To the panel,

The progressive trend in Australia higher education (HE) for more than a decade has been towards lower standards and worse outcomes. This is reflected in the opinions academics, the dissatisfaction and lowered performance of students, and the increasing cynicism that the general public directs towards institutions that should embody the very best of Australian society. Australia faces a choice. We must decide whether or not we are willing to pay the price for world-leading HE institutions or not. Extended underfunding has produced increasingly invasive budget cuts and a pervasive lowering of standards for both units and admissions. If we wish to rectify these problems we must take immediate steps to restore funding and deal frankly with the compromises that have been made so far. If we do not wish to pay the costs then we should be honest with ourselves and our children, and reflect seriously on how a leaner, less ambitious tertiary education sector would function. I hope deeply that we will choose the former, but the evolution of the national university system leads me to fear that we are on the path towards the later. I have focused a handful of points I think represent either significant problems or opportunities for reform. At the risk of seeming like something of a grab-bag I have attempted to give the most attention to issues that I felt were less likely to attract extensive comment.

Point 1: University enrolment is a means to an end, not a goal. I am concerned that the discussion paper seems to treat increased rates of university participation as an unambiguous good. University participation certainly has considerable value to both individuals and communities, but we must remember that university participation is merely a means to an end, rather than an end in itself. Judging the HE system by this metric will lead to misguided and likely harmful policy making. The focus should be on university graduates, how well those graduates have been educated, and how well the graduate cohort reflects Australia’s diversity and includes disadvantaged groups. Approaching commencement as an important metric completely ignores the growing problem of non-completion.

Point 2: On the role of the government encouraging certain degrees over others. It is entirely legitimate for the government to take a hand in encouraging people to undertake degrees in areas that are likely to be important and in demand in the future. People are correct to argue that the government cannot foresee what skills will be valuable in the future, but this is equally true of students when they choose a course of study. However if these incentivized degrees were to become a partisan political issue the end result would most likely be harmful to Australia’s future skill needs, and harmful to the reputation of higher education in Australia.

Point 3: Marketization threatens the ability of universities to act as repositories of knowledge. The government should take steps to protect the function of universities as repositories of knowledge. At various points in time the demand for skills and knowledge from one academic discipline or another will fluctuate. By employing experts even when demand is low the university sector helps to preserve important knowledge and skillsets so that they can be benefited from if or when they become pertinent. For an Australian example, consider the role of anthropologists in the native title system. The use of anthropological evidence in native title cases created an urgent demand for domain expertise. In the early days this expertise was frequently provided by working academics. With time the university system was able to produce graduates who could fulfil the need for anthropological input on native title issues on a more professional basis. As this example demonstrates a diversified academic body is like a form of insurance for any knowledge society. It is an expense to be paid so that the nation can be ready to face a greater variety of unexpected scenarios thrown up by a changing world. However the current HE system, in which the persistence of a discipline or sub-discipline is often dependent on their profitability, threatens the capacity of universities to act as secure, long term repositories of knowledge. A funding system should be devised so that fields of long term importance to Australia are at least somewhat preserved against dissolution.

Point 4: Institutional autonomy has been hollowed out and fails as guide for public policy. One of the guiding principles for government policy towards higher education in Australia is that of institutional autonomy. This is a principle that emerges from a previous era of higher education and it is increasingly out of step with the realities of the contemporary university system. In the current system ‘institutional autonomy’ fails to bring the benefits it is supposed to, while protecting many aspects of the university system against appropriate scrutiny. Institutional autonomy is meant to facilitate free inquiry, and diverse and innovative approaches to research and education. In practice the national university system has achieved the exact opposite. Autonomy to teach and conduct research has overwhelmingly been subordinated to the need to conform to the expectations of federal regulation and assessments. This trend was well apparent by the early 2000s, and reached its ultimate conclusion in 2022 when the Morrison government decided that it was appropriate for the Education Minister to hold veto powers over research grants. Academic autonomy exists only in a residual sense. Under the current system the main beneficiaries of ‘institutional autonomy’ are those charged with the governance and administration of the Universities. Respect for this principle primarily serves to ensure that the accountability and transparency of Australia’s public universities is appalling, falling far short of what should be expect of such large and important institutions. If institutional autonomy continues to be treated as a sacred rather than pragmatic principle it will simply serve to hide the festering problems in the sector from proper examination and treatment.

Point 5: Universities cannot control labour costs under the current system. As it currently stands academics have their wages paid by Universities, but promotions are handled by external entities. It makes little sense to have a system in which universities can neither control nor predict one of their major expenses. This dynamic contributes to unstable funding arrangements in departments, and is one of many factors that incentivise the use of insecure labour arrangements. The current system should be altered so that the promotion process takes account of the financial circumstances of the university, or so that the government bears a more direct burden for the costs that this system creates.

