in university in the first place, and I am more likely to remain in a rural environment after graduation.”

*The academic:*

“In order to respect the principle of autonomy, I am pleased to be trusted to have control over my professional activities including course development and delivery and to have a collegiate relationship with university administration. Intrusive managerialism has gone[[7]](#endnote-7). I can expect the same respect and academic rewards for my teaching as for my research.

“For my university to do good, and to pursue justice, I appreciate the opportunity to practice in a distributed university environment. Its multimodal operation, which requires some in-person training or assessment, with the remainder being exclusively online is satisfying for me as teacher as well as for my students.

“I enjoy using high quality open access educational materials in my teaching, making the material I produce available online to other academics in other places[[8]](#endnote-8)[[9]](#endnote-9). This fits with the evidence that online is not inferior to face-to-face learning[[10]](#endnote-10). Distributing knowledge as well as its production has led me into valuable research collaborations.”

*The Vice Chancellor (and other senior administrators):*

“For my university to do no harm, I have refashioned the composition of the University Council to increase the representation of people with a social mission. I am seeking to reduce unhealthy competition in both education and research as we push towards the social mission of the university. I have reduced the size of the administration, and we are replacing managerial oversight with collegiate relations with academics.

“The distributed model will reduce the need for centralised campus buildings, so I will work with local and national government to convert several current buildings to social housing and other community functions. There will be no new buildings, other than those that might be required to house innovative infrastructure to support distributed research.

“We are appreciating the opportunity to work with industry and community partners to develop a set of social responsibility parameters and appropriate accountability. I look forward to my university being ranked according to the extent to which we honour our social responsibility. I am commissioning a rigorous examination of the carbon footprint of all aspects of the institution, and will act to reduce it[[11]](#endnote-11)[[12]](#endnote-12).”

“One of my major ethical concerns relates to the injustice of reliance on international student fees[[13]](#endnote-13). Without this fee income, the support given by the government will be insufficient to support much of our research and teaching. I will band together with my colleagues across the sector to lobby the government for adequate research funding.”

*The Vice Chancellor of a university in a developing economy.*

“Respecting the requirement of Australian universities to do good, and to pursue justice, I look forward to joining and collaborating with an online global network of Australian universities[[14]](#endnote-14). This will allow us access to the high quality of Australian universities rather than losing our brightest young people to them. We can double badge awards, keep students in Africa and build capacity in my own staff as well as collaborating on research.

“I am sure that my Government will look favourably on the Australian Government as it acknowledges the importance of helping to reduce global inequalities in access to higher education[[15]](#endnote-15)[[16]](#endnote-16), rather than just using international students to generate income.”

1. Seeing university reform through an ethical lens. Stephen Leeder and Richard Heller. https://johnmenadue.com/seeing-university-reform-through-an-ethical-lens/# [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Higher education must reinvent itself to meet the needs of the world today. Enter the distributed university. Richard Heller https://theconversation.com/higher-education-must-reinvent-itself-to-meet-the-needs-of-the-world-today-enter-the-distributed-university-175927 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Discussion document Q4 and Q5: ‘*Impact of new and emerging technologies. Changing technologies create new demands and possibilities for research, innovation and entrepreneurship, as well as new ways to design and deliver learning experiences and educational services, all bringing fresh challenges and opportunities for higher education providers’* [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Discussion document Q8 and Q9: ‘..*there is a call for higher education to work more directly with industry, the professions and other cross-sector partners to ensure that the courses, knowledge and skills that students develop are better aligned with the changing capabilities and skills needed across the workforce.’* [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Discussion document Q15: *To increase the numbers of people with higher education qualifications, more people will need to be encouraged to enrol and re-enrol in higher education later in life.*  [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Discussion document Q4 and Q5: ‘*First Nations Australians, people with disability, people from regional, rural and remote areas, and people from low socioeconomic status (low SES) backgrounds remain substantially under-represented.’* [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Discussion document Q36 and Q42: ‘*A significant challenge for the sector will be maintaining academic quality and integrity. The emerging democratisation of information, automation, and proliferation of digital technologies provide both opportunities for innovation and threats of disruption to the sector’s traditional practices.’* [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Productivity Commission. Advancing Prosperity 5-year Productivity Inquiry report 17 March 2023 https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/productivity/report [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Plan E for Education—Increasing Online Public Access to Higher Education. Richard Heller. https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-981-16-6506-6\_3#Sec11 and more detail in: Plan E for Education: open access to educational materials created in publicly funded universities https://doi.org/10.1629/uksg.607 (available after publication end April 2023) [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Discussion document Q32: ‘*During the pandemic, improvements in online learning enabled many students to remain in their community while studying. Models such as the Regional University Centres program allow students to access the benefits of social and other support in a campus-like environment, while still studying in their home community.’* [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Discussion document Q4 ‘*Sustainability is an urgent priority across Australian society and the world, reflecting the need to reduce emissions...’* [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Reforming higher education to sustain planetary health. Richard Heller. https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanplh/article/PIIS2542-5196(22)00216-9/fulltext [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. See Appendix A: The role of international education [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. See How Australian universities could stop inequality and save the planet in one easy move. Richard Heller. <https://www.aare.edu.au/blog/?p=14344> [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Discussion document Q43: ‘*International education helps to deepen Australia’s engagement and influence with strategic partners such as the Pacific and Southeast Asia, particularly with priorities like climate change and sustainable development, and contributes to jobs, skills, investment, and industry development in Australia too.’* [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. See Appendix A: The role of international education

