



HEDx

**Universities Accord
Post Interim Report Submission**

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In reflecting on the interim report, I believe we now need answers to the questions of:

- **How much of it can we afford and who will pay for it?** We need realistic and affordable arguments for new public investment and rebalancing of investment in the current system. We also need new and stronger steps towards increased private investment from employers for workforces, business and government for research, and private funders and investors for new providers and models the report calls for and which will be required for the goals for increased completions to be realistically achievable.
- **How do the proposals add up to an overall systemic strategy for the sector?** The final reports needs a strengthened unifying framework to communicate an overall direction for radical change, and what the case for and benefits of change would be. It needs it to garner wider stakeholder support, and justify decisions that differentially impact current providers and interest groups. We need to extend the “growth for skills through equity” ambition into a systemic implementation plan of changes, able to be continuously updated with ongoing policy informing capability, and which drive radical sector change.
- **How do we future-proof the long-term vision in the Accord?** The ongoing Accord process and its vision needs contemporary, dynamic, and continuous updating, for Australian tertiary education to be continuously informed, challenged and stimulated by global best practice. This is needed regarding: AI technologies, learner and employer expectations, and future skills needs and what global leaders and other sectors are doing to respond to them. This is needed for the vision to grow beyond short-term incremental change, and remain future proof and dynamic for an extended future period of time.

This last and most critically important need in our Accord, which the Interim Report has not adequately addressed, is for a long-term culture, leadership, strategy, technology, and innovation agenda. It is implied in the report’s overall vision and headlines, but only partially addressed among current specific proposals. This requires an ongoing search for global examples of innovation, best practice and change, in pursuing goals of equitable access to tertiary education. This needs to come from a new independent, best practice, policy-oriented think-tank capacity beyond current proposals for a research centre under the direction of the TEC. While a research centre undertakes long-term deep understanding for theoretical advances, we also need rapid and continuous access to actionable insights for our providers to see and match global tertiary education best-practice and models of innovation.



“The Review believes that bold, long-term change is required to fulfill the mission of higher education in Australia. Change in the sector must be significant. Complacency cannot be tolerated.”

The Accord generates a need and opportunity for all to access thought leadership and policy innovation ideas and best-practice global examples of experiments that go beyond short-term and discrete policy changes. These best practices need to inspire and drive continuous innovation by our current and emerging providers of tertiary education for 25 years and more.

This calls for a think-tank to share insights into global best practices and to make them relevant to Australian tertiary education practice. Such best practices include Coventry and Surrey University in the UK innovating with integrated student support technologies in partnerships with employers. They include University of Waterloo in Canada pioneering cooperative education with employers and embedding entrepreneurship in its programs. They include Instituto de Tecnico de Monterrey in Mexico and Singapore Institute of Technology pioneering competency-based education approaches to lifelong learning. They include ASU’s charter to measure themselves by “who they include not exclude, and how they support them to succeed” and how their EdTech ecosystem, online delivery, and approaches to transnational education and employer-funded partnerships make that possible. And Southern New Hampshire’s commitment to putting “Students First” overcoming limitations of “Broken” US public service systems. And Western Governors University’s commitment to innovative EdTech and innovation with a relentless focus on its purpose and promise of “transforming lives through activating talent into opportunity”. This resulted in the world’s largest online university, grown in a timescale equal to now until 2050.

“Greater priority now needs to be given to educational development and experimentation.”

The Interim Report invites the sector to embrace long term experimentation with pointers to how the future of work, current model stresses, and technological change within a dynamic societal, environmental and geo-political landscape, require differentiated future institutions. Paths to achieve such differentiated future institutions are less well-articulated at present and are needed.

The stressed state of the system arises from major flaws. These are that graduates lack the skills for a fast-changing future of work. That study is too expensive and does not represent good value for money. That study is long and difficult to complete, partly because of bad experiences. And that access to completable study is inequitable for different groups in society. Some of these flaws may be easier to respond to by some ideas and initiatives which for Australia mean starting institutions or strategies anew, rather than tweaking existing models. The think-tank will generate these ideas and models inspired from global best practices shared in an Australian context.

“Without change, Australia’s higher education system will rapidly become unfit for purpose.”

Our global best-practice examples and innovation must harness employer interest and potential for private investment. This has to be opened up as a new path to create new models of lifelong learning in areas of skills shortage such as teaching and healthcare workers. How might a model like the ASU Starbucks partnership inspire new models of teacher education to overcome skills shortages from a new stream and pathway of mature lifelong learners?

There is evidence that short-term global softness in domestic university demand will not recover. The US is ahead of the curve in declining total student numbers and increased attractiveness of online study. Learners and employers are looking beyond school-leaver degrees, postgraduate degrees and micro-credentials, towards continuous lifelong learning. The global softness in demand is more pronounced among time poor equity groups. This casts significant doubt on the current system, or tweaks to it, being able to meet planned growth in equity group graduate numbers, without radical innovation and new models.

Our sector can be argued to be inequitable, outdated, and in urgent need of change. Is short term softness in demand a cyclical phenomenon or are other structural demand changes at play? Will more students from equity groups generate the future workforce the nation needs unless we change the student experience and rates of completion? And is the rate of technological change and emergence of AI, changing future skills needs and lifelong learning needs beyond the ability of current providers to respond?

To answer these and similar questions, we need the sector and its current and future providers and supply chains to have an independent think tank. It would be a policy informing global best practice network capability similar to how the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) was established from a similar review of HE in the UK more than 20 years ago.

“The Review considers that Australian higher education would benefit from having a wider range of complementary institutions differentiated by their unique missions.”

The above, and other examples yet to be uncovered, need to be exposed in an Australian context, to explore how we can experiment with different university models for the future. We can do so by creating wholly new, differentiated, student focussed, globally relevant learning providers. This Interim Report headline might get more arguments of why some believe we need more providers like them, than anyone arguing for types of providers that we do not yet have in our system. Do those new forms of future providers have a voice? This HEDx submission and proposal for an independent best-practice policy think-tank, seeks to give that voice.



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