# **Submission in response to Q. 38 - How can the accord support higher education providers to adopt sector-leading employment practices?**

## **Overview**

The Australian Universities Accord Discussion Paper identifies the many challenges and opportunities for Australian universities in providing a high quality and sustainable higher education system that meets our national needs. Being a service industry, and with 55-60% of university operating costs being attributed to staffing, a key focus of any resulting accord needs to be on the workforce, academic and professional staff.

This submission explores the employment landscape across our universities and draws on current international initiatives revolutionising the world of work for academics, researchers and allied professions to envision an innovative workforce of the future. Any resulting accord needs to aspire to delivering an internationally competitive employment value proposition to not only develop our own academic talent but attract and retain global leaders from overseas in key fields of research and innovation. Without this, the ability to deliver on the priorities identified in a future accord will be significantly impeded.

## **The Current Employment Landscape**

Employment arrangements offered by all Australian universities are governed by a myriad of enterprise agreements. The core elements of those agreements, such as the Minimum Standards for Academic Levels (MSALs), Classification Structure for General Staff, fixed-term contract conditions and casual teaching arrangements have not changed significantly since their inception. These structural elements underpin the employment offerings our universities use to in seeking world-leading academics, researchers and allied professions. They limit the cross-pollination of talent between industry and academia. They limit the capacity for better recognition of emerging ‘third-space’ professions within the teaching, learning, research and innovation spaces[[1]](#footnote-2). Without incentivising a fundamental shift, one that fosters collaboration and thought-leadership, universities will be hamstrung in developing the talent they need to achieve the aspirations of a future accord.

Those familiar with Australian universities will only be too aware of the proliferation of precarious employment arrangements that exist – much because of short-term funding arrangements, whether they be for core university operations or research activity. If the higher-education sector is to flourish for the next 20-30 years, resulting funding arrangements need to provide greater certainty in employment for all staff, regardless of their role. Failure to do this will see the continuation of leading academic and research talent being attracted to overseas institutions and not returning. Australian universities need to be funded in a manner that enables them to effectively plan for future workforce needs and attract, develop and retain world-class talent across all parts of their operations.

At an individual level, the frustrations of academics arising from performance expectations and workloads are consistent with those expressed by academics across the globe. Global conferences discussing open science and fairer assessment of individual research performance lead the way in envisioning a more sustainable academic career. Australian universities have minimal representation and/or participation in these forums and initiatives[[2]](#footnote-3) which does not bode well for providing academic careers that support individuals to thrive, both professionally and personally. An accord needs mechanisms which incentivise all Australian universities to be bold and fundamentally shift their employment practices beyond the current paradigm and actively engage with the global discussion on academic and research careers. Australian universities face the real threat of being unable to attract the innovators and creators needed to deliver on the aspirations of a final accord.

## **Creating the Employment Paradigm Shift**

It is all very well to discuss what needs to be addressed, however it would be remiss not to explore the possibilities – ones which deliver the academic career of the 2050s now. There are several opportunities for delivering a longer-term shift in the sector’s employment practices that can be embedded into a future accord. These focus on developing world-leading academics, improving recognition and reward systems for a diversity of career paths, and incentivising universities to undertake wide-ranging reviews of employment practices and enact detailed action plans to address short-comings.

### **Developing World-Leading Academics**

The many efforts to measure quality of teaching, learning and research do not consider how the talent required to deliver these is developed. To stay internationally competitive, a sector-wide academic career development framework is required. This needs to outline indicative examples of teaching, research, academic leadership and engagement excellence at various career stages fundamental to long-term sector sustainability.

Significant work has already been done in the tertiary teaching space, led by Emeritus Professor Denise Chalmers[[3]](#footnote-4). This has already been used by many Australian universities for their academic staff appraisal, promotion and career development processes. Expanding this work to research, academic leadership and engagement excellence would provide prospective and current academics a clear view of expectations within the sector. The resulting framework would not be another layer of benchmarking or governance for universities, but rather a guide for academic career development.

