

National Union of Students

Submission to The University Accords DEC 2022

Introduction

The National Union of Students Australia broadly supports the creation of the Universities Accord to design and champion reform and change in the tertiary education sector. The NUS has been a strong champion of reform for many years and is excited by the prospect of working alongside the Minister and expert panel to inform the changes we need to see to the sector to make it truly work for students.

However, for the Accord to genuinely change how tertiary education is run in Australia, they need to embed the voice of students in all the decisions they make. Students are the primary stakeholders in education and students are the experts at being students. There is significant distrust from students towards universities and a real power imbalance exists between our two groups. The Universities Accord must take this into account.

Key areas for review

Meeting Australia's knowledge and skills needs, now and in the future.

Accessibility to education and the equity of that education is the key driver to meeting the skills needs of Australia. We cannot talk about skills needs without acknowledging that to get an education, we need a system that supports people to survive while studying. If we do not have the right incentives to encourage young people into education, we'll never meet this skill need.

It has become increasingly evident that Job Ready Graduates is not working as a solution to pushing students into areas of key skills need, Key analysis by Mr. Max Young of the university of Melbourne displayed this¹ showing that increased cost was not a disincentive from studying courses as HECs is not seen as an immediate problem.

The higher education system as it stands is not one that lends itself to lifelong learning. The job ready graduates created two barriers that need to be immediately removed. The 7 year cap on degrees² makes longer degrees inaccessible. If a medical student has a 6 year³ course but they did an undergraduate course in science they would exceed their cap. This is the case for many students that attend the University of Melbourne where an undergraduate Medical or Law degree is not offered so high school students will instead enrol in a bioscience or arts as a pathway. The legislation hurts any student that

¹<https://www.afr.com/work-and-careers/education/students-ignore-costs-in-choosing-university-study-analysis-20221021-p5brsw>

²<https://honisoit.com/2021/11/seven-year-time-limit-on-university-degrees-to-affect-most-disadvantaged-students/>

³<https://go8.edu.au/go8-submission-to-the-australian-government-department-of-education-skills-and-employment-on-the-draft-higher-education-support-student-learning-entitlement-guidelines-2021>

wishes to go back and do another degree- and when “nine in ten new jobs require post-school qualifications” post-degree learning and the ability to change fields is essential.

Further, under JRG if you fail 50% of units you have studied you lose your commonwealth supported place. This has implications for many Disabled students and students living in financial insecurity, especially when we know special consideration at universities is appallingly hard to get. First year undergraduate students who are still getting a handle of how university life works also have been hit hard by this change.

Ultimately, the Job ready graduates package needs to be reversed.

Recommendations:

- 1. Reverse the Job Ready Graduates package**
- 2. Remove the federally mandated 7 year cap on degrees**
- 3. Remove the federal restriction that you'll lose your CSP if you fail 50% of your units, this should be left to the discretion of universities.**

Access and Opportunity

A major flaw of our current tertiary education system is that students have to work around systems that date back hundreds of years. For a truly inclusive and equitable system that works for students we need the system to work around our students and their lives.

For those with families, jobs and other commitments, tertiary education can be an impossible challenge, not because they lack ability but because the system simply wasn't designed to accommodate them.

The biggest barrier to higher education isn't not being able to pay for your degree- it's the financial security that is essential to be able to complete a higher education degree.

The NUS just did a massive report into what we see as the biggest change needed in the sector- changing the age of independence: the report can be read here: <https://changetheage.asn.au/research/>

The Key findings :

- that a majority of students (over 450,000) are excluded from youth allowance payments due to the age of Independence being set at 22.
- Young people aged 18-21 who do receive youth allowance are mostly paid less than \$26 a day even if they are paid a higher rate as they are considered to be independent it is still well below the poverty line.
- Youth allowance payments are indexed at lower rates and less frequently than other social security payments like the Age Pension or the Disability support pension, creating significant disparities in payment rates based on age discrimination that needs addressing.
- Commonwealth Rent Assistance payments do not match the realities of renting in Australian analysis of 45,000 rental properties in 2022 found that 0% were affordable to those on youth allowance

The report also notes that 60% of students surveyed found that being unable to access youth allowance negatively impacted their education. This included their grades, ability to make connections at their campus or place of learning and ability to undertake placements or other hands-on learning.