**Appendix A:**

3. Challenges and opportunities for the higher education system

**The role of international education**

**Discussion document Q43: How should the current recovery in international education be managed to increase the resilience and sustainability of Australia’s higher education system, including through diversification of student enrolments from source countries?**

Responding in particular to the preamble: *International education helps to deepen Australia’s engagement and influence with strategic partners such as the Pacific and Southeast Asia, particularly with priorities like climate change and sustainable development, and contributes to jobs, skills, investment, and industry development in Australia too.*

**The dilemma:**

At more than a quarter of its total tertiary student numbers, Australia has the largest proportion of international students of any country (other than Luxembourg). Around one half of all master’s students in Australia are international. Fees from overseas students represent Australia’s fourth largest export industry, and the fees have replaced some of the government support to the higher education sector. Hence, these fees are used to cross subsidise both teaching and research in our universities. Students are encouraged to stay in Australia after graduation, hence depleting scarce manpower in their country of origin during and after their education. Education has become a valuable commodity. In addition, there is a high carbon footprint from international students who travel and live in Australia during their studies.

In 2018 UNESCO reported the Gross Enrolment Ratio (enrolment regardless of age as a percentage of the population who are in the five-year age group immediately following secondary school graduation) for different countries:

Australia 77%,

East and South-east Asia 45%

Sub-Saharan Africa 9%.

But global inequalities in access to higher education such as these are largely ignored. The selection of international students depends largely on their coming from rich families who can afford to send their children to Australian universities. This does not represent the real global or even regional needs for access to higher education. For example, as a proportion of its home population Nepal has 20 times more international students in Australia than India or Indonesia, and Malaysia has twice as many as Vietnam and three times that of Cambodia, while Africa, the continent with the lowest access to higher education globally, is poorly represented among international students in Australian universities. Population trends which suggest massive future growth among the youth of Africa are also not being taken into account for future proofing the sector’s international offerings. Sustainability is also threatened by the geopolitical vagaries that might influence sources of international students.

So, we have an ethical dilemma – Australian universities are subsidised by rich international parents while global inequalities in access to higher education remain. The very high quality of education that Australia offers is not being used to the best effect globally now or being set up for the future. Countries who send their students to Australia stand to lose highly trained and scarce manpower. This might be termed educational colonialism.

In addition, the process of bringing international students to Australia creates a high carbon footprint. In a partnership with a UK University, 128 students enrolled in a fully online master’s programme from 70 cities in 30 countries, mostly African. Rather than students travelling to and studying in the UK, study online was estimated to have saved nearly a million Kg of CO2, and the programme was judged to have led to a number of successful outcomes. Among 15 higher education institutions examined in the UK, distance-based education models were associated with an 83% reduction in carbon emissions. Huge changes are occurring in higher education due to the possibilities opening up with advances in information technology. These may assist universities in many ways, including to have a lower carbon footprint. A pivot to the distributed university, in which education takes place mainly online and in regional hubs, would lead to major reductions in carbon emissions, and we suggest that this could be extended to international students.

**Some examples of innovations in global education:**

The School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London has developed a new, third, business model termed equitable global partnerships. Their first two models are high fees for international students attending SOAS in person, and a substantial but lower distance learning fee for international students. The equitable partnerships model is education offered in partnership with selected global partners and offered at cost, which is considerably lower than the other two models. It not only allows for lower costs for students, but for collaborations in education and research between the partner organisations and enables the co-development, co-teaching and co-accreditation of academic programmes in a much more integrated way that helps build capacity among each of the partners. Education is more likely to be localised to reflect the experiences and requirements of students in an international setting. This model is a hybrid between online and face-to-face so that both partners make a contribution.

