



UMSU Submission

**Consultation on the Terms of Reference for the
Australian Universities Accord**

19 December 2022

To: Professor Mary O’Kane and Panel
From: University of Melbourne Student Union

The University of Melbourne Student Union Inc. (UMSU) welcomes the opportunity to provide comments on the Terms of Reference for the Australian Universities Accord, and to provide UMSU's views on the Accord's priorities.

UMSU is an incorporated association and is recognised by the University of Melbourne as the representative body for all students. UMSU is governed by an elected Students' Council and twelve committees elected by and from students. UMSU is responsible for a broad range of student representative, student engagement and student support activities.

UMSU operates under the principles of Student Unionism which are broadly defined as student control of student affairs.

The UMSU Constitution establishes that UMSU will:

- advance the welfare and interests of students;
- represent students of the University within the University and to the community;
- provide amenities and services, principally for students and other members of the University community, and incidentally to the public.
- provide an independent framework for student social and political activity;
- develop, maintain and support student clubs, societies and associational life generally;
- promote and defend the rights of students to education on the basis of equality, without regard to race, colour, sex, sexuality, gender identity, age, physical disability, mental illness, economic circumstances, political religious or ideological conviction, or national or social origin;
- oppose violence and/or hatred through militarism, nationalism, or discrimination on the basis of race, colour, sex, sexuality, gender identity, age, physical disability, mental illness, economic circumstances, religion, or national or social origin;
- provide a democratic and transparent forum in which students' affairs and interests can be governed in an effective and accountable manner; and
- promote free and accessible government-funded education.

Executive Summary

This is a brief targeted submission setting out some of UMSU's priorities in respect of the proposed terms of reference for the Australian Universities Accord (the **Accord**).

UMSU believes that there is much at stake with this accord for students, our communities and the academics and professional staff who educate us.

UMSU welcomes The Hon. Jason Clare MP's commitment to improve access and opportunity and assess affordability in the tertiary sector through the accords process. We echo that the accords need to assess how access and equity for marginalised students can be improved and how students need to be supported through sufficient measures that build their capacity and remain successfully enrolled.

The adequate funding of public education in Australia is a critical consideration, including reformation of the confused and messy system for domestic student charges in the form of the job ready graduates' program, and the over reliance by universities on international fee revenue. The exploitation of university staff forced into insecure work must be addressed, and the inadequacy of universities' response to the continued impacts of COVID on domestic and international cohorts.

Summary of Recommendations

UMSU recommends that the following are areas of particular focus in the Accord:

1. A realistic and robust framework which is genuinely able to deliver the promise of consensus and avoid the traps of partisanship and the primacy of corporate interest.
2. Consideration of the lived experiences of students; especially how inflexible work arrangements, and barriers to access welfare impact their education experience
3. A greater clarity about the scope of priorities to be considered and how a very diverse range of inputs can contribute to coherent policy.
4. Student interest should drive resourcing to the sector, not bureaucratically set targets.
5. A priority for the Accord should therefore be to ensure that universities do not only provide access to equity groups – but proactively support and build capacity in those students to reach completion.
6. Any policy for tertiary education should aim to improve overall funding, junk the mis-conceived job-ready graduates' program, and include genuine consideration of free education models.
7. The connection between treating staff well and the student experience should be a focus of the Accord.
8. The Accord should engage with the dual problems of insufficient government funding support to universities and the corresponding over reliance on international student fees to prop up funding shortfalls.

General Observations

A simple matter of consensus?

The Accord's promise is that it will form a basis to gain consensus around the purpose of the Australian higher education sector and inform the policy settings required to realise this consensus.

This is superficially appealing and seems straightforward, as though if all stakeholders simply share a seat at the table, we will rationally discuss our concerns and reach an evidence-based and sensible approach. However, on further reflection this seems a naive and implausible suggestion. It implies a depoliticised consultation is possible and that partisanship is the only the barrier to creating a better education system – and this is simplistic.

