

SUBMISSION TO THE UNIVERSITIES ACCORD PANEL

19 December 2022

Studiosity and its Academic Advisory Board welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Australian Universities Accord Panel.

We strongly support a review that will lead to positive change for students and educators and make this submission with a focus on five of the seven key areas of the review from the Accord Terms of Reference¹.

- Meeting Australia's knowledge and skills needs, now and in the future
- Access and opportunity
- Governance, accountability and community
- Quality and sustainability
- Delivering new knowledge, innovation and capability

Recommendations

Nearly 35 years after the Dawkins Reforms, Australia's universities now enrol nearly 1.6 million students, with the average university enrolling 40,000 students.

It is not possible to grow sustainable enrolments more than four-fold without a concomitant increase in all the human, pedagogical, and technological capabilities that go into a quality student experience and excellent tuition delivery.

The best solution is to invest in the student experience so that students feel valued and supported, so that the value of Australian Higher Education can be maintained and grown, and also so that students are less inclined to breach the trust that their educators have placed in them. The urgency and context for the recommendations are expanded upon in Appendix 1.

¹ Australian Government Department of Education. (2022). Review of Australia's Higher Education System - Terms of Reference. <https://www.education.gov.au/australian-universities-accord/resources/terms-reference>

| Recommended action | Key areas for review as per Terms of Reference |
|--|---|
| i. Develop a national framework used to rate the quality and excellence of teaching and outcomes for student learning and experience across student life stages. | Governance, accountability and community; Quality and sustainability |
| ii. Establish an Office for Students to ensure that all enrolled students are given the best opportunities to succeed in Australian higher education, via key performance metrics and a focus on learner engagement. | Meeting Australia's knowledge and skills needs, now and in the future; Access and opportunity; Governance, accountability and community; Quality and sustainability |
| iii. Require universities and providers to respond to their annual QILT scores with a publicly-accessible response regarding their plans to address shortcomings in their teaching and student experience scores, including the scores of students from underrepresented backgrounds, particularly equity cohorts. | Access and opportunity; Governance, accountability and community |
| iv. Offer universities access to significant bonus funding for achieving and maintaining improvements in their QILT data, including focus on engagement by equity cohorts. | Access and opportunity; Governance, accountability and community; Quality and sustainability |
| v. Reinstate the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) and/or establish an Office for Learning and Teaching (OLT) to fund critical scholarship and research and recognise development of learning and teaching. | Meeting Australia's knowledge and skills needs, now and in the future; Access and opportunity; Quality and sustainability |
| vi. Standardise an Australian university student experience that inculcates: student belonging, connection to peers, inclusion, and personal support, as part of a sector-wide prioritisation of: student (and staff) wellbeing, quality careers advising, engagement in learning, and academic integrity, especially where supportive, formative feedback practices can better prevent academic misconduct that is born of disconnect. | Access and opportunity; Governance, accountability and community; Quality and sustainability |
| vii. Fully fund quality learning and teaching and the provision of necessary services and support for equity group students, in addition to the current Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) funding and regional loading. Research has determined that the cost of teaching an undergraduate student from a low SES (LSES) background is six times higher than for more advantaged students and the cost of teaching a postgraduate student from a LSES background is four | Access and opportunity; Governance, accountability and community; Quality and sustainability |

times more.² If the demand driven system is reintroduced for any equity groups, full funding should be allocated to ensure these students are properly supported for success over the student life stages.

viii. Given the significant funds required to build and maintain world-class researchers and facilities, consider whether parts of research-intensive universities should be re-established as separate, independent, research entities, with purposeful focus on key areas, rather than broad reach across all disciplines.

Meeting Australia's knowledge and skills needs, now and in the future; Delivering new knowledge, innovation and capability

Establishing a new set of incentives that encourages our universities to redouble their efforts into their education missions and deliver a better student experience will have profound benefits for the nation.

Sincerely,

Prof Judyth Sachs

Former Deputy Vice Chancellor, Provost Macquarie University and Former Pro Vice Chancellor learning and teaching at Sydney University; Studiosity Academic Advisory Board

Prof John Rosenberg

Former Senior Deputy Vice-Chancellor and Vice-President (Global Relations) at La Trobe University; Studiosity Academic Advisory Board

Prof Sally Kift

President, Australian Learning & Teaching Fellows; Studiosity Academic Advisory Board

Prof Chris Tisdell

Former Associate Dean (Education), University of New South Wales; Studiosity Academic Advisory Board

Jack Goodman

Founder, Studiosity; President, Friends of Libraries Australia

² Devlin, M., Zhang, L., Edwards, D., Withers, G., McMillan, J., Vernon, L., & Trinidad, S. (2022). The costs of and economies of scale in supporting students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds in Australian higher education, Higher Education Research & Development, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/07294360.2022.2057450>

Appendix 1

The Business Model of Australia's Universities is Breaking. What Needs to Be Done to Fix It?

