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Australian Universities Accord Panel

Department of Education

By email: australianuniversitiesaccord@education.gov.au

Submission to the Australian Universities Accord Panel – Review Priorities

I thank the Australian Universities Accord Panel (the Panel) for the opportunity to provide this submission regarding priorities for the Accord as they commence the review of our higher education system. I write this submission as the Australian Greens Education portfolio-holder, and as a former academic and researcher.

Our universities are some of the most important institutions in the country, yet as a consequence of decades of neoliberal policies their public-focussed mission has been reshaped. They are increasingly operating as corporations in an ‘international market’ and a ‘domestic market’ rather than first and foremost being institutions of public good operating in a society.

Universities have been plagued by public funding cuts, wage theft, rampant casualisation, a big rise in job insecurity and deteriorating work conditions. During the Covid-19 pandemic, and without government support, this situation worsened as tens of thousands of staff lost their jobs. The lack of support for staff, including researchers, and the broken state of funding has meant that some of our brighter minds leave higher education because they have been forced out or they see no future in it.

Expensive degrees are leaving students in decades of debt and making higher education increasingly a burden. The previous government’s fee hikes and funding cuts through the ‘job-ready graduates’ package are making the situation worse for young people, at a time of extremely high costs of living.

University democracy is eroding. More and more elected staff and students on university governing bodies have been replaced with corporate appointments. Funding for student services and student unionism is not sufficient and needs to be allocated democratically.

Research funding and academic freedom have also been steadily eroded with creeping political and corporate influence.

It's clear that universities are at a crossroads. They can continue hurtling down a path of corporatisation, austerity and job insecurity, or they can chart a new course based on the principles of democracy and equity.

An ambitious, big picture, transformative approach is needed to chart a new course and fix the problems highlighted above, and that starts with determining the Panel's priorities. Acknowledging the Panel's Terms of Reference, the Review should prioritise the following issues:

1. Recognition of education as a right and the related need to provide free education and wipe student debt;
2. Ensuring proper and stable long-term public funding of universities and academic research, in recognition of the fact that universities are essential institutes of public good;
3. Universities that are accessible to all and which support international students;
4. University democracy and the need for staff and students to have much more say in how universities are run;
5. The need for secure jobs with fair conditions and an end to rampant casualisation and wage theft at universities, and a transparent review of the salaries of VCs and senior management;
6. Encouragement of student activism and campuses as civic and political spaces;
7. The need to decolonise and promote First Nations knowledges, research, and leadership;
8. Building anti-racist and equitable universities;
9. Protecting academic freedom; and

10. The need to ensure university independence and prevent excessive political and corporate influence in university management and curricula.

These matters and others are discussed in greater detail in the discussion paper (*The University of the Future -Higher education built on democracy and equity*) which I released last year and which has been attached to my covering email. The paper can also be accessed through this [link](#).

The fact that the Panel has been given a broad remit and the ability to conduct a big-picture analysis of the higher education system presents an opportunity which should not be wasted. The Panel should seize this opportunity to re-imagine higher education where universities are not seen as big businesses or job factories, but as places of collective knowledge creation which hold the power to push society forward. It is time to start treating universities as a public good.

I thank the Panel for its vitally important work and would be very happy to assist further. I really look forward to more detailed engagement with you as this work progresses.

Yours sincerely



Dr Mehreen Faruqi

**DEPUTY LEADER OF THE AUSTRALIAN GREENS
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