Point 6: Domestic advertising is an expensive drain on university resources. The HE sector has increasingly turned to large scale, expensive advertising campaigns in an attempt to increase student numbers. Domestic advertising represents an enormous waste of money, diverting a growing share of university budgets towards fighting over a stable and shrinking pool of potential students. This competition in ad-money serves nobodies interests and the government is well placed to break this trap that the HE sector has fallen into. This issue can easily be resolved by placing caps on how much institutions can spend on advertising. This would benefit all institutions by freeing up an unproductive expense, but I expect it would be particularly beneficial for smaller and rural universities, which are least able to compete in the advertising arms race.

Point 7: Shrinking numbers of non-academic support staff. The shrinking numbers of support staff are a little discussed but very serious problem for the HE system. University administrations have been able, in the short term, to save money by reducing support staff and shifting the burden of the various tasks they perform onto academic staff. However from the perspective of effective use of money and achieving desired outcomes this practice introduces an immense amount of largely concealed inefficiency into the system. Academics are highly trained, highly qualified specialist knowledge workers. The more time they are able to spend on the core expertise for which they were hired (in this case research and teaching) the greater the value they produce. The greater the extent to which they are expected to take on board miscellaneous administrative tasks the less efficient they will be, and the less effective the HE system will be. The principle that knowledge workers are most productive when allowed to focus on their domain of expertise has been well established since Peter Drucker devised the notion more than half a century ago, and remains a common theme in management literature. The shortage of frontline support staff is also sharply felt by students. Both the academic world and university administration are frequently opaque and confusing. Staff shortages exacerbate this by making assistance harder to find and slower to work through. This is most acutely felt by students from underrepresented groups, for whom the HE landscape is the least familiar and the need for prompt assistance in difficult times the most pressing. It is important that any examination of the HE sector also give due consideration to how sufficient, stable provision of non-academic support roles can be met.

Point 8: Non-academic staff in managerial positions are a growing cost. Alongside the persistent cutbacks in in non-academic support staff, the Australian HE system has seen a significant growth in the number and wages of non-academic staff in senior, predominantly managerial roles. This growth has been poorly explained and does not appear justified by any manifest outcomes within universities. Investigating the causes of this and devising strategies to control this growing expense should be a priority to ensure long-term sustainability of the system.

Point 9: Improving the use of metrics and rankings. The Australian HE sector currently makes extremely heavy use of metrics and rankings. Appropriately used these are useful tools, but as it currently stands they are used in a way that is inconsistent, poorly informed and arbitrary. The result of this is that universities are frequently making major decisions based on data that appears to have been misused or misunderstood, and which is then presented to the public in a misleading way. The abuse of these numbers has been a longstanding driver of dissatisfaction in the academic workforce and an ongoing driver of poor university decision planning. There is a real need for stakeholders to come together and devise a set of guidelines regarding the limitations and appropriate usage of this data, hopefully resulting in a more collaborative and effective attitude towards using them to inform decision making in the future.

 Point 10: Admission standards There is a widely held view within Australian universities that a growing proportion of students are not properly prepared to undertake tertiary study despite being admitted to do so. The increasing proportion of students who fail to complete their degree gives support to this view. Increasing the admission of students who are extremely unlikely to complete their degree is harmful to everybody. The student incurs debt without improving their skills or employability, limited teaching resources are stretched even further, and academics face pressure to lower standards so that only an ‘acceptable’ proportion of their classes fail. It is an enormous waste of time and money, is deeply stressful for everyone involved, and is highly unethical. Admitting ill-equipped students that the university knows are unlikely to succeed borders on cruelty. To improve outcomes and help account for this ethical breakdown there is need to establish a standardized, transparent and equitable system for university admissions. The current state of affairs is not working.

Point 11: Confusion between state and federal authorities. Universities are institutions that awkwardly overlap both state and federal governments, and as a consequence of this it is often extremely confusing to navigate the relevant regulations, entities and responsibilities should one wish to raise an issue. The complexity of this is great enough that I have seen people abandon quite serious complaints due to exhaustion. There is a pressing need for greater clarity in this area.

Point 12: Mental health is in a state of crisis. The final point I want to raise is that the university sector is sick in a very literal sense. It is unsurprising that employees are anxious and have low morale, given the difficult and uncertain situation they have been in for some time. What is more shocking is the scale and prevalence of mental illness amongst the student body. There is something about how we are conducting university education in this country that is deeply harmful to people’s welfare and it seems to be the best and brightest who are worst afflicted by it. It is a massive detriment to people’s ability to benefit from a university education, and it carries a great human cost.