



Consultation on Universities Accord Terms of Reference

Submission by Deakin University

December 2022

Consultation on Universities Accord Terms of Reference

Submission by Deakin University, December 2022

Introduction

Deakin University welcomes and appreciates this early-stage engagement with the Australian Universities Accord Panel regarding priorities, focus areas, and key issues within the Terms of Reference (ToR).

The Accord process represents a unique opportunity to consider the fundamental questions of post-18 higher education in Australia and its place in an economically and socially advanced, global middle power. Coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic, now is the time to reconsider the very foundation stones of our current system, one that is largely a function and image of then-Minister John Dawkins almost and his four decades reforms. While such reforms, and the legacy of these, served the nation, its people and institutions well for some time, the system is no longer fit for purpose. The time has come to move beyond tinkering at the edges and effect cardinal change to suit the now, and critically, the next.

Such scale of task poses significant challenges. This is even more so given economic and cross-national realities that must be considered and strategically addressed. Likewise, as a sector wide in views and broad in stakeholders, our shared priority must be to set aside our own interests, instead focusing on change that serves the nation: its economy, its communities, its people, and the holistic Australian project.

An overarching purpose

Though appreciating the focus on the Terms of Reference (ToR), Deakin strongly argues that an immediate retreat to a segmented, partitioned approach to reforms risks failing to grasp the scale and necessity of change, as well as the core question of why. Australia in the twenty first century is a vastly different country to that of the 1980s. The nation that we, as a sector, serve, and the world within which we engage and compete has evolved to such a degree that to somehow carry on within a framework established under the auspices of four decades prior, is folly. Rather, we must reconsider, re-plan, and remake.

As part of the Accord process, it is imperative the panel look beyond the structure of the ToR, to the very question of the sector itself: what is the overarching purpose; our mission; our values and ethos? Why do we want from a modern, successful, impactful university sector? These are not merely questions of policy or funding, equity, teaching, or research. Instead, it goes to the essential role of universities in twenty first century Australia. As a nation, society, and government, what do we want from the sector and why?

Our sector is a substantial recipient of public funding, and as such we exist to serve the needs of the country and its people. For this we must be accountable at all times, with a system rewarding high performance balanced with clear consequences for failure to reach meaningful standards. However, we must first have clarity of purpose, mission and ethos. While acknowledging the role of existing compacts, such agreements are largely mechanics of operation. They fail to speak to purpose across our sector; our impact as a collective; and our role in the next stages of our nation's journey.

We would also suggest that within this consideration the panel considers not just the purpose of the sector but also how individual institutions contribute to the overall ecosystem in ways that are complementary – diversity of excellence must be valued rather than our current model that sees excellence through a narrow lens.

We would enthusiastically commend the panel for any consideration of this larger question.

Further to this we suggest that the ToR's should be grouped into those that speak to education and skills, those that speak to research, innovation, and new knowledge and those that speak to the way the system operates as a whole.

1. Education and Skills Needs

A high quality, accessible system (ToR 1 and 2)

Deakin shares the Federal Government's prioritisation of reform to ensure the required education and skills that will drive economic and social opportunities across communities in future decades, are readily and equitably accessible.

However, to achieve a system that truly values and delivers equity in a meaningful manner, we must marry equity to excellence: excellence of courses and teaching; excellence of support systems for non-traditional students/student groups; and excellence of outcomes for these students and their attainment. This would include:

- a system that views equity as a meaningful, supported system to engage students from diverse backgrounds and groups to not simply enrol in university, but do so at the highest standard and with clear pathways towards achievement and attainment.
- the systems, markers, and compliances systems that reward institutions for meaningful success that goes beyond enrolment metrics or recruitment approaches
- an exploration of the distinct challenges and barriers to underrepresented groups, and those measures and systems required to support in each case – avoiding a lowest-common-denominator approach.

Link to, and integration with, Vocational Education (ToR 5)

While Deakin is not a dual sector institution, we have close, collaborative relationships across a range of TAFE and vocational sector partners. However, it is undeniable the intersection and integration of university qualifications with the important skills of TAFE and vocational providers will be central to a raft of emerging industries and career paths.

Representing this experience, our priorities for this ToR include:

- Options for enhanced recognition and portability of course credits towards qualifications requiring both tertiary and vocational education approaches – including clarity for students.
- Potential mixed qualification delivery, with an administratively clear process for students to enter, and aligned fee and funding systems.
- Simplified administrative and regulatory requirements, as well as clarity of funding mechanisms, for university-vocational partnerships and alignment in delivery of education, skills, and training to student cohorts.
- Recognise a one-size-fits-all approach is inappropriate, failing to represent the diversity of institutional approaches required to meet local need and demand.

