



The University of Notre Dame Australia

Priorities for the Universities Accord
— submission

December 2022



About Notre Dame

The University of Notre Dame Australia (UNDA) welcomes the opportunity to outline its priorities for the Australian Universities Accord. We thank Professor O’Kane and the panel for meeting representatives of WA based universities in Perth on 9 December 2022.

UNDA is a Catholic University with campuses in Fremantle and Sydney, along with being the only university to have a permanent presence in the Kimberley region of Western Australia with a campus in Broome. In addition, we have rural clinical school sites throughout regional New South Wales and Victoria.

Notre Dame has a long-standing reputation for graduating outstanding work-ready professionals across national priority professions. This has been most recently demonstrated in the national Graduate Outcomes and Student Experience surveys, where Notre Dame ranked as the number 1 university in Australia for Overall Employment, and in the top 5 universities for Skills Development and Overall Quality of Educational Experience.

Student retention and success goes to the heart of our learning and teaching ethos, with Notre Dame performing well above the average for Table A universities. Our retention rates for indigenous students are nearly 10 per cent above the national average and 6 per cent higher for regional students.

Notre Dame’s Table A status, acquired in 2021, has allowed us to open our doors to more students from underrepresented cohorts, with the support of vital government funding such as CSPs and HEPPP. These initiatives will see the University steadily grow its cohort of equity students as set out in our new Strategic Plan.

The Accord provides a unique opportunity to review the Australian higher education system, and put in place a reform agenda that seeks to achieve the following key elements:

- **Long term funding and policy certainty**— as a first priority the Accord must focus on giving universities certainty to inform longer term planning, policy and investment decisions. Often governments have offered short term funding initiatives to support growth in the sector which has resulted in universities bearing the long-term financial impost across areas such as systems and processes, staffing and new facilities and technologies.
- **Good reform does not always correspond to a “one size fits all” approach**— the higher education sector is diverse, including the size, shape and composition of each institution. The Accord must embrace the importance of a differentiated system that allows each university to meet the learning, teaching and research needs of their local community. Australian universities have embraced diversity and we need to ensure any future policy changes do not lead to a rise in uniformity across the sector.



- **Reform must not result in a greater regulatory burden**— the Accord should take a whole of government approach and lead to the simplification of cross-agency and jurisdictional requirements. Over recent years, a series of policy changes have seen the bureaucratic burden on universities increase across areas such as data reporting, compliance across multiple government agencies, and the introduction of new regulations.
- **Each reform foci must be aligned to the national interest**— this is a unique opportunity to ensure that universities are properly supported to invest in learning, teaching and research that will support Australia’s future economic and social needs.
- **A plan for implementation**— this is an important opportunity to deliver long lasting, and much needed, improvements to the Australian higher education sector. The Accord Review should not only consider what improvements are needed, but how they can be implemented by government and the sector in a coordinated and orderly way.

Policy priorities

Skills & future of work

UNDA welcomes the creation of Jobs and Skills Australia which will provide independent advice to government on current and emerging workforce needs. It remains unclear whether the agency’s remit will adequately address the needs of the university sector in its capacity as a major contributor to skills and knowledge creation in Australia. As the pace of change in workforce needs continues to grow, universities will require sophisticated models of assessing and monitoring Australia’s current and future labour market needs to proactively design courses and embrace new methods of delivery, such as microcredentials and short courses, that will deliver a knowledgeable and skilled workforce.

Equity

The University supports the government’s intention to raise efforts nationally in relation to student participation in higher education. Any new equity targets that may be introduced must consider local institutional and community factors such as demographics, socio-economic and historical factors that have previously contributed to poor outcomes.

For example, student load should not be the primary measure of success for remote and regional higher education initiatives. We believe a range of indicators should be applied, based on local circumstances, such as population size, demand for education and previous education attainment. Our experience in Broome demonstrates that while the total number of students enrolled is below the minimum threshold required to attract additional financial support in the form of a regional loading, the benefits to the local community of having highly skilled graduates, cannot be underestimated.



Pathway programs are a critical component of creating and maintaining equity. This review provides an opportunity for the sector to consider how these programs are supported, and how they can complement traditional modes of entry into the tertiary sector, given the changing environment in school years 11-12.

