**Submission to the Australian Universities Accord Discussion Paper**

**April 2023**

**The University as**

**‘’A centre of learning to ensure the sustainability of the planet and the human race”**

**from**

**Emeritus Professor of Medicine, David Shearman**

**Preamble**

The Committee has a huge task and I commend their effort so far. I send my appreciation and good wishes to Mary O’Kane who was my VC in Adelaide.

The discussion document is comprehensive and challenging but I believe the questions would be very different if the terms of reference and Committee discussion paper had taken fully into account the major changes which are being imposed on the world at this moment.

The discussion paper leaves me with the worry that it displays a sense of unreality in relation to future needs. Perhaps the woes of the Universities are so many and so consuming that they overwhelm other vital considerations. Only section 2.4 provides some semblance of the changes that will necessitate further consideration of university reforms.

Perhaps these woes reflect that Universities have gradually withdrawn from discourse with the community and their administrations have failed to foster this discourse perhaps related to their adoption of corporatist values as I will explain later.

However I do believe my submission does fall within the TORs which say “The panel will make recommendations for Government, the sector and other relevant stakeholders to deliver a higher education system that meets the current and future needs of the nation, and targets to achieve this” with some emphasis on “ future needs of the nation” and to do this the higher education system needs to consider additional reforms to its structure, operating systems and priorities and to make changes with urgency.

Professor Mary O’Kane has made major contributions to climate change science. It is appropriate therefore that she writes in her Foreword

“We are asking *big* questions: What kind of higher education system does Australia need in two and three decades’ time? What actions and solutions are needed now, to address the major changes underway in our society, economy and environment? How can we ensure all Australians have the opportunity to participate in higher education?”

This merits much consideration which I don’t see in the current discussion Paper and many of the original submissions.

Indeed one has to read through the document to Page 32 before the words climate change are mentioned – in relation to Pacific Islands!

I agree with Professor O’ Kane’s sentence above and contest only one point.

I believe “Two and three decades’ time” should be changed to “this decade” or “now”, because of “the major changes underway in our society, economy and environment”. These changes are already more serious than most of us understand and are accelerating. Western counties including Australia have been insulated so far but collapses in society are already occurring in many developing countries.

An appropriate mission statement for each of our universities would be

**‘’A centre of learning to ensure the sustainability of the planet and the human race”**

The following short section defines my position on the threats of climate change and environmental degradation as a doctor and scientist who has given past service on the IPCC and has continued to follow their deliberations. I understand the meaning of the sometimes nuanced statements in the main report of the IPCC which receive modifications in the government modified Summary for Policy Makers.

**The threat of collapse and extinction**

I must raise this issue for it is fundamental to action in the Universities and should bring about much wider changes than suggested in the discussion paper.

The recent IPCC report essentially documents with a high degree of confidence that humanity will be unable to cope with 1.5 degree rise in temperature (now 1.1) which may be reached in the next few decades. At 1.5 degrees human survival will become difficult, reparations for ongoing structural damage unaffordable and ecosystems almost irretrievable.

In addition to the IPCC report, statements of concern from thousands of scientists are a regular occurrence. Concern relates to increasing climatic instability not just the rise in temperatures and to the many potential tipping points beyond which climate warming will become self perpetuating.

There are now innumerable articles from scientists warning of the collapse of the world systems supporting humanity and many are already in marked evidence in developing countries. <https://johnmenadue.com/david-shearman-and-phil-shearman-anguished-scientists-and-the-collapse-of-democracy/> Some of these articles use the word extinction but I prefer collapse because it offers some hope of recovery.

I have chosen this article for the Committee because it explains <https://titaniclifeboatacademy.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2028:edge-of-extinction-we-ve-been-warned&catid=116> the range of data you need to know.

Unfortunately a similar progression of deterioration is occurring in the world’s natural environmental, due not only to climate warming but to humanity’s destruction of the environment. Thousands of environmental scientists are issuing warnings.

It is also becoming evident that disintegration of society is being fostered not only by climate and environmental changes but by other destructive forces for example some political systems and social media. The disintegration itself then stops effective action being mandated.

This has become a feature of modern society acting synergistically with climate and environment leading to Collapse. It is recognised by social scientists, social services and health workers in nearly all Western countries. This issue is best explained in article by Richard Horton editor of the distinguished Medical Journal, The Lancet <https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(23)00670-0/fulltext> The article is based on a recent meeting of scientists and policy makers convened at the Robert Koch Institute in Berlin, Germany, to discuss 21st-century threats to global health—and what to do about them.

In conclusion it will be apparent that these massive threats will influence the universities and we must prepare now to address them for they were not addressed in the discussion paper.

I hope fervently that they will be addressed in the final report.

**The Universities and future Health of Individuals and Communities**

Since health is my main area of expertise I will explain the future needs of health in the rapidly changing world. The future will bring contacting budgets because of the rapidly increasing costs of reparation and many other factors. Hopefully society will give priority to the factors crucial to a happy life, and health is crucial component for this life. How will this be enacted and delivered?

