University Accord Discussion Paper submission

Liz Temple, Associate Professor in Psychology, UNE Despite currently being on annual leave, I have taken time to prepare a submission because I feel that there are a great number of changes required to improve the university sector and I am really concerned that the Accord process will result in only university management and other interested bodies really having a say, and much of that will be lobbying and spin. If the Accord process does not hear enough from academics and professional staff members, there will likely be little attention paid to the actual situations in our workplaces, so you won’t get a true sense on what is happening on the ground, where things have gone very wrong, and what could be done to fix things. For example, I think that much could be learnt from the current crises at many universities, being demonstrations of how not to do things in the future. My university, UNE, is a good example for that – so many errors of judgement, compounded by managerial incompetence, an unwillingness to take responsibility, and so much more… but I have run out of time to write everything I would like to say or to finesse what I have written below. I also must apologise because I have written general comments rather than responses to the specific questions included in the Discussion Paper. Many of the problems that currently afflict Australian universities stem from the way they have come to be considered ‘businesses’. Despite being designated as ‘non-profit’ enterprises, the expectations and KPIs set for university executives and councils have come to prioritise improving the ‘bottom line’ rather than focusing on high quality teaching and research. As ‘businesses’, Australian universities are competitors within the higher education market – seeking to attract the most students (domestic and international) and the largest amount of research funds. Innovations, whether teaching- or research-related, are not well-shared if they are seen to confer an edge that can be monetised. None of this is good for Australia, particularly as it results in much wastage of public money and prevents our higher education sector being as good as it could be, and what it should be if we are serious about our universities fulfilling their potential for the betterment of all Australians. For example, when Australian universities compete for students it is pretty much a zero-sum game – when one university takes more students, other universities get fewer students. These fluctuating increases and decreases in student numbers across universities (and in different disciplines within a university) have numerous flow-on effects on resourcing within universities (e.g., the number of staff needed to support, teach and administer the student population, the amount and type of physical spaces required for teaching, IT support and infrastructure requirements, etc.). More costly, however, are the vast expenses incurred by universities in the name of this competition for students. In particular, massive amounts of money are spent on marketing and related activities to attract students, including attempting to ‘poach’ potential students from other universities, with the sole aim of growing market share. This includes spending on glossy ads and merchandise, hiring consultants and contracting marketing companies, re-packaging degrees, increasing campus facilities beyond what is necessary, not to mention all of the university staff time expended on devising and enacting these strategies, and so on. Besides seeking to increase revenue via increased student enrolments, universities that are run as ‘businesses’ also seek to reduce costs without adequate care or consideration for the impacts of the core university functions of teaching and research. Such efforts are typically focused on reducing staff numbers because labour costs are usually the largest component of a university’s budget. The scope of staff cutbacks made by universities over 2020 show what happens when management has free rein, without adequate oversight or regulation – specifically, domestic student numbers increased, but staff were cut in large numbers, so the universities improved their bottom-lines, but this came at the cost of the well-being of remaining university staff, who ended up massively overworked due to covering the work of the staff who were made redundant or who took voluntary early retirement. The ridiculousness of this at many universities is that the supposedly redundant positions have had to be refilled, including by people who took payouts in 2020… It is important, however, to note that the staff cuts in 2020 were only part of a longer-term change in staff-student ratios, whereby Australian universities have long had insufficient academic and professional staff members to adequately meet the needs entailed by the magnitude of their student loads. So, while promising potential students a world class education with all the bells and whistles, university executives have not secured the resources to deliver what they are selling. The only reason our universities have not fallen over, why students are still being taught and supervised, why research is still being completed, and all the administrative processes are still running, is because academic and professional staff members have been covering the gaps by ‘volunteering’ massive amounts of their time, unpaid. This is not reasonable and is not sustainable. But it is an entirely predictable outcome of universities being run as businesses, where the KPIs set for university executives focus their attention on growing the customer base (i.e., student enrolments) while keeping costs down (i.e., reducing staff-related overheads). Moreover, this framing leads university councils and executives to be more concerned with the balance sheet than the quality of the product (i.e., education and research) and more focused on attracting new students than on ensuring existing students are well taught and supported, not to mention the lack of care regarding the wellbeing of their staff. Furthermore, framing universities as ‘businesses’, means that students are then considered ‘customers’, which has resulted in an increased proportion of students seemingly believing that they are paying for a degree rather than the opportunity to learn and, if they pass all elements, being awarded a degree. The expectations associated with a customer-service provider interaction differ markedly from those associated with student-teacher interactions, and therefore teaching staff who will not give students the support they demand (including answers to assessment tasks, lengthy extensions on assessments, availability on demand, etc.) are often punished via bad teaching evaluations, false claims to student grievance, and other forms of bullying and/or harassment. While most students do not behave this way, there are far too many who do. High quality education, teaching and learning takes time. However, in the battle to attract students and reduce costs, many universities have enacted policies that do not allow adequate time for the development and delivery of teaching, nor for student learning or assessment. These include changes that are designed to fast-track students through degrees, such as running trimesters, block-mode teaching, etc., which do not allow adequate time for students to learn or academics to teach. Course and assessment policies at many universities also undermine good quality teaching and learning opportunities because they have been designed to save money rather than to support good outcomes for students. Specifically, over the past few decades the number of small group classes, such as tutorials, practicals, lab sessions, etc. have been reduced at most (if not all) Australian universities because they are more expensive to run than large group teaching activities, such as lectures, which are now predominantly pre-recorded and available online. In addition, in an effort to reduce the costs associated with marking assessment tasks, many (if not all) universities have reduced the number of individually marked assessment tasks, like essays and lab reports, with these being replaced with automatically marked multiple-choice assessments and similar. Moreover, the marking rates set by universities (i.e., number of words to be marked per hour) are so high as to make it impossible to provide meaningful and individualised feedback to students (unless ‘volunteering’ additional, unpaid, time). Together, these factors mean that students receive fewer and/or poorer quality opportunities to learn and gain meaningful feedback on their work. If we want highly capable graduates, we need to invest adequate time in all aspects of their education – faster and cheaper is not better, particularly for the average student, and definitely not for students who require extra support. These university policies, along with the financial incentives for keeping students in degrees, have also interacted with the broadening the student population (i.e., taking more students who are less prepared and less capable academically) to result in a ‘dumbing down’ in many areas of university study. In my experience, this equates to about a grade and a half change over the past 25 or so years, such that what is now a high-level credit was once a bare passing mark. This means that, on average, graduating students now have less knowledge, skills and competencies than they used to. Beyond those discussed above, another reason for this includes the pressure placed on academic staff to pass students even if they do not demonstrate expected minimum levels of knowledge and skills, rather than make them re-take the subject to pass – this pressure is particularly prevalent with regards to international students. If universities were considered places of learning, rather than businesses, the focus would be put back on the core principals underpinning high quality teaching and learning, rather than on making/saving money. Further, if we start treating universities like any other part of the government funded education sector by getting rid of the ‘universities as businesses’ approach we would have a much more functional and less wasteful higher education sector. If we remember that education and research are societal goods, being of benefit to all Australians whether they attend university or not (i.e., we all benefit from innovative research and the availability of well trained professionals, like doctors and engineers, for example), we shouldn’t seek to continue to have a sector that is made up of ‘winners’ with billions of dollars of assets and ‘losers’ that are struggling to keep the lights on. We should be sharing and collaborating to ensure all universities can provide the same high level of educational opportunities to students, and career opportunities to staff, regardless of their history or location. Relevant existing strengths include that Australia has robust systems in place to ensure the quality of our degrees. Hence, if a student would like to complete a degree in most disciplinary areas, the content of the degree, including the knowledge and skills learnt, is much the same regardless of which Australian university it is completed through. This is largely due to the external accreditation required for many undergraduate and postgraduate degrees, which is usually conferred by an industry or professional group and requires all accredited degrees to meet the same criteria and standards. All degrees also must meet AQF guidelines, etc. Similarly, expectations and requirements for higher degree research students are common across Australian universities. This means that all of our universities are essentially equivalent in what we teach, how we teach, and what we require students to demonstrate in terms of knowledge and skills to be awarded degrees at all levels. We do the same work, provide the same services, so should be able to be more integrated and collaborative, if only we stop competing with each other. There is also a need to stop the endless cycles of restructuring that occurs in universities - so much stress and expense incurred only to be repeated again approx. 7 years later. In part, this seems to occur because every new VC wants to make their mark on a university, regardless of the outcomes (which they rarely wait around long enough to see...). Ultimately, a system of needs-based funding could be developed to ensure universities can fulfil their core activities, including mandating sufficient staffing levels. The number of separate universities and/or university campuses across the country could be determined in an organised and logical manner, to ensure accessibility (whether on campus, online, or hybrid) while reducing redundancies and entrenched historical advantages/disadvantages. Basically, we should be taking the blinkers-off – rather than thinking about minor recalibrations in the sector that are largely preordained due to the current environment, we should be thinking about what a higher education sector would look like if you were starting from scratch. While it might sound radical, and would certainly upset some people, we need to be bold in our thinking if we are serious about reimagining Australia’s university sector to ensure it meets the needs of the country now and into the future.