Australian Universities Accord

Panel Discussion Paper Consultation

'Towards Lifelong Educational Well-being'

Authors

Prof Michael Rosemann, PhD
Director, Centre for Future Enterprise
Queensland University of Technology
m.rosemann@qut.edu.au
(Note: This is an individual response by the author, and not a response on behalf of or endorsed by QUT).

Emeritus Prof Martin Betts, PhD
Co-Founder and Director of HEDx
martin@hedx.com.au

Abstract

The future higher education system in Australia needs to cater for the societal and individual needs for continuous, and not one-off, educational well-being, i.e., the ongoing possession of contemporary skills, competence and consciousness that enables learners to deal with professional demands and beyond. The pace of environmental changes will make continuous engagement with education a constant, very similar to how citizens take care of their physical and financial well-being.

Thus, metrics such as percentage of the population with a bachelor degree will no longer be sufficient. Instead the population-wide state of educational well-being will become a priority. This is comparable to developments over the last decades in other industries. For example, the quality of a mobility system is not measured by the possession of cars, but the ability to access mobility services when needed.

In the light of this new aim for our education system, this response to the Australian Universities Accord Panel Discussion Paper calls for

- Policies and communication strategies targeting the role of lifelong learning to ensure **public awareness for and a deep understanding of the importance of educational well-being** ('education literacy') and ways to achieve and maintain this form of well-being;
- boosting the **national co-innovation capability** in the higher education sector by establishing shared capabilities (The Australian Centre for Innovative Higher Education) and sourcing venture capital to fuel the national education ecosystem;
- the provision, governance and management of an **electronic education record**; and
- extensions to our accreditation standards to cater for **upgrades of an existing degree.**

Our submission is grounded in and informed by two years of research into the strategic options of future education systems, which we summarised in our book 'The New Learning Economy', Routledge 2023. In the following we provide our response to a selected subset of the questions posed within the Accord discussion paper.

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?

We predict that Australia's Higher Education system's **most significant challenge will come from demand-side changes**. Lifelong learning and with it a new, and yet to be operationalised requirement for educational well-being will emerge, leading to demands for continuous educational services going beyond current (micro)degree-focused offerings. At this stage, however, the national responsibility and ecosystem for life- and work-complementing education is largely under-specified and lacks policies, digital infrastructure and public awareness. A functioning educational ecosystem beyond tertiary education is largely missing. Thus, we support Universities Australia's and HEDx' calls for a lifelong learning strategy.[1]

The key premise of this submission is that national education systems will have to ensure, and be measured by, the lifelong educational well-being of their population. Educational well-being is here defined as the state of possessing the knowledge, competence, and consciousness to master contemporary professional and societal needs. The higher our educational well-being, the higher will be economic prosperity and societal metrics such as quality of life. However, there are at least **three significant limitations** to a well-functioning higher education system as a backbone of the nation's educational well-being.

1) The Australian education system **lacks advanced innovation capabilities**, and this might turn out to be the core limitation in a growing learning economy that will witness the disappearance of geographical boundaries, blocked education offerings (= degree programs), and most of all provider-centric, time-constrained service offerings (semesters). It can also be expected that global BigTechs and EdTechs will be attracted to the growing learning economy and offer distinct, digitally sophisticated learning services that might be popular but not accredited. As a result, Australian education providers and relevant government institutions need to make bolder moves than offering further micro-credentials, a model they are very comfortable with. Instead, business model innovation, service models extending and even replacing existing product (degree) models, and capabilities allowing continuous engagement with learners who seek relevant and engaging learning over recognised qualifications needs to be developed.
2) If educational well-being is the new challenge, then established metrics such as 'percentage of the population with a bachelor degree' are no longer sufficiently capturing the desired qualities of our education system and are **metrics of declining relevance**. New measures need to be identified that capture the actual state of educational well-being which is more than the fact that at some stage during a professional life a degree program has been completed. Unlike other areas such as health and finance, the education sector, largely lacks systems that allow capturing our *current* state of well-being.
3) Australia has made substantial progress in developing health and financial literacy among its citizens. The ability to learn, unlearn and assess our own state of educational well-being, however, is significantly under-developed in comparison with other systems of well-being. Such an **under-developed education literacy** is a significant limitation as it constrains learner-centric innovation.