Much was learned from the Covid pandemic in terms of prevention, treatment and appearance of a new disorder and increasing mental disorders. Covid hit western societies and we soon realised that a part of our inadequacy was that our health services had been deteriorating in most Western countries for at least 2 decades. They have not been prioritised in the growth economy of the richest countries.

However Covid was the orchestral overture to much more complex problems due to the factors mentioned above. Unfortunately the following symphony is discordant and conductors have failed to have the orchestra playing in tune or unity. We failed to recognise the need for post –Covid change. <https://johnmenadue.com/david-shearman-after-covid-19-the-new-normal-must-have-real-universities-acting-on-the-climate-crisis/>

A new normal is required in health care in which it is essential that both governments and universities avoid working in silos and we learn to work and teach across silos, for health must be in all policies and university faculties.

In terms of climate change, environmental degradation and the many related threats, the health aspects are not yet included in any way in most medical courses. They have to be.

The new formula for dealing with health issues has to be across the silos with science, medical science, prevention and treatment, social science and services, population studies, aged and disability care, psychology, geographical distribution of services, all taken into account in medical and nursing education. This needs a revolution.

In addition current services are being overwhelmed by a considerable increase in ”trauma” medicine, not physical trauma but mental trauma**,** PTSD etc due to rapid changes in society and particularly to breakdown in positive social interaction. In addition our way of living is increasing a range of infections due to diminishing habit to cause epidemics and pandemics. Industry has produce PFAS and other toxics and plastic particles now ubiquitous in the human body. All are more than likely to produce a range of new diseases.

Teaching must change and a large increase in health workers is required to at least provide basic care and address the many new medical challenges.

This need is so urgent that the medical course should be reduced to 4 years and the number of entrants increased.

How can this be done for the next entry in September? Now and in the future Universities need structures to act within such time frames, are they available?

I believe that a four year course would be possible from my experience in a lifetime of medical teaching. It can be accomplished by pruning some parts of the course without diminishing professional outcomes. It will be facilitated by changing the current 3 terms concept to three expanded terms with 6 weeks holiday per year. Living expenses will need to be provided as well as no fees. Living costs are required because many students have to earn in the current long breaks.

National costs will increase for these changes but will not be comparable to allowing the health services to continue deteriorating in face of the increasing workloads.

Currently some States are recruiting from overseas countries with more dilapidated health services than ours. This is unconscionable and the commonwealth government should stop it.

**The Accord**

Q1 How should an Accord be structured and focused to meet the challenges facing Australia’s higher education system? What is needed to overcome limitations in the current approach to Australian higher education?

**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?**

We need to move the emphasis of teaching and research and the structure of the University to environmental sustainability; in other words to sustain our life support systems of stable climate and clean air, adequate and clean water, maintenance of biodiversity which provides ecological services and which are necessary for purification of natural and man created harms; most importantly ecological services which are the basis of food production.

The University would be;-

‘’A centre of learning to ensure the sustainability of the planet and the human race”

In addition to the health sciences there are other disciplines that require priority in the pursuit of sustainability.

The most crucial are agricultural sciences, biodiversity and ecology that sustain it and which must be greatly and urgently expanded to work across numerous silos, including water science, planning, transport and energy provision to ensure sustainability through resilience in rural communities.

Again priority must be given to rural and Aboriginal candidates with the same fee-waving considerations as for the health sciences.

A salient change to effect progress is a move from the increasing influence of corporatism which has led to a growth economy to providing prosperity partly by consumption of natural resources. The requirement is for a collective effort on sustainability to maintain what will now be a reduction in living standards as natural resources diminish. The Universities have to lead this change and an understating of alternative of no growth economies must be included in agricultural science studies.

**How should the University be reorganised?**

**Some key thoughts**

Every student commencing university should have an introductory series of lectures and discussion groups (perhaps 6 for months) to define the universal mission, which is relevant to all students whether in physics, philosophy or pharmacy. Each student will develop knowledge on sustainability threats and developing action to address them. The reasons are as follows:-

This interaction would have the important role of both fostering lasting interactions between students with differing interests and focussing on the environmental disasters of modern society and the daunting tasks ahead. The course would detail the truth of science to counter social media where disinformation abounds.

Students would have the facts and a vision to disseminate in society.

It would set the scene for collegiality in Universities which has been fractured by disciplines, splitting of campuses, Universities where VCs want the exposure of a separate city campus and divisive reorganisations to save money.

Many do not enjoy university today, the joy of collegiate interaction has gone and the university experience is seen solely as a means to an end- a job.

There is another aspect to the vision, the absence of underprivileged students whose admission would increase social cohesion- I will refer to this later.

# **Section 2.****Challenges and opportunities for Australia**

It is stated

*Supporting an ageing population will require many more people working and gaining skills in personal care, including in specialist fields such as health, disability and aged care, and a more highly skilled workforce overall to drive productivity gains to maintain economic prosperity*

Yes, more people will be required with different skills but it is over ambitious to mention productivity gains and economic prosperity. There is much evidence that Western governments have allowed these “gains” to be prioritised over finance for health. Times are changing, we have to prioritise sustainability and this is impeded by current theory on economics and corporatism.

Attitudes have to change to provide sustainability.

