

INDEPENDENT SCHOLARS ASSOCIATION OF AUSTRALIA (ISAA)

**RESPONSE TO THE AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITIES ACCORD: INTERIM REPORT
AUGUST 2023**

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*...developing a stronger understanding of the true costs
of the core activities in higher education.*

Interim Report, page 139

ISAA supports the five priority actions in the Interim report (IR pp. 6–7). ISAA welcomes the IR's thrust to improve higher education access for Indigenous Australians and disadvantaged groups. The report has a narrow view of the purposes of universities and needs to recognise the wider social functions that universities do and should provide.

A welcome aspect of the report is its recognition of the issues and problems that have developed over the long period since the Bradley review. These include: the stressed state of our universities (IR, p. 24), serious governance issues in relation to treatment of staff (IR p. 115-116), inadequate resources for providing needed student assistance (especially for disadvantaged groups) (IR p.130), and workloads that affect the quality of teaching (IR pp. 52, 74, 116). It is essential that the final report respond adequately to these and other identified issues.

A danger for the present report is that what happened following the Bradley report will happen again — that is, an ambitious set of objectives to be implemented, but without adequate resourcing. ISAA welcomes the statement 'The Final Report will propose new funding arrangements for consideration by Government' (IR, p. 7), but those arrangements will need to ensure that funding is stable and realistic for expectations and objectives.

ISAA welcomes the changes proposed in priority action 2 (abolition of the 50% pass rule) and priority action 4 (certainty in funding, especially support for equity groups). ISAA supports programs that would facilitate the participation of more First Nations students in higher degree programs and research (IR, p. 94). Access and equity issues are complex and need serious thought and careful implementation if real progress is to occur. Further comment is in this submission. Personal safety on campuses needs to be reviewed.

The report envisages more students from disadvantaged and minority groups, and more academic and personal support for them, and also for the student body as a whole. This has major staffing and funding implications that must be addressed in the final report. Attention must be given to institutional culture and to valuing, attracting and retaining academic staff, including casual staff.

The report admits much of the gap in research funding has to be met by universities, where the larger ones can draw upon international student fees. The inadequate financial support for research from Government has serious consequences. The IR is limited in that it sees research overwhelmingly in terms of industry needs, and there is little or no mention of basic science research which may ultimately inform later industry developments.

ISAA agrees that governing bodies should have greater representation of people with knowledge and experience of universities. However, issues of governance in universities go far beyond the composition of governing bodies.

Universities will never be 'exemplary employers' until they are properly resourced, with realistic expectations that value and create more opportunity for core duties, with a change in management culture to match.

2. GENERAL COMMENTS ON THE INTERIM REPORT (IR)

The Interim Report (IR) from the panel on the Universities Accord is an ambitious and potentially far-reaching document. The report is comprehensive and has involved a great deal of thought and effort. ISAA agrees that many of the challenges mentioned in the report were ‘identified by the 2008 Bradley review’ (IR, p. 23). A welcome aspect of the report is its recognition of the issues and problems that have developed over the long period since the Bradley review. Among these are: the stressed state of our universities (IR, p. 24), serious governance issues in relation to treatment of staff (IR p. 115-116), inadequate resources for providing needed student assistance (especially for disadvantaged groups) (IR p.130), workloads that affect the quality of teaching (IR pp. 52, 74, 116) and the issue of stable and adequate funding (IR p. 124). The implementation of the Bradley review without adequate resourcing and with a dominant corporate management culture in universities has been the primary source of these issues. However, the issues go back to the changes in university policy in 1988, when it was made clear that universities were to be more responsible for raising their own funds. In effect, universities became businesses, they have been semi-privatised and they are over-reliant on funding from international students.

ISAA supports the five priority actions in the report (pp. 6–7). ISAA welcomes the report’s thrust to improve higher education access for Indigenous people and disadvantaged groups.

A danger for the present report is that what happened following the Bradley report will happen again — that is, an ambitious set of objectives to be implemented but without adequate resourcing. It is welcome that the IR is aware of this issue as indicated by the comment ‘...the system must provide for universities to receive sufficient funding to enable their ongoing financial health and continued high-quality delivery, and also that students are treated fairly and not left with unreasonable debts...’ (IR, p.124), together with similar comments elsewhere. ISAA welcomes the statement: ‘The Final Report will propose new funding arrangements for consideration by Government’ (IR, p. 7). It is essential that new funding arrangements are adequate for what is envisaged for universities and their staff to accomplish.

We read: ‘many equity students need additional support including increased academic advice and learning support, and the delivery of enhanced wraparound services’ (IR p.130). This is indeed the case, and under the changes envisaged in the report, this need will increase very considerably. A similar comment applies if the quality of teaching and student support is to be lifted, and if Work Integrated Learning is to become more common than at present, not to mention other initiatives. It is not possible to keep the current funding levels of universities while at the same time realising the objectives envisaged in the IR. Stability of funding is also a very important issue.

