

Response to the *Australian Universities Accord Discussion Paper* by Dr Tim Thornton, April 11th, 2023.

I taught in the Australian university system between 2005 and 2018. In that time, I designed and directed both graduate and undergraduate programs. I also undertook a considerable variety of teaching across inside and outside the Group of Eight. I am currently a Senior Research Fellow at Tufts University and also at Boston University. In addition, I am Director of the Australian-based School of Political Economy (SPE) which is an entity I set up in 2019 because I felt the Australian university system was so problematic, unethical, and exploitative that some alternative was required.

Given the large volume of submissions you likely be receiving, I will be reasonably succinct and concentrate mainly on making practical suggestions on how certain things might be improved. In other words, this submission is addressed to *Question 1. 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?*

External auditing of student assessments

Australian universities are regularly assessed for the quality of their research. For example, being accorded rankings that range from 1. 'Well below world standard' to 5. 'Well above world standard'. Because there are no similar rankings for the level of student learning, universities face a strong incentive to concentrate on boosting or maintaining their research ranking and to put as little as possible into teaching and learning. True, there are some incentives within the system to promote better teaching, but they are utterly overshadowed by the much stronger incentives to focus on research.

Given what has just been said, it is suggested that all universities in Australia should have the quality of student learning externally audited. This should be done by people overseas-based academics who have no knowledge of what university they are auditing. Assessing a relatively small random selection of already graded work could play a significant role in restoring standards. There is a strong prima facie case for the audits to be made public. If universities face this strong incentive to care more about teaching standards, it necessarily influence who gets employed, on what terms they are employed, and they incentives to put time and energy into teaching and curriculum design.

External auditing of complaints to the University Ombudsman

A small percentage of complaints to a university's ombudsman should be audited by an *external* auditor. This simple measure could be expected to promote much greater compliance with a university's own processes and/or the general norms of behaviour expected of other organisations in society. In my experience, abuses of power and process regularly occur within the system. A university ombudsman is often impaired by the fact they are an employee of the university that they are charged with monitoring. Their lack of genuine independence regularly compromises their capacity to be impartial and to speak truth to power.

I often found when various actors within a university were engaged in, or aware of, something that I thought was deeply wrong or irregular, they would refuse to communicate in writing. At best you would get some mealy mouthed and evasive verbal response. To me, this simply confirmed the university was deeply in the wrong and they knew it. Nonetheless, their unwillingness to engage in written form made it more difficult and daunting to launch external legal proceedings when something particularly egregious has transpired. Accordingly, it is suggested that if a university

receives a written legal complaint they are obliged to respond in writing whenever that is explicitly requested. Compliance with this requirement is something that an annual external audit could monitor.

Assessment Only Universities

Many Australian universities spend quite large amounts of money on advertising seeking to promote their 'brand.' These often vapid marketing exercises simply cancel each other out, their only substantial effect is to help mask the reality that Australian universities are marked by a considerable degree of uniformity. If so many of them were not already so large, and exhibiting such obvious diseconomies and dysfunctions of scale, one would recommend more of them merge.

One antidote to all this homogeneity would be to have at least one assessment-only university. Academic staff would still undertake assessment of learning, and charge for that service accordingly, but they would be free from the responsibility of having to lecture, run tutorials, field student queries, etc. Furthermore, the university does not have to worry about the cost of physical teaching spaces, library resources, cleaning, etc. Instead, a university would only have to design subjects, stipulate learning outcomes, nominate recommended readings, and describe the assessment requirements and dates. If a person could demonstrate their knowledge via the assessment tasks to a sufficient standard, the university would record that the student as having completed the subject. A whole degree could conceivably be completed via this approach. What matters in the awarding of a degree is that the person in question has mastered a certain body of knowledge, how they acquired that knowledge and where they acquired that knowledge should not really matter.

Consider a hypothetical example. Imagine you can learn first-year organic chemistry by doing a free massive open online course (MOOC) such as those offered by Stanford University. You then submit (and pass) all the assessment items for first-year organic chemistry at Melbourne University. In such circumstances, why should have to pay for lectures, tutorials, swimming pools, and grand buildings at Melbourne University that you did not need? If we want to make tertiary education far more affordable here is an option to experiment with. Of course, it would not suit all students and would be more appropriate in some subjects areas than in others (e.g., chemistry versus counselling). External auditing of results (as suggested earlier) would obviously be important, but as argued earlier, this is something that now needs to occur for all students.

Teaching only universities

Given that it is often the case that much of what students pay to universities to undertake courses gets spent not on delivering those courses, but in cross-subsidising research, there is a strong prima facie case for setting up at least some teaching-only universities.

The obvious danger is that these universities do not attract strong applicants and or produce well educated graduates. However, this problem could be managed around by *properly* employing staff with a demonstrated track record of excellence in teaching and curriculum design (something which otherwise rarely occurs) and in stipulating high ATAR requirements for course entry. Scholarships for particularly strong applicants could also be considered. If there was national auditing of teaching quality (as was suggested earlier) then these universities would likely be quickly recognised as producing the best graduates in the country. This would attract the attention of employers and the universities would be seen as prestigious. This would supply yet further reason for other universities to end the over charging and poor teaching performance that is such a disservice to society.

Overseas students

In principle, and sometimes in reality, having overseas students studying in Australia is a very good thing. I have taught a great many wonderful international students. However, there can definitely be a problem that the primary motivation for some overseas student to study at Australian universities is to increase their chance of getting Australian citizenship or simply to be able to work in Australia whilst they study. At one level, I don't begrudge anyone trying to improve their circumstances. However, if we are concerned with the systematic consequences of this, the net effect is an even greater proportion of students in the system who are uninterested in genuinely engaging with their studies at the required level.

Inappropriate candidature can also be stressful on overseas students that *do* want to learn but don't have the English language skills or pre-requisite knowledge and skills to cope. Universities can be quite venal in their pursuit of the international student dollar and can care little about the students themselves and have quite low standards of candidature in order to maximise income. Also, there is so much money involved in international enrolments governments have often turned a blind eye. Ultimately, we have to decide as a society whether we want to run a system that has academic and ethical integrity or simply one where everyone pretends that we do.

What is to be done? If governments are serious about reforming the sector, they should break the link between citizenship points and having done study at Australian Universities. Applicants for citizenship should get no more credit for a university degree from an Australian University than a degree from another country whose university courses are ranked at a similar standard to Australian degrees (there are third parties that provide such international rankings). This reform could be expected to improve the ratio between appropriate and inappropriate enrolments to a considerable degree. If there were also higher entry standards in terms of academic and English-language skills, then this would improve things further still (though for some subjects in maths and sciences current English language requirements might be currently sufficient). Let us always be open and welcoming to international students but let us have some integrity around how this occurs.

Domestic Students

It must also be said that many domestic students are inappropriately enrolled into Australian Universities. Part of the solution here is in auditing student assessment results as discussed earlier. There should also be changes made to consumer law in order to make it easier for students who have been enrolled in a course without sufficient pre-requisite knowledge and skills, to obtain a full fee refund from the university that admitted them to course in question. Of course, the option to do this should also be just as open to international students.

I would welcome the opportunity to elaborate on or defend with reason and evidence any claim I have made in this submission.

Dr Tim Thornton, 11th of April 2023.

