

The Australian Universities Accord Process offers our nation an incredible opportunity to create the architecture where excellence and equity intersect to enhance our Higher Education system. This process has been welcomed by my community in Chisholm, which has a number of universities and is home to many students, academics, university staff and families with a deep interest in higher education. This transformational opportunity allows us to make use of our assets as a country known for its creativity, cultural diversity, and dedication to knowledge to create an accessible, high impact and internationally competitive higher education system. As stated in the Interim Report, the overall goal of reform must be growth for skills through greater equity – this is the bedrock upon which this house must be built and the thread which must weave this ambitious project, the immediate priority actions as well as the Final Report together.

A brighter future where no one is left behind is at the heart of the Accord. This scenario imagines a society where every Australian, regardless of background or circumstance, has access to world class higher education if they want to pursue it. This submission provides a community perspective on the Australian Universities Accord Interim Report. It is informed by a range of engagement activities undertaken across my electorate of Chisholm, including direct feedback received via electronic correspondence and mobile offices, but primarily via the results of a comprehensive Higher Education Survey conducted by my office throughout the Chisholm electorate, which received 413 submissions.

The Chisholm Higher Education Survey provided both quantitative and qualitative feedback about experiences and challenges from the viewpoint of prospective students, current or former students, academics, researchers or professional staff. It provided an opportunity for the community to suggest ideas that might improve Australia's Higher Education system. Subsequently, insights from the survey have been instrumental in shaping the recommendations presented in this submission. By way of background 84% of respondents had previously studied at an Australian University and 61% of respondents are currently working in Higher Education in an Australian University.

The survey, in combination with direct community feedback, identified three areas of priority for transformation of Australia's Higher Education system: Improve student supports, Improve support, stability and security for academic staff and reform the Higher Education Loan Program.

1. Improve Student Supports

The Chisholm Higher Education Survey underscores the need for immediate action to address the multifaceted challenges faced by university students. We need to foster a supportive, inclusive, and accessible higher education environment, promoting the well-being and success of all students. The survey highlighted an urgent need for comprehensive wraparound support services for university students, with a particular emphasis on mental health support. Survey results revealed widespread concerns among students, parents, and university staff regarding student well-being, including complex mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, substance abuse disorders, and post-traumatic stress disorder.

Feedback indicated that the pandemic and rising cost of living have significantly increased students' stress and anxiety levels. This has led to adverse consequences such as disengagement, absenteeism, academic overwhelm, and an urgent need for increased pastoral care. Mental health issues have been exacerbated by cost-of-living pressures, with students struggling to balance their studies while trying to make ends meet.

The Interim Report's emphasis on enhancing student support services is commendable, however, to ensure a thriving and inclusive higher education environment, survey responses indicated six urgent actions needed to address the challenges facing students.

a) Improve accessibility and availability of mental health support services for students and staff

Feedback highlighted a pressing need for improved mental health services at universities for students and staff. Participants expressed concerns about the accessibility and availability of free counselling, support groups, and crisis helplines. Survey responses revealed long wait times for free mental health support services, and lack of availability for ongoing mental health support. Both Government and universities themselves have a role to play in provision of mental health services for comprehensive, subsidised mental health care services as a matter of urgency.

b) Improve safety on campus for students and staff

Feedback indicated a need for more support for victim-survivors of sexual violence and domestic and family violence. Support services should be developed in partnership with victim-survivors. Sexual violence, domestic and family violence can be disruptive of university studies. Actions need to be taken to ensure students suffering from mental health challenges, or from sexual violence, domestic and family violence, are not penalised in their studies. It is positive that our government has already taken steps by establishing a working group led by Our Watch CEO Patty Kinnerly to advise on action regarding campus safety and I look forward to seeing progress made, and consultation with advocacy groups, survivors and student and staff groups take place. Targeted action is also needed to tackle racism, misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, ageism, ableism and bullying on campus. These issues impact students and staff. I acknowledge work undertaken to date, noting public comments by Professor Sharon Pickering at Monash University to this end when stating, “we support victims-survivors, respond justly and empathetically to all disclosures and reports, and implement evidence-based prevention programming for staff and students.”¹

We also need to address the intersecting barriers students may face: Socioeconomic status, gender, race, religion and disability as well as other factors will all affect students differently. It is vital that in addressing disadvantage, exclusion and inequity we must take an intersectional approach that considers the way multiple factors contribute to the challenges people face.

c) Improve financial support for students

Many students face significant financial challenges during their studies. Both government and universities should collaborate to expand and better target scholarships, grants, and bursaries for disadvantaged students. However, fee structures must not be prohibitive to students studying and safety nets for students struggling financially must be sufficient. We cannot have a system where financial difficulties mean students are unable to access and complete their education, and improved affordability in cost-of-living expenses such as housing must be a broader focus in confronting this problem as a government. We need more affordable housing near campuses and transport to adequately address this issue.

d) Improve career pathways

Respondents emphasised the importance of career services and internships in preparing students for the job market. It is important that universities establish partnerships with industry to provide experiences to students and ensure students are equipped with practical skills that make them both employable and valuable to industry. Respondents reported a disconnect between the university curriculum and industry needs, with feedback indicating that universities often lag behind teaching students industry best practices. University graduates reported dissatisfaction with the transition from university to the workforce. Enhanced industry and university partnerships could aid in this transition. Additionally, availability of free careers counselling for graduates could provide great benefit to those experiencing challenges entering the workforce.

e) Reform unpaid university work placements

Courses such as teaching and nursing require unpaid university work placements. Community feedback revealed how financially challenging and prohibitive unpaid placements are for students. There needs to be consideration of paid internships and placements as otherwise it is only those who can afford to take time off paid work who will be qualified in many professions. We must ensure there is more equity in who will be able to study particular degrees, with unpaid internships and placements creating obstacles to opportunity. These obstacles should be removed.