### **Better Recognition and Reward Mechanisms**

The concept of the traditional academic career consisting of teaching and research is evolving to a broader role that the current sector employment structures have failed to keep pace with. The drive for sector-wide innovation and excellence demands engagement with individuals and groups from a diversity of backgrounds, knowledge and experience. New ways of recognising and rewarding this is essential for the sector to remain competitive in the broader Australian and international employment market. To achieve this, focus needs to be given to:

* ensuring key employment instruments (i.e. modern awards) and funding mechanisms (incl. research grants) give better recognition to non-traditional career paths that many individuals take before entering academia and the value these diverse and varied experiences add when compared to formal qualifications required for academia;
* supporting greater career mobility between industry/government and the sector without individuals taking a backward step in their career trajectory by, once again, recognising and rewarding the experience, knowledge and skills gained through such experiences; and
* a greater ability for individuals to pursue their diverse career aspirations within academia by reducing the traditional barriers to career progression whilst ensuring universities can achieve their institutional missions.

### **Incentives for Adopting Internationally Competitive Employment Practices**

There are few incentives available to encourage universities to adopt a holistic approach to addressing the array of career issues being experienced across the Australian higher-education sector. These range from underpayment of casual/sessional staff to long-term precarious employment arrangements and do not foster the culture needed to deliver innovation or creativity for Australia’s long-term economic security. Supporting all universities, regardless of size or location, to offer viable career paths with appropriate career development should be a fundamental component of the accord.

Inspiration should be drawn from overseas programs such as Euraxess’s *HR Excellence in Research* or The Netherlands *Rewards and Recognition – Room for Everyone’s Talent[[4]](#footnote-5)* to develop incentives for the sector to take a broad-brush approach in evaluating current employment policies and practices across the employment lifecycle. These incentives need to empower universities to collaborate and be brave in reframing employment approaches and develop targeted action plans that enables the Australian economy to capitalise on the benefits of open science and open education.

By incorporating these three elements into a final accord, Australian universities will have the permission to take a blue-sky approach in identifying innovative employment practices needed to build a higher-education workforce capable of delivering the teaching, learning and research aspirations contained in the accord.

## **Conclusion**

The Australian Universities Accord Discussion Paper highlights the challenges and opportunities for universities in Australia. The focus of any accord needs to be on the workforce required to achieve its ambitions. The industrial arrangements governing employment within Australian universities have not changed significantly since their inception. A radical shift is needed to embolden universities to undertake a comprehensive overhaul of employment practices entrenched in the sector. Developing world-class academics, improving recognition and reward systems, and incentivising universities to undertake wide-ranging reviews of employment practices will achieve this shift. Without these, universities will be unable to attract or develop the talent needed to realise the aspirations of the accord.

## **Authors’ Backgrounds**

**Emma Badminton** is a highly experienced human resources professional with nearly 20 years’ experience in the Australian University sector. Having been exposed to all aspects of the human resource function within universities, Emma has been involved in sector-wide programs such as the Higher Education Workplace Reform Requirements (HEWRRs), UniForum and Athena Swan. At an institutional level, Emma has played pivotal roles in developing organisational-wide strategies addressing specific human resource challenges from enterprise bargaining to equity and inclusion employment activities. Emma is currently Senior Strategy and Policy Consultant in People and Culture at Edith Cowan University.

**Cass Marie-Soong** has two decades of experience in the Australian higher education sector. With a human resources management background and expertise on academic career frameworks I would like to acknowledge the input of Cass Marie-Soong who drew from her human resource management background and expertise in developing academic career frameworks and promotion. Cass has developed and delivered numerous organisation-wide strategic projects focused on organisational change and stakeholder engagement. She is currently a Strategy analyst in the Office of Strategy, Planning and Performance at The University of Western Australia.

**The views expressed in this submission are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of their employers.**

1. ‘Third Space’ is commonly used to describe academics working in research management (incl. commercialisation), student and learning support, industry engagement and collaboration etc. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Examples include [San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment](https://sfdora.org/), [Advancing Teaching](https://www.advancingteaching.com/survey/); [Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment](https://coara.eu/about/). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. See [Australian University Teaching & Criteria & Standards](http://uniteachingcriteria.edu.au/) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. See <https://euraxess.ec.europa.eu/jobs/hrs4r> and <https://recognitionrewards.nl/> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)