

11 April 2022

Professor Mary O'Kane AC
Chair, Australian Universities Accord Panel
C/o Commonwealth Department of Education

Dear Professor O'Kane,

Re: An Accord Without Students is Not an Accord

I write to make a submission to the Australian Universities Accord Panel in response to your February 2023 discussion paper, aiming to make a positive contribution to the policy formation process. Given that sincere premise it saddens me to say that the conditions for a genuine Australian Universities Accord do not currently exist. They cannot exist whilst ever students are not in a position to fully and equally participate in an Accord process, as is an obvious but largely overlooked problem of the moment. It's a problem that's unresolved and is the focus of my submission.

The basis for my claim starts with thinking about what a genuine Accord would look like in the contemporary Australian context. Using Accord language invites reflection on the more positive elements of the 1980's Hawke-Keating industrial relations Accord process. I leave its flaws aside for present purposes, and instead focus on the fact that it raises the idea that government, industry, and labour could meet as roughly equal partners to hammer out an agreed universities structural reform package for the potential benefit of all parties, in a way analogous to what occurred in 1980's industrial relations. The problem is that universities and education are not the same as industrial relations, with students and our futures being the key difference I wish to focus on. In education students should be additional and equal partners in the creation of any genuine Accord, but we presently don't have the infrastructure to play that role.

Over a period of nearly two decades Australian student representative capacity has been substantially obliterated. From the level of previously thriving autonomous clubs and societies at Australia's public universities, to strong and vibrant representative associations which once existed at virtually every institution, to the various national representative bodies which had highly sophisticated and quality policy and research capacity, each level in what was a thick and rich socio-community network has been weakened. Further, each level up this chain is weaker than the previous one. By the time one gets to the relevant national bodies you have organisations with virtually no staff, no funds, and no capacity. Their very survival is a minor miracle. They perform miracles given what they have, but that does not amount to genuine capacity to play an equal role in Accord making.

As I write this submission the Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations (CAPA) does not have any staff at all. After years of just surviving CAPA is on the brink of potential collapse. Meanwhile the undergraduate peak National Union of Students (NUS) is a shell of its former self and is also virtually staff-free. At the same time Australia's 1.4 million university students face eye-watering socio-economic challenges, from exploding fees and associated debt, to curricula which threatens to be cleared-out of humanities and languages capacity, to grindingly difficult employment and housing challenges whilst students, and sharply harsher conditions ahead even once graduated. It is a travesty of something called an Accord process that students have such absurdly little collective capacity to research, articulate, and propose solutions to our concerns.

Making the situation worse is that across the same two decades or so of student-capacity decay, the policy capacity of other conglomerates has strengthened and multiplied. The big four accounting firms have moved into education consultancy in a highly significant way, partly as a lower risk diversified business opportunity after the Global Financial Crisis. Universities themselves have significantly increased their internal and individual policy and lobbying capacities. Meanwhile and with regards peak lobby groups, the Group of Eight research intensive universities was only formed in 1999, Innovative Research Universities got formed in 2003, Universities Australia was established in 2007, the Regional Universities Network came together in 2012, and so on. All have significant policy and government lobbying capacity, quite aside from the plethora of other industry bodies now heavily lobbying over higher education.

The result is a broad variegated network of hundreds of non-student policy professionals and lobbying groups of different flavours, all now engaged in higher education in a way which was simply not the case in times past. These different actors are bolstered in terms of their effectiveness by all the financial and institutional clout sitting behind them, whilst students are left with virtually nil capacity at all. The Accord Panel is not responsible for this situation but there are two core things you could do in response to it. First is that you could radically increase and multiply your efforts to seek out and draw out direct student voices in the Accord formation process. As much will not negate the issues just articulated but it would reduce them. Second is that it's open to you to come up with an Accord proposal which, over time, will move things back towards a more equal and fair situation for students, such as might be befitting for something called a Universities Accord.

The **attached** submission gives background on my own policy and professional experience, briefly comments on the first issue, and then addresses it and the second by offering eleven recommendations. I commend my submission to the Panel.

