



The University of Notre Dame Australia

Universities Accord
— submission

April 2023

The University of Notre Dame Australia (UNDA) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Australian Universities Accord Discussion Paper and share our ideas for the future of the Australian Higher Education sector.

Notre Dame has contributed to, and is supportive of, the submission from Universities Australia which outlines a sector-wide view and a broad reform agenda. We also note the submission by the NSW Vice Chancellor's Committee to which we have provided input.

UNDA welcomes the Accord process and the opportunity to contribute to the shaping of policy for the sector.

This is an important opportunity to put in place the policy foundations to unlock the true potential of the Australian higher education sector.

About Notre Dame

UNDA is a Catholic university with campuses in Fremantle and Sydney, along with being the only university to have a permanent presence in the Kimberley region of Western Australia with a campus in Broome. In addition, we have rural clinical school sites throughout regional New South Wales and Victoria.

Notre Dame has a long-standing reputation for graduating outstanding work-ready professionals across national priority professions. This has been most recently demonstrated in the national Graduate Outcomes and Student Experience surveys, where Notre Dame ranked as the number 1 university in Australia for Overall Employment, and in the top 5 universities for Skills Development and Overall Quality of Educational Experience.

Student retention and success goes to the heart of our learning and teaching ethos, with Notre Dame performing well above the average for Table A universities. Our retention rates for indigenous students are nearly 10 per cent above the national average and 6 per cent higher for regional students.

Notre Dame's Table A status, acquired in 2021, has allowed us to open our doors to more students from underrepresented cohorts, with the support of vital government funding such as CSPs and HEPPP. These initiatives will see the University steadily grow its cohort of equity students as set out in our new Strategic Plan.

The Accord provides a unique opportunity to review the Australian higher education system, and put in place a reform agenda that seeks to achieve the following key elements:

- **Good reform does not always correspond to a “one size fits all” approach—** the higher education sector is diverse, including the size, shape and composition of each institution. The Accord must embrace the importance of a differentiated system that allows each university to meet the learning and teaching and research needs of their local community. Australian universities have embraced diversity and we need to ensure any future policy changes do not lead to a rise in uniformity across the sector.

- **Long term funding and policy certainty**— the Accord must fundamentally focus on giving universities certainty to inform longer term planning, policy and investment decisions. Successive governments have offered short term funding initiatives to support growth in the sector which has resulted in universities bearing the long-term financial impost across areas such as systems and processes, staffing and new facilities and technologies.
- **Reform must not result in a greater regulatory burden**— the Accord should take a whole of government approach and lead to the simplification of cross-agency and jurisdictional requirements. Over recent years, a series of policy changes has seen the bureaucratic burden on universities increase across areas such as data reporting, compliance across multiple government agencies, and the introduction of new regulations.
- **Each reform foci must be aligned to the national interest**— this is a unique opportunity to ensure that Universities are properly supported to invest in learning and teaching and research that will support Australia’s future economic and social needs.
- **A plan for implementation** – this is an important opportunity to deliver long lasting, and much needed, improvements to the Australian higher education sector. The Accord Review should not only consider what improvements are needed, but how they can be implemented by government and the sector in a coordinated and orderly way.

Scope of Submission

The University of Notre Dame Australia has a range of views and ideas covered in this submission in response to the questions posed by the review panel in its Discussion Paper.

This submission has been prepared after considerable consultation and discussion within the University. Staff were invited to a series of roundtable conversations where they were asked to share their thoughts and ideas for the future of the higher education system. A similar conversation was held with our Academic Council – an important governance body within the University.

Our submission won’t repeat the recommendations provided to the panel through Universities Australia and other peak bodies. Instead, we will offer additional suggestions unique to our university community.

Areas for Consideration

1. Student support to encourage wider participation

The University of Notre Dame Australia supports the government’s intention to raise efforts nationally in relation to student participation in higher education. Any new equity targets that may be introduced must consider local institutional and community factors such

demographics, socio-economic and historical factors that have previously contributed to poor outcomes.

A university education is one of the most powerful tools a person can have, setting them up for a fulfilling and rewarding future while delivering broader benefits to the entire nation.

