RESPONSE TO THE AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITIES ACCORD DISCUSSION PAPER

This response is from a group of University Academic Leaders who are all Chairs of Academic Boards and Academic Senates.

Preamble:

Universities are repositories of knowledge, places where the brightest minds of each generation come together to think deeply, advance our understanding of the human condition and to develop solutions to the myriad solutions facing our society. They are characterised by a scholarly approach.

They are also places where students and other members of society make contact with scholars, to be educated, to improve their understanding, and set it in the wider context of historical and current leading international thought. Education is seen as an interactive process where learners and teachers can both influence and contribute to the sum total of human understanding.

The concept of a university is therefore key to the continued development of knowledge, and its primary goal is one which can benefit our society and indeed the future of humanity.

The ***Magna Charta Universitatum*** [1] says: "To fulfil their potential, universities require a reliable social contract with civil society, one which supports pursuit of the highest possible quality of academic work, with full respect for institutional autonomy. As they create and disseminate knowledge, universities question dogmas and established doctrines and encourage critical thinking in all students and scholars. Academic freedom is their lifeblood; open enquiry and dialogue their nourishment. Universities embrace their duty to teach and undertake research ethically and with integrity, producing reliable, trustworthy and accessible results. Universities have a civic role and responsibility. They are part of global, collegial networks of scientific enquiry and scholarship, building on shared bodies of knowledge and contributing to their further development. They also are embedded in local cultures and crucially relevant to their future and enrichment. While they are immersed in and connected with global developments, they engage fully with and assume leading roles in local communities and ecosystems. Universities are non-discriminatory spaces of tolerance and respect where diversity of perspectives flourishes and where inclusivity, anchored in principles of equity and fairness, prevails. They therefore commit themselves to advance equity and fairness in all aspects of academic life including admissions, hiring and promotion practices.

Education is a human right, a public good, and should be available to all. Universities recognise that learning is a lifelong activity with tertiary education as one part of a continuum. Within that one part, universities serve diverse learners at all stages of their lives. Universities acknowledge that individuals and communities, often due to inequitable circumstances, have difficulty gaining access to higher education or influencing the modes and matter of academic study. To realise human potential everywhere, universities deliberately seek ways to welcome and engage with diverse voices and perspectives."

While these lofty goals remain at the core of each university's mission, the expectations of governments, commerce and industry, individual students, and society in general have become fractured and often contradictory. The recent vicissitudes of COVID have exacerbated this. Universities are organised as large commercial businesses: indeed, an average metropolitan university annual budget can be somewhere between one and two billion dollars, so they **are** large commercial businesses. A majority of the income is derived from student fees and government contributions. Increasingly, business, government and industry are funding university research projects.

[1] Formulated in Bologna 1988, and updated in 2020. Signed by 950 universities world-wide.

With the emphasis on "impact" and "national interest", university research is facing issues around ownership of the research agenda. There is a tension between, on the one hand, the scholars in the field, whose expertise includes a view of the important research problems and, on the other, the perception of government, funding agencies and indeed the management of universities themselves on the immediate issues to which funding should be devoted. Happily, these sometimes coincide, although that is not always the case, particularly with the financial imperatives mentioned above. There is not always agreement about who should determine what research is important, nor upon how it should be done. The contributions of pure research, that is, research not directly driven by an immediate and compelling need, have been considerable in the past[2]: while few will argue that we should abandon it, those funding research are conscious of commercial imperatives, and research which can make direct links to applications is generally in a stronger position. The research done in universities has a significant impact on what is taught.

The current state of university education is in flux. The growth of the internet as a means of communicating has had an ineradicable effect on teaching practices, which has been accelerated during the COVID years, where school students have had to adapt to absorbing material via the screen. Adaptive Artificial Intelligence has forced a re-evaluation of assessment practices. Therefore, university teaching cannot ignore online learning and information technology as a useful and necessary component. On the other hand, education is essentially a means of passing knowledge and experience from one person to another, and the essential value proposition of universities is that they provide a place where one can learn directly from an expert in the field. There is research to show that this is more effective than watching videos. With the growth of well-resourced private providers, universities are not currently set up to succeed in the market place of online education.