The concept of higher education placements are fundamentally flawed. Many students are forced into financial insecurity to complete the hands-on learning parts of their degrees. These are often in areas of skill shortage such as teaching and nursing. These students are oftentimes required to do up to 6-8 week regional placements having to leave their jobs- often highly casualised minimum wage jobs where job insecurity is rife. Some students told us of 6 month unpaid full time medical placements- It can be financially unsustainable for students, especially single mums to complete their degrees.

The last full study of student poverty found that 2/3rds of students⁴ were living in poverty and 1 in 7 were regularly skipping meals⁵ and other necessities in order to survive. This dire state of affairs has recently been made worse by the cost of living crisis which has students taking up more hours of work at the expense of their education in order to survive. Full time university is now a luxury many students can't afford. This has been exacerbated by youth wages which sees students aged under 21 paid less for doing the same work as those older. It is an example of plain age discrimination. The Mckell Institute estimated the individual cost of the employee junior rate is \$8,483 per year- amounting to \$3.5 billion per year in lost wages for young people under the age of 21 (this doesn't include superannuation payments). The NUS would note that this law continues despite the fact that young people still pay the same amount of tax regardless of how much they earn.

The NUS would note that they fully endorse the ALSA submission into the accords of our joining research paper written by Andrew Shim into Disability & Higher education in Australia.

Recommendations:

- 1. Lower the age of independence from 22 to 18**
- 2. Lift social security payments to above the poverty line (at least \$88 per day)**
- 3. Adjust youth allowance (and other social security payments) with the cost of living**
- 4. Update rent assistance to reflect and grow in line with market rents.**
- 5. Ensure there is welfare support for students completing placements**
- 6. Abolish youth wages.**

Investment and affordability

Tertiary education is a public good. Society derives immense benefit by investing in students from filling skill gaps to improving employment prospects and contributing to the growth of knowledge in Australia.

But since the introduction of HECS, we have placed the financial burden of education on students. This lifetime of debt has ruined countless lives and is setting many back by decades. Things that used to be

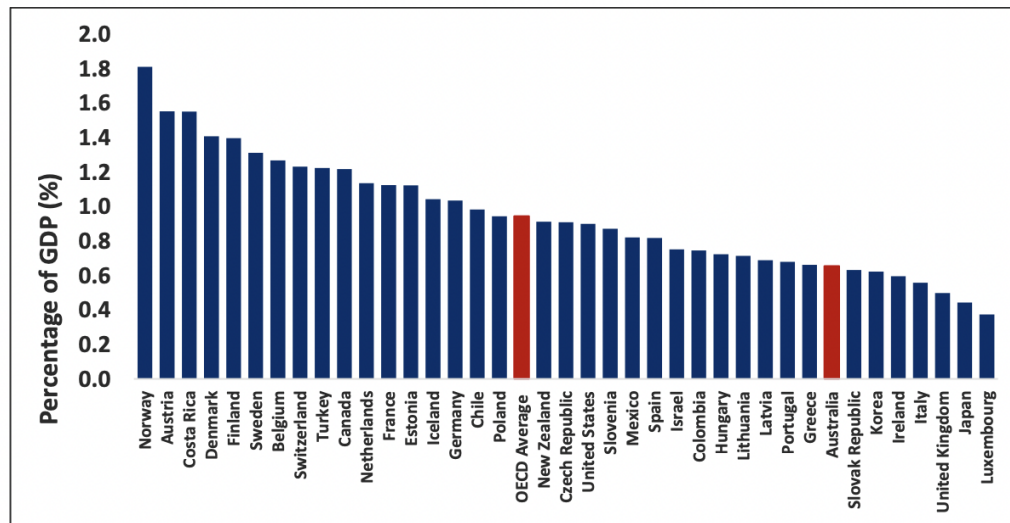
⁴ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2013-07-15/majority-of-students-in-poverty2c-research-shows/4821230>

⁵ <https://www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au/media-item/one-in-seven-uni-students-regularly-go-without-food/>

taken for granted, like buying a house or starting a family, are now haunted by the spectre of debt. The Accord presents a real opportunity to prevent this calamity from scarring another generation of students.

Australia’s funding for universities does not reflect their central role in society. Relative to the size of our economy, university funding has been in decline since the 1980s⁶. At 0.65% of GDP in 2018/19, Australia's investment shows a significant undervaluation of education, particularly in comparison to international standards.

