



University Chancellors Council

Response to the Accord Interim Report

The University Chancellors Council is pleased to provide a response to the Australian Universities Accord Interim Report. The UCC would like to commend the panel on the Report, recognising that further discussion needs to take place. The strong focus on access, equity and First Nations peoples throughout the report is a welcome and a much needed perspective upon which the future of the tertiary education sector can be built. As has been mentioned over and over again, the university sector in Australia is highly successful and competitive on the world stage for both teaching and research. Minor changes, simplification of processes and a shared vision for the future of tertiary education will enable Australia to truly remain leaders.

Through the initial consultation period, UCC provided feedback via two direct consultations and three written submissions. The UCC responses were from the perspective of Chancellors and their specific roles in university governance and ensuring the financial sustainability of the large organisations they oversee. Chancellors, as the chairs of these organisations, are experienced across a range of industries including the judiciary, corporate business, education and politics. They are knowledgeable about both strategy and education and are well-connected to the communities they serve. They can and do have considerable leverage as a collective group, which should be taken advantage of. Some important content of the three submissions and two consultations provided by the UCC to the panel has sadly been overlooked.

Access and equity:

The UCC applauds the Accord Panel for their focus on equity and access to the higher education system for everyone, including First Nations peoples. There is a need for the sector to better understand the barriers to achieving education, be they financial, geographical or skills based, and ensure these matters are addressed and that more supportive pathways throughout the whole education system are implemented.

In addition to ensuring the broadest range of people can access quality education, it is also a responsibility of the sector to encourage the avoidance of discrimination of qualified graduates from underrepresented cohorts as they transition from education to employment.

The UCC would also support the opportunity to explore the granting of partial qualifications in certain circumstances. A partial qualification could help assist people who are unable to continue their studies to gain employment: learning for even 12 months has value to employers if it is correctly recognised.

Universities as businesses:

With budgets often in excess of \$1 billion, universities are in the business of providing education and research for the communities in which they operate, and to provide the skills and knowledge for the future of all Australians. To do this, they need to run like businesses all the while ensuring academic integrity and exceptional standards of teaching and learning and high quality research.

This balance between academia and business is struck through careful implementation of well-established governance frameworks. The approach to university governance in Australia is, on the whole, in line with what has been documented as best practice.

As was addressed in the supplementary paper commissioned by the UCC and provided to the Panel entitled *Best Practice Governance for University Councils*, universities in Australia have very high levels of governance, compliance and academic integrity. The relationship between academia and business is unique for each university, but the foundation of financial sustainability, student experience and academic rigour is paramount to their success.

The assertion that there is insufficient representation of staff, students or academia in the composition of governing bodies is without foundation. The composition of councils and senates is a matter under state government control, and most individual universities do not have the autonomy to appoint all members of the governing body. Despite most universities having comprehensive strategies and skills matrices for council composition to ensure broader perspectives are considered in the leadership of the business, the state still has the final say for some appointments. It must also be noted that university executive leaders, most of whom have spent their entire careers in the sector, report to the governing body of the organisation.

Universities as good employers:

The tertiary education workforce is specialised, skilled and integral to the success of the sector. Governing bodies acknowledge this and spend considerable time and resources to ensure the workforce is adequately supported financially, professionally and mentally.

The UCC takes exception to the Interim Report's assertions that the universities are not good employers. It is well acknowledged that there have been some failings of systems and processes at individual universities in relation to salary payments, these are not the norm across the sector. Universities have demonstrated a commitment at both management and council levels to ensure appropriate system reform and process improvements are implemented to ensure best practice going forward. On the whole conditions and salaries are progressive and in line with community expectations and in many cases more favourable than the corporate sector, eg superannuation.

The UCC's response to the discussion paper included a long list of ways universities support their staff and students to achieve success. Support for staff and student wellbeing and safety is at the forefront of governing body considerations, with most governing bodies establishing separate committees to specifically address this essential part of the university. Casualisation of the workforce is frequently expressed as a failing of the system. The UCC would contest that the capacity to employ specialist staff to teach specialist subjects for short periods of time enables the university sector to be agile and responsive to meet the changing needs of the skills that are required by business and industry to build the workforce that is required.

