I would like to offer suggestions in relation to the Interim Report issued in July by the Australian Universities Accord body.

I am a member of a discussion group set up to explore a broad ranging array of issues impacting Australian society. Two of us have spent several months early this year researching issues impacting on the quality of the contribution of universities this year, especially in relation to their role in teaching.

At the outset, I was really impressed with the scope of your work and with the quality and focus of the initial set of conclusions. There was a strong alignment with the conclusions we had reached – and this was of course very gratifying.

Executive Summary

1. **In your final report you should start by defining what the word University should denote in the context of teaching and developing undergraduates – the primary deliverables of these organisations. What ideally will our universities be delivering in their graduates, in say, ten year's time?**

2. **One outcome that hese statements might then be used for would be to call into question whether some organisations calling themselves universities should be permitted to do so – and some might then be given a timeframe to either lift their outputs or migrate to a different descriptor.**

3. **We need a broader, national way to assess the value of what we do, or fail to do, in terms of assessing teaching quality in Universities.**

4. **We need to move beyond teaching people how to read academic studies and how to write academic essays in humanities degrees – to include, or add a focus on much broader capabilities – capabilities vital in the emerging world of work. A selection of these is attached to this submission.**

5. **We should work to overcome the current reliance on the fees paid by overseas students being used to fund university based research. University based research should certainly be funded, but under a separate, national, fully independent body.**

6. **Over the course of a ten year period, fees captured from overseas students should be taken up by the Federal Government, and recouped in appropriate proportions by universities subject to their adoption of a steadily widening set of criteria around measured teaching quality and their focus on the broader capabilities I have identified.**

7. **Emerging technology – and the development of MOOCS, micro-credentiallingand online lectures - has great potential, but also profound limitations in terms of building broader capabilities in university students. Where some higher educational bodies have moved - or are moving to – is an almost a fully online process of course delivery using these tools. Much is left untouched or ignored in the fuller development of students.**

What follows are some suggestions, as you refine and finalise your report.

1. Rather than working initially through a number of aspects of the current university sector, you might spend a period of time working to define how a strong, relevant comprehensive

university sector should be described in, say, 10 year's time. This should be a full, rich summary of what would make the sector excellent in its contribution to Australia and our population at that time.

This series of statements would challenge universities to build a roadmap for the implementation of real change in their operation and governance over that time frame rather than comprise incremental more superficial improvements to their present array of activities. We should start with what the country and our students need, rather than starting with deeply ingrained current perspectives. We should also stand aside from the international ranking system and develop our own measures of quality in universities.

2. Universities are one category of the institutions in the higher education sector. A first step in the foregoing recommendation is the need to address a clearer definition of what an institution needs to provide if it is permitted to call itself a university.
There are now a range of organisations with this label ranging from the traditional sandstone campus layout and traditions, to some run more like accreditation factories – with very little engagement with students. Some are also teaching subjects which have highly questionable scientific credibility.

A university degree should only be attached to courses with externally audited content of a high level with proven scientific integrity where appropriate. The current ongoing oversight processes are clearly insufficient. We should also undertake a review of self-accreditation in the awarding of degrees, with the possibility that TEQSA should issue stronger guidelines and have greater monitoring capability to ensure improved integrity in course content and delivery.

3. Then there is the issue of teaching quality. We, and you, acknowledge the work of QILT surveys in gathering student impressions.

As it stands however the formal evaluations of teaching quality are drawn from a fraction of the student and ex-student populations. Employer evaluations come from an even smaller fraction of employers generated by those graduates willing to identify their employers. Nor does the work of QILT sufficiently assess the contribution of universities in developing broader, critical workforce capabilities – which leads to the next point.

4. I have attached a summary of what I regard as critical capabilities in facing life and work in the emerging world. Ideally, these or some version of them, should be part of the statements developed going to the new higher purposes of universities

Universities are places where many of us felt we began to grow up and to acquire some measure of breadth of thinking, learning how to learn, and being challenged and stretched by a rich exposure to people from diverse backgrounds. We begin to build these capabilities through excellent engaging teaching practice and group work, and then through participation in university clubs and sports and politics.