By Jack Goodman

In 1988 Bob Hawke was prime minister, a giant flagpole was being set atop New Parliament House, and A Current Affair hit our analogue televisions with Jana Wendt as host. 1988 was also the year the current business model of Australia's universities was invented in Canberra.

The legislation developed under employment and education minister John Dawkins effectively mandated that the nation's diverse collection of colleges of advanced education, arts institutes, conservatoria, etc. either amalgamate with existing universities or form new universities in their own right. Put another way, the new rule was: Go big or go home.

As Glyn Davis has commented, "The unified national system accepted only one idea of a university and made it the national standard. Minister Dawkins stressed efficiency, and imposed a new size requirement. The Commonwealth would only support research institutions with at least 8,000 full-time students."³

And "go big" our universities did. In 1988 Australia's universities enrolled about 440,000 students and there was essentially no international student economy. Nearly 35 years later the sector enrolls more than 1.6-million students. And that 8,000 student threshold seems downright petite. The average public university is five times that size, enrolling more than 40,000 students.

Half-a-million of those additional students have come from overseas, generating enormous tuition revenues for some of our largest and oldest universities and broad economic benefits for the nation. The balance has come from the "widening participation" policy and "demand driven system" that emerged a decade ago with the stated intention of seeing 40% of Australians under the age of 40 achieve at least a bachelor's degree by 2020.⁴ (We got close, but not quite there.)

For most of Australia's public universities, the last three decades have been a period of "a rising tide lifting all boats." Alongside skyrocketing enrolments, budgets have soared, research

³ Davis, G. (2018, Jul 11). The power of a policy. Nitro. Retrieved December 9, 2022, from <https://nitro.edu.au/articles/2018/7/13/the-power-of-a-policy>

⁴ Noonan, P., Nugent, H., Scales, B. (2022). "Review of Australian Higher Education: final report [Bradley review]". Canberra: DEEWR, 2008. Online. Internet. <https://www.voced.edu.au/content/ngv%3A32134>

capabilities have expanded and, directly linked to research volume and percent of international enrollments, international rankings have inched steadily upward. When people talk about our “world-class university system” they are almost always referring to how many Australian universities are ranked in the top 100 or 150 of global research universities.

There have been casualties, too. And if we take a clear-eyed look and other data points, we can see quite plainly that the most deeply suffering stakeholders are the 1.6 million students who foot an increasing majority of our universities’ budgets. How do we know this?

Every year since 2011 more than 600,000 university students across Australia receive a survey to find out what they think of the teaching and learning experience at their institutions. The Quality Indicators in Learning and Teaching (QILT) provides a snapshot of student satisfaction, and until 2020 they showed fairly consistent results, sufficient to allow most universities to argue that, on the whole, students were happy with their learning experience.

Then the pandemic hit, and overnight the sector was faced with the prospect of moving every component of the teaching and learning experience online, using whatever tools were at hand. The process shone a million-megawatt spotlight on the sector-wide underinvestment in technology infrastructure and digital delivery. As research group HolonIQ noted in 2021, just 3.6% of universities’ budgets were directed at technology, while 96.4% went to infrastructure, real-estate, and labour.

Even with such underinvestment, available technologies were powerful enough and easy enough to use that, in the space of a fortnight or less, nearly every institution moved every unit of study online. It was a mammoth effort which, much like the Apollo 13 mission, averted what would otherwise have been a potentially unrecoverable crisis, and teaching staff were appropriately praised for their work. And like the astronauts in Apollo 13, who were left exhausted, bedraggled, and ill, so too did Australia’s university students - and staff - suffer.

Two years of pandemic restrictions, including campus shutdowns and online-only delivery has had a profound impact on those QILT results. The “headline figure” of “positive rating of the entire educational experience” went from the high 70s prior to the pandemic, down to 69% in 2020 and 73% in 2021.

But dig just a centimetre deeper and we find more troubling data: “Learner Engagement” figures, which cover questions about students’ “sense of belonging” and their interactions with peers within and outside their course of study, collapsed in 2020 to 44%, and recovered only to 49% in 2021.

Another way of looking at this is to say that half of all students enrolled - about 800,000 individuals - do not currently have a strong affinity for - or sense of belonging to - their university.

And that’s not all. Across all six areas of QILT and since its inception in 2012, Learner Engagement has shown by far the lowest satisfaction scores. National averages of between 57-62% were annual occurrences until 2020 when the pandemic further alienated students from their universities. Even worse, international students have reported deeper dissatisfaction than domestic students across their entire university experience. And continuing students are significantly less satisfied than new students. Apparently, once the excitement of the “new” wears off, the reality of life as a student in a large, anonymous university settles in.