Yours sincerely,



Adrian Cardinali

**Response to the February 2023 Universities
Accord Discussion Paper**

11 April 2023

Adrian Cardinali

Contents

- 3 Introduction: A Universities Accord without University Students?**
- 4 Author Background**
- 5 Summary of Recommendations**
- 6 Consulting Students**
- 7 Rebuilding Advocacy and Representation**
- 8 Rebuilding Student Media**
- 9 National Advocacy and Representation**
- 10 Student Housing**
- 11 Income Assistance**
- 12 Research Stipends**
- 13 Tuition Fees and Debt Relief**
- 14 Employment**
- 15 Reinvigorating Humanities**
- 16 Reinvigorating Languages**

Introduction: A Universities Accord Without University Students?

Without active intervention the Universities Accord process risks illegitimacy even before an Accord is formed, on grounds of the substantial exclusion of Australia's 1.4 million university students from the process. Building on an argument in this direction in my covering letter, I refer to the policy formation process for the Job Ready legislative package in 2020 to illustrate what could happen. When former Education Minister Dan Tehan announced a process leading to laws which raised student fees and gutted Commonwealth Humanities funding, a departmental review was opened which garnered 56 submissions from various industry and interest groups. None were from students or student organisations. The Federal Senate review was only marginally better from a student perspective, garnering 280 submissions overall with a smattering of individual student and 7 student organisation submissions. Lack of fair student representative capacity meant student concerns about the regressive nature of proposed changes got drowned out by a tidal wave of industry lobbying capacity from elsewhere.

I indicated in my covering letter that this situation resulted from roughly two decades of sustained dismemberment of student bodies. I will clarify what I mean by that within this submission. But I also want to make an uncharacteristic defence of former Minister Tehan's approach upfront. He pursued a certain kind of industry and political agenda as an elected official and managed to ram it through the parliament, raising student fees and weakening the Humanities in a window of opportunity part-created by pandemic conditions. He may have taken advantage of a deeply weakened student body to do so and it may have been unconscionable on all manner of levels. Still, he did not describe the process as an Accord. The process this time is different. Describing this as a potential Universities Accord, with the express goal of achieving transformational vision for higher education across forthcoming decades, immediately raises presumed standards and expectations. It implies that all major parties will have substantial and real input into a finalised agreement, and that with a degree of give and take all will mutually benefit from the outcomes.

Noting this background, the founding premise of a Universities Accord falls apart if students are not fairly, equally, and substantially represented as parties to the Accord. But what does one do when student community has been so weakened over years that there are no longer substantial and well-resourced national representative bodies with which to engage, and where community and representative bodies beneath that level are weakened as well? That is a central question my submission seeks to address. There is already hard evidence of a problem to solve, in the sense that the 2022 consultation over Accord Terms of Reference garnered only 9 student association submissions out of a total of 185. As concerning as that is I genuinely believe it is part resolvable. I start by giving brief background of my experience, including an explanation of why I have such deep and sustained knowledge of the student representative landscape such that I can defend the claims made herein. I move on to a discussion of what the Accord Panel could do in the present process to partially remediate the situation.

Knowing that the Panel cannot immediately reconstitute what is already destroyed even if it wanted to, I discuss and propose eleven recommendations which take account of the absence of more substantial student representation. Taken as a whole and as you will see, what I imagine are steps towards a fairer and more just Accord between students and other parties over the life of a long-term process, given inadequacies that mean the grounds for such agreement does not exist in the present. I imagine a series of steps which address the injustices of the moment by progressively improving things in future, such that students now and in the future might look at the Accord and see it as a genuine, fair, and good faith attempt to fully re-incorporate us, our energies, our capacities, and our potential as full, equal, and fair participants. Anything less isn't even moving towards a Universities Accord, let alone making the most out of our potential.

Author Background

I am a graduate of the University of New South Wales, having completed a Bachelor of Arts with Philosophy Honours and a Bachelor of Social Work. Over time and in different spheres I have worked or volunteered in areas such as crisis street and housing work, homeless food services, drug harm minimisation, marginal population education, community health support, disability support, and access and equity policy formation. However, my main employment covering most of my professional life to date was for the Sydney University Postgraduate Representative Association, one of the largest and most important such bodies in the country. I was employed continuously between 2001 and 2020, spending the first decade doing a combination of case, policy, and project work and the second decade as the head of advocacy services.