The Tertiary Education Commission and consistency of practice:

The establishment of a Tertiary Education Commission to oversee consistency of governance is welcomed, as is the review and implementation of the best practice code of governance across the sector, which has long been advocated for by the UCC.

The reform of the tertiary education system, including overall funding, integration with vocational education and pathways from school to education opportunities, the requirements around accreditation and ongoing regulation of the sector cannot take place at a local or state level. The role of the Federal Government to oversee policy and delivery of higher education in conjunction with the states and the institutions themselves is critical to the success of the sector. This reform can only be done through a cooperative holistic approach and needs to be undertaken immediately.

The functions and responsibilities of the Commissions need to be very clearly articulated and include provision for performance monitoring. In establishing the Commission, the learnings from similar bodies established in New Zealand and Ireland need to be taken into account to ensure the Commission is effective from the outset. A great deal of thought needs to be put into the composition of the Commission membership to ensure representation from within higher education as well as industry, employer and representative groups.

To ensure the implementation of the Accord's recommendations, consideration should be given by the Commission to incentivise the delivery of recommendations by individual institutions.

Research: funding, innovation and key priority areas for Australia:

The Interim Report highlights the need to invest more fully in research and research infrastructure to ensure the future of the Australian research ecosystem and the continued evolution of Australia as an entrepreneurial knowledge based economy. The UCC categorically agrees with this view, but would go further to suggest that innovative ways of funding and supporting the sector, including the funding for indirect research costs, need to be explored.

The opportunities for industry in the delivery and support of innovative research is currently critically undervalued by governments. Encouragement and incentives could be offered to businesses to promote industry/research partnerships and investment in the development phase of R&D.

In addition to this expansion of funding and support, there needs to be clearer articulation of what the priority areas are for Australian research and development so funding and resources can be better directed to support future needs. A whole of government approach, with clear, national goals is required to focus the research carried out by universities to be in the nation's best interest.

The UCC has requested the development of national priorities for research so that universities can create the knowledge needed to find the solutions to tomorrow's problems today in partnership with industry and business in a sustainable fashion.

Institutional diversity and the importance of regional centres

Diversity of institutions, especially in outer metro and regional areas, ties into the Regional University Centres and the messaging from regional universities needing specific funding.

Each of Australia's universities has its own identity, values and targets based on the community that they serve. Historically, universities have had to diversify their offerings to ensure they can attract the broadest range of students. This has resulted in a sector where it appears that all universities are offering the same courses to maximise student numbers and therefore income. Funding needs to be provided to universities to enable them to diversify to suit the communities they serve and to foster the differences that geography and demography require.

The development and promotion of Regional University Centres is very welcome to encourage participation in higher education in areas where these opportunities can be scarce. The establishment of further centres in outer metropolitan areas will likewise enable opportunities for people who may otherwise be unable to access educational offerings. Keeping people in the regions to perform key roles and enabling them to further their education at the same time will increase and retain the skills in the community.

The establishment of a National Regional University is an interesting concept, but may be difficult to implement. There is already a well-established network of regional universities (at least 10 with their main campus located in regional Australia, with a number of others with satellite campuses located in the regions) that provide educational opportunities to their communities. Specific funding to develop and resource these regional institutions could provide an equally beneficial solution rather than the establishment of another university.

Conclusion

The University Chancellors Council applauds the Accord Panel for their approach to securing the future for Australia's higher education sector. Tackling the big issues facing the sector including equity and access for all Australians to relevant educational opportunities, appropriate funding for teaching and research and ensuring a safe and vibrant environment for staff and students takes vision and leadership. It is essential that the final report provides clear, measurable recommendations that can be implemented across the sector.

The capacity for the sector to implement the recommendations will hinge upon the establishment of an appropriate policy and regulatory framework that will support the growth that is required to deliver the skills for the future without adding to the already significant compliance requirements placed on universities. This policy framework also needs to acknowledge the importance of universities as autonomous organisations with diverse priorities, strategies and stakeholders.

The University Chancellors Council looks forward to continuing to work with the Accord Panel to shape the future of the Australian higher education sector.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'John Stanhope', with a stylized flourish at the end.

John Stanhope AM
Convenor University Chancellors Council
Chancellor Deakin University
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