Figure 16: Public spending on tertiary education as a percentage of GDP, 2018/19



Source: OECD (2022) *Public spending on education (indicator)*

The Job ready graduates package reduced government contributions from 58% to 52%, further decreasing the government’s relatively low contribution to the sector. However, the pre-JRG status quo is not a satisfactory goal. The government should commit to increasing university funding to 1% of GDP, to bring Australia in line with the OECD average. The increase in funding will allow powerful reforms which can significantly reduce generational wealth inequality and power world-class research.

The Australia Institute estimates that free undergraduate education for all Australian citizens and permanent residents would cost \$3.1 billion per year. This cost could easily be covered if Australia reduced their subsidies of the fossil fuel industry by 30%, acknowledging that Australia’s future lies with a young, educated workforce, not with oil and gas.⁷

More than 2.9 million people have student debt, averaging \$23,685⁸, this is up from \$15,191 in 2012 and will only go up with JRG. It now takes, on average, almost a decade for people to pay off this debt, significantly impacting their economic outlook when they are just starting out in the workforce. It is vital

⁶ Australia Institute report p6

⁷ Ai report 52

⁸https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/FlagPost/2021/November/HELP-2020-21

the new government wipes this unnecessary debt, easing generational inequality.⁹ The Greens Election plan to wipe all student debt would cost \$33 billion over the forward estimates and \$60.7 billion over the decade, about a third of the \$184 billion cost of the Stage 3 tax cuts¹⁰.

Recommendations

1. **The government should commit to increasing university funding to 1% of GDP**
2. **Implement free undergraduate education**
3. **Wipe student debt**

Governance, Accountability, and Community

In March this year we saw the release of the National Students Safety Survey¹¹. The Survey gave us some devastating results, finding 1 in 6 students had experienced sexual harassment on campus. We saw evidence that 1 in 2 students did not know the reporting or support mechanisms available to them on campus. The survey detailed truly harrowing stories in the qualitative part of the report and proved our observation that during COVID, many students who had never been on campus were simply left behind.

TEQSA, the supposed regulator for the sector, does not deal with individual complaints. Students are therefore thrust into general consumer processes such as state-based ombudsmen who are not up to the task of dealing with the horrific challenge of addressing SASH (sexual assault and sexual harassment) on campus. TEQSA was also put in charge of implementing recommendations from the 2017 Change the Course survey and it was starkly unqualified and unmotivated for the task. We saw very little difference in the 2021 National Student Safety Survey which is stark, considering this period included two years of lockdowns.

The National Duty of Care is essential to mandate student voice in long neglected areas that need to be urgently addressed. Reform is sorely needed on Disability, LGTQIA+, Ethnocultural, First Nations, Residential accommodation and International Student issues. We need a mandated and regulated Code to enshrine, embed and empower the voices of students in the decades worth of change that needs to happen now, before the system crumbles around our ears.

The NUS believes we should institute a Duty of Care replicating New Zealand's Education (Pastoral Care of Tertiary and International Learners) Code of Practice 2021¹² as we see it as an excellent indicator of best practice in the Pacific context.

⁹ AI report 51

¹⁰ <https://greens.org.au/news/media-release/greens-plan-wipe-student-debt-instead-stage-3-tax-cuts>

¹¹ <https://www.nsss.edu.au/>

¹² https://www.nzqa.govt.nz/assets/Providers-and-partners/Code-of-Practice/Tertiary-and-International-Learners-Code-2021/NZQA_Pastoral-Care-Code-of-Practice_English.pdf

The New Zealand Code was established by Education Minister Chris Hipkins in response to the tragic death of a student in residential accommodation at the University of Canterbury¹³

The whole New Zealand tertiary sector came together to design the permanent Code and took a learner-centric approach that recognised that students are the experts at being students. The Ministry of Education ran an effective consultation process on the Code, informed and led by student voices¹⁴. The Ministry also adopted many of the proposed amendments made by the New Zealand Union of Students' Associations (NZUSA)¹⁵ which has led to students being able to "hear" their voices in the final version of the Code.

Once the Code was created, the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) co-designed guidance¹⁶ on how providers should use the Code to work with students and what the expectations on them were. NZQA adopted frameworks¹⁷ designed by NZUSA to hear student voice and build partnership, this has radically changed how students are engaged and partnered with to achieve change in the tertiary sector.