We believe that it is a good time for a new Accord between Government and Universities with the aim of re-evaluating the value of Universities to society and creating a meaningful partnership to maximise this value. In this discussion we would like to underscore the transformative power of education that goes beyond learning skills. Widening access to this transformative experience as a fundamental human right is important, and universities need to champion of this fundamental right, but this doesn't come without challenges. The Accord offers an opportunity to lay out these challenges and develop ways to address them. The Accord is also an opportunity for a new social contract in which tertiary education is of central value in itself not as a means to an end, however that end may be defined.

The present submission was prepared alongside the submission from OzCABS, the Australian Chairs of Academic Boards and Senates: all the undersigned are also signatories to that document. Not all chairs, however, subscribe to all of this submission.

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[2] and arguably have far exceeded other more applications oriented research

Response to the Accord Questions:

Challenges and Opportunities for Australia

As Australia's population grows, we will require more educated people: these are not simply people with knowledge and skills, but people who can think flexibly, in new ways about the future. It will also require not just adaptation to new and emerging technologies but the creation of new technologies to benefit humankind, our environment and our planet. These two requirements are interrelated, and can be produced by a carefully crafted university education. A further reason for equality of participation is that we need the talents of ALL people to respond to the challenges facing us: we cannot afford to be exclusive about who we include.

Geopolitically, there is a strong argument that in facing global challenges, we are in a stronger position collaborating internationally, rather than competing in our individual national research programs.

We note that QQ4-7 are all phrased in terms of higher education providers rather than universities: we believe that the answer to each of the questions is intimately connected to research, which can of course be undertaken by all HEPs, although it is not part of their mission as it is for universities.

Over the last few decades, the Australian higher education sector has moved from having 20 'universities' (pre-Dawkins era) of which some were teaching-only institutions to now having 40 'universities'. These have now been supplemented by around 130 Higher Education Providers, some highly specialised. Is this the most appropriate structure for the sector to generate the research and pedagogy needed for the future?

The essence of a university education which will be necessary for our future is exposure to a range of different domains and experiences, and the understanding of how research works and how to think strategically about the future. It would be a travesty if some institutions were no longer able to offer this to their students.

Pathways to university can be very different for metropolitan versus regional universities. There are significant concerns around equity issues for students and funding constraints for regional universities who might want to offer a whole range of program offerings but may not have the budget to do so. There is a risk of having a two tiered university system, between metropolitan and regional universities due to funding and equity issues.

We need to find the right balance between universities spending time and resources responding to priorities set by the federal government, but also still having time and space to carve out their own strategic institutional agendas and take autonomous action.

We need less regulation and more trust between the Commonwealth and the universities. This is at the heart of an Accord.

Challenges and Opportunities for the Higher Education System.

3.1 *Quality teaching and learning* is at the heart of what the system must deliver. As mentioned previously, it is a given that students must have the skills they will need for the jobs they are about to start, or in which they are already working, but a critical part of tertiary education is the ability to think, reason, and generally be sufficiently adaptable, that they can develop new skills as new demands and new technology come along. The discussion paper mentions modes of delivery that are tailored to students' preferred modes of learning: this is often hard to identify from a cohort of

students with varied experiences and expectations, and even harder to implement in large classes in large institutions.

3.2 *Meeting skills needs*

Usually, faculties bring academic programs to Academic Board for approval and the Board considers the quality and integrity components. However, there is often a gap in the 'forward planning' at a 'bigger picture' sector level to ensure that there are sufficient future graduates in the relevant critical industries to meet the national interest. Though it is hard to predict the "national interest" in advance, and it is also sometimes politically charged.

One way which universities use to keep abreast of national interest, and which is not discussed in the Accord paper is by professional accreditation of degrees. This procedure is relied upon by TEQSA and by the universities to guarantee that professional degrees remain current. There is however, little standardisation of the accreditation process. The Australian Committee of Academic Boards and Senates has been in touch with the Australian Council of the Professions to try to develop some joint processes, and standards in this domain.

Pathways for students

The ATAR still represents the most transparent consistent indicator of academic performance. There are ongoing concerns around the eroding of the ATAR due to the proliferation of early offer/entry schemes. There is a case for re-examination of the School-University interface, which could be made more flexible. The issue of HELP levels is clearly a critical determinant in student choices (particularly those from lower socio-economic backgrounds) and has been the subject of many apparently political decisions over the past decade and more.

