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Professor Mary O’Kane AC & Australian Universities Accord Panel Members
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Dear Professor O’Kane AC & Australian Universities Accord Panel Members,

Thank you for the consultation opportunity to respond to the *Australian Universities Accord Discussion Paper*.

My response below is made on a personal basis: the views and specific recommendations given do not reflect the views of my current or former university employers.

I have 20 years of experience in 6 Australian universities in research management and administration, quality assurance, teaching and research. As a student I have seen how Australia’s higher education sector has been transformed over the past 30 years.

My response draws in particular on my Professional Services experience in research management and administration (in central and Faculty/Institute research offices) and my part-time PhD candidature at Monash University (2011-2020) in political science (Field of Research code 4408).

I will focus on the *Discussion Paper’s* following two questions:

Q27. How can we improve research training in Australia including improving pathways for researchers to gain experience and develop high-impact careers in government and industry?

Q41. How should research quality be prioritised and supported most effectively over the next decade?

My academic field/discipline training is in political science. Thus, when I compare the Accord Panel’s *Terms of Reference* to what I know of the Australian higher education sector and my own experience, *ToR #3* (Investment and affordability) seems more likely in reality to underpin the likely decision-making over the other key areas.

In the past 30 years, I have seen and experienced many innovations in Australian universities. Two examples are Swinburne University’s early aughties embrace of strategic foresight, and the Smart Internet Technology CRC and Smart Services CRC’s role in shaping

policy consultation for the National Broadband Network. However, many innovations have been rolled back due to cost-cutting and restructuring.

The Accord Panel's recommendations will thus occur in a political arena in which most Australian universities are financialised and highly leveraged due to property portfolios and overseas student exposures. The senior management emphasis on cost-cutting, restructures, and casualization is not new: it reflects a corporate philosophy that was ascendant in the neoliberal United States during the Reagan, Bush, and Clinton Administrations: excellence (Tom Peters), financialisation (GE's Jack Welch), and cost-cutting (Al 'Chainsaw' Dunlap and Michael Hammer). The result is that many University senior executive teams are managing Australian universities using outdated and discredited management philosophies, and they are also captured by consulting firms, rather than truly listening to their employees.¹

In reality, whilst Australian universities are many things the single aspect that has emerged for me over the past 20 years is that it is a site for rent-seeking.² Seen through this lens, an Australian university is just a pass-through vehicle between its students and the Defined Benefit superannuation funds of its elites. Another way to look at this is that for some of its superstar academics the Australian university is like the Hollywood star system of the Hays Code period.

Over the past decade Australian universities have also endured a hostile policy environment of austerity and 'efficiency dividends' (Orwell-speak for cost-cutting). Education as a facilitator of meritocratic social mobility is now being strongly questioned.³ For university Academic Staff researchers, their work combines the worst aspects of two very different work contexts: the Up or Out pressures of major consulting firms, and the instability of casual and fixed term contracts (as found in Australian education, government, and defence sectors). These work contexts facilitate rent-seeking via extractive risk transfer practices such as wage theft: this so-called anomaly can be readily found in many other industries in Australia and the United States.⁴ In simple terms: exploitation where the employer shifts a lot of the burden and the human capital risks and costs to the employee.

I focus below on readily achievable policy and organisational reforms rather than 'big picture' thinking. Unless the above rent-seeking is challenged and overcome, the Accord Panel's final recommendations are unlikely to be achieved to the fullest possible extent. Where relevant, I draw briefly on my own personal experiences to explain.

¹ Mazzucato, Mariana & Rosie Collington. *The Big Con: How the Consulting Industry Weakens Our Businesses, Infantilizes Our Governments, and Warps Our Economies*. London: Allen Lane, 2023. Lindsey, Brink & Steven M. Teles. *The Captured Economy: How The Powerful Enrich Themselves, Slow Down Growth, and Increase Inequality*. New York: Oxford University USA. 2019.

² Collins, Joe. *Rent*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2022.

³ Shelton, Jon. *The Education Myth: How Human Capital Trumped Social Democracy*. Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 2023. Markovits, Daniel. *The Meritocracy Trap*. New York: The Penguin Press, 2020. McNamee, Stephen J. *The Meritocracy Myth* (4th ed.). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018.

⁴ Schneiders, Beth. *Hard Labour: Wage Theft in the Age of Inequality*. Brunswick, Australia: Scribe Publications. Weil, David. *The Fissured Workplace: Why Work Became Bad For So Many and What Can Be Done To Improve It*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2014.

