



# **The Australian University Accord Consultation on the Terms of Reference**

Swinburne University of Technology

Dear Professor O’Kane and Panel Members,

Swinburne University of Technology welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the panel’s consultation process on the Terms of Reference, that will guide future discussions and contributions on how the generational reform opportunity presented by the Universities Accord will shape our sector.

The need for a new Universities Accord is real and urgent, and we commend the Government for commencing this vital reform. The current system is out-dated, not fit-for-purpose nor responsive to the changing needs of the employment market and modern factors that drive decision making.

The higher education sector is increasingly siloed, and this is felt most acutely by dual-sector institutions such as Swinburne, that must respond to skills and training priorities determined by State Governments, while seeking federal funding for university teaching and learning, and applying separately for research grants and programs. It is a fragmented system that risks big, and bold ideas slipping through the cracks.

If Australia’s university sector is to thrive in an increasingly uncertain and disrupted post-pandemic world, a fundamental, holistic and cross-sectoral reset will be required.

The Terms of Reference allow us to group themes for individual examination. We urge the panel that the sum of a reformed sector must be greater than its constituent parts, and that a broad, macro-view of the post-secondary system, must ensure the settings serve our students and the knowledge needs of our country, which relies on a strong higher education system for future prosperity.

This letter does not intend to address all key areas for review, but clusters together perspectives that may spark curiosity and new thinking during the consultation period.

**Funding must be sustainable and agile.** This includes recognition of online education platforms must remain equal in funding to that of on-campus delivery, noting the need for universities to adapt to global forces to thrive. Short-sighted policy ventures that seem to incentivise student study pathways must not have perverse incentives for universities, such as the Job Ready Graduate scheme.

**STEM enrolments must be funded appropriately.** The sleeper issue that arose from Job Ready Graduates policy, was that while the student contribution to university fees in the Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) disciplines deteriorated, the Commonwealth contribution to universities for those same capital-intensive courses declined further still. For example, universities now receive \$4,758 less for enrolling Science and Engineering students (a 16.4% reduction) and \$3,513 less for maths students (a 17% reduction). The package resulted in a total misalignment between fee incentives for STEM students and support for the universities that would enrol them. As a result, courses which will see significant employment growth in the coming years, including nursing, teaching and engineering, now receive less total funding per student.

**Excellence must lead equality.** Universities must straddle the space between offering a bespoke education and learning experience that meets important excellence standards, while also creating space for all groups to obtain an education. The Panel need to grapple with the tension, noting the desire to obtain targets for inclusion laid out in the Bradley Review that have not been met, some 12 years later.

**Commercialising research must be rewarded.** Prioritising commercialisation as part of university activity will break the mould of it being the last step in a linear research process. As the challenges we face become more complex, Australia needs to attract global talent, create our own research sovereignty through intellectual property and turbo-charge our industry-based output, and continue to be competitive. Key relationships with multi-nationals will ensure our best and brightest can drive future innovations.

**Policies for students must be student centric.** Providers should be encouraged to deliver a wide range of learning experiences and teaching strategies, to address the differing learning needs and interests of students from an increasingly diverse range of backgrounds (on this point we refer both to the individual diversity of students which may be cultural background, or diversity on the basis of entry to the tertiary system). This diversity in student needs at should be matched by a diversity of provider missions in the sector.

**Use this opportunity to repair the Vocational Education and Training (VET) system.** As one of Australia's six dual-sector institutions, Swinburne supports policies that provide opportunities for articulation between the vocational and higher education sectors and the development of integrated programs that span the sectors. The post-compulsory education and training system must be able to respond to student and community needs, with the current fragmented policy, funding and regulatory settings providing barriers to pathways, innovation and participation.

Presently, the binary choice faced by school leavers between VET and Higher Education (HE) is further engrained by separate regulatory regimes in ASQA (VET) and TEQSA (HE). Post-secondary education should operate as a continuum of diverse and distinctive offerings through the VET and HE systems, which learners can access at different stages to meet their changing needs.

**A seamless, nationally consistent interface between VET and HE is critical.** Individual system-based reforms to HE and VET must be replaced by an overarching policy framework for post-secondary education in Australia, thus the Accord process should consider a framework which preserves the distinctive roles of the higher education and VET systems while better connecting them, so that together they can help meet the future economic, social and demographic challenges facing Australia. Course fee caps jointly agreed between the states and matched by an income-contingent loan scheme administered by the Commonwealth, is a possible solution to this dilemma which would address a fundamental disparity between the sectors.

On behalf of Swinburne University of Technology, thank you again for the early opportunity to contribute to setting the scene for the Australian University Accords.

I personally look forward to meeting with the panel throughout 2023 and sharing Swinburne's ethos, our mission and view for the future of higher education.

Should there be anything afore mentioned spark your interest and would like to begin a conversation, please reach out to me directly at [vc@swin.edu.au](mailto:vc@swin.edu.au)

Yours sincerely,



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