



## Education Department Accord Submission *University of Melbourne Student Union (UMSU)*

The University of Melbourne Student Union has a history spanning 130 years and we are committed to providing quality experiences at University of Melbourne campuses to create a community for students, staff, and visitors. We are a non-profit organization run by students for students and we provide funding that keeps arts, representation, advocacy, and cultural services running at the campuses. The Education Department is responsible for being the voice of students both inside and outside the university and government. An initiative started by the Education Department was the collection of student voices and perspectives on matters related to Quality and Access to Education through a series of discussions known as UMSU Assemblies – and during these assemblies we asked questions related to areas of review in the accord terms of reference:

- Access and opportunity
- Quality and sustainability

The questions we asked came directly from the discussion paper:

Access:

- How can governments, institutions and employers assist students, widen opportunities, and remove barriers to higher education?
- How can universities ensure that all students have equal access to educational opportunities regardless of socioeconomic status, race, or other factors?
- How can the costs of participation, including living expenses, be most effectively alleviated?

Quality:

- What reforms are needed to promote a quality learning environment and to ensure students are equipped with the skills and knowledge they need to succeed?



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- How do technology and online learning impact the quality of education for university students, including benefits, drawbacks, and their relationship with academic integrity?
- What reforms are needed to ensure that all students have a quality student experience?

### Context of the Submission Paper

This submission is based on a three-day workshop hosted by University of Melbourne Student Union's (UMSU) Education Department in late March 2023. Through the workshops and this submission, UMSU Education aimed to gather students' perspective on existing pain points within Australia's tertiary education system, and what can be done to solve these problems. We devoted our time to discussing two major issues: access to education, and the quality of education. Students and staff based in the University of Melbourne, Parkville and Southbank campuses, were involved in the workshopping process, with panelist input from the National Union of Students (NUS). We are grateful for their inputs that formulate UMSU Education's comments to the Universities Accord Discussion Paper.

The Universities Accord, commissioned by Australia's Ministry of Education, is significant because it is very rare for government departments to devote their time, logistics and resources to a discussion specifically dedicated to education. It is particularly relevant to this time as Australia's tertiary education is increasingly, and overwhelmingly funded by international students. Combined with the increasing cost of education and living in general, these issues beg a questioning of the implications of Australia's tertiary education market, and how its related processes impact students' access to and quality of education.

### **Quality of Education**

Students who participated in the workshops reflected a need for universities and governments to actively remove structural barriers to education. This includes widening access schemes for



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under-represented or disadvantaged groups, which should facilitate more of these people to enter university. However, support should not stop at the level of access schemes, as students should

also be able to receive different forms of social and psychological support during their time in university. A few ways for universities to do this is to strengthen their existing student unions and/or student associations, as well as devote more staff and resources into providing students the mental health support services that they need. Other students also noted that access to and equity in earlier stages such as primary and secondary education are essential in helping students prepare for university success.

It is also worth noting that an effective partnership between universities and their student unions is an essential component of a university student's support network. Having been established and active for many years, student unions already possess immense knowledge in creating successful student engagement initiatives and events. Therefore, the responsibility of universities should involve providing even greater institutional and financial support for student unions. This allows student unions to effectively serve their leadership role by actively fostering a sense of community, care and engagement within the student body. This is especially important for international or interstate students who often move to university away from their previously-established social networks, and are feeling alienated by their outsider status (across a range of factors from financial to ethnicity). It was noted by international students that seeing fellow students in elected representative positions was a clear indicator that opportunities existed within the university for students like them. Henceforth, building a support system for students that goes beyond procedural measures can simply start from strengthening existing schemes and initiatives. This goes way beyond federal targets of education attainment goals, but facilitates greater retention and completion rates of students within higher education.

Furthermore, the Australian government and universities should also address the issue of an increasingly transactional relationship between universities and students. Student participants highlighted universities' decoupling of the relationship between university experience and its cost, which has negatively impacted both international and domestic students' access to



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university education. Firstly, it is understood that international students are willing to receive Australia's well reputed education for their own personal or home country's benefit, at a significant economic cost. Student participants have noted that universities' support ends at the moment of graduation, yet there is a lack of consideration on how international students'

citizenship status (or lack thereof) hinders their ability to translate their valuable education and skills attained from university into job positions. While it is understood that citizenship pathways may not be the most effective way forward, the Ministry of Education should strongly consider the implications of study visas on work opportunities, and how such visas can be streamlined with other pathways (such as work visas) in order to effectively retain and utilise graduated students to support Australian job industries.

With regards to domestic students, NUS panellists pointed out the pre-eminent cost of living crisis that troubles the current generation of university students. Firstly the age of independence remains at twenty-two years old, which does not reflect the current situation of students that are moving away from parental support, whether it be voluntarily or not. The consequences of COVID-19 have also demonstrated that it is no longer realistic to expect students to maintain financial independence while committing towards full-time study, as well as immersing oneself in campus life. While existing needs-based schemes and scholarships attempt to widen students' access to university education, most of them require students to explicitly quantify their struggles, which can be deeply triggering or even dehumanising. Therefore, the Australian government should urge universities to review their methods of identifying students who require support.

Students call upon the Australian government and wider society to re-evaluate and confront the issue of upskilling students and workers as a necessity, rather than over-relying on extracting profit from Australia's natural resource base. This is where tertiary education providers such as universities can step in to provide training for the currently existing labour force to adapt to new challenges and embrace the emergence of new industries. Education of the Australian population



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should be considered as a long-term investment rather than as a short-term solution to meet labour demands.