The definition of 'lifelong learning' in the discussion paper is currently somewhat limited and needs to encompass a more holistic, expansive view of what constitutes 'lifelong learning'.

One major obstacle for many would-be learners in later life is the fact that it is quite expensive for an individual to enrol in a university course. Perhaps the HELP scheme could be extended to lifetime study.

3.3 Connections with VET: pathways

It would seem sensible to allow students to transfer between TAFE and university, although university courses are often not based on skills, but rather research-informed education, so this would have to be carefully managed. For example, a first year TAFE programming course would not generally prepare a student for a second year university subject on the theory of databases. In NSW we have recently taken a step which will allow all HSC courses (vocational and academic) to count towards the ATAR, so the gate is open to use the ATAR for entry into TAFE.

3.4 Research: new knowledge, innovation and capability

This is a key area in which universities can contribute, not only providing expertise and commentary on the major problems of the day, but also beginning to develop new ideas, ways of thought and technologies which will help shape the future of humanity. It is important to preserve the balance between fundamental and applied research so these twin goals can be met.

A crucial aspect of university innovation is as part of a national and international network of research organisations. Regulation of international research contacts has recently been subject to increased Government scrutiny, which has resulted in barriers to many legitimate research

collaborations. National collaboration between university research groups can be strengthened by incentives to be less competitive.

There is scope for businesses, government organisations and universities to cooperate more fully. Barriers are often financial, or structural in the sense that a greater part of the university workforce is occupied and is not able to meet the often rather immediate needs of business. Historically, Australian innovation transfer from universities to business has lagged behind the OECD, perhaps because of our smaller population base. Thought could be given to structures to ameliorate this within the Australian context.

3.5 Creating Opportunities

The traditional pathway to university (do well at secondary school, sit the HSC, get a good ATAR , do a degree at the university of your choice funded by HECS) does not favour people from diverse backgrounds. However, simply admitting a greater range of people whose backgrounds have not prepared them to compete with those who have been fortunate enough to follow the traditional path is not an adequate response. Most Higher Education providers want to admit students who will succeed: a range of bridging courses, support mechanisms for those with gaps in their background, psychological and pedagogical support exist. These are mainly funded by the institutions themselves at present.

One of the principal determinants of success is motivation and a vision for how the course one is pursuing will benefit one's life. Another is a sense of belonging to the institution. It could be productive to investigate these issues for students from a greater diversity of backgrounds.

Similar remarks apply to the concept of a lifetime of learning: if we are to break down the paradigm of "school then university", much of what universities present and how they are funded need to be re-thought. With this observation comes the caveat that universities must be allowed to teach at a higher level of conceptual thinking and should not, for example, teach high school level courses.

3.6 *Communities*. Whilst universities and other Higher Education Providers often measure themselves against international benchmarks, they invariably have an important part to play in their local communities: it is from there that they draw an important part of their student body, and often where a proportion of their important research collaborations are to be found. Having good quality education within the community contributes to the equity issues discussed above. Therefore, we feel that it is important that support be found, both financial and in-kind from within communities. The present model where the Commonwealth funds universities (and other higher education providers) who are seen as a benefit to the local community could be re-examined. Perhaps tax incentives for donations of time, labour or money to local universities could be considered.

Governance and accountability

Good university governance should be tripartite in nature (with a productive tension between Council, University Management and Academic Board.) However, the Academic governance tier of the 'triangle' can sometimes be sidelined. There is a need to re-frame the dynamic between Management/Council/Academic Board and reinforce the critical role of academic governance in the modern university.

There are concerns about the skillset of Council members who often bring general corporate or financial expertise but are not as familiar with the academic side of universities. In addition, there was concern about the balance of ex-officio members versus elected members on governance bodies.

The academic mission of a university needs to be sufficiently prioritised, supported and enabled to ensure quality. TEQSA understands the value and importance of Academic Boards and David Gonski referred to 'harnessing the collective intellect of universities'. However, internally within institutions, sometimes the critical role that Academic Boards perform and the robust nature of the tripartite governance model is not always recognised or acknowledged.

The report notes: "The Panel has heard concerns from stakeholders about the make-up of these bodies, including whether they hold sufficient sector expertise. For some universities established under state or territory acts, some members are directly appointed by the relevant government. It is also common for governing bodies to include representatives from staff, student bodies and alumni" (p 27).

