**The next ‘big idea’: Inverting the distribution of higher education: from top-down to student-led.**

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The proposal speaks to a number of the questions in the Discussion paper, including

Challenges and opportunities for Australia

Q4 Looking from now to 2030 and 2040, what major national challenges and opportunities should Australian higher education be focused on meeting?

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?

Quality

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?

Meeting skills needs

Q9 How should Australia ensure enough students are studying courses that align with the changing needs of the economy and society?

Lifelong learning

Q15 What changes are needed to grow a culture of lifelong learning in Australia?

Collaborating to a purpose – solving big challenges

Q23 How should an Accord help Australia increase collaboration between industry, government and universities to solve big challenges?

Regulation and governance

Q36 What regulatory and governance reforms would enable the higher education sector to better meet contemporary demands?

Quality experience for students

Q39 What reforms are needed to ensure that all students have a quality student experience?

**The problem:**

Students find themselves in an environment where teaching is downgraded in favour of research and their teachers are disaffected. The learning environment does not reflect the way students (and their teachers) usually gain knowledge, which is largely self-directed and takes advantage of information technology. Students are exposed to a competitive learning experience aiming for high value careers, rather than their own needs or the requirement of increasing the knowledge stock of the population. Universities offer a standard set of courses and curricula, which are replicated across the sector, and although there are innovations they are hard and slow to introduce. Universities are in general conservative organisations, resistant to change – both at the organisational/administrative and the academic levels. The system is institution dominated – with much activity and funding aimed at allowing institutions to prosper, in competition with others, rather than encouraging the primacy of the student consumer.

**Examples:**

There are a number of examples of ways in which education recognises that students can take responsibility for their learning. These include self-directed, active (such as problem based learning) and reflective learning being examples for which there is support in the literature. At the organisational level, there are also institutions who claim that they are student centred – of which [Western Governors University](https://www.wgu.edu/) (WGU) in the US is probably the best known. WGU market themselves as ‘The University for You’. Education is fully online, assessments - which can be taken at any time - are based on competences not credit hours.

**The proposal:**

Student takes charge, accesses online courses, finds a mentor either from the institution offering the courses or elsewhere, and gains microcredits based on accredited assessments. Students pick their courses, and make up enough credits for an award offered by a partner university or other provider. No curriculum or mandated timescale, but what a student wants to learn and when, or an employer requires. Finds a mentor or joins a group of students to take up a mentoring offer.

Universities, and other providers, would put open access resources on repositories, and offer awards from collections of microcredits. Repositories of open access courses or parts of courses which each include competency assessments are populated by universities, and maybe other providers, who offer microcredits based on an appropriate level of assessment. The provision of coursework as open access to all was [recommended by the Productivity Commission](https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/productivity/report) and [has been presented](https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-981-16-6506-6_3#Sec11) as a concept similar to that of open access to publicly funded research. As discussed in the paper on Plan E for Education ([available here](https://doi.org/10.1629/uksg.607) after the end of April 2023), the open repositories might consider a peer review system for educational materials to mirror that already used for research publications. Academic credit could then flow to those who publish and review educational resources and extend to other academic input such as updating the work and creating instructional materials. This might help correct the imbalance between research and teaching in universities today.

Industry involvement is encourages and facilitated, to provide courses and/or offer suggestions to universities for relevant competences and to offer experiential practice based learning.

Systems of accreditation and evaluation would need to be established, from and beyond those offered by individual universities.

**That is the theory, what is needed to put this idea into practice?**

*a) the political economy.* The process of winning over existing academia and institutions will be very difficult, given that the change to a bottom up, student-centric polity is not currently much discussed, and there is resistance to changing to online delivery. For that reason, while we are suggesting that this approach be organised and facilitated by an external agency, we would also recommend that this approach become the central feature of at least one new university. A number of the features, such as centralised repositories will not need to be based within a university, but can be accessed by all academics and students. Over time, as the utility of this approach becomes better accepted, other universities are likely to join in.

There will be a need for more university places in Australia to cope with population growth, so while this approach will help meet this need, there is also an opportunity to establish new universities with new models. Current universities in Australia are large in international comparisons, and making them larger will only increase the much criticised managerialism. We would like to see new Australian universities copy this model, and have previously recommended a complementary model which is also primarily based on online learning – [the distributed university](https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-981-16-6506-6) – which could also be the basis of a new university. However, in this paper, we are recommending a further flexibility of student-led learning by going beyond an individual institution for students to gain their education.

*b) the financial economy.*

How can this initiative be funded? There will have to be government funding both to establish, support and evaluate the repositories and to establish the new university(ies). While the courses are open to access, there could be a cost to the student for all assessments, as in the [OERu](https://oeru.org/), as well as for mentoring. Student loans could feature as at present. Academics offer mentoring of their courses and/or generic mentoring. Advantage is taken of new and emerging educational technologies. Although all courses are online, there will be some need for face-to-face experiential learning, as in the regional hubs as suggested in [the distributed university model](https://theconversation.com/higher-education-must-reinvent-itself-to-meet-the-needs-of-the-world-today-enter-the-distributed-university-175927). Management needs are much reduced, relieving universities of those costs and academics of intrusive surveillance.

The experience of WGU discussed above is that the cost per student is about a quarter of that of courses taken from other private US universities. Costs much lower than having to support buildings, management and pastoral care for students. We would not like to see the new universities we are proposing come from the private sector. The corporatisation of universities has already gone too far to meet the public good.