The fault lines of partisanship are primarily seen in fractured relationships – particularly between students and the university which they feel uses them to maximise profit, and in the objectively exploitative manner Universities engage academic staff.

It is UMSU's view that this vision lacks nuance and reality, and while the aspiration is laudable, it is not a sufficiently sophisticated framework to produce meaningful results.

Ultimately, the hollow promise of simple consensus and bipartisanship will most likely mean that many student activists, and peak bodies will not be interested in contributing to the Accord.

Breadth of the Accord's ToR

An advantage of the current ToR is that it is framed in sufficiently broad terms to allow almost all aspects of Higher Education policy to be discussed, and this may enhance the Accord's capacity to align or realign its many disparate parts in a more holistic manner.

However, the lack of specificity in the priorities of the Accord could also end up diluting the impact of what will, undoubtedly, be a broad range of inputs from stakeholders. Creating coherent policy from such a diverse base of recommendations will be challenging for the panel, to say the least.

Key Areas for review

Meeting Australia's knowledge and skills needs

Rather than being driven by bureaucratically set targets, **student interest** should drive resourcing to the sector. It is uncontroversial to suggest that student interest in courses is largely tied to demand in the labour market, and so this provides a far more flexible and responsive approach to artificially set targets.

The Job Ready Graduates provisions discussed further below were predicated on untested assertions as to what is considered a 'job ready degree'. While jokes about basket-weaving Arts degrees are funny at the pub, the idea that humanities and social sciences are less valuable within society is an outdated trope. Indeed, 60% of Federal Government MPs have studied some kind of social science degree at University.

Grattan Institute modelling looking into the cost influence on decision-making shows us that even though students already can save money by choosing certain courses, they do not typically decide what to study on this basis.¹

Rather, the entire HECS system was designed to ensure that cost did not impact the choosing of a degree. The lack of upfront payments ensure that students make decisions on interests. While it may bear little influence on one's decision in choosing a course, it will punish some and continue to place a burden on them for years to come.

Boosting enrolments for First Nations people, people with disability and rural and regional student

This is a welcome policy goal; however, it comes with the responsibility to proactively support and retain those students once enrolled.

In the middle of 2014, the UMSU Advocacy Service began highlighting the over representation of students suffering mental health and financial problems in academic progress processes, noting that a large number of university students fall into in the age group featuring the highest proportion of those who suffer mental illness and poverty.²

The Advocacy Service noted that it frequently sees students who have been struggling to keep up with their studies due to problems with their

¹ Grattan Institute, 2015. University Fees Report. URL: <https://grattan.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/830-University-Fees.pdf>

² Student between 16 and 25 years old. The Mentally Ill Students' Guide for Academics <https://www.unimelb.edu.au/accessibility/guides/mental-illness>.

mental and physical health and those students can be particularly vulnerable to the gap between the special consideration process and those mechanisms to support students with chronic disabilities or ongoing health problems. This is due to both the episodic nature of acute illness as well as this effect such illnesses can have on the organisation and motivation required to negotiate the current special consideration regime.

In addition, there are a range of potential institutional disadvantages and systemic challenges facing First Nations people, people living with disability and rural and regional students which are not accommodated, even in principle, by University support systems. There are many sources of data which indicate that the support provided to students by tertiary institutions is manifestly inadequate.

A priority for the Accord should therefore be to ensure that universities do not only provide access to equity groups – but proactively support and build capacity in those students to reach completion.

Student fees and government contributions, including a review of the Job-ready Graduates program

Free Education

The ultimate aim of most student-led organisations is the comprehensive re-introduction of free education. Indeed, given the breadth of the ToR it would be disingenuous for the Accord to avoid engagement with an examination of free education models and genuine consideration of how this is achieved in international settings, among other things.

Given the current Prime Minister and many of those involved in the Accord will have been the beneficiaries of free education in Australia in the 70s and 80s, it would be deeply insulting to current students should this issue be considered off the table in any Accord.