2. Improve job security for academic staff

There is a critical link between academic support and student success. We need to improve job security for academic staff by increasing ratio of full-time permanent staff and reducing the amount of job casualisation. We must ensure that where workforce casualisation does exist that it is executed in good faith and to an agreed set of standards across universities. The renaming of what would traditionally be considered as tutorials to that of ‘lab’ or ‘practical’ to avoid paying full tutorial rates to academics should not be the accepted behaviour. Insecure work is at very high levels at our institutions, and this means scholars do not have the ability to plan their lives or careers. This is detrimental to academia and to our communities when people cannot lay roots down in our suburbs, regions and cities. Our government has led the way on improving job security for workers in Australia, and we must not neglect or forget the structural reforms needed in the way universities employ staff.

3. Reform the Higher Education Loan Program

The Higher Education Loan Program plays a pivotal role in enabling access to higher education. 30% of survey respondents stated that the availability of HELP influenced their decision around pursuing higher education.

¹ Source: Sydney Morning Herald (2023) [Sexual violence on campus not being transparently documented by most Australian universities \(smh.com.au\)](https://www.smh.com.au)

Increasingly, it appears that the combination of high course fees, near record indexation rates and a repayment rate based on income levels that is not seen as progressive enough is diminishing the value proposition of studying at university for some students.

This is supported by data that shows that the cost of undertaking tertiary education in Australia has on average increased by 140% over the period June 2000 – March 2023. Comparatively, this rate of increase has grown faster than that of automotive fuel at 129% and take away and fast food at 120%². In addition, the value proposition of certain degrees relative to other degrees has also diminished over time. For example, the cost to undertake an Arts/Humanities degree in 1990 was \$5,646 with income upon graduating being \$22,416 or a ratio of approximately 4³. In 2022 the cost to undertake an Arts/Humanities degree is \$43,890 with a median graduate income level of \$66,000 being a ratio of 1.5 with the outcome being a more than halving of the value proposition to study such degrees. This reality, as outlined by the Accord interim report may explain why there has been a downward trend in enrolments in these degrees over the last decade, a trend that is not good for students or Australia³.

The fields of study which recorded the highest average annual percentage increase in course costs were Arts/Humanities, Business/Economics and Law which since 1990 have all recorded increases of 6.6% per annum — around double the average annual increase in graduate starting salaries for each discipline³.

The average amount of outstanding debt per debtor has steadily increased over time, from \$10,460 in 2005–06 to \$24,771 in 2021–22. Alongside rising levels of outstanding debt, the time taken to repay in full has grown from 7.3 years in 2005–06 to 9.5 years in 2021–22³. Our Government has asked Professor Bruce Chapman to review the fee structures in Australian universities. I welcome his forthcoming recommendations into improving the affordability and accessibility of higher education.

Conclusion

It is important that our communities are heard on such matters because ultimately higher education in its role as a public good significantly impacts the lives of individuals, our communities, and the broader society we live in. Higher education has a role in strengthening our democracy and ensuring that our communities are full of engaged citizens and that everyone has a chance to benefit from and contribute to our nation's prosperity. The issues uncovered through the Chisholm Higher Education Survey demonstrate that there is a clear expectation from the community and sector stakeholders that higher education is meaningfully reformed. We must not squander the chance afforded to us to make the deep and significant changes that are required.

There were many great ideas raised in the survey, although the key themes above were most strongly featured in responses. Other issues that were raised were:

- Extending the government paid parental leave scheme to research students;
- Reversing the Job-Ready Graduates Scheme;
- Valuing and enhancing the role of humanities and social sciences degrees in Australia;
- Improving and formalising relationships between VET institutions and universities, and ensuring that there are clearer pathways between all types of tertiary education.

The Accord process and the Final Report, as foreshadowed in the Interim Report, is critically important as it serves as a platform for fostering consensus and driving transformative change. It is essential that both the challenges and opportunities explored during the Accord process are addressed comprehensively and that the benefits are shared. It is a future where no one is left behind that is at the heart of the Australian Universities Accord and its successful delivery, whatever that final shape takes, will be a vision that will require deep collaboration to build a better system to serve our communities now and in the future. I look forward to seeing the recommendations and map of the future of higher education and feel privileged to be a part of a government initiating a vital reform process.

² Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (2023) [ABS Consumer Price Index \(CPI\) data](#), Parliamentary Library calculations

³ Source: Graduate Careers Australia & Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching (2023); Parliamentary Library calculations