This seems to be discussing University Councils (or their counterparts in non-university HEPs), and to overlook the role of Academic Boards and Senates altogether, even though they are prescribed in almost all university acts. Typically (but not universally) the Chair of the Academic Board is a member of the University Council, and can provide some balance of sector expertise.

We believe that it would be useful to restore the balance between collegial and corporate governance, and our purpose/goals. Ensuring the social license and value proposition of the university sector is key, which is currently threatened by both perception and reality of universities being used to serve a narrow economic agenda, rather than a broader social and cultural remit, and ultimately the public good.[3]

A core argument is around needing to maintain University autonomy, including independence from, but with support provided by, government, and also to be free from the constraints of competitive funding, surplus imperatives and capricious political agenda.

Michael Tomlinson from TEQSA wrote in 2018: "Our preferred scenario is to establish that all providers are regulating themselves so effectively that all we need to do is maintain some high-level, soft-touch monitoring. Academic governing bodies are key allies in bringing this desirable state of affairs about, regardless of perceived or actual imbalances of power."

One way that this can be achieved is by harnessing the professionalism of staff through collegial governance. The UNESCO Recommendation concerning the status of Higher-Education Teaching personnel states: "Self-governance, collegiality and appropriate academic leadership are essential components of meaningful autonomy for institutions of higher education." It also speaks directly to the tension between regulation and academic freedom: "Higher-education teaching personnel should contribute to the public accountability of higher education institutions without, however, forfeiting the degree of institutional autonomy necessary for their work, for their professional freedom and for the advancement of knowledge."[4]

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[3] We note that the origins of corporations were much more collective and high-minded but the reality has somewhat departed from that ideal (although new public governance and stakeholder models may suggest everything old is new again).

[4] *Paragraphs 21 & 36*, UNESCO Recommendation Concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel (1997). The document continues: *Para 31*. Higher-education teaching personnel should have the right and opportunity, without discrimination of any kind, according to their abilities, to take part in the governing bodies and to criticize the functioning of higher education institutions, including their own, while respecting the right of other sections of the academic community to participate, and they should also have the right to elect a majority of representatives to academic bodies within the higher education institution. *Para 32*. The principles of collegiality include academic freedom, shared responsibility, the policy of participation of all concerned in internal decision making structures and practices, and the development of consultative mechanisms. Collegial decision-making should encompass decisions regarding the administration and determination of policies of higher education, curricula, research, extension work, the allocation of resources and other related activities, in order to improve academic excellence and quality for the benefit of society at large.

It would be useful to consider the creation of a principles-based 'code of good academic governance' that shows what robust academic governance looks like across universities, noting that there is a lot of variance. We feel that it is important to identify what academic governance is in service of and what the enabling conditions to achieve good academic governance are.

3.7 *Academic quality, integrity and standards* are critical for universities. We need to consider academic integrity through a lens of institutional integrity. The nature of learning, pedagogy and assessment need to keep pace to manage ethical implications of technological changes such as AI. Ask what are we 'regulating' for and how can we "re-tool" to assess learning in light of AI (which will keep evolving) and other technologies.

The crisis of the pandemic highlighted the critical role of Academic Boards and academics. There is concern about the sustainability of hybrid learning and pressure it places on academics as well as the difficulty of genuinely validating learning outcomes for online students.

Online examination practices within universities have recently seen an unparalleled growth in academic misconduct cases, and difficulties of universities in being able to attest to the competencies of their graduates (at least in some areas) appear to be looming.

The practical issues involved in teaching and assessment vary radically depending on the subject material and the class size. There is unlikely to be a single solution which applies in every case. Many of the solutions being suggested by educational theorists and others, which might apply to smaller classes, could absorb significant resources and become unviable if applied to the larger classes which the current funding models of universities are leading us to adopt.

We are considering a national statement of principles for learning and teaching. We believe that education is a human activity where students learn from someone who knows the subject, understands what one needs to know, and is keen to transmit their hard-won knowledge to the next generation. Learning from one's peers and their reactions to ideas is a key feature of university learning. University educators need to guarantee some core competencies in their students, and we must have secure examination practices to assure this.

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