

## Response to the Interim Report of the Australian Universities Accord, 1 September 2023

The University of Newcastle's **Centre of Excellence for Equity in Higher Education** provides this submission to set out our position on equity measures suggested in the Interim Report. We note this has been provided to the Panel via the Equity in Higher Education Panel, and provide again here for full transparency.

Through its Centre of Excellence for Equity in Higher Education (CEEHE), the University hosts the [UNESCO Chair in Equity, Social Justice and Higher Education](#), which aims to mobilise higher education as a vehicle for social justice and to advocate for UNESCO's (2022) call for higher education institutions and their stakeholders to "systematically rethink their role in society and their key missions, and reflect on how they can serve as catalysts for a rapid, urgently needed and fair transition towards sustainability". This goal is entirely consistent with the goals set in the Accord, and will support future participation targets to address skills shortages.

The Accord process is an invaluable opportunity to reinvent higher education for future sustainability, which demands that those communities that have been historically excluded benefit from *both quantitative and qualitative forms of parity of participation*, ensuring their full representation in the development of equity policy and practice. This requires a visionary framework for the future of higher education in Australia that is equitable, inclusive and sustains its commitment to widening (rather than increasing) participation in higher education to groups navigating socio-economic, cultural, place-based and systemic inequities.

One of the key challenges is to sustain the vision of the Accord process and translate it into progressive and innovative strategy and practice. This takes the particular expertise that is underpinned by sustained equity research and practice.

In relation to the interim report, we recommend seven overarching points, which would contribute to the Accord Panel's aim "to build a visionary plan for Australia's universities and higher education sector".

### 1. Secure, Stabilise, and Grow equity funding and expertise.

Genuine transformation of universities to deliver high quality educational opportunity must be whole-of-institution and systemic, to shift entrenched structures that continue to exclude those from underrepresented communities. This will require securing, stabilising, and growing public equity funding and expertise.

Any development of a "student-centred needs-based model" should include increased and sustained public funding towards both dedicated equity expertise, and also towards general staffing to reverse the trend to increasing student/staff ratios. Funding the development of equity expertise will help to challenge deficit models and imaginaries (see recommendation 2 below) which are deeply embedded and directly disrupt sector goals. It is funding equity expertise that makes change possible, including developing research-informed, community based and relationship-driven avenues of new educational opportunities to counter decades of institutionally entrenched inequities.

### 2. Legislate for Sustainably Resourced Enabling Programs

Recognise the critical role of enabling pathways in the Australian education landscape by enshrining enabling pathways in legislation. Over decades, enabling pathways developed in unique ways at many Universities, providing hundreds of thousands of students across our nation access to higher education. For nearly half a century, the University of Newcastle Open Foundation has supported community members towards university education. Enabling has been demonstrated to improve

student participation, retention and success, providing a crucial platform for becoming meaningfully prepared for higher education study. The success of Open Foundation and its related programs (including Yapug, for Indigenous students) lies in a Lifelong Learning ethos, a depth of curriculum rather than a narrow competency or skills-based approach, providing a foundation from which students experience parity of participation as they move through their studies and a long-term commitment to continuous improvement through evidence-based pedagogy and research-informed practice. To deliver on a commitment to equity, our higher education system needs to sustain accessible, high-quality educational opportunities such as Open Foundation, to counter the deeply exclusive pattern of narrow pathways. Expanding the fund for enabling so that any and all universities can establish these programs would have a profound impact on producing equitable higher education.

### **3. Do not entertain competitive or contested equity schemes.**

Competition for students does not widen participation, nor produce equity. Any approaches to reaching equity targets must not lead to the potentially destructive outcome of universities competing to enrol students from underrepresented backgrounds. Student enrolments must be paired with long-term commitments to community engagement and notions of success that are developed from the perspective of the student being enrolled (see [Rubin, Burke, Bennett et al, 2022](#)).

Narrow constructions of graduate outcomes that only adhere to job-ready graduate impoverish the possibility of higher education and directly undermine the important goals of organisations such as UNESCO who advocate universities becoming catalysts for urgently required fair transitions towards sustainability amidst global intersecting crises. Greater facilitation of collaborative approaches to equity initiatives and programs both within and between universities will improve equity outcomes more than competitive approaches.