Funding arrangements

We do not support a funding model that seeks to artificially create an inequitable divide between program clusters. An evidence-based review of the Job Ready Graduates package is of the highest importance to the Accord process. As a starting point, we encourage the immediate abolition of the minimum pass rates of 50% for students to retain their CSP. This is counterintuitive to the Government's vision of increasing university participation from underrepresented student groups, as these students are more likely to be disproportionately impacted by such funding measures. All future initiatives of this kind must themselves be evidence-based, relying on comprehensive data to identify alignment between areas of study and employment.

Further, recent funding arrangements have focused on time limited arrangements, especially places for students. For example, the recent allocation of 20,000 additional CSPs is only for two years (2023 and 2024) and does not consider the longer-term growth needs of the sector. In addition, these short-term measures require universities to contribute with additional staff, capital, and partnerships, however once the funding expires, universities continue to incur the costs of the program.

Regulatory environment

Universities, especially national institutions, such as Notre Dame, work in multi-jurisdictional environments and are required to apply considerable resources to the delivery of regulatory reporting throughout a range of government bodies at state and federal levels. At times there is tension between regulatory requirements for the different levels of government. There needs to be a cross jurisdictional review of the higher education regulatory framework to identify ways to streamline reporting processes and to create efficiencies that will result in a greater focus on the core business of learning, teaching and research.

International education

A renewed effort is needed to promote Australia as a destination of choice for students, academics and researchers. This will help attract and retain the smartest minds to our country.

Australia's visa system does not reflect contemporary best practice, making it unnecessarily difficult for students, researchers, and academics to choose Australia as a destination to learn and live. Visa reform will result in a system that lifts the ambition of Australia's international education offerings by actively encouraging programs with joint degrees, allowing greater inbound and outbound student mobility.



Research

The Accord must result in the development of a sustainable research funding model that is transparent in its ability to determine the full cost of funding research activities.

Universities have spent decades cross-subsiding the cost of research using income generated from other activities, including international and postgraduate fee-income. The government's research funding model does not adequately factor in the true cost of research despite the well documented evidence outlining the significant additional costs universities incur when leading government funded research.

The current funding model also acts as an impediment for universities such as UNDA, limiting the cross-subsidisation of research from teaching in order to deliver high quality pastoral care for its students, as demonstrated by successive QILT surveys.

In addition, the Accord Review needs to consider other reviews into research activity currently underway. The review of the Australian Research Council (ARC) known as the Sheil Review is under consideration which includes the role of the body, the allocation process for research funding, governance models, and the national interest test. There needs to be a strategic and aligned approach to the future of the ARC and research funding.

Infrastructure

Australian universities spent \$23.9 billion in capital expenditure over the period 2013 to 2018, which included \$715 million in maintenance expenditure. During the same period Government investment in university capital grants fell by more than \$1 billion.

However, the cost of upgrading and maintaining our facilities to ensure students have access to high quality learning environments falls largely to individual institutions. As the way of learning and sharing knowledge evolves and becomes increasingly sophisticated, including the adoption of new technologies, universities need greater financial support from the Commonwealth to ensure our campuses are modern, contemporary and cutting-edge places of learning.

The Accord process must also consider the post COVID learning and teaching environment, including the role that digital learning, cyber and emerging technologies will play in the way knowledge is shared and consumed.

In order to meet the ever-changing nature of learning, universities will need to invest substantially in the replacement of ageing digital platforms, adopt more interactive learning approaches, and provide safe and secure digital environments, especially in response to the ever-increasing threat of cyber-attacks and data security.

Universities will require financial support from the Commonwealth to meet these infrastructure needs, both physical and digital.



Vocational education & training (VET)

States and Territories have made considerable progress over the past five years to strengthen the VET sector, resulting in the delivery of more affordable programs that are linked to building supply within the national skills priority list. This has recently been reinforced at a federal level with the delivery of a range of “fee-free” places across 2023 and 2024.

As the skills market tries to react to the growth in the care economy and trades training, we have the opportunity to create stronger connections between VET and universities. Building stronger connections between the VET and higher education sectors will improve education opportunities for students, especially those from equity groups. UNDA operates a private RTO that delivers VET courses in nursing, education support and community care. The lack of a national framework that guides consistency in pathways and shared resources between VET and universities is an opportunity to be pursued.

Further engagement

- For further information please contact the University's National Manager of Government Relations at [REDACTED]