I served postgraduate students in this important milieu by literally conducting thousands of cases directly, and then supervising thousands more. The service I helped build was highly atypical from several perspectives, including that it was fully professionalised with staff of Social Work, Law, Psychology, and related backgrounds. It not only survived during the 2000s and 2010s but grew when other analogous bodies shrivelled or closed. By the time I finished employment advocacy staffing alone was roughly 5.6 full time equivalent plus casual caseworkers for peak periods and casual administration for data entry support. As much made it one of the largest such services in the country.

The policy and projects side of the work involved coordinating the same team to deliver briefing and support services for elected postgraduate leaders with various representative responsibilities. By the end it meant coordinating student representative briefing and training for roughly twenty university committees and working parties across the institution in any given year, plus support for ad hoc campaigns, higher education policy research, support in lobbying or approaching members of government, and similar such roles. In the context of an institution whose postgraduate population alone reached around 30,000 as much was more than needed. We were run off our feet.

I was deeply committed to the best community ideals which animated the association, delaying my own long-intended graduate research. However, my Honours thesis explored philosophical gaps in theorisation of migration, ultimately leading me to my current Master of Arts in Italian Studies at the University of New England. My thesis is on conceptions of home in Italian language literature written by Indian background authors. I ran for election to the University of New England Academic Board, intent to use previous experience to offer public service in a new and presumably quieter context. I ran for election in February 2020. I was successfully elected by March 2020, concurrent with the first global pandemic restrictions in Australia.

Over the next two years and to fulfill what I committed to when elected, I unexpectedly found myself on multiple different committees and became an accidental leader amongst student leaders. I have since joked that it was the equivalent of a fourteen-year term, noting that I am not the only one to have had that kind of experience. However, I have also had a combination of experience which is likely unique. I have literally sat with thousands upon thousands of students across two decades, and directly supported them with seemingly every manner of student challenge one could imagine. I was very effective too. I have run a major service and grown it. But I also worked with generations of student leaders, first alongside them, then training and briefing them, and finally leading them.

In many cases those leaders have either already gone on to extraordinary futures in academia, politics, public service, industry of different kinds, unions, and entrepreneurship, or else are on their way. Yet over time and across a wide range of institutions, I have also seen the infrastructure which supports such growth crumble and erode away to a current parlous state. I look at the current state of affairs and see it as one existential threat to broader democracy, but there is something potentially more positive here too. I also look at how extraordinary some of the student leaders coming through are without infrastructure that should exist and wonder at how much further they could go and how much higher they would fly with a modicum of fair support.

A key element of this submission learns from and builds on worthwhile elements which I am aware of and have been lost. Without nostalgia for a past which I do not seek to recreate, I imagine contemporary-appropriate rebuilding that would learn from what has already been done. I imagine the recreation of fair student representative capacity, first to facilitate the very possibility of a fair and legitimate Accord, and then to create a fairer and more just future for all.

Summary of Recommendations

Recommendation 1 (Consulting Students): That the Accord Panel conceive, negotiate, and implement an appropriate proactive direct-consultation method with Australia's university students and their representatives, as a mechanism to fairly compensate for systematic barriers to their genuine and fair participation in the Accord process.

Recommendation 2 (Rebuilding Advocacy and Representation): That amendments to Student Services and Amenities Fee provisions be developed and implemented, which would concurrently restore quality independent advocacy staffing levels, student association funding, and student representative support at universities across the country.

Recommendation 3 (Rebuilding Student Media): That amendments to Student Services and Amenities Fee provisions be developed and implemented, which would encourage the re-establishment and re-development of a wide, varied, quality and rich democratic and independent student media landscape.

Recommendation 4 (National Advocacy and Representation): That amendments to Student Services and Amenities Fee provisions be developed and implemented, which would divert a modest but fair proportion of each student's fees to fund their national representation.

Recommendation 5 (Student Housing): That provisions be developed for the guarantee of quality low-cost student accommodation for, at a minimum, students who are moving beyond certain defined domestic limits to study at the relevant institution, and those who are international students relocating from overseas.

Recommendation 6 (Income Assistance): That to continue to widen participation in higher education and give access to sufficient development opportunities, all coursework masters and doctorate programs should be made eligible for relevant Austudy or Youth Allowance payments.

