



THE UNIVERSITY OF NOTRE DAME AUSTRALIA

Submission to the Australian Universities Accord: Response to the Interim Report

AUGUST 2023

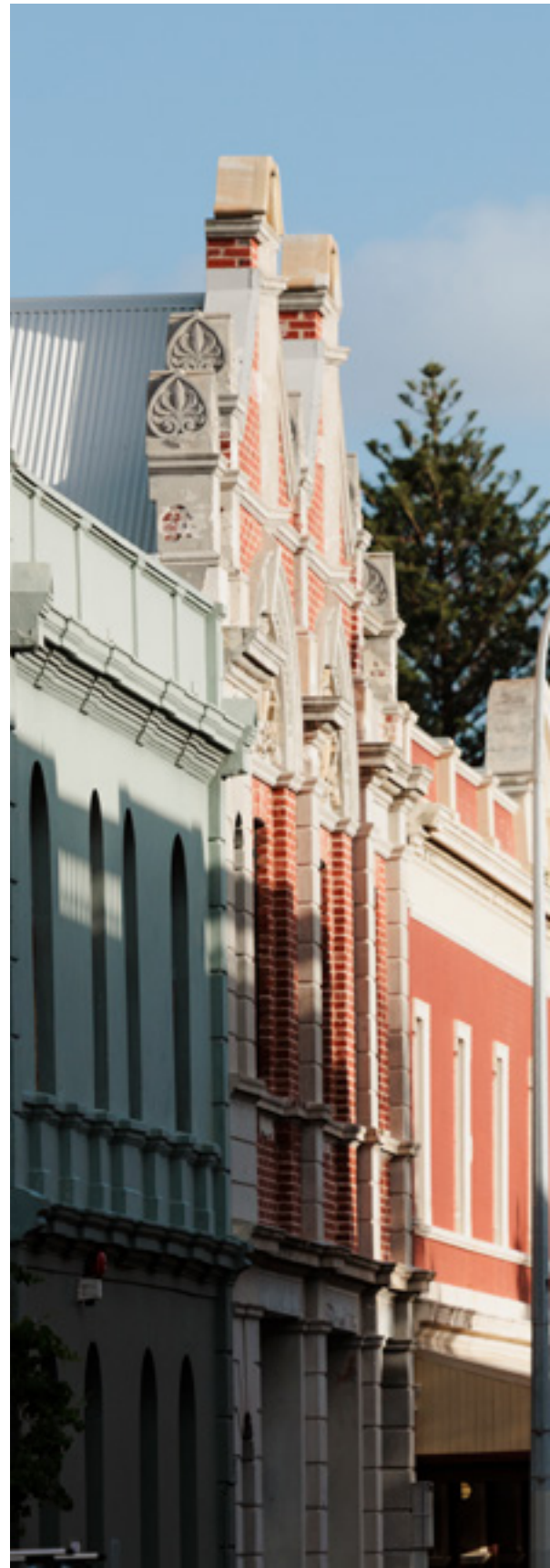


The University of Notre Dame Australia (UNDA) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Australian Universities Accord Interim Report and share our ideas for the future of the Australian Higher Education sector.

The University has contributed throughout the review process, including written submissions in response to the Terms of Reference and the Discussion Paper. The University also participated in the recent Accord Workshop hosted by Universities Australia in Canberra.

The Accord provides a unique opportunity to review the Australian higher education system, and put in place a reform agenda that seeks to achieve the following key elements:

- Good reform does not always correspond to a “one size fits all” approach— the higher education sector is diverse, including the size, shape and composition of each institution. The Accord must embrace the importance of a differentiated system that allows each university to meet the learning and teaching and research needs of their local community.
- Long term funding and policy certainty— the Accord must fundamentally focus on giving universities certainty to inform longer term planning, policy and investment decisions.
- Reform must not result in a greater regulatory burden— the Accord should take a whole of government approach and lead to the simplification of cross-agency and jurisdictional requirements.
- Each reform foci must be aligned to the national interest— this is a unique opportunity to ensure that Universities are properly supported to invest in learning and teaching and research that will support Australia’s future economic and social needs.
- A plan for implementation – this is an important opportunity to deliver long lasting, and much needed, improvements to the Australian higher education sector. The Accord Review should not only consider what improvements are needed, but how they can be implemented by government and the sector in a coordinated and orderly way.





SCOPE OF SUBMISSION

The University welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback to the Review Panel on the more than 80 ideas included in the second part of the interim report to identify the priority reforms to be pursued.

With such a large number of ideas being considered by the Review Panel, it will be important that the final report is clear on what the priority reforms are, as well as how they will be funded and implemented.

The University of Notre Dame has carefully examined the ideas outlined in the interim report and believes the following policy initiatives should be prioritised, recognising not every good idea can be implemented or funded immediately.

1. Student support to encourage wider participation

The University of Notre Dame Australia supports the Government's intention to raise efforts nationally in relation to student participation in higher education. Any new equity targets that may be introduced must consider local institutional and community factors such as demographics, socio-economic and historical factors that have previously contributed to poor outcomes.