Challenges

This is a crisis staring at us in broad daylight, though you might not recognise it by reading the text that accompanies the report. The Social Research Centre does its best to put a rose tint on the story, but certain conclusions are unavoidable, including:

- Smaller, private and regional universities deliver better student experiences, on the whole, than larger, metropolitan, research universities. By way of comparison, Australia's top-ranked university for overall student experience, Avondale University, has a positive learner engagement score of 74.1%. The lowest-ranked university, The University of Melbourne, has a score of 43.8%.
- Australia's most prestigious and highest-ranked universities are over-represented at the bottom of the league table of student experience. Indeed, half of the Group of Eight universities are in the bottom 10 performers for overall quality of the student experience.
- Non-university higher education providers are also, in general, delivering experiences that exceed the ratings of public universities.

A more honest assessment of the situation would come to the following conclusions:

First, it's simply not possible to grow enrolments more than four-fold without a concomitant increase in all the human and technological capabilities that go into quality tuition delivery. Australia's public universities have gone from being largely elitist institutions educating the privileged children of professional classes to being closer to open enrolment engines of social mobility and international education.

Not only have enrolments skyrocketed; the students who are enrolling are more likely to need personalised attention, support and guidance of a world class teaching and learning experience. And yet the structure and reward mechanisms of the traditional academic career path over-reward research excellence and undervalue teaching ability. Put another way, the most successful academics teach little, if at all, while the teaching and learning function of universities is increasingly handled by casual and sessional staff.

Further, as we move beyond this phase of the pandemic, it is clear that some version of hybrid learning is now the norm. The majority of students are engaging with their course and their university via both the campus and online, and they expect to move seamlessly between the two to get the best of both worlds. In this environment it is clear that universities need to dramatically rethink the scale of their investment in all aspects of the digital student experience. One university leader has described the new way of thinking as treating the digital sphere as a campus in its own right and deserving - indeed requiring - a level of investment on a par with any physical campus.

Second, while every university will describe its mission in some form of the following words - excellence in both research and teaching - the reality is that they don't divide their effort and resources anywhere near 50-50.

In fact, as our universities have grown their tuition revenues, they have increasingly redirected those fees into "higher value" research activities. It makes sense according to the unwritten Dawkins rules: research drives university rankings, which in turn drive international enrolments. At the same time, Canberra has been incrementally scaling back funding for domestic students and encouraging universities to find alternative sources of funding. And the biggest one, by far, has been international students.

In a moment of unusual candour at a recent conference, the CEO of the Group of Eight, Vicki Thomson, noted that the Go8 spends \$6.5 billion on research, of which only \$2.8 billion comes from

Canberra. She then went on to suggest that the current system of filling the shortfall with tuition revenue from international students is neither morally sustainable nor ethical.⁵

The one scenario in which such a cross-subsidisation could be justified would be if there were genuine evidence of a “teaching-research” nexus at our universities. This refers to the idea that great research informs great teaching, and you cannot have the latter without the former. And yet study after study has shown either a weak or negligible correlation between research quality and teaching quality. As far back as 2015 the higher education researcher Andrew Norton agreed there was “no or a weak relationship between statistical measures of research and teaching performance.”⁶

The consequences of a poor student experience are more than just the grumblings of disaffected students responding to online surveys. One thing we know for certain is that “Dissatisfaction with the teaching and learning environment” is one of three primary indicators for contract cheating. Large, anonymous education environments where there is the “perception that there are lots of opportunities to cheat,” is also a red flag.⁷ These findings by one of Australia’s leading academic integrity experts suggest we may be on the cusp of a tsunami of cheating scandals.

So it should not have come as a surprise - though it was a shock - when the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) announced earlier this year it had asked all universities to block 2,333 websites it had identified as providing cheating services.⁸

Several months later TEQSA announced that 40 of the most trafficked of these sites - in total accruing 450,000 visits from Australia per month - would be blocked at the internet service provider level.⁹ While this is a welcome step, it does raise two obvious questions: Why block only 1.7% of the cheating websites that have been identified? And if there really are 2,333 websites, they must be serving massive demand, because they wouldn’t exist if students weren’t willing to pay.

Universities are beginning to report a substantial increase in cheating scandals, though given TEQSA’s recent actions it is likely that there is substantial underreporting of illicit activity. That’s the take of a recent episode from Radio National, which investigated “the billion dollar industry helping students cheat”.¹⁰ At the same time, the excellent work that’s been done into academic integrity and the student experience says that a punitive approach will never solve the problem.