### **4. Reframe debate to overturn deficit models and challenge systemic inequalities**

The way ‘the problem’ of equity is represented has important implications for the efficacy of equity initiatives. The focus on increasing aspiration and confidence in the Interim Report follows a long-running and failed approach which proceeds from the presumption that those cohorts not currently represented in higher education lack aspiration and confidence and the role of equity programs is to remedy these deficits in potential students. A key finding of a recent Australian Government funded [International Literature Review of Equity in Higher Education](#) is that equity is regularly misrepresented through ‘deficit imaginaries’.

Despite wide-spread acceptance that the drivers of student inequity are entrenched in structures of social inequality, deficit models sustain the deeply flawed assumption that inequity is rooted in the perceived deficiencies of individuals from underrepresented backgrounds. Deficit imaginaries make flawed connections, *such as the notion that material poverty leads to impoverished aspiration*. Overall deficit imaginaries presume individuals who have experienced disadvantage lack potential, aspiration, confidence, capability and/or resilience. Research shows this is simply not true. This ‘deficit model’ must be overturned in favour of challenging social inequities and generating strategies for institutional change. If deficit models remain there is unlikely to be progress made in line with sector wide aims to create a more equitable Australian higher education system.

### **5. Provide more robust living expense support without increasing student debt**

The material basis for learning and thriving is not secured for students from low-income backgrounds, or whose families and communities are unwilling or unable to provide financial support. We welcome the focus on this issue in the Interim Report and agree that addressing this is central to increasing participation and success for wider layers of students. We share the concern represented in the Report that provision of living support through loans will only add to the growing problem of student indebtedness. Rather, income support needs to be provided through government funds.

Currently students who are not able to prove themselves financially independent for the purposes of Centrelink are only eligible for the most minimal financial support, even if their families are in no position to provide for them. Even for those who are eligible for Centrelink, these payments are not sufficient and leave many living below the poverty line. Scholarships are a useful mechanism to support students facing disadvantage but cannot replace publicly funded higher education, additionally supported by a well-designed income support system. In practice students who are forced to take on large work hours to support their education struggle to fully participate in their studies and are significantly more vulnerable to attrition. The success of these students can often hinge on the flexibility of their employers and those in paid employment in which the importance of their education was disregarded put students in the difficult and financially precarious situation of having to choose between their degrees or their employment ([Burke et al, 2017](#)). Universal provision of adequate financial supports is urgently needed to redress these inequities.

**6. Reduce private funding of studies through an increase in public funding**

Australia has moved rapidly from public towards private funding since the late 1980s, and there are many negative impacts associated with this shift. The doubling of student fees for humanities under the jobs ready graduate package is a direct attack on equitable higher education policy. It will result in life-long debts for many Indigenous students and women, who are overrepresented in these subjects but whose life-time earnings remain lower than other students. Economically similar nations retain a much higher proportion of public funding through progressive taxation. Moving in this direction is essential for Australian higher education to engage broader segments of the Australian population and play a role in eroding class stratification rather than entrenching it.

**7. Increase government funding to ensure universities lower student/staff ratios and increase resources for student engagement and support.**

For many students from non-traditional backgrounds, relationships with tutors and course coordinators are central to their capacity to succeed and thrive in their studies. We agree with the understanding in the Interim Report that retention of students from underrepresented backgrounds requires increased commitment to both learning support and pastoral care. It must be urgently recognised, however, that provision of increased supports, both through student services and by teaching staff requires significant investment by government. The current higher education staff is in a crisis of overwork and cannot provide increased support to students. Further, many teaching staff are casuals or are not currently paid to offer this level of support and interaction with their students. The incredible proliferation of casualisation has become a hallmark Australian higher education. Casualisation not only has a detrimental impact on the working conditions of all higher education staff (including those with ostensibly permanent positions who experience the 'race to the bottom' of work intensification), but it also negatively impacts the experience of higher education for students from underrepresented backgrounds. If the laudable goals of the Interim Report to support the participation and success of wider layers of students are to be met, government funding of higher education must be dramatically increased and sustained. This alone provides the basis on which student/staff ratios can begin to be reduced, overwork and casualisation can be tackled, and meaningful student equity activities across higher education can be supported to flourish.