The IR has a narrow view of what constitutes higher education and seems to regard higher education, including university education, as directed almost solely to the acquisition of skills and preparing students for immediate employment. The report seems to see universities as there to meet the needs of industry, and in that sense the objectives, to the extent that they are realised, are a subsidy to industry. The report has a marked tendency to consider research solely to the extent to which it is beneficial to industry, with only a nod to the basic research which contributes greatly to Australia’s international research impact and reputation. This continues the limited thinking about the scope of universities that has prevailed since the ‘unified national system’ was created in 1988 by the then labor government.

Employment opportunities for students and the needs of employers are of course extremely important, but the word ‘education’ embodies more than skills. Universities are important for society in more general terms, as they are a repository of intellectual rigour, research, scholarship and humanity, and have an imprint and an effect on our wider public culture and our communities. Universities are good for democracy, and that is a crucial role in times when extremism and misinformation are a threat. There is no discussion in the IR on its conception of the overall purposes of universities and our higher education system. The qualities universities can bring to creating an informed public culture need to be explicitly valued, and not just by a sentence or two, but incorporated more fully into the final document.

There is also the tendency to try and use universities to rectify problematic issues in society while failing to recognise explicitly that those issues have been long in the making prior to higher education entry. But note the comments of the minister:

If you think that you can fix this [the low level of graduates from low SES homes] at the gate of university when someone turns 18, then you're wrong. It goes back to what we do in our schools and in early education as well.

Minister Jason Clare, ABC radio, 19th July, 2023

Every non-government school in Australia is either funded at the level David Gonski recommended, is above it, or is on track to be there by the end of the decade. But no public school is, apart from here in the ACT. That gap needs to close.

Minister Jason Clare, National Press Club, 19th July, 2023

This is not to suggest that universities have no role to play in contributing to problems of accessibility and equality — they do, and it is a very substantial role. But the minister's comments are indicative of the scale of commitment, resources and individual staff support that are required. ISAA understands that three working parties have been set up by the government to advise on Early Education, Schools and Higher Education. This is a very welcome initiative and supports the whole-of-education approach recommended by ISAA in its original submission. However, TAFE somehow should be included if that has not occurred.

The IR identifies various issues within universities such as governance, treatment of staff, insecurity of employment, student support, etc. However, there is little consideration of the causes of these issues. In fact, these issues have arisen in large part because of management culture and inadequate resources, especially staff numbers. When resources are out of kilter with the demands and expectations imposed from outside, tasks cannot be carried out with the quality and to the extent that are demanded. That is the present reality. There is a danger that that reality will simply continue. Rhetoric is all too easy, whereas implementation and achievement require specific action, determination, patience, stability and resources. As ISAA said in its initial submission, resources need to be commensurate with expectations.

There is a further awareness of resourcing issues in the IR where it recommends: '...developing a stronger understanding of the true costs of the core activities in higher education..' (IR, p. 139). Note that the term 'costs' here should refer not simply to money, but should relate to the opportunity for staff to carry out their duties to a high standard, an impossibility for many staff given current workloads. In the past, there has been little understanding or concern over 'the true costs of the core activities' in higher education, with corresponding effects upon workplace culture, governance, workloads, the quality of teaching, the well-being of staff, the capacity to provide support for students, and so on. It is important, even critical, to ensure that such past attitudes are not carried into the future.

ISAA also comments that the structure of the future workforce may be substantially affected by artificial intelligence (AI) whereas the possible implications of AI are not discussed in any detail in the IR. As well, the uncritical response to AI by universities suggests a lack of awareness that the overall effects of AI need not be benign. The assumptions in the IR, presented as more-or-less self-evident concerning the nature and structure of the future workforce, may not be justified.

3. EQUITY IN PARTICIPATION, ACCESS AND OPPORTUNITY [2.3 pp. 59 -- 69]

The interim report has acknowledged problems of equity in participation in higher education, especially in relation to First Nations people, people with disability, those from lower socio-economic backgrounds and those living in rural, remote and outer suburban areas.

ISAA is pleased to see the changes proposed in priority action 2 (abolition of the 50% pass rule) and priority action 4 (certainty in funding, especially support for equity groups), which will go some way to addressing consequences of the problematic JRG.

However, ISAA wishes to sound three notes of caution on the proposals to increase participation by 'equity groups'. First, a larger higher education system does not, by itself, mean a fairer system. Without significant support, those who have long been outside the system will be in the position of having been given the opportunity and be seen not to have taken advantage of it – in other words, the system itself will contain the seeds of their exclusion. Second, collecting more data to better understand the needs of students from these groups can itself lead to exclusion, because the collection can be biased to existing norms. Thirdly, systemic factors, such as pay and conditions in some female-dominated professions and the interrupted work lives of women, will continue to leave many women who do manage to complete their studies at a disadvantage compared to their male counterparts (IR p. 60, p. 78).