2. Research, innovation and new knowledge (ToR 7)

The funding model for research undertaken across the university ecosystem is chronically flawed, and often works in opposition to world-leading advancements, outcomes and impacts. Too small in envelope and failing to finance the extensive infrastructure requirements that underpin, it has led to a system reliant on cross-subsidisation from other income streams. As seen through the lens of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and indeed highlighted by many leading voices preceding this, such a situation was to the derelict on the purpose and aims of universities, as well as the opportunity to drive new knowledge and build meaningful academic careers.

Likewise, our research funding system continues to struggle to meet the demands and opportunities of industry-aligned activity and knowledge generation, including towards commercial ends and value creation, while simultaneously nourishing the cherished discovery phase, the blue sky. Facing such a dichotomy, Deakin proposes the following priorities:

- Recognition of the evolved nature of university research, including the balance between discovery and new knowledge generation, with industry-aligned/commercial pipeline work.
- This will include consideration of the workplace relations, academic career progression, research product recognition, intellectual property and integration with education offering implications, as well as others.

3. A quality, sustainable system

All comments above, and those operations of universities they refer to, are reliant on cornerstones of our system: funding, governance, and our workforce. As such, comments below are intended as continuations of prior points.

Governance (ToR 4)

The evolution of how we educate students as well as the demands of twenty first century research focus – increasingly industry-aligned and in speculative areas – has led to fundamental issues with our workplace system. The overreliance on a casualised labour force is indefensible. Yet a return to an imagined universal, traditional 40-40-20 model is equally inappropriate in the modern context, failing to provide flexibility and certainty for both parties. Likewise, the ongoing inability for a teaching-oriented academic career pathway to be offered as a meaningful option speaks to the broken state of the current system. Consideration of all options, balancing the need for security and progression for staff, with flexibility and responsiveness for institutions is a must.

Furthermore, as an institution heavily invested and involved in defence and national security partnerships, as well as a leading advanced manufacturing player, Deakin views exploration of the role of universities in the critical space of sovereign capability and security as vital.

Investment and affordability (ToR 2 and 6)

Consideration of the affordability, accessibility and required investment questions may be broadly divided between the teaching, research and community missions of universities.

In addition to our earlier comments regarding the necessary duality of equity with excellence, for the teaching pillar, our priorities include:

- Consider how caps may be representatively allocated, in an ongoing, responsive manner, in-line with student demands and education/skills needs – caps should serve student opportunity, community need and reward successful institutions, not protect universities that are failing to attract enrolments.
 - Such consideration would be in-line with the above points regarding excellence, equity, and accountability at an institutional level.
- The role of short courses, micro-credentials and models of qualifications delivery that recognise the increasingly across-career engagement needed for most.
- Consideration of how support for the entire post 18 system delivers the needs for individuals and communities – we would argue that it would be timely to consider a whole of working life approach to support and funding that better allowed for career movement and parity of esteem between modes of post-18 education.
- An international education sector aligned to national needs, and addressing critical social, economic and skills requirements for Australia's future prosperity, whilst at the same time acknowledging the wider benefit of universities global linkages (e.g., soft diplomacy).
 - In short, a clear pronouncement of the social value of international education, and retreat from a model based on revenue raising.

In the case of research, and contribution of new knowledge, Deakin would prioritise:

- Revitalisation and renewal of the funding model to support the dual aims of discovery knowledge, as well as industry-aligned, and commercially oriented research outcomes.
- Consideration of options and systems for a funding model that reduces the need for cross subsidy from other revenue sources for research activity by universities, including associated research infrastructure costs and provisions.
- Research funding systems that accurately aligns to the purpose and mission of universities, both as a sector and individual institutions, as well as measures quality and impact of research activity.
 - Consideration of accountability measures to reward high performance, with consequences for lack of performance standard.

The community and social role of universities features but fleetingly in the ToR. Nevertheless, it is core to our impact, our contribution, and our role in twenty first century Australia. We would therefore request the panel consider a variety of issues herein:

- Funding pathways recognising our delivery of core services beyond our immediate educational and research mission i.e., health and career infrastructure, rural engagement etc.
- The role of regional and rural institutions across the breadth of the education system, including via joint initiatives to address lacking infrastructure and opportunities in school and related settings i.e., STEM availability etc.

Concluding remarks

Thank you for your consideration of Deakin's initial priorities and feedback. We look forward to continuing to engage in this timely and far-reaching work, partnering to achieve those reforms that will set the sector on course to serve our nation for decades to come.

If any material within requires expansion or clarification, we would welcome the opportunity to discuss further. Please contact David Reeves in the Office of the Vice-Chancellor on [REDACTED] or [REDACTED]

Professor Iain Martin
Vice-Chancellor
Deakin University