Alongside the Code, New Zealand now has a Dispute Resolution Scheme¹⁸ to settle contractual disagreements between students and providers. Under S536(2)(b) of the Education and Training Act, students can also make claims for redress for any loss or harm suffered due to a breach of the Code.

There is a lot of work to be done in instituting student voice within our structures and all university structures: The University of South Australia student association holds best practice in this area at the moment but they have great recommendations for the way it should be held in other universities:

The USASA structure includes:

University Council

- Student President (ex-officio)
- Student Postgraduate Representative (ex-officio)
(Postgraduate Representative is replaced with a student organisation nominated Undergraduate Representative if President is a Postgraduate)

Academic Board

- Five student organisation nominees

Student Appeals Committee (Appeal Body for Misconduct, Academic Integrity and other matters)

- Student organisation nominee

Sexual Assault and Sexual Harassment Steering Group (SASH Steering Group)

- Student President (ex-officio)
- Student organisation nominee

¹³<https://www.rnz.co.nz/national/programmes/the-house/audio/2018801318/how-the-death-of-a-student-changed-the-law>

¹⁴<https://conversation.education.govt.nz/conversations/wellbeing-and-safety/>

¹⁵<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5f0515b1b1a21014b5d22dd6/t/60b46e06e39ebd5295615de5/1622437384673/NZUSA+Submission+on+Wellbeing+Code+Final.pdf>

¹⁶<https://www.nzqa.govt.nz/assets/Providers-and-partners/Code-of-Practice/Tertiary-and-International-Learners-Code-2021/NZQA-Code-2021-Implementation-Guidance-November-2021.pdf>

¹⁷<https://www.students.org.nz/s/Whiria-Nga-Rau-Booklet-English.pdf>

¹⁸<https://tedr.org.nz/>

Academic Inquires (Academic Integrity Inquiries, Preclusion Hearings)

- Student chosen from a pool of trained student representatives by the USASA Student Voice team Student and Academic Policy Advisory Group (SAPAG)

- Student organisation nominee

Safety and Wellbeing Committee

- Student President

Academic Enterprise Oversight Committee (AEOC)

- Student organisation nominee

Authentic Assessment Steering Group (AASG)

- Two student organisation nominees

Academic Unit Boards

- 7 Academic Units: UniSA Allied Health & Human Performance, UniSA Business, UniSA Clinical & Health Sciences, UniSA Creative, UniSA Education Futures, UniSA Justice & Society, UniSA STEM

Each Academic Unit Board has:

- One elected Undergraduate Representative
- One elected Postgraduate Representative

Academic Student Representatives

- Varying number between courses. Role depends on what feedback and information the course is seeking.

Academic Unit Mental Wellbeing Steering Groups

- Only some units have these steering groups, and they vary in size and purpose

Although USASA holds best practice in Australia, There are many more recommendations to ensure student voice is highlighted through universities around Australia.

Recommendations

- 1. To Legislate a National Duty of care with student voice at the centre.**
- 2. To create a National Dispute Resolution scheme to fill the gap in needed for student grievances.**
- 3. A minimum of 3 elected student representatives on a University Council (Board or Senate) be enshrined in the governing Act of each institution.**
- 4. A minimum number of student representatives on Academic Boards be set by each and every institution.**
- 5. All faculties or academic units within a university should have a minimum number of elected student representatives on their principal decision-making body. This should be enshrined in policy.**
- 6. University policies reflect that student representation or participation on decision-making bodies affecting students is the rule rather than the exception. If students are affected by the decisions made by that body they should be included in these decisions.**
- 7. Student organisations be they associations, guilds, unions or SRCs should be empowered by university management to create ongoing, collaborative projects aimed at training staff and students about student representation on committees and working groups.**

- 8. Universities should be made to provide some form of remuneration to students who are doing the same work as a paid staff member sitting on an advisory or decision-making body. This should not be done in a way which dissuades universities from having students on decision-making bodies.**
- 9. Changes to lower levels of decision-making should not disrupt any organic growth of student representation at a grassroots level and should not take the form of a top-down approach. Any changes made should not leave students worse off than existing arrangements which may be contained in a student partnership agreement or otherwise though minimum representation on higher level decision-making bodies such as Councils or Academic Boards should not be negotiable.**

The Connection between the Vocational education and training and higher education systems

Within the Australian higher education sector, there is a systemic “othering” of TAFE. Students who learn vocationally are viewed as “lesser” and deserving of fewer services than their university counterparts by many who administer the sector. This blanket judgement has informed, consciously or not, every investment decision and regulatory change for the last decade.