[1] Universities Australia: Response to the Australian Universities Accord Panel Discussion Paper, April 2023, pp. 22-23; M. Betts and K. Treacher: HEDx Universities Accord Submission, April 2023, p. 12.

.

Q3 What should the long-term target/s be for Australia's higher education attainment by 2030 and 2040, and how should these be set and adjusted over time?

If educational well-being is to become the primary goal of Australia's higher education, we encourage the study and replication of successful target measures from national systems that have a more advanced understanding of well-being and how to secure it. The most relevant benchmark would be the national health system which breaks down the national quality of health into interrelated outcome measures (e.g., life expectancy, cancer rates), citizens' behaviour (e.g., uptake of health checks, decline of smoking), system metrics (e.g., beds per citizen, waiting times) and related literacy levels in the population (e.g., nutritional knowledge, self-diagnostic capability).

The same system of targets is proposed to measure the quality of national education with the metrics for each of these yet to be defined. However, one could imagine metrics such as

- By 2030, 70% of Australia's population between 17 and 65 possesses a sufficient level of educational well-being. This level increases to 85% by 2040 (outcome measure).
- By 2030, 70% of Australia's population between 17 and 65 is engaged with learning activities and the same percentage has an active electronic education record. Both these metrics increase to 85% by 2040 (citizens' behaviour).
- By 2030, it takes 5 working days to make an appointment with a (public or private) learning advisor. The lifelong learning entitlement[2] is $2,000 pa for citizens between 40-50 years of age. In 2040, these metrics are 2 working days and $3,000 (system metrics).
- By 2030, 70% of Australia's population between 17 and 65 is familiar with essential measures of educational well-being ('the BMI of education') and knows how to learn and unlearn. This level increases to 85% by 2040 (literacy levels).

Q4 Looking from now to 2030 and 2040, what major national challenges and opportunities should Australian higher education be focused on meeting?

There are a number of widely discussed challenges such as access to affordable state-of-the-art education across the country. In the following we focus on two specific opportunities that have so far received less attention.

1) Educating the Workforce Ahead of the Demand Curve

A pure focus on satisfying a request for work-ready graduates will always face **educational latency** – the time lag education providers require to develop a curriculum according to employers' expectations. Rather than such a reactive curriculum design, which tends to be in a constant 'catch-up' mode, higher education providers should be incentivised to educate students ahead of the demand curve. Universities, informed by their research capacity, need to be able to forecast with significant accuracy the type of job profiles and skills required in the future. This would mean universities would also educate for jobs that are only about to emerge. Executed successfully, the direction of influence (industry -> education sector) would in part be reversed (education sector -> industry). Employers would create jobs according to the qualifications provided by universities, such as data economists, trust designers or GAI

[2] M. Betts and K. Treacher: HEDx Universities Accord Submission, April 2023, p. 18.

Engineers. Related curriculum would come with first mover advantages and might be rewarded with global export opportunities.

2) Electronic Education Record

Australia has by global comparisons a high affinity with digital technologies, and therefore could play a worldwide leading role in the design, roll-out and ultimately capitalization of an electronic education record. Such a record would provide individuals with a private data record in the cloud that reliably consolidates educational achievements. Education providers would securely upload and authenticate qualifications, and individuals could make (parts of) their record available if needed, for example to future employers or learning advisors. An e-education record would mimic e-health record experiences and systems. If successful, such a solution would also attract global attention. Learners would own and control this record. Such a record would facilitate a growing education ecosystem where universities as well as other providers could proactively offer learning services.

Q6 What are the best ways to achieve and sustain future growth in Australian higher education, given the changing needs of the population and the current pressures on public funding?