Recommendation 1: PhD supervision and University research activity needs to be shielded from cost-cutting / restructures, and their often adverse psychological impacts. There needs to be better public reporting of the adverse psychological impacts that University staff face.

Academic Staff in reality often have little autonomy over their PhD supervision, research funding, and research activity. Likewise, when I have spoken over the past 17 years in particular with Professoriate, Senior Managers and Chancellery staff, they often have a willfull blindness about how cost-cutting and restructures can have adverse psychological impacts on staff. Universities seem to value their buildings – and the debt covenants and ratings involved – more than their staff or truly harnessing their human capital.

I had 5 PhD Supervisors during my part-time candidature at Monash University between 2011 and 2020. Many were adversely impacted by cost-cutting and restructures. I have likewise gone through cost-cutting and restructures in central Research Offices, in Faculties, in Centres/Institutes, and in a Cooperative Research Centre and a successful rebid.

The human costs involved for others show up in staff surveys, in staff use of counselling services, and, more rarely, and in Fair Work Commission cases and confidential settlements. Thus, when the media reports uncritically on Australian university profit figures they never report on the actual full story. If it's good enough for the recent movie *She Said* and Miramax's disgraced Harvey Weinstein – who used non-disclosure agreements - why don't Australian universities and their senior executive teams face similar investigative scrutiny?

Recommendation 2: The Up or Out pathway for Academic Staff full-time positions needs to be urgently reformed.

To get appointed to a full-time Academic Staff role such as a Lecturer, applicants must often achieve this within their Early Career Academic stage (first five years after PhD conferral date). This creates immense psychological pressure, and it leads to observable distortions such as herding and winner-takes-all effects in research grants; it creates a market for Postdoctoral Staff and Teaching Only staff that can often be exploitative; and where there are survivorship biases for the successful applicants.

This is an example of a problem where there has been international empirical evidence for over 50 years. In particular, Robert K. Merton's documentation of the Matthew Effect in science and its subsequent use in the sociology of stratification literature has a strong evidentiary base.⁵

In my field/discipline area of political science, an entry-level lecturer has to have a BA (Hons) and a PhD (8 years of university) plus grants, journal articles, a book monograph, and recent teaching experience. This immediately imposes a class ceiling on low socio-economic students who do not have the invested human and social capital—and this can be found in

⁵ Merton, Robert K. The Matthew Effect in Science. *Science* 159(3810) (Jan 5. 1968), 56-63. Cole, Jonathan R. & Stephen Cole. *Social Stratification in Science*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1973. Rigney, Daniel. *The Matthew Effect: How Advantage Begets Further Advantage*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010.

other (creative) industries as well.⁶ Recent PhD graduates also face competition from international academics who may have better track records and methodology skills.⁷

One other way that this can occur in grant applications or consortia bids is for an Early Career Academic to be named as a preferred named candidate – and for their track record and background intellectual property to be used – and then they are dropped from the successful outcome.

My next couple of recommendations suggest several simple ways that this dynamic can be reformed.

Recommendation 3: Abolish the application limits for Australian Research Council DECRA and Future Fellowship grant programs.

I've seen over 80 DECRA and Future Fellowship applications and confidential Assessor feedback. Problems with the ARC DECRA grant's implementation have been known for a decade: in political science many of the successful applicants are in Years 4 and 5 and have had Postdoctoral experience; successful applicants may at time of application actually be Associate Professors; application success rates are low; and the application process is often complex and stressful.

The Australian Research Council's application limits of two DECRA and three Future Fellowships restrict the freedom to apply; contribute to some of the above economic distortions in the (government monopsony) market for research grant income; and limit Australia's human capital and innovation potential.

The existing application limits are artificial and they should simply be abolished.

Recommendation 4: Introduce an Expression of Interest phase and a Full Application phase for ARC DECRA and Future Fellowship grant programs.

I have heard this suggestion from ARC General and Detailed Assessors for the past 15 years but in that time the ARC grant administration paperwork has gotten more complex.

We should follow the late anthropologist David Graeber's advice and reduce the bureaucratic paperwork.⁸ It would also align our Category 1 grant funding agencies with the best practices of international funding agencies in the United States and Europe.

⁶ Friedman, Sam & Daniel Laurison. *The Class Ceiling: Why It Pays To Be Privileged*. Bristol, England: Policy Press, 2019.

⁷ Brown, Philip, Hugh Lauder & David Ashton. *The Global Auction: The Broken Promises of Education, Jobs and Incomes*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.

⁸ Graeber, David. *The Utopia of Rules: On Technology, Stupidity, and the Secret Joys of Bureaucracy*. Boston: Melville House, 2016.