### **Access of Education:**

In recent discussions, students have raised concerns regarding the current state of higher education in Australia. One of the key issues highlighted is the need for greater equity, specifically in terms of financial support for students. The government has a critical role to play in this regard by increasing youth allowance and Abstudy payments, as these actions would directly benefit students from low socioeconomic backgrounds and Indigenous students.

It was also emphasized that institutions cannot lead the change. Rather, the power to make a difference comes from government policies that support equitable access to education. Universities have a role to play in removing barriers to education, such as the ATAR, but ultimately it is the government that needs to address the root causes of these issues.

Employers also have a role to play in ensuring that students can balance work and study. Many students work casual or part-time jobs to support themselves while studying, but this can be challenging, especially for those from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Employers need to be more flexible and accommodating to ensure that students can balance work and study effectively.

Another key issue highlighted is the affordability of attending university. The government is currently discussing expanding places at universities for students from low SES backgrounds, but this strategy is not enough. Students need to be able to support themselves financially while studying, which can be difficult for those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Reforming the Centrelink system, including increasing the parental income thresholds and increasing allowances for students living out of home, would go a long way in addressing these challenges.



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Unpaid placements and internships were also highlighted as unsustainable and problematic for students. Students are expected to work full-time for free while also holding down a job to pay their rent and bills. The government needs to address this issue and consider policies that ensure students are not exploited in this way.

Access problems also need to be addressed through effective policy approaches that address universities not being funded and our welfare system being broken. Students are living in poverty, and this is unacceptable. The government needs to improve the welfare system, lower the age of dependence from 22 to 18, and ask itself what the purpose of higher education is and what outcomes it wants for young people that go through higher education. This is especially important for marginalized cohorts, including low SES, Indigenous, and rural students who face unique access barriers.

Students also noted that universities need to consider what contributes to an ATAR. Privilege and access to resources have a strong influence on a student's ability to succeed, and universities need to consider these dynamics when it comes to ATAR. Having guaranteed access to a course and being able to apply based on one's background and how it impacted their results would go a long way in making access to education more equitable.

Finally, it was noted that students are increasingly facing mental health problems due to the cost of living crisis, including issues with housing and transportation costs. The mood of students is generally one of stress and disillusionment, which is not conducive to learning. The government needs to take these issues seriously and tackle the big challenges raised through these conversations to ensure that students are not left behind.

In conclusion, there are significant challenges facing higher education in Australia. However, through effective policies and a commitment to equity and access, we can ensure that all students have the opportunity to achieve their full potential. It is the responsibility of the government, employers, and institutions to work together to make this a reality.



## **Quality and Access to Education**

The Southbank campus of the Faculty of Fine Arts and Music is a center of creative expression and artistic development. The unique perspectives and experiences of the students and faculty at Southbank are particularly valuable in understanding the strengths and challenges of arts education, particularly in the face of rapidly changing educational environments. To create a more inclusive, accessible, and effective learning environment for all, it is essential to understand the perspectives of those immersed in fine arts and music.

According to students, technology and online learning provide alternatives for students struggling to balance study, work, and life. However, online learning has adversely affected students in some cases. Students felt betrayed by the institution and gaslit when their learning was moved online without proper acknowledgment and support. Online coursework that requires teamwork or physical work is not always suited to online learning or has not been appropriately adapted. Therefore, universities need to provide online options that are adequately funded and supported, including staff training and adequate tech support. Classrooms need to be fitted out with easy-to-use tech that is also effective.

Students mentioned COVID-19 has let the genie out of the bottle when it comes to using online classes to help balance workloads, and universities need to acknowledge the value in this and ensure online classes continue to be available and properly resourced. While it was seen as a positive development for some students, particularly those with unusual schedules or living far from campus, online learning presented challenges for students studying performative arts. Practical subjects were particularly difficult to teach online, as they hindered the ability of students to collaborate and accurately assess their skills. Nevertheless, some subject coordinators were able to adapt their assessments to an 'open book' examination format, which was seen as



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better reflecting real-life situations and professional expectations, promoting organic learning, and improving mental health by reducing pressure on students.

Additionally, universities need to recognize that taking longer to complete courses is not the end of the world, and support services must be adequately resourced to support students with high courseloads. Late submission policies need an overhaul, and staff should be supported to work with students who need flexible deadlines. Furthermore, students should not be punished for being overwhelmed.

To ensure a quality student experience students suggested that options for international students to reduce study loads or take longer to complete courses without risking their visas would be hugely beneficial, especially for students who have to take out loans to study here. Centrelink reforms, including options for domestic students to reduce study loads without risking Centrelink support, increasing all welfare payments to the Henderson Poverty Line, abolishing "mutual obligations" on Jobseeker payments, and lowering the age of independence so that university students can afford to pay their rent, would also benefit students. Additionally, universities need to roll back Student Learning Entitlement and Completion Rate requirements that impact student eligibility to get Commonwealth Supported Places. This would allow students to have the opportunity to make mistakes and figure out their work-life balance without the threat of losing government-subsidized places hanging over their heads.

Policy changes, such as those related to Centrelink and student learning entitlements, highlight the need for systemic changes to ensure that all students have access to resources and support to succeed. Also, cultural representation and sense of belonging highlight the importance of creating a supportive and inclusive campus environment for all students. Additionally, technology and online learning emphasize the need for universities to adapt to changing circumstances and embrace new technologies to improve the student experience.





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