As the next decades will continue to be opportunity-rich, and the exact nature of technological affordances, available business models, and environmental changes is difficult to predict, it is most important that the Australian higher education sector increases its capability to innovate. Though individual providers will have different appetites to build innovation capability, **orchestrated co-innovation across the sector** would be a way to reduce the costs of innovation and increase the related economies of scale. This could be an initiative similar to the banking sector, where global banks formed an alliance to jointly understand the impact of blockchain, and then individually created response strategies. The current debate covering AI/GAI, blockchain, cybersecurity etc. shows the high demand for a nation-wide system that is able to make informed impact assessments faster. This could even culminate in an **Australian Centre for Innovative Higher Education**.

Q7 How should the mix of providers evolve, considering the size and location of existing institutions and the future needs of communities?

Education ecosystems consisting of universities, TAFEs, colleges, BigTechs, EdTechs, regulators, etc. will require their own governance, leadership and management as Australia's experiences in the establishment of innovation ecosystems have shown. This is a very complex topic. Thus, we just want to share one related specific idea; **education venture capital**. In order to boost and benefit from an EdTech community, government as well as individual providers need to define new forms to make venture capital available to those emerging organisations that create new educational services. Such a focus would also ensure that the current demand-sided narrative (e.g., popularity of Australia for international students) is complemented with a provider-centric view (e.g., emergence of globally successfully, Australia-based start-ups/scale-ups in the education sector).

Q8 What reforms are needed to promote a quality learning environment and to ensure graduates are entering the labour market with the skills and knowledge they need?

Q10 What role should higher education play in helping to develop high quality general learning capabilities across all age groups and industries?

Entering the labour market is not just a question of skills and knowledge that can be immediately deployed to a professional role with limited onboarding and upskilling time. In addition, there is a growing demand for **meta-education skills and knowledge, i.e., the ability to learn and unlearn**. However, such knowledge is rarely available in graduating students. It is proposed to develop such a meta-educational curriculum and shared content that can be deployed across disciplines and providers leading to an advanced learning literacy and self-directed learners. One might even consider that future accreditations require such meta-educational content as part of a curriculum. This would be a valuable extension of the debate on the future of work towards the future of learning.

Q9 How should Australia ensure enough students are studying courses that align with the changing needs of the economy and society?

This requires two activities. First, ensuring that in the future **everybody will be a student**, and 'enough' is not only a question of how the current generation of young students divide their learning interests across the diverse educational offerings. Rather, it needs to be measured by the ability to re-train large parts of the workforce quickly (see for example the current debate regarding the rapid need for generative AI skills and knowledge).

Second, universities need to be able to **predict the changing needs of the economy and society** to reduce their curriculum latency (see also answer to Q4, item 1).

Q15 What changes are needed to grow a culture of lifelong learning in Australia?

Q16 What practical barriers are inhibiting lifelong learning, and how can they be fixed?

Q36 What regulatory and governance reforms would enable the higher education sector to better meet contemporary demands?

Lifelong learning requires individual learners to continuously update their existing skills and knowledge base. This demand is not satisfied by the ongoing extension of competence by additional degrees and micro-credentials. Rather it is proposed to facilitate a system in which **degrees can be updated**, thus replicating a model that works well in other product-based environments (e.g., the software industry). Degrees would need to be version and release managed, and learners would individually or via employers subscribe to ongoing updates.[3] This approach ensures that the one-off achievement of educational well-being captured by a degree remains current. At this stage, however, students witness the depreciation of their knowledge year by year after graduation as existing education markets (e.g., professional associations) are not able to adequately maintain this knowledge base. Upgradeable degrees

[3] The idea is further specified in M. Betts and M. Rosemann: The New Learning Economy. Thriving Beyond Higher Education. Routledge 2023, pp. 132-136.

currently do not exist anywhere in the world. Thus, here is a substantial first mover opportunity for the Australian higher education sector.

Its successful implementation, however, requires regulatory changes as today such upgrades cannot be accredited. The technological capabilities (version and release management) are already available in most Learning Management Systems, though often under-utilized. New governance and pricing models would need to be defined.

Upgradeable degrees in combination with electronic education records could be a key enabler of overcoming practical barriers to lifelong learning. Working closely with employers to incentivise investments in educational well-being and adoption of models they are familiar with from their engagements with technology partners would be crucial.