Recommendation 5: PhD-qualified Professional Staff need access to research opportunities.

One of the recent buzz words on the academic job market is the Alt-Ac (Alternative Academic) career in administrative Professional Services. I have worked in this area for 16 years across 6 Australian universities.

Professional Services roles can be great to work in. However, they can involve subtle discriminatory/exclusionary practices by Supervisors and Academic staff.

For example, I have had Professoriate at one Group of 8 university question my academic credentials, field/discipline training and research administration experience, because I gained some of this at other Go8 and non-Go8 universities. University enterprise bargaining agreements (EBAs) further enshrine this stratification between Academic Staff and Professional Staff. Deeper historical roots for this can be found in eugenics views on stratification and workforce planning.⁹ They also show up in Michael Porter's influential value chain model which is taught to Masters of Business Administration students.¹⁰

This illustrates how Australian universities fail to cultivate or manage their human capital.

PhD qualified Professional Staff have the skill – and some have the field/discipline resources – to do research. I have done so as a self-funded researcher since March 2007. But they are blocked due to EBA terms, role contract terms, and the rules of university internal grant schemes from also building a viable research career. As I also discovered, even when they publish highly cited research with a clear university affiliation, they will be blocked from receiving research funds because of their Professional Staff status. Academic Staff will treat their contract status as an ontological identity rather than who the Professional Staff member is, or their cumulative research track record to date and future potential.

The Professional Staffing profile is changing—and Australian universities need to change with it.

Recommendation 6: PhD students need coordinated training in Intellectual Property Rights and intangible assets.

In a neoliberal political economy, control of intellectual property rights and the valuation of intangible assets is a key to collecting rents.¹¹ PhD students and Early Career Academics often have an unequal power relationship when they enter into industry-based commercialisation contracts for their research or work in research consortia.

⁹ Rutherford, Adam. *Control: The Dark History and Troubling Present of Eugenics*. London: W&N, 2022.

¹⁰ Porter, Michael. *Competitive Advantage: Creating and Sustaining Superior Performance*. New York: The Free Press, 1985.

¹¹ Haskel, Jonathan & Stian Westlake. *Capitalism Without Capital: The Rise of the Intangible Economy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018. Haskel, Jonathan & Stian Westlake. *Restarting The Future: How to Fix the Intangible Economy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2022.

In particular, there should be standard training available across Australian universities in topics such as the differences between Background and Project Created intellectual property; the role of copyright, licensing, and trade secrets; the role and nature of confidential information; and intangible assets and portfolio valuation.

This training could be developed and delivered by IP Australia.

Recommendation 7: To achieve greater autonomy, Australian university researchers need to: (1) receive royalties and licensing income from their publications and intellectual property portfolios; and (2) research publication categories and impacts need to reflect actual contemporary practices rather than legacy categories such as book monographs and journal articles that empower the status quo of oligopolistic cartels.

I have published academically since 1999 and in journalism from 1994 to 2008. Since 2007, I have never received any income for research publications (apart from some very helpful travel stipends by professional associations). I have earned more actual research income from a Substack.com newsletter that I have personal control over.

Academic publishing involves rent-seeking and capture behaviour by oligopolistic cartels.¹² During my PhD candidature one of my Supervisors told me that the average book monograph by an academic publisher sells 300 copies, and is usually written for promotions applications. Academic journal article production costs between \$USD100 and \$USD1000.¹³ Yet researchers are forced to sign over their copyright at the production stage to the academic publisher. Unlike authors, musicians, or film-makers, academics don't receive royalties or licensing income—instead university libraries have to pay oligopolistic cartels for access rights. Recent innovations have introduced further economic distortions such as having to have budget line items in grant applications for Open Access fees to the same oligopolistic publishers.

This is rent-seeking capture. It is also a betrayal of Tim Berners-Lee's original vision of the World Wide Web in 1989 at CERN: to freely share academic papers and other research on a distributed global network. This shift has also occurred because the Cult of Professoriate in Australian universities are often either dismissive or out of touch with actual contemporary practices that would increase research publication availability, contribute to research impact, and lead to a more empowered, democratic society and engaged public.

Thank you for considering my vantage point and recommendations. Please contact me if you would like further information.

Sincerely,

Dr Alex Burns

¹² Giblin, Rebecca & Cory Doctorow. *Chokepoint Capitalism: How Big Tech and Big Content Captured Creative Labour Markets and How We'll Win Them Back*. Brunswick, Australia: Scribe Publications, 2022.

¹³ Lamdan, Sam. *Data Cartels: The Companies That Control and Monopolize Our Information*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2022, 67.