

Response to the Australian Universities Accord Discussion Paper

Recommendations from the Queensland College of Art, Griffith University

Background

Queensland College of Art (QCA) is an art and design school that was amalgamated into Griffith University in 1991 and currently has approximately 1500 students. According to Table 1 of the Discussion Paper, 10.73% of Griffith's enrolments are in Creative Arts, one of the higher percentages in this broad field of education. In response to the Australian University Accord Discussion Paper QCA's comments and four recommendations relate to the following sections:

- 1.3 'The nature and purpose of Australian higher education'
- 3.2 'Meeting Australia's knowledge and skills needs'
- 3.9 'Investment and affordability'

While our feedback is from the perspective of art and design it advocates for universities developing not only graduate skills but also fostering student capacity to be curious about the complexity of humanity and to think creatively and critically about the world. The Accord must ensure that graduates enter the workforce with an ethical, honest and humane understanding of how to best use the skills they have attained. Australian universities should have a remit to advance social good and to provide safe and supportive places for robust conversations and for tackling humankind's challenges.

1.3 The nature and purpose of Australian higher education

As noted in the Chair's forward, higher education 'delivers endless, intangible benefits to the nation, far beyond any individual qualification or job it provides'. The Discussion Paper also refers to the creation of public good. The focus, however, tends to be utilitarian and based on a transactional relationship between higher education and Australian society. The provision of skills is emphasised and while this is obviously a function of higher education, universities must also have the remit to advance the values that are important to Australia and shape what sort of society we want to be. Griffith University is renowned as a values-based institution and QCA is guided by a set of values to be 'creative, innovative, disruptive, inclusive, unconventional, sustainable'. This idea of universities as institutions that advance values and ethical approaches needs to be given prominence in the Accord.

Recommendation 1: In addition to meeting Australia's 'knowledge and skills needs', the Accord should be structured to include a remit for universities to foster social good, advance Australian values and produce ethical and well-rounded graduates.

3.2 Meeting Australia's knowledge and skill needs

While there is a strong demand for STEM and technical skills in Australia, this should not be at the exclusion of building graduate capacity in power skills such as adaptability, communication and problem solving. The ability to think creatively, work collaboratively and to provide innovative solutions to complex problems will be critical in the future, partly as a result of the impact of artificial intelligence and new technologies automating many jobs. In recent studies on the jobs of the future 'creativity' is increasing in importance. For example in the World Economic Forum's [*The Future of Jobs Report 2020*](#) lists 'creativity, originality and initiative' as number 5 in the top 15 skills that will be in high demand by organisations by 2025. While other disciplines can provide training in these areas, it is the creative disciplines that are the key drivers for ensuring we have graduates who can push boundaries and bring innovative solutions to problems.

Recommendation 2: The Accord should include a discussion of power skills, particularly as reports on jobs of the future demonstrate that skills such as creativity and the ability to adapt and problem solve will be increasingly in demand as automation advances.

QCA is in agreement that the current learning and teaching links between higher education and industry is underdeveloped. Universities and industry must take collective responsibility for ensuring that graduates have the skills of the future. QCA currently operates 'QCALive' which is our interface with industry. Different industry organisations, as well as local and state government, approach our visual art and design studios to develop creative projects and public art commissions that are undertaken by students. This model differs from placements where students go into industry and instead industry comes into the university, noting we charge market rates so that the students are not seen as inexpensive labour. Even though there are many benefits to students in this model and it attracts critical funds for learning and teaching, this type of activity is not recognised as a form of income generation in the way that research income is acknowledged. Creating a category of income generation that is for learning and teaching initiatives would provide incentives for universities to engage with industry on student-led projects.

Recommendation 3: Incentives need to be provided for universities and industry to strengthen learning and teaching links, including creating a category for learning and teaching generated income where a university has attracted funds from industry for student projects.

3.9 Investment and affordability

The disparity across the student contribution amounts in the JRG package is highly problematic. While the 'Visual and Performing Arts' cluster was relatively unchanged with JRG it is worrying to see the impact on our colleagues and students in other HASS disciplines. The concept of 'the user pays' that accompanied the introduction of HECs has been dislodged with HASS students incurring a significantly higher debt than a medicine student, despite having less capacity to pay that debt when they graduate. While the logic of offering incentives for students to go into areas where there is a skills shortage makes sense on one level, potentially there are perverse outcomes.

One of the most troubling of these possible outcomes involves low SES enrolments. The low SES students who have talents outside of the fields of education with more affordable student contributions may find the costs of their preferred degree prohibitive. There is evidence that arts subjects are already being actively discouraged in senior secondary schools. Data from the [Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority](#) found there was a reduction of more than 44 per cent in the number of students enrolled in arts subjects (music, visual art, drama, dance and film) between 2012 to 2021. QCA in its work in regional Queensland is also finding that students in these disciplines are not even opting to do their ATAR, adding to their likely exclusion from a university education. QCA is introducing portfolio entry to give these students another pathway but as we look to the future we must be careful that by encouraging some into the University system we are not inadvertently discouraging and excluding others. If the inequity continues with the Funding Clusters there is also a danger that universities that traditionally attract low SES students will not have adequate enrolments to continue to offer these subjects and it will only be the private providers and the Go8 universities that can offer these degrees. This will mean that Australia could have a two-tier system where the arts and humanities are only offered by a select few universities, resulting in a very limited range of creative voices contributing to society.

Recommendation 4: Increase equity across the student contributions in the JRG Funding Clusters so that students (particularly those from low SES backgrounds) who excel in the creative and HASS disciplines are not excluded from higher education because of the high costs of a degree.

Thank you for this opportunity to provide feedback and respond to the Australian Universities Accord Discussion Paper.