Recommendation 7 (Research Stipends): That higher degree research stipend numbers be radically increased to meet the needs of the expanded research student population, and that rates be adjusted such that they are the equivalent to a real and fair wage and not below the poverty line as is currently the case.

Recommendation 8 (Tuition Fees and Debt Relief): That tuition fee reduction and debt relief measures be explored and implemented, including a progressive return to free undergraduate education, significant and serious price amelioration measures in postgraduate coursework education, and widespread debt relief.

Recommendation 9 (Employment): That measures be implemented to address persistent and ongoing gaps in the treatment of casual university staff, to increase the conversion of ongoing casual and sessional roles to ongoing positions, and to create more early career researcher pathways across the full range of institutional intellectual inquiry.

Recommendation 10 (Reinvigorating Humanities): That any and all reasonable steps are taken to restore the fair and crucial role of the Humanities and languages in Australia's universities, including but not limited to ensuring sharp expansion of program and staffing capacity, reversing any and all artificial disincentives to study including regressive tuition fee structures, and promoting renewed scholarship.

Recommendation 11 (Reinvigorating Languages): That a comprehensive, nationally coordinated, well-funded and high-quality languages and cultures promotion program be implemented, such that scholarship and study of non-English languages blossoms and expands across the period of a transformational Universities Accord.

Consulting Students

Here I continue to deepen the picture of parlous national student representation. To start one needs to consider that for all the good things I think of NUS and CAPA as historic entities, in the present they can't even claim legitimate universal national representation of undergraduate and postgraduate students. Both have significant gaps in their campus-association affiliation profile for any who might care to do the research, remembering that both organisations are peak bodies for campus student representative associations around the country. CAPA in particular is presently embroiled in a messy and public affiliation disaster, which means that some of the major associations in the country appear to want to pay affiliation fees but can't. I wish all this was not the case but it is the unfortunate and long-building current status quo.

Rather than eliding problems and pretending they don't exist, my view is that the Accord Process presents an opportunity to recognise NUS and CAPA as victims of long-term problems substantially not of their making, and then get the national policy response right. An interim and temporary Accord-specific solution could, for example, be to organise a series of student forums at select but representative campuses, where weakened but still-existing local student representative associations should organise and chair receptions for the Panel, to discuss what students want out of visionary higher education policy. Giving flagging representation that responsibility has the twin benefits of re-enlivening representatives and allowing the Panel to directly access energy and ideas not presently matched by structural maturity and resources.

Filling this idea out further helps to make its virtues more self-evident. Given my background I am most familiar with the universities landscape in Sydney specifically and then New South Wales more broadly. Within this state my suspicion is that one will not receive submissions from representative bodies for University of Sydney postgraduates, the relevant Western Sydney University representative association, nor the representative body at the University of New England. I may be proved wrong, but I am aware of resource and related weaknesses in each case which means they are not likely to be in a position to participate. Indeed, it's plausible that with the obvious and anomalous exception of myself, the Accord Panel will not get a single submission from any student within any of the constituencies just indicated, or if else if submissions are offered they will not be backed by sufficient resources and background to make them truly cut through.

If my prediction proves more or less accurate then the Panel might hear very little or nothing from one of the largest postgraduate populations in the country, with one of the largest higher degree research student populations in Australia. Surely as much would have to be remedied and these on-the-ground voices would need to be given some space if an Accord is going to be visionary with respect to research futures. This population is a large part of Australia's research future. I no longer work for the University of Sydney postgraduate association, even if I rightly hold them and their role in high esteem. Given that I do not speak for them. If, however, the Panel was to approach them to ask to organise an appropriate forum, my suspicion and hope is you would be warmly received, it would be strongly attended, and it might be a rewarding experience for all concerned.

I mention Western Sydney University because on the other side of the city it's substantially the opposite of the University of Sydney. The latter has one of the lowest low socio-economic enrolment profiles in Australia, whilst the former has one of the highest and does some important heavy social mobility lifting for us all as a society. I am well aware that the current Western Sydney University Vice Chancellor is on the Accord Panel. I only have impressions of him from a certain distance, but at that distance I would struggle to think of a university leader anywhere in the country who did a better job of steering their institution through the global pandemic. He did it without large redundancies and no forced redundancies I am aware of, he took real action on casual employment issues even if there is much to go, he rewarded staff with bonuses when finances did not deteriