

Submission to the Consultation on the Universities Accord

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We are colleagues from the School of Media, Creative Arts and Social Inquiry at Curtin University. Our teaching and research is housed within the iSchool and focuses on media and information. We welcome this opportunity to respond to the Universities Accord discussion paper and this once in a generation opportunity to be part of a conversation that shapes the future of Universities in Australia.

In this submission we outline three essential areas for consideration in support of Universities becoming open knowledge institutions

About Open Knowledge Institutions.

We welcome the review and the opportunities afforded by a new Universities Accord. Universities have served many purposes internationally and in Australia over the past 150 years. The breadth of those purpose has narrowed and there is now no coherent narrative of the role and mission of Australia's university sector.

Colleagues in the iSchool at Curtin have articulated a vision of universities as "Open Knowledge Institutions" (Montgomery et al, 2021). By this we mean that the purpose of universities is to provide the platforms and capacities to support society in knowledge-making. This includes traditional conceptions of the university as a place of research, and learning. But it is a more expansive vision that can incorporate the role of universities in supporting civil society and broader communities to identify, articulate, and solve problems. It includes a role for engaging industry in innovation and in supporting policy makers and governments to make informed decisions.

The framework that unites these apparently disparate activities is built on the fact that knowledge work is done when groups come together. These may be members of a research group, they may be teachers and students, community groups and social scientists, or companies and engineers.

Knowledge-making occurs when groups come together. It is *bi-directional* not broadcast and it is at its most productive when it occurs in spaces that are *designed* to make the encounter generative. The classroom has specific structures and expectations, industrial collaboration is supported through NDAs and technology transfer offices that provide translation between academics and industry. Working with indigenous communities requires frameworks and systems that create trust, starting with the gesture of acknowledgement and continuing with a broadening commitment to respect and reconciliation.

Productive knowledge-making discussions are *risky* for those participating because we must hold open the opportunity to change our views. But creating these opportunities also means making

these spaces *safe* and defining rules of engagement. That is, successful knowledge-making spaces require effective *coordination* to ensure that diverse groups coming together can mutually benefit and have *productive* and *generative* dialogue.

We believe that the role of universities in the 21st century is to act as a form of national infrastructure and expertise to coordinate diverse knowledge-making groups and create the spaces and places where productive dialogue takes place. Such an agenda does not merely offer the opportunity to drive wider engagement, or collaboration and innovation with industry. In bringing these approaches to teaching we help students to be productive knowledge-makers and coordinators themselves.

An Open Knowledge Institutions vision for Australian universities is not only capable of including the disparate narratives and political visions that battle for attention of policy makers and implementors but to bring them into conversation with each to make the whole more productive.

Whether or not the OKI framework is the right one for Australian Higher Education is rightly a question of debate – but the HE Sector is in desperate need of a framework that allows the effective interrogation and prioritisation of the complex and differing narratives in play.

The Submission

In this submission we draw the Committee's attention to three key points for consideration

1. Teaching

Taking teaching seriously is a part of knowledge production as well as knowledge communication.

We perceive a structural problem in university teaching. The current system designates teaching as just one of a range of business activities universities run yet for students, relationships with teachers are the core of their experience. The current structural arrangements in teaching rely upon sessional and short term contract staff for many parts of teaching including the delivery of lectures and the facilitation of tutorials and workshops. Through these activities sessionals play an integral part in the students' learning experience, and indeed, their overall university experience. From a student point of view, these staff are integral to their learning experience but due to the insecure nature of their employment they are unable to engage in more substantial university-related activities that can actually help benefit both the teaching and learning experience. Such activities may include:

- making improvements to course content and assessments based on previous cohorts' feedback
- advocating for students in progression or disciplinary hearings, or who may require certain accommodations from the university
- contributing to policies that impact the learning and teaching experience

If we want to improve teaching in this sector we need to move beyond performative teaching models and efficiencies and seriously invest in the people actually doing the teaching. We observe that the message this communicates to students that this task, crucial to them, is low value to the university.

At the moment, the learning experience for students is compromised because there's not a consistent message that learning is the key and crucial relationship they should have with the university. That structural problem needs to be addressed to put students at the centre of universities.

A concrete measure universities could commit to is transparency in outsourcing arrangements around teaching – pay rates, casualisation/outsourcing percentages for example.

A further point is about the role of universities in modelling a just society. We perceive benefits from modelling exemplary ethical behaviour and relationships in those between students and teachers and that can be supported by an appropriate structural relationship expressed by the university that shows its commitment to teaching and the value it places upon it.

The discussion paper notes a significant increase in the reporting of students experiencing mental health conditions and associated disability in the period since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the last 25 years the number of university students with disability has increased by 1000%. Similarly, the student population has become increasingly diverse with international students, mature age students and students who adopt differing learning styles. International students face a number of challenges when choosing to study in Australia including: the struggle to find stable housing; financial strain exacerbated by limits on their capacity to supplement income with part-time work; discrimination from broader society as well as domestic staff and students; language barriers; as well as culture shock, loneliness, and homesickness. The broader student body has also become increasingly diverse with fewer students meeting the perception of the "ideal student" that is able to study full-time while being financially stable, able-bodied, and neurotypical. Students today also juggle caring and/or work responsibilities alongside their university studies.

Within this context research shows that accommodations designed to assist students with disability have far reaching benefits for an increasingly diverse student population. At the same time universal design for learning has become increasingly embraced in the university context. According to this framework there is no one typical way to learn and the education system.

In the context of the OKI model the benefits of inclusive design are key. That is because students are not just passive recipients of knowledge but contribute to its creation and application. Building a robust knowledge capacity requires us to be sensitive and responsive to the needs of the full diversity of identities and experience in our society and overseas. Overseas students are not simply a financial resource to be exploited but can contribute to the testing of our concepts and understanding.

Under-represented groups are poorly addressed by much modern research because their experiences of disease, democracy, opportunity and deprivation are less prevalent in the groups that design and conduct research.

2. Generative relationships are key to developing a values-led role for the university sector.

The university sector in Australia has embraced an extractive mindset.

The political narrative for universities in Australia has been one of industrialisation "Australia's third-largest export industry" and the financial model has been one of extraction, particularly from overseas full fee-paying students. This extractive mindset, which focuses on what can be taken, and is largely financialised and zero-sum, fails to engage on what can be built together. It has driven financial models that focus on teaching as cheaply as possible (for instance, excluding senior staff from active face to face teaching because it is "too expensive").

We also see this extractive mindset permeating the university accord discussion paper in areas related to disability inclusion,

When approached for a generative position, disability and required accessibility can be considered a form of innovation. Students with disability have much to teach the sector about how students can be supported to achieve their goals and of the benefits of hyper personalisation. Within digital environments this is especially important. Inclusive Design focuses on 'edge users' or people overlooked in the design process, to improve innovation outcomes and value for all users. The iPhone, electric toothbrush and accessible websites and policies are all examples of products

designed for edge users that offer benefits to everyone. Research conducted by the Centre for Inclusive Design (CfID) in 2019 discovered that an inclusive design approach embraces diversity, quadruples the potential user base and reduces the disadvantage experienced by groups such as the disabled.

Again the OKI model points us towards understanding inclusive design as a fundamental driver of good knowledge systems. An extractive mindset, in which students are a resource or a market to be exploited encourages efficiency, simplicity and homogeneity. A commitment to bidirectional and generative encounters drives us towards a commitment to inclusive design and asks what opportunities there are for more productive interactions. The result that inclusive design focusing on one group delivers benefits across the board for all students, and implicitly for teaching staff, is not a surprise under this model.

3. The climate crisis is changing everything and the university must respond

Finally, we draw attention to the current climate crisis and urge the university accord to consider way this will reshape institutions, including universities. Universities that jump early to really envisage a post carbon/post extraction framework will be rewarded. At a very simple level the costs of travel will rise, emphasising the role of universities as local infrastructures, and requiring new approaches to network building and collaboration. The pandemic is showing us what is possible, and indeed how flexible and responsive university staff can be in addressing these challenges.

Our current institutional assessment structures are narrow and focus on homogenised measures that fail to take into account innovative approaches, local and community engagement, and wider impacts. They are a poor fit with the imperative universities will face to deliver and contribute to just futures as the climate crisis deepens. Just futures include contribution to social structures post growth-focused economies – universities can explore and model that.

The models we would like to see:

- A diversity of institutions, each seeking deliver on its unique missions with confidence and purpose, within a broader shared narrative that aligns HE institutions nationally in the goal of supporting knowledge-work
- Universities reclaiming their role as places for modelling and experimenting with institutional alternatives for supporting societal needs, including but not limited to research, and learning and teaching
- A clear articulation of universities' role in supporting the public good, as well as the production of specific public goods
- Universities that are embedded within their local, regional and national communities, seeking to understand the needs of those communities and to support and enable them to be addressed, both by professional knowledge workers, students and the involved communities
- Centring learning and teaching as a core part of knowledge work, putting students at the core of this work and working with them to build wider knowledge capacities both within and beyond our institutions

4. Evaluation and monitoring

In an increasingly instrumented and instrumental world it is important to consider how such aspirations will be tracked and evaluated. Many of the goals articulated here are difficult to measure and quantify. More than this, this challenge of quantification is directly related to their important characteristics as open-ended goals. Simple quantification or ranking is neither appropriate nor possible with any credibility.

To give a concrete example, real solutions to climate crisis challenges will arise from creative work. Most likely this work will occur due to effective interactions between local communities, researchers and industry. It could also involve learners. Not only is the precise form of this kind of innovation impossible to predict and track, it will arise in diverse sites in different ways. Any simple form of quantitative will guide practices to the specific measured aspect, the means, not the ends.

This is not to say that evaluation and accountability are not important. They are crucial. Public institutions with a claim to supporting the public good and supported by public financing must be accountable and evaluation against goals will be important. However such evaluation will need to adopt more flexible and contextual approaches than the current systems such as rankings and citation-based research evaluations.

Some part of this may relate to the sector committing to transparent, open and publicly auditable evaluation modes. The Netherlands' Standard Evaluation Protocol system may offer some useful pointers in this area.

Above all we see universities as centres of expertise not just in specific areas of knowledge, but in the effective systems for developing knowledge. This includes capacities for bringing communities together, identifying opportunities for consensus and building shared concepts where possible, even in the face of substantial disagreement or conflicting interests.

5. Conclusion

In summary we urge the university accord working group to consider the important role universities play as an open knowledge institution, the importance of listening and learning from diverse groups and designing a sector that benefits everyone and values the expertise we all bring.

We have not addressed the specific questions raised in detail as we see the development of a framework as more important. While all the questions are relevant and important, our view is that they should be addressed in a coherent way, supported by an overarching understanding of missions, aspirations and responsibilities. The final determination of tactical decisions implied by the specifics of the questions requires an overarching strategy to be in place.

For a more in depth analysis of the issues raised in this submission, we respectfully request the inquiry refer to the following papers

- [Open Knowledge Institutions: Reinventing Universities](#)
- [The Pandemic Preferred User](#)
- [Automatic Closed Captions and Immersive Learning in Higher Education](#)

Finally, in addition to recommending a return to the university as an open knowledge institution, we encourage the committee to go further in considering the university sector as having an opportunity to embrace much more ambassadorial relationships with diverse groups, industry and research.

We appreciate the opportunity to provide this contribution to the Inquiry, and we trust that the Committee will find our contribution useful in its ongoing work.