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31 August 2023

Bond University Submission to The Accord Interim Report

The Role of Private, Non-Profit Institutions

The broad scope of the Interim Report and the ideas canvassed within it open a wide range of possibilities for tackling some of the systemic challenges that our sector faces. As the Panel distils these ideas into recommendations for the final report, we ask for full consideration to be extended to all of the stakeholders that have capacity to contribute to the advancement of our nation's system of higher education, and not just a focus on the public universities.

The Interim Report gives relatively little attention to providers other than the public universities. It is somewhat ironic that, while recognising that Australia will require a system that is more dynamic, provides a broader range of pathways for students, and is significantly larger, the Report gives little focus to the private providers that represent the fastest growing and most adaptive segment of the sector.

Private non-profit universities like Bond remain independent of the CGS funding model. Student enrolments outside of CGS places reduce the tax-payer burden. Our business model dictates that we must provide an experience that meets students' demands. We offer an alternative for students who are less suited to the public model, and our student successes evidence our ability to deliver the educational outcomes that they both seek and require.

The Accord presents an opportunity to find ways for private universities to better complement the public system, expand its capacity and provide more diverse pathways for students. We ask that more attention be given to the barriers that stand in the way of those goals, and removing the systemic policy settings and funding mechanisms that advantage public institutions and contravene the principles of competitive neutrality.

As an example, there are a suite of Commonwealth funding programs that target specific government priorities and are available only to Table A universities (disability support, OS-HELP, HEPPP, etc). If these schemes were designed with students' needs at the fore, eligibility would be extended to all registered and accredited providers that have the demonstrated capacity to deliver the policy objectives being targeted.

Diminishing University Autonomy will reduce Sector Diversity

Bond University has concerns regarding the weight of ideas within the Interim Report that appear to lead towards greater intervention and centralisation. For example, the Interim Report explores the creation of a national approach to student admissions, a generic approach to recognition of students' learning from other institutions, and more standardised admission requirements for equity groups. It also considers a number of new regulatory institutions, national bodies and national schemes.

While we acknowledge the desire to enhance efficiency and streamline processes, we believe that these initiatives may have unintended consequences that are counterproductive to the objectives of the Accord.

Australian universities have thrived by exercising their autonomy in decision-making, curricula development, research focus, and community engagement. This autonomy fosters innovation, promotes academic freedom, and allows institutions to respond to the needs and interests of individual regions and communities. The proposed centralisation could undermine this autonomy, locking in the homogeneity in our current system and stifling choice, creativity and responsiveness.

Historically, decisions about course offerings, student places, and curriculum have been decentralised, respecting the unique mission, focus, and context of each institution. Governments have traditionally taken a non-interventionist approach. However, proposals in the Interim Report such as centralising or standardising mission setting, admissions, and recognition of prior learning, will undoubtedly narrow the range of course choices and limit pathways. We must carefully examine the rationale for moving away from this historically successful approach and thoroughly assess the potential risks that such a departure may entail.

To respond adequately to the needs of our expanding and increasingly diverse student body, Australia must create a higher education system that offers sufficient breadth and depth of opportunities for learners from every background, and at each stage in their careers, to access knowledge and skills that are relevant and build prosperity for the individual. This will be achieved through the creation of a more diverse, competitive and innovative sector that is made up of institutions of different shapes, sizes, structures and missions, and underpinned by coherent policy settings that assure quality while supporting institutional autonomy and mission-focus.

The HELP Scheme

Bond supports the panel's view that the HELP system remains a world's best practice system for funding higher education, and the overall approach remains sound in terms of affordability, sustainability and equity. Australia's HELP scheme has been exceptionally successful in supporting students to gain access to higher education for the first time, and to extend their knowledge to adapt to new technologies or retrain for new industries. The scheme can be made even more effective by careful and responsible expansion to remove current limitations that inhibit or prevent further study.

Bond University supports:

- Relaxation of limits on HELP loans that limit students' ability to access higher learning and mid-career retraining.
- A HELP system that calculates repayment based on marginal income over a repayment threshold, rather than requiring repayment on total income applied under the current system.
- An update of indexation methods to remove the timing issue that results in HELP debt being indexed on debt already paid.
- Changing indexation of HELP from CPI to the lesser of CPI and the government 10-year bond rate (an approximation of the effective long-term cost to government of the HELP debt).

Bond does not support the extension of a HELP-like income contingent loan to cover general student costs of living. Social support should be delivered as means-tested grants that recognise the circumstances of the individual at the time, as they are now (though we should have ambitions to raise Centrelink allowances to a level that allows a primary focus on study). Access to an income contingent loan scheme for general living expenses would create perverse incentive for non-genuine students.

By contrast, a limited expansion of the HELP scheme to better support curriculum-based activities, such as living expenses while on placement, costs associated with Work Integrated Learning and exchange opportunities, should be considered as a way to assist under-represented groups gaining the same opportunities as other students to engage fully in higher education.

Proposed Levy on international student revenue

A levy on international students is likely to be counterproductive. Implementing a levy would send a message that contradicts a warm welcome for those dedicating years of their lives to education in Australia. Numerous reports indicate a growing sentiment among international students that they are viewed as mere 'cash cows' for Australia's immediate economic gain – a perception that may have lasting consequences for the country's international education revival.

The Role of Research

The Interim Report outlines potential recommendations for the Panel to review. One such suggestion involves re-evaluating the Provider Category Standards (PCS) with the objective of abolishing the requirement that all universities must engage in research. While the concept of breaking the nexus between teaching and learning for some institutions may create more flexibility and institutional diversity, it is important to implement change carefully and not undermine the public understanding of, and support for, the sector.

The 2018 Review of the PCS emphasised the indispensable role of research in the Australian university structure, affirming that it not only establishes a distinctive identity but also sets a vital benchmark for quality and standards. The reputation of our universities is at the core of our credibility with the Australian public and has allowed us to become one of the largest exporters of higher education globally. The pursuit of research and the creation of new knowledge is central to that reputation.

Bond University endorses the synergies between teaching and research. The convergence of teaching and research creates a nexus that enhances the educational experience by fostering greater student engagement, cultivating critical thinking abilities, attracting globally relevant academic staff, developing of research skills and creating the next generation of innovators, and ensuring familiarity with the most recent advancements in research findings.

We also understand the importance of diversity in the sector and support policy settings that allow teaching-only institutions (public and private) to play a greater role. However, after spending 40 years post-Dawkins establishing a reputation for Australian universities as global leaders in teaching and research, the proposal that an institution might keep its designation as a university while divesting of the core function of research would create uncertainty domestically and devalue our international brand. Australia's global reputation has been hard earned and the rewards are spread across society because of it. Put simply, the term 'university' must stand for something.

Yours sincerely



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