Government Contributions

Any drop in course funding has a significant impact on the quality of teaching and learning. COVID-19 has left our universities vulnerable – the University of Melbourne alone is expected to lose around \$1 Billion over the next three years³. University of Melbourne students are deeply concerned with job cuts at the University, which saw 450 staff let go just in 2020, and a high likelihood of more to come. UMSU has received feedback from hundreds of students, who through larger class sizes, fewer subject offerings and poorer administration support know they will feel the direct impacts of further cuts to higher education.

Any policy for tertiary education should aim to improve overall funding -

³ Duffy, C <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-08-05/university-of-melbourne-announces-450-job-losses/12527576>.

Australian Government funding is already below OECD standards⁴.

Job-ready Graduates program

The gaps in the mythical conveyor belt from education to work have been one cause of students' disenchantment, leading to the insistence by the community, employers and governments alike that universities produce "job-ready graduates".

However, as discussed above - narrowing the supply of graduates to meet *predicted* labour force needs, rather than a system that is responsive and flexible to student demand for places does not improve the alignment between education and work.

Nevertheless, if the Accord could deliver a system based on a more sophisticated understanding and management of the connection between higher education and work, this would be a useful outcome.

Other issues for focus in the area of student fees and debt include:

'Debt Sentence' and the cost-of-living crisis

Changes introduced by the Job-ready Graduates program included increases of 113 % to humanities and communications degrees and 28 % for law and commerce degrees. These changes have and will continue to result in thousands of university students entering the higher education system already facing more debt than any other student in Australian history. Modelling from the Parliamentary Library that show students will take nearly 20 years to pay off their HECS debts under this program – doubling the current time frame.⁵

Rising cost of living has meant students have to work longer hours instead of spending time on university work.

The age of independence for youth allowance remains too high, locking many people out of receiving youth allowance to help them at the university. Parental income tests have not been changed despite inflation and the cost-of-living crisis with no consideration about effect these pressures have had on households. This means the choice to study can have a knock on effect to vulnerable families.

Workplace relations settings with universities

⁴ OECD, 2018, Public spending on education.

⁵ Hunter, F (2020). Students face 20 years of debt under university fee changes, modelling finds. URL: <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/students-face-20-years-of-debt-under-university-fee-changes-modelling-finds-20200828-p55q8c.html>

Many academics have tenuous careers, and this issue is only becoming more prevalent.

If the Accord is to genuinely engage with questions about the best quality of education, including adequate levels of student support, then a re-evaluation of how to ensure universities have the best workforce possible will be necessary.

It has been conceded by the Vice-Chancellor of Melbourne University that much of its workforce is employed on fixed-term and casual contracts. Why would the most talented educators and researchers put up with such precarious employment?

Insecure work for academic staff has a direct impact on student experience. Staff who are not paid adequately to mark assessment provide poor feedback. Staff who are not paid to consult with students, do not provide office hours for student contact and support. Staff who experience a toxic and exploitative workplace will often pass on this culture to their relationships with students.

Accordingly, the connection between treating staff well and the student experience should be a focus of the Accord.

The impact of COVID-19 and the role of international students in Australia

Before COVID, there were more than 580,000 international students in the country. During COVID, many international students experienced the University's attitudes as unresponsive, lacking compassion, and essentially exploitative. Given the significant fees paid by international students, and the reliance upon these fees

Those Universities which are no longer offering dual delivery to their students (such as Melbourne University in respect of the undergraduate cohort) are also demonstrating a lack of engagement with the realities of their international cohorts, while government neglect and funding models have in many ways created the exploitative business model evidenced in most Australian tertiary institutions in respect of their international student cohorts.

Accordingly, a focus of the Accord should be on the dual problem of insufficient government funding support to universities and the corresponding over reliance on international student fees to prop up funding shortfalls.

Conclusion

Given the short time frame for submissions into the ToR for the Accord, this submission is necessarily brief and targeted.

However, UMSU strongly encourages the Accord to actively view the higher education landscape through a student lens.

If the Accord can remain open to and embracing of student perspectives and genuinely incorporate them in the recommendations and resultant policy settings, it may actually come close to delivering on its real promise.