Unfortunately, some Australians are missing out on the opportunity to go to university, while others who get there are not finishing their qualification. This is particularly true among Indigenous Australians, low-income families and people living in regional and remote areas.

We must ensure that every Australian who wants to can access higher education, regardless of their location, background or financial position. To make that happen, additional support is needed to enable individuals to not only enrol at university, but to go on and graduate.

We believe a range of indicators should be applied, including retention and completion rates. These measures also need to take into account local circumstances, such as population size, demand for education and previous education attainment.

Our experience in Broome demonstrates that while the total number of students enrolled is below the minimum threshold required to attract additional financial support in the form of a regional loading, the benefits to the local community of having highly skilled graduates, cannot be underestimated.

Notre Dame supports Universities Australia's recommendation to review the unmet and the partially unmet access and equity recommendations of the Bradley Review.

As the only University with a campus in the Kimberley region of Western Australia, we see a particular need to grow participation among Indigenous students and those living in remote and regional areas.

Over recent years, progress has been made in improving access to higher education for Indigenous Australians, with Indigenous student enrolments more than doubling between 2008 and 2020.

However, there are still significant gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in all parts of the tertiary education system, with far less Indigenous people having a university education than their non-Indigenous peers. Those individuals as well as the economy are worse off because of this.

In 2020, the government set a Closing the Gap target to increase the proportion of Indigenous people aged 25-34 years who have completed a tertiary qualification (Certificate III and above) to 70 per cent by 2031.⁷

Subsequently, the government uncapped places for Indigenous students living in regional and remote areas (omitting those living in major cities) with the expectation that more than 1,700 Indigenous students would attend university by 2024.

The Australian Government should provide uncapped Commonwealth Supported Places for all Indigenous Australians regardless of where they live.

Cost-of-living pressures are hurting all students, but Indigenous Australians and equity groups are disproportionately affected. This is not only due to the cost of their degree, but also because they are struggling to make ends meet while they study.

The establishment of living scholarships available at scale should be pursued to support students. To build a strong culture of philanthropic giving to universities across the country in

support of support success, the Australian Government should match philanthropic giving to student support programs such as Notre Dame's Student Hardship Fund.

2. Job Ready Graduates

UNDA does not support a funding model that seeks to artificially create an inequitable divide between program clusters. An evidence-based review of the Job Ready Graduates package is of the highest importance to the Accord process. As a starting point, we encourage the immediate abolition of the minimum pass rates of 50% for students to retain their Commonwealth Supported Place. This is counterintuitive to the Government's vision of increasing university participation from underrepresented student groups, as these students are more likely to be disproportionately impacted by such funding measures.

Enabling programs are an important foundation of our effort to widen participation, especially among equity students.

However, the Job Ready Graduates changes diminished the amount of funding universities receive per student for enabling programs and has created an uncertain policy future for these programs.

UNDA supports calls for the following outcomes for enabling programs as part of the Accord:

1. The Accord must recognise the critical role of enabling pathways in the educational landscape.
2. The Accord must enshrine enabling pathways back in legislation, and resource them appropriately.

In addition, recent funding arrangements have focussed on time limited arrangements, especially places for students. For example, the recent allocation of 20,000 additional CSPs is only for two years (2023 and 2024) and does not consider the longer-term growth needs of the sector. In addition, these short-term measures require universities to contribute with additional staff, capital, and partnerships, however once the funding expires, universities continue to incur the costs of the program.

While JRG created additional university places, it did not provide any additional funding for these places. Instead, universities are expected to provide 39,000 extra places within the existing funding envelope. At the same time, it changed the way in which disciplines are funded through student contributions. The Job Ready Graduates package incorrectly assumed that financial incentives would encourage students to choose some courses over others. However, price signalling does not work. Students' interests and career aspirations have a far greater impact on their choice of degree. The Policy should, therefore, be focused on promoting the value and quality of degrees, rather than relying on pricing strategies to attract students into certain areas of study.

3. Funding and Regulatory Environment

The Australian higher education sector is diverse, including the size, shape and composition of each institution. The Accord must embrace the importance of a differentiated system that allows each university to meet the learning and teaching and research needs of their local community. Australian universities have embraced diversity and we need to ensure any future policy changes do not lead to a rise in uniformity across the sector.