The end result of this mindset for students has been an incredibly inaccessible system to transfer between the TAFE and university sectors, with limited recognition of qualifications and prior learning. Because qualifications frameworks were designed with this mindset, most students aren’t able to have all of their learning in one part of the sector recognised by the other and even where it is technically possible students don’t have the time, energy or money to make it happen.

The culture of “othering” TAFE also impacts the societal view of vocational education. For many parents and prospective students, TAFE is seen as a second-class choice, rather than as an alternative learning system that works for many. The Accords need to assess how secondary to tertiary transitions either enshrine or challenge this societal view. For example, in states like Western Australia, students can complete TAFE courses while still at secondary school, allowing them to experience vocational education before deciding whether to pursue university education. Sharing knowledge and experiences of both methods of tertiary learning with prospective students is vital to ensure that the prevailing societal view of vocational education is changed.

Any effective review of the university sector must not only assess the interaction between TAFE and universities, but how effectively TAFE is performing for vocational students. There will undoubtedly be lessons that can be learnt by both sectors, and, as the example of New Zealand’s Reform of Vocational Education has demonstrated, closer collaboration and regulatory alignment, especially around the Duty of Care, is important to achieving meaningful change.

At the end of the day, regardless of sub-sector, all providers in higher education have one overarching duty. To teach students. Creating divisions between them merely allows fiefdoms and factions to be

created. True system change requires us to recognise that it is one system, with many interdependent parts.

Recommendations:

- 1. Create greater interchangeability between universities and tafe courses.**
- 2. Elevate Tafe as an equal Higher Education pathway.**

Quality and Sustainability

Crucially, This accords provides perhaps a lone opportunity to put student services amenities fees up for discussion. Currently, student unions are funded by university management, who allocate some amount of revenue from the Student Services Amenities Fee (SSAF)¹⁹ to their respective student union(s). It's perhaps useful to think of SSAF as the equivalent of our union due, except instead of going directly to the union, it is paid to management who then has full discretion in most states to determine how much to pass on to the student union (the exception is WA where they are required to give the student union at least 50% of acquired).

No other union would pay their dues to their boss, students shouldn't either.

Student Union and associations are being threatened and defunded across the country. La Trobe student Union has had to fight for survival year after year after its funding was cut from \$2.8 million in 2020 to \$275,000 in 2021- devastating the union.

Student unions are essential for universities. The administration of student-run clubs and societies, volunteering programs, leadership opportunities and social events are all the responsibility of strong student unions. Vital support services - including independent advocacy, financial aid, legal services and wellbeing programs like food banks and free breakfasts - are all best managed by the independent student union. And importantly, student unions provide a strong and informed student voice on campus, an important check and balance on university activities to ensure that student interests are being looked after.

If SSAF was in students hands, Universities would still be able to use it for projects but the bargaining power would be put instead in student hands. The transparency for the use of SSAF would also improve massively. If this had been in place during COVID it would have allowed an increase in assistance to international students who were left forgotten by the government. It's important to fund student unions properly so they are able to hire qualified staff to assist the young student unionists who often only have 1 year terms.

One of the most important things that came out of the pandemic was the importance of clubs and societies with keeping young people connected to their university campus. We need properly funded clubs and societies through a student union that has the capacity to do proper outreach to students. Involvement in clubs and Societies is essential for online students to feel engaged and invested in their university or higher education provider.

¹⁹ <https://www.legislation.gov.au/details/c2011a00130>

Recommendations:

1. **To change SSAF legislation (higher education legislation amendment (student services amenities) act 2011)) to replace ‘higher education provider’ apart from 4 subsection p and q and instead replace it with ‘democratically elected independent student body’ and to add a subsection (t) to read “advocating for students rights and taking to an activist approach to student rights”**

Delivering new knowledge, innovation and capability

The Research Block funding model needs to dramatically change and be properly funded. At the moment universities are forced to rely on high International Student income to fund research in their universities. This leads to lower quality education as the funds are pulled from all over the institution.

Simply put, Universities need better consistent funding from the government so they are not relying on and exploiting external funding sources.