ISAA welcomes the acknowledgement of the impacts of casualisation of the workforce, especially on gender equity (IR p. 34).

ISAA also acknowledges the importance of the safety and well-being of staff and students, a societal concern that goes beyond the context of universities and colleges (IR p.38).

4. EXCELLENCE IN LEARNING, TEACHING AND STUDENT EXPERIENCE [2.4 pp. 70 – 79]

Modes of learning. Figure 2.4-1 (IR p. 72) indicates that there is little difference in quality between on-campus learning and online learning as currently perceived by students. In student engagement, however, on-campus study is rated 100% higher than on-line. To the extent that learning is about accumulating information and skill acquisition there may be little difference between the two modes, but for the remainder of the overall education experience, on-campus with personal interaction is likely to remain superior. There should be no automatic assumption that 'innovative' learning based on technology outreach is automatically superior. However, a major feature of online learning is that it can widen access to education for those not able to attend in person, so it is certainly important to strive for high quality online learning experiences. Also, the comment by the Australian Historical Association (IR p. 72) that online teaching is not valued in staff workloads is pertinent, and this is part of the more general issue of the 'true costs of the core activities in higher education' (IR p. 139). The attainment of objectives cannot be separated from available resources.

'Systemic excellence in learning and teaching'. The report envisages more individual support for students, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds and the many who need improved language skills. Many academic staff have been providing that type of support over many years, not only those staff specifically employed to provide additional support for students. The need for this has created unreasonable and stressful staff workloads and many have made sacrifices to their career, because much support for students occurs informally and is neither valued nor considered for career progress. It just doesn't count. This has a marked negative effect on the capacity of some staff to carry out research, teach their regular classes to the standard they would like, and upon the possibility of career progression. Also, the proliferation of administrative and other non-core expectations upon staff likewise contribute to these issues. The current situation is incompatible with the objectives in the IR to retain academic staff who are good teachers as well as researchers (IR p. 77, and see below). Particularly for disadvantaged students, providing adequate support is also a major challenge, as noted in 2.3.1.1 (IR pp. 60-61). Excellence in learning and teaching requires dedication, time and effort and this has been insufficiently acknowledged in the past.

Attraction and retention of staff. The report envisages a future where 'Increased investment in workforce, teaching and research capability has enabled effective recruitment and retention of talented staff, and Australian universities are seen as exemplary employers and attractive places to work' (IR p. 18). There is a long way to go on these issues. Considered overall, current expectations upon staff are markedly more than can be justified by the resources available. Student-to-

staff ratios have doubled over the last 20-30 years, and the advent of computers and the internet has increased workloads, not decreased them, contributing to stressful workplace environments, quite apart from many other factors.

While the IR notes the importance of 'academics who are both excellent teachers and cutting-edge researchers' (p. 77), the panel should note that an academic who is a good and conscientious teacher may well find their teaching and administrative load to be such that it is hardly possible to do research, even when he or she has had major research achievements. Further, an academic who is conscientious and good at administration may well find they spend a disproportionate time on administration and management. Many academics are prevented from doing research, or at least have limited opportunities, and because such an academic will most likely be assessed on the number of their research 'outputs' their career is likely to founder. (Note that the counting of 'outputs' is simplistic and inconsistent as a basis for assessment anyway, for what is taken as a legitimate 'output' can vary enormously.)

Another issue is the high level of casual staff and staff with insecure appointments. This affects the overall support levels that can be provided to students. These staff frequently have been badly treated and that is recognised (IR pp. 26, 115, 117). Sometimes casual staff are used to carry out duties that are formally prohibited for casual staff by university policy.

5. RESEARCH INNOVATION AND RESEARCH TRAINING [2.7 pp. 92 – 101]

Research focus of the report. The Interim Report takes a heavy utilitarian focus on research with an emphasis upon translational imperatives, much of which ARC and NHMRC grants do not fully or even partly support; the possible exception being some Linkage grants. The report admits much of the gap in funding has to be met by universities, where the larger ones can draw upon international student fees. There is little or no mention of basic science research which may ultimately inform later industry developments.

The inadequate financial support for research from Government has serious consequences. The extremely low success rates for ARC and NHMRC grants have at least three negative consequences. First, researchers spend an inordinate amount of time each year in submitting demonstrably sound proposals which fail to be funded. Second, successful proposals often have their budgets severely reduced limiting the opportunity for successful outcomes, and third, failure to receive funding often leads to the breakup of successful research teams with younger researchers being most affected.