I believe we need a good hard think about how the development of capabilities of the type summarised in the attachment can be the foundation of a much richer, more valuable experience in going to a university. These capabilities don't lend themselves to being

acquired through a screen and with almost minimal contact with fellow students – which is the reality of many university students today. These are not covered, incidentally, in the STEM subjects favoured by the previous government.

I envision the introduction of capability-building activity streams, putting groups of students into multi-disciplinary cohorts, tasked with addressing current community challenges and broader issues. With possibly non-academic facilitators providing support and guidance, this activity stream would go someway to building skills in communication, in influencing, in leadership etc which would become a key differentiator in the Australian university sector, in comparison with overseas equivalents, and of enduring value to our collective strength as a country.

We should work from how we might build these capabilities back to a redesign of what should be happening in universities rather than seek to simply modify the current academic conception of teaching.

5. We permit, or participate in international rankings which are based by international agencies mostly on the research output of universities. This takes little account of teaching quality.

   We are seeing highly ranked Australian universities, in this system, also being shown to have very low rankings (in Australian assessments) in teaching quality from student and graduate surveys.

   This outcome is in part a result of the race to attract the highest possible share of international students (or more importantly the high fees they permit) because the international ratings, and their bias towards research outputs, is almost all that overseas students and their agents have to work from in selecting universities.

   We should differentiate Australian universities from competitors through a revitalised approach to teaching quality, with a broad focus on the capabilities covered here – and then develop our own national and distinctive rating or ranking processes.

6. In my view fees for international students should be paid to the Federal Government, and then retrieved by universities in proportions based in large part on the quality of the teaching and broader experience of students. A portion of the same income should also fund improved (and compulsory) courses in English and academic skills for international students. This would avoid current spurious practices in assembling "teams" of native speakers and international students in group work, where in many instances the international students are "carried" through assignments by local students and the group is in no measure supported in learning and applying team building skills.

7. Currently fees from international students are used to cross–subsidise research. This is understandable, but is largely the result of Federal and State governments reducing direct research grants.

   We need a full review of research funding, how it is allocated, and from whom it is drawn – which could then underpin a new, national body to collect funds, and disperse them in terms

of national priorities – with some degree of allocation to fields in the arts and humanities with only indirect linkage with national priorities. There is currently widespread dissatisfaction in the wider community with the disjointed and unbalanced approach to research funding in Australia.

As a subset of this, Australia should break apart from the international university ranking system, and also set high and broad hurdles around what is taught and teaching quality. We might consider developing our own ranking system, with clear messaging around what is measured to the wider national and international community.

8. In slide 26 of your interim report you refer to the ambition that "learning and teaching will be transformed with an ambitious commitment to student experience and the use of technology"

The technology supporting modern teaching practices – and I refer to online lectures, MOOCs and micro-credentialling – has mixed outcomes. Clearly these developments support a mix of paid work alongside study – necessitated by the re-introduction of student fees – and then enables rapid distribution of knowledge.

However, MOOCs, micro-credentialling and online lectures have profound limits in terms of achieving engagement with others in the cut and thrust of a good lecture or tutorial or in face to face group work - in building critical capabilities for the future world of work. As we test and improve student engagement we should also develop new methods for assessing student learning and achievement going beyond submitting essays – especially in the light of AI and ChatGPT technologies. Writing essays and academic papers is simply not a skillset of value in the future world of work.

We can and will gain a lot generally through the development of online knowledge delivery – however we need to take seriously the profound limitations it has in terms of developing important broader capabilities for university students. Students can now complete whole courses online, with minimal contact with fellow students. In the words of one young commentator recently, the university experience has become transactional rather than transformative.

I hope improved data capture in surveys of participation rates - particularly focused on the disappointments and lack of engagement in those who drop out - will be a part of the next phase of your work. I believe that what I am describing will become more visible in this process.

Thank you for the opportunity to send you this submission.

Hugh Davies

Attachment.

Skills and Capabilities - Going beyond Specific Knowledge – which are critical in career building and in the modern world of work

Critical Thinking

Emotional Intelligence

Creativity

Communication skills

Values, existential human meaning and purpose

The assertion of moral and ethical agency

Being intentional

Resilience

Optimism

The ability to build deeper and diverse connections

Leadership and managing others