The best - indeed only - solution is to invest in the student experience so that students feel valued and supported and are disinclined to breach the trust that their educators have placed in them. This was the sentiment expressed by Mark Scott, the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Sydney in a speech at the National Press Club in August. He said: “I think we need to look very carefully at what

⁵ Bennett, T. (2022, Aug 30). Is it “morally sustainable” to fund research from international students? Australian Financial Review. <https://www.afr.com/work-and-careers/education/is-it-morally-sustainable-to-fund-research-from-international-students-20220830-p5bdul>

⁶ Norton, A. (2015). The cash nexus: how teaching funds research in Australian universities. The Grattan Institute. <https://grattan.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/831-Cash-nexus-report.pdf>

⁷ Bretag, T. Curtis, G., McNeill, M., Slade, C. (2019). Academic integrity in Australian higher education. Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency. <https://www.teqsa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2022-10/academic-integrity-workshop-slides.pptx>

⁸ TEQSA. (2022, Jun 24). Intelligence sharing: updated cheating website database. <https://www.teqsa.gov.au/about-us/news-and-events/latest-news/intelligence-sharing-updated-cheating-website-database>

⁹ TEQSA. (2022, Aug 5). TEQSA action against academic cheating websites. <https://www.teqsa.gov.au/about-us/news-and-events/latest-news/teqsa-action-against-academic-cheating-websites>

¹⁰ Christodoulou, M. (2022, Jul 29). ABC Radio National. <https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/backgroundbriefing/the-billion-dollar-industry-helping-students-cheat/13993086>

we are learning about student behaviour, student feedback...about how we create the kind of environment where they feel strongly supported at the university...in their learning, so that the prospect of cheating and the risk of cheating and what that means to their careers and their futures does not look attractive compared to doing the work and getting the support that the university has on offer."

Scott continued, asking "whether our students feel fully supported by the university to successfully graduate, or whether they fight the university to successfully graduate. And whether the euphoria at graduation is that we made it together or that they beat the university."

While Scott made these comments in support of an improved student experience, the vast majority of his speech was about his university's investment in research. Indeed, a few days later he posted on LinkedIn about Sydney's new nearly \$500-million research precinct. No doubt many of those millions of dollars came from international students' tuition fees, but there was no mention regarding how the investment would improve the teaching and learning experience of students.

Our universities have proven themselves adept at pushing the framework of the Dawkins model to its limits. In the process they have skewed their mission to the point where it is now profoundly biased in favour of research and to the detriment of teaching, learning and the student experience. It's also clear that without some external impetus it is highly unlikely our universities will independently risk their research reputations in order to restore some balance to their dual mission.

As long as the sector as a whole whitewashes the continued under-valuing of teaching and under-investment in student experience, it exposes individual institutions and the sector as a whole to a potentially existential reputational crisis. For there is only so long that the international student market will hold up if the sector continues to syphon tuition revenues into research while offering students a learning experience that is, as the QILT data shows, mediocre at best.

The first large, public university that publicly acknowledges this and takes steps to separate these two functions and value them equally - is going to have an enormous advantage over every one of its peers. Because our universities look to Canberra to set the rules of engagement, the only way a change is likely to happen is via a changing of the ground rules.

Recommendations

What would such a change look like? Incremental options could include:

Development of an Australian equivalent of Britain's Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), whereby universities are rated and required to publicise their results on their websites. The TEF scores institutions on the "gold/silver/bronze" spectrum, and it was shocking when several highly regarded institutions scored less than optimally on their teaching quality.

Requiring all universities (and Non-University Higher Education Providers) to respond to their annual QILT scores with a publicly accessible, concise response regarding their plans to address shortcomings in their teaching and student experience scores.

Offering universities access to bonus funds for achieving improvements in their QILT data, and likewise financial penalties for persistently failing to address poor results.

But it may also be time to consider braver changes to the rules that bind our universities. The funds required to build and maintain world-class researchers and the facilities they need to do their work are now astronomical. It may not be economically sensible for every university - or even every one of our most research-intensive universities - to try to maintain excellence across every discipline. Moreover, given the lack of crossover between research and teaching, it is worth considering whether these research entities be formally separated from their universities and established as independent entities.

It may also be that QILT is highlighting for us the impossible task of serving two masters equally well. A new set of incentives that encourages our universities - or at least some of them - to redouble their efforts into their education missions and deliver a better student experience will have profound benefits for the nation. It will preserve the international student market, and it will deliver better value to domestic students as well. It will also better prepare all students for whatever career paths they pursue, and surely that is amongst the greatest of our national interests.

Jack Goodman
Founder, Studiosity

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jack Goodman', written in a cursive style.