Learna is a UK educational company currently whose academic awards are validated by a UK university. They have a commitment to empowering medical professionals in some of the world’s developing nations through online learning and is currently working with 361 students sponsored by the Merck Foundation in African nations including Ghana and Zimbabwe, who are studying online Postgraduate Diploma and MSc courses. Over the years more than 120 students sponsored by the Merck Foundation have already graduated from Learna’s medical programmes.

Peoples-uni was a volunteer led fully online educational charity established in the UK (with major Australian input). Awards were validated by a UK and then a UN charter university registered in the DRC. Volunteer expert tutors came from 55 countries, many of whom were university academics or those in a service role. Students came from more than 100 countries (70% from Africa). 159 Public Health master’s graduates, with other gaining a Diploma or a Certificate. Many more students took individual modules or courses for their continuing professional development including 7000 enrolments on the Peoples-uni Open Online Courses site. An active Alumni group produced peer reviewed collaborative publications and a number of Alumni joined as tutors. Cost of the master’s award was GBP 500.

The International Clinical Epidemiology Network (INCLEN) was an institutional capacity building programme established in the 1980s funded by the Rockefeller Foundation. Four universities in the North America and Australia offered master’s degrees and research support. Among the original 26 medical schools, a number developed their own master’s degrees via technology transfer. The network continues, led from the Global South and is active in research and education.

These selected examples demonstrate that universities, businesses, volunteers and philanthropists can come together to offer innovative global capacity building examples. We are also aware that Australia does have many committed academics who offer education and research programmes aimed at building global capacity. However we believe that there is a need for the Australian Accord to make some suggestions for ethical Australian led innovations in international education.

**The future:**

We accept that the Australian higher education sector is currently dependent on fee income from international students. However, failure to explore other options risks the long-term sustainability of the sector and does not encourage governments to move towards fully funded research and teaching in Australian universities. We are aware that there are a number of initiatives to secure the overseas student market with delegations to India and elsewhere, but we believe that there should be a sector-wide approach to this issue. With international students comprising more than a quarter of all university enrolments, their carbon footprint is substantial and not sustainable.

**Possible innovative programmes:**

*Network for global online learning.* Australian universities come together to create and support a network for global online learning offered at low cost to make it affordable to those at need. The network would include universities in the Global South and so would contribute to their institutional capacity-building (and avoid the dangers of colonising education). This could start with the use of existing online courses but the co-development and accreditation of courses, as well as the development of research partnerships would be a goal.

One idea might be to create a scheme of ‘EduOffsets’, the educational equivalent of carbon offsets until university finances can become less dependent on international student fees. This would require a global perspective of need, a balance between current regional and future global priorities, and the search for partner universities in the Global South. As an initial guiding principle, universities would offer one at-cost place on an online course to ‘offset’ the income they gain from each international student on campus. A philanthropic organisation might be sought to create the infrastructure for the development of the network. The network would be underpinned by educational and collaborative technology.

*Equitable partnerships model.* Here individual Australian universities would partner with international universities as in the SOAS equitable partnerships model. This would also enable the co-development, co-teaching and co-accreditation of academic programmes and lead to research collaborations. As in the SOAS model, it would require the programme to be offered at cost, rather than the current high international student fee level.

*Global online programme(s) led from outside the traditional higher education sector*. Here, commercial or third sector providers would create and offer the programmes, with validation and certification of awards by the higher education sector. This could be funded by the Government through the higher education or international aid budget, or by philanthropy, or it could be funded by the providers in exchange for student fees to cover costs. Features of each of the options above could also be included.

**Need for experiment.**

Some of these ideas, as with other suggestions for university reform, might be the subject of experiment and evaluation.

**Need for data.**

Data on the global needs for higher education, in relation to both Australia’s global priorities and the current provision should be obtained. Also, good longitudinal data on the employment fate of international students.

There are also no good data on the carbon footprint of alternative structures for the delivery of higher education by the sector including for its international students. CDP, ‘a not-for-profit charity that runs the global disclosure system for investors, companies, cities, states and regions to manage their environmental impacts’ does not provide data on the education sector. A recommendation from the Accord should be to require universities to obtain and publish credible data on their carbon emissions and their steps to reduce them. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)