Future funding and policy settings need to encourage and reward uniqueness and differentiated offerings across the sector.

The Accord should result in the creation of partnership agreements between universities and government, based on the locations and specific institutional visions of each university.

This should be combined with financial support for additional, vision-based and place-based program delivery of national and university priorities in teaching and learning, research, access and equity, community engagement and innovation.

As has been noted in other submissions to the Review Panel, Australia's universities have played a vital role in turning Australia into the safe, successful and prosperous nation it is today. However, this status can not be taken for granted.

New and emerging economic and social challenges facing the nation, such as skills shortages, workforce upskilling and reskilling, inflation and cost of living pressures, housing, climate change, and national security, require fresh approaches.

The Accord should consider the establishment of a National Higher Education Commission to provide a whole of government approach to higher education and help better connect the sector these current and emerging national challenges. The Commission would connect the sector with the many arms of government such as skills and learning, industry development, workforce planning, schools education and science, research and innovation.

The aim would be to break down some of the many silos across government in how they interact with the sector and help bring universities to the table with government, industry and other stakeholders in a more strategic and coordinated way. The Commission would encourage and facilitate the sector to make a greater contribution to the national policy agenda.

4. Integration between higher education and vocational education

Currently funding for collaborative models between vocational and higher education face barriers given the split funding responsibility between the states (which fund VET) and the Commonwealth (which funds universities).

States and Territories have made considerable progress over the past five years to strengthen the VET sector, resulting in the delivery of more affordable programs that are linked to building supply within the national skills priority list. This has recently been reinforced at a federal level with the delivery of a range of "fee-free" places across 2023 and 2024.

As the skills market tries to react to the growth in the care economy and trades training, we have the opportunity to create stronger connections between vocational education and universities.

Breaking down barriers between vocational education and higher education and promoting collaboration and innovation can improve access to knowledge and skills at different life stages. Building stronger connections between the VET and higher education sectors will improve education opportunities for students, especially those from equity groups.

UNDA operates a private RTO that delivers VET courses in nursing, education support and community care. The lack of a national framework that guides consistency in pathways and shared resources between VET and universities is an opportunity to be pursued.

The pathways between VET and universities need improvement to create a seamless environment of lifelong learning and skills development. Currently, the sectors operate under different levels of government (State and Federal), have separate funding models, and operate under different policy and regulatory settings.

The current arrangements make navigating the pathways between the two sectors complicated and unwieldy for students. From a student perspective, study in TAFE/university programs should require a student to access only one funding source, and a simple enrolment process. This is crucial in improving the student experience and overall participation.

The Accord should consider merging the two sectors, under the remit of the Federal Government, to create a single national post school model that would streamline funding, policy, regulation, as well as encouraging better coordination between the sectors.

5. Skills & the future of work

UNDA welcomes the creation of Jobs and Skills Australia which will provide independent advice to government on current and emerging workforce needs. It remains unclear whether the agency's remit will adequately address the needs of the university sector in its capacity as a major contributor to skills and knowledge creation in Australia.

As the pace of change in workforce needs continues to grow, universities will require sophisticated models of assessing and monitoring Australia's current and future labour market needs to proactively design courses and embrace new methods of delivery, such as micro credentials and short courses, that will deliver a knowledgeable and skilled workforce.

Skills shortages are choking productivity and weighing heavily on our economic performance, threatening to undermine our high standard of living.

Australia's demand for skills and knowledge is growing all the time, with more than half of the one million jobs expected to be created in the coming years requiring a university degree. We need to ensure our university system is set up to facilitate the education and training of more students to meet our workforce demands.

The Accord Review should consider new measures that encourage participation, skills enhancement and lifelong learning linked to national skills priorities.

The Accord Review should consider the creation of a new lifelong learning trust through an Education Future Fund. The Lifelong Learning Trust program should link a trust account to every Australian's Unique Student Identifier, provided at birth to recognise their need for lifelong participation in Australia's education system. The program should offer an initial fund for continuous education, co-financed by governments, industries and individuals, to encourage lifelong learning without accumulating education debts.

Additional funds could be paid into an individual's trust account after reaching key learning milestones. For example, credit could be provided for students upon completion of high school, with further credit after completing accredited VET or HE courses, and then further credits added for other learning throughout life such as micro credentials.

To support this initiative, a digital education record system could be created, similar to what has already been implemented in the health system. It would provide a safe and secure place for people to keep their education information, track their education achievements, and allow them to regularly update them. It could be linked to an individual's My Gov account and be useful in implementing, tracking and measuring other ideas associated with lifelong learning and RPL.

Tax incentives should also be looked at as an incentive to drive participation. Currently educational expenses are only a tax deduction if the training is related to your employment activities. This definition could be expanded to provide tax deductions for any learning and reskilling through accredited education providers. It would be an incentive for people to take up learning and training opportunities.

To build the nation's skills in critical professions such as health and education, fee free education should be considered for students. Students who enrol, complete and enter the profession in critical professions such as teaching, nursing and allied health, would receive fee free education. This would involve the Government paying the full cost of their education (waiving the HECS student contribution in the form of a scholarship). It would be an incentive and reward for students taking up roles in these critical professions. The success of a similar scheme in Victoria for nursing students shows there would be interest and demand.

6. *International education*

A renewed effort is needed to promote Australia as a destination of choice for students, academics and researchers. This will help attract and retain the smartest minds to our country.

Australia's visa system does not reflect contemporary best practice, making it unnecessarily difficult for students, researchers, and academics to choose Australia as a destination to learn and live. Visa reform is needed that will result in a system that lifts the ambition of Australia's international education offerings by actively encouraging programs with joint degrees, allowing greater inbound and outbound student mobility.

UNDA supports the recommendations of Universities Australia including replacing the genuine temporary entrant visa requirement with a genuine student visa requirement that focuses on a student's academic record; automatically granting temporary graduate visas to all international students who meet the course requirements for graduation and relevant character conditions; and establishing a unit within Jobs and Skills Australia that provides advice on migration-related issues, ranging from the suitability of visa types to fill occupations through to differences in regional and state-based skilled occupation lists.

Research

The Accord must result in the development of a sustainable research funding model that is transparent in its ability to determine the full cost of funding research activities.

Universities have spent decades cross subsidising the cost of research using income generated from other activities, including international and postgraduate fee-income. The government's research funding model does not adequately factor in the true cost of research despite the well documented evidence outlining the significant additional costs universities incur when leading government funded research.

The current funding model also acts as an impediment for universities such as UNDA which limit the cross subsidisation of research from teaching in order to deliver high quality pastoral care for its students, as demonstrated by successive QILT surveys.

The Accord Review should recommend funding the full cost of research by 2030.

In addition, the Accord Review needs to consider other reviews into research activity currently underway. The role of the Australian Research Council (ARC) known as the Shiel Review is under consideration which includes the role of purpose of the body, the allocation process for research funding, governance models, and the national interest test. There needs to be a strategic and aligned approach to the future of the ARC and research funding.

Infrastructure

Australian universities spent \$23.9 billion in capital expenditure over the period 2013 to 2018, which included \$715 million in maintenance expenditure. During the same period Government investment in university capital grants fell by more than \$1 billion.

However, the cost of upgrading and maintaining our facilities to ensure students have access to high quality learning environments falls largely to individual institutions. As the way of learning and sharing knowledge evolves and becomes increasingly sophisticated, including the adoption of new technologies, universities need greater financial support from the Commonwealth to ensure our campuses are modern, contemporary and cutting-edge places of learning.

The Accord process must also consider the post COVID learning and teaching environment, including the role that digital learning, cyber and emerging technologies will play in the way knowledge is shared and consumed.

In order to meet the ever-changing nature of learning, universities will need to invest substantially in the replacement of ageing digital platforms, adopt more interactive learning approaches, and provide safe and secure digital environments, especially in response to the ever-increasing threat of cyber-attack and data security.

The Accord Review should consider re-establishing a national infrastructure fund to support critical infrastructure projects at universities. This would not be limited to physical infrastructure but also support universities with digital and cyber projects. There would be a broader community benefit as these infrastructure projects would be used by local communities to reflect the role our campuses play in local communities.