Notre Dame welcomes the decision to introduce uncapped Commonwealth Supported Places for all Indigenous Australians regardless of where they live as one of the five immediate recommendations of the interim report.

Cost-of-living pressures are hurting all students. This is not only due to the cost of their degree, but also because they are struggling to make ends meet while they study. The current HECS-HELP funding system should be maintained and protected, but expanded to provide financial support to students who don't currently qualify for support, such as permanent residents.

2. Skills and the Future of Work

UNDA welcomes the creation of Jobs and Skills Australia which will provide independent advice to government on current and emerging workforce needs. Building greater collaboration and coordination between JSA and the higher education sector is required to ensure the future skills and workforce needs of the Nation are properly planned for.

As the pace of change in workforce needs continues to grow, universities will require sophisticated models of assessing and monitoring Australia's current and future labour market needs to proactively design courses and embrace new methods of delivery, such as micro credentials and short courses, that will deliver a knowledgeable and skilled workforce.



The University supports the idea of a national skills passport to help graduates impress their qualifications on employers, become more employable and achieve career progression. A national skills passport could provide a secure digital platform for students and graduates to access, compile, display, and share their higher education qualifications, micro-credentials and general capabilities. The University made a similar suggestion in its submission in response to the Review Panel's Discussion Paper.

UNDA also welcomes the idea of creating a universal learning entitlement to create a culture of life-long learning. The University suggested this idea in its response to the discussion paper as a way of meeting Australia's demand for skills and knowledge by encouraging participation, skills enhancement and lifelong learning linked to national skills priorities.

3. Funding and Regulatory Environment

The University of Notre Dame Australia believes that the Accord must embrace the importance of a differentiated system that allows each university to meet the learning and teaching and research needs of their local community.

The best way to achieve this is through mission-based compacts that recognise the community engagement work of universities. Such agreements would enable institutions to specialise and align their missions and activities to the communities they serve. Mission-based compacts would be an avenue for universities to demonstrate engagement with their unique community and detail plans to further advance their civic functions.

UNDA is supportive of the establishment of a National Higher Education Commission to provide a whole of government approach to higher education and help better connect the sector to current and emerging national challenges. The Commission would connect the sector with the many arms of government such as skills and learning, industry development, workforce planning, schools education and science, research and innovation.

The aim would be to break down some of the many silos across agencies and help bring universities to the table with government, industry and other stakeholders in a more strategic and coordinated way. The Commission would encourage and facilitate the sector to make a greater contribution to the national policy agenda. The University made a similar suggestion in its submission in response to the Review Panel's Discussion Paper.



4. Integration between higher education and vocational education

As a dual sector provider, UNDA supports greater integration between VET and universities.

Breaking down the barriers between vocational education and higher education and promoting collaboration and innovation can improve access to knowledge and skills at different life stages. Building stronger connections between the VET and higher education sectors will improve education opportunities for students, especially those from equity groups.

The current arrangements are counter-productive to the national skills agenda as navigating pathways in and across the tertiary education sector is needlessly complicated for students, and the information needed by students is spread across too many disparate platforms to be useful.

There needs to be a seamless environment of lifelong learning and skills development. Currently, the sectors operate under different levels of government (State and Federal), have separate funding models, and operate under different policy and regulatory settings.

5. International education

A renewed effort is needed to promote Australia as a destination of choice for students, academics and researchers. This will help attract and retain the smartest minds to our country.

Australia's visa system does not reflect contemporary best practice, making it unnecessarily difficult for students, researchers, and academics to choose Australia as a destination to learn and live. Visa reform is needed that will result in a system that lifts the ambition of Australia's international education offerings by actively encouraging programs with joint degrees, allowing greater inbound and outbound student mobility.

UNDA supports the recommendations from Universities Australia including replacing the genuine temporary entrant visa requirement with a genuine student visa requirement that focuses on a student's academic record; automatically granting temporary graduate visas to all international students who meet the course requirements for graduation and relevant character conditions; and establishing a unit within Jobs and Skills Australia that provides advice on migration-related issues, ranging from the suitability of visa types to fill occupations through to differences in regional and state-based skilled occupation lists.

One idea raised in the Interim Report is the introduction of a levy on international student recruitment. The University is wary of the introduction of any new taxes or levies on the sector, especially considering we operate in a highly competitive global market and all effort needs to be made to ensure Australia is an attractive and desirable destination for international students.



6. Research

The Accord must result in the development of a sustainable research funding model that is transparent in its ability to determine the full cost of funding research activities.

Universities have spent decades cross subsidising the cost of research using income generated from other activities, including international and postgraduate fee-income. The government's research funding model does not adequately factor in the true cost of research despite the well documented evidence outlining the significant additional costs universities incur when leading government funded research.

The Accord Review should recommend funding the full cost of research by 2030. As a starting point the Government should commit to fund at least 50 per cent of research indirect costs as a matter of priority.