Limitations to later career opportunities for PhD graduates is touched upon in the IR with recognition that current stipends are below the poverty line. Further consideration of career pathways in both research and teaching is supported. For those wishing to move into teaching positions the picture is bleak owing to the casualisation policies of most universities. Permanent positions are difficult to find.

For those wishing to pursue a research career the IR has recognised the scarcity of post-doctoral positions. Data are required on the career outcomes of doctoral graduates following completion. In the social services field in particular, opportunities outside of the university tend to be administrative/managerial positions which do not always provide satisfaction, nor the opportunity to exercise scholarly skills. It is noted that the IR suggests the employment of a person with a doctoral degree does provide opportunities for the application of their critical thinking skills in an industry position.

Government use of research. There is potential for government to make more use of university research, especially in areas of public policy. As the IR notes (p. 98), this should happen more commonly than it currently does. Also, a greater awareness of the relevance of university research to industry, business and communities would be beneficial (IR, p.98). The establishment of gov-

ernment advisory committees on education, mentioned previously, is a welcome step in this direction.

Separation of teaching and research. There seems to be a tacit call for a separation of teaching and research funding. This seems to fit with the efforts of some universities to increase the number of teaching-only staff. It would also go against the IR's own view : 'An important part of the higher education workforce is academics who are both excellent teachers and cutting-edge researchers. These academics can be particularly inspiring in exposing students to the process of knowledge breakthroughs. This is a vital contribution for graduates hoping to work in the knowledge economy' (IR p. 77). The fact is that most academics are attracted to their role, to varying degrees, by the expectation that they will be able to conduct research. If this is taken away by separating research from teaching, many extremely capable people will simply pursue other careers, and the quality of teaching will lurch towards mediocrity. It is important that universities are explicitly funded to support 'research, innovation and scholarship' as well as teaching, but these activities should be required for most academic staff.

First Nations research opportunities. ISAA supports programs that would facilitate the participation of more First Nations students in higher degree programs and research (IR, p. 94).

Levy on International students. The IR proposes to examine a 'funding mechanism such as a levy on international student fee income' (IR p. 139). ISAA opposes such a levy. Although technically it might be a tax on universities, affecting those universities with a greater number of international students, it would most likely be seen as a tax on students. This would not be good for international perceptions of Australia and would appear to be inconsistent with the panel's (welcome) view: 'The Review sees international education less as an industry and more as a crucial element of Australia's soft diplomacy, regional prosperity and development' (IR p.12). As well, it is arguable that postgraduate international students benefit to an extent if there is no levy, because they benefit from the money directed to research from international student fees.

6. INSTITUTIONAL AND COLLABORATIVE GOVERNANCE [3.2 pp. 115 – 123]

Governing bodies. ISAA welcomes the concern expressed in the interim report on university governance. In particular, the recommendation that governing bodies should have greater representation of people with knowledge and experience of universities rather than commercial entities is welcome. The composition of governing bodies should reflect the academic and intellectual character of universities.

Wider governance issues. Issues of governance in universities go far beyond the composition of governing bodies. The changes implemented by the Labor government in 1988 implemented corporate values in the whole operation of universities. Corporate modes of operation and governance are now the norm throughout all non-academic levels of university management.

'Exemplary employers'. Corporate culture is a reason for the imbalance between the proportion of professional staff compared with academic staff. It is also a reason why there are so many expectations on academic staff, having the consequence that workloads cannot be kept within the Enterprise Agreements. Over a long period those agreements have not been respected by universities, with underpayment of casual staff being just one issue. Also, the corporate culture means that teaching and its demands are undervalued at the management levels, despite superficial marketing rhetoric to the contrary. Quality research is more easily measured and can therefore be 'marketed' to institutional advantage, so it is more valued, as well as 'demonstrating accountability' by attainment of a good position on a league table. In practice, there are not enough staff to meet the many expectations placed upon them, including unrecognised but imposed non-academic activities, that detract from their ability to teach better and to carry out research.

Retaining and attracting quality staff. In evaluation of staff 'performance', universities often use simplistic KPIs for research that take no account of the lack of opportunity for research that has been provided. Plenty of academic staff are swamped by duties that limit or severely restrict opportunities for research and proper teaching. Universities will never be 'exemplary employers' until they are properly resourced, with realistic expectations that value core duties, with a change in management culture to match.

Use of consultants. The corporate mindset is also a reason why universities have spent millions of dollars on consultants (not mentioned in the IR), most of which monies could have been properly spent on teaching and research. The use of consultants should be markedly reduced, or even not used. Consultants should only be used when there is no alternative, there should be accountability and quality assessment of any reports, and any such assessments and reports should be notified to the representative academic body within the institution.

Independent Scholars Association of Australia
Website: <https://www.isaa.org.au/>

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