*Meeting the demand for jobs, skills and talent will require Australia to lift the number of people with higher levels of knowledge and skills dramatically. These people will necessarily come from a wider range of backgrounds, including those who have been historically under-represented in higher education.*

Yes, we need candidates from a wider range of backgrounds particularly indigenous persons and those for poor particularly rural backgrounds. Thus we must recommend the removal of fees to encourage these admissions. I come from a poor background and had not all my schooling and university education been free, society would have been denied my medical and scientific discoveries that are present in diagnosis and treatment today.

Q28 What is needed to increase the number of people from under-represented groups applying to and prepared for higher education, both from school and from other pathways?

Q31 How can the costs of participation, including living expenses, be most effectively alleviated?

There is a great need for Aboriginal and rural entrants into the health sector, university medical, nursing and other health related courses and to the range of sustainability silos which will enhance sustainability via agricultural sciences.

The solution of free education has to be grasped by governments. Without it the Closing the Gap cannot be delivered and basic health care in rural and remote centres should be delivered by graduates who identify with these rural and remote regions and will return to them.

These are decisions for government but the Report must support them.

**Economics and Corporatism**

A consideration of these is fundamental in moving the university to address current threats for much endeavour is devoted to ‘progress and prosperity’.

In 1997Bill Readings of Harvard identified growing corporatism as an increasing problem in his book The University in Ruins. <https://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674929531>

He explained that universities were increasingly turning into transnational corporations, and the idea of culture was being replaced by the discourse of “excellence”. The new University of Excellence is a corporation driven by market forces, and as such, is more interested in profit margins than in thought. We must look to establishing a Real University <https://johnmenadue.com/david-shearman-after-covid-19-the-new-normal-must-have-real-universities-acting-on-the-climate-crisis/>

The words “excellence” is frequently used in the discussion paper also with productivity and prosperity. These words have to relegated to address sustainability successfully.

In 2007, in the book *Climate Change and the Failure of Democracy* 2007, by myself and Joseph Wayne Smith, Chapter 6. ”Education for Living” we, along with many other academics recognise that the organisation of society focuses of the use of science and technology to create individual and corporate power and wealth. Progress in our society is equated with development, with gross national product and with per capita income that, beyond a certain point, have a tenuous relationship to the fulfilment of individuals or society.

The statements of universities like those of the corporatists now induce a deep scepticism and despair. The brief-case carrying Vice Chancellors and their statements are often indistinguishable from the corporate CEO’s; even the crumpled suits with baggy pockets have gone.

The current economic system is devoted to growth. In its present form this is incompatible with sustainability for the environment and its natural resources are being consumed. Western society needs too many earths to live on

The most powerful industries causing these changes are also responsible for many of today’s diseases and government allows these damaging practices to continue in the interest of growth and prosperity. Coal, gas, and some other industries are supported in their developments. .

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

One can conclude that this collaboration needs major reform for sometimes joint reports carry information which need to be questioned. Strict regulation is required for the question arises as to how far the fossil fuel industries have infiltrated Australian Universities as they have in those in the USA <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2023/mar/27/fossil-fuel-firms-us-universities-colonize-academia?CMP=share_btn_link>

Also relevant to corporatisation of universities is Q42

Q42 What settings are needed to ensure academic integrity, and how can new technologies and innovative assessment practices be leveraged to improve academic integrity?

I agree with the Committee’s statement on integrity but it needs to be expanded because Universities often act within their corporate view and this lacks integrity.

In this study <https://johnmenadue.com/do-universities-with-medical-schools-fail-on-fossil-fuels/> from members of the organisation I founded, the leaders of universities fail to provide details of their Universities investments in harmful industries particularly fossil fuels. This disregards the studies from the doctors and scientists in their own universities .The fact is that much ill heath and deaths are being caused which University leadership is prepared to disregard. The same accusation can be levelled about some funding they accept. The article is a must read for every academic.

**Some conclusions**

I have written this article more as an essay to depict the nature of the threats to University and not as a series of answers to questions some of which I think are irrelevant to the main issue.

I sincerely hope some of my vision will enter your report. Some suggestions are related to government and cannot be enacted solely by Universities but they could be raised in the report.

Essentially my submission represents a vision that each University could proudly say it is;-

**‘’A centre of learning to ensure the sustainability of the planet and the human race”.**

My short Bio is below

**Professor David Shearman AM MB, ChB, PhD, FRACP, FRCPE.**

David Shearman is Emeritus Professor of Medicine at Adelaide University 1975-1997, and previously held senior positions at Edinburgh and Yale Universities. He is author of many books relating to climate change, its science, consequences, democratic and international and economic implications; he served on the IPCC for two terms on health and scientific sections. He has been President of the Conservation Council of South Australia and with the late Professor Tony McMichael he founded Doctors for the Environment Australia in 2001 and was the Hon Secretary 2001- 2018. He is author and co-author of several hundred scientific and medical papers and writes frequently for the media. He was awarded an AM for service to medicine and to climate change.

His website is [www.davidshearman.org](http://www.davidshearman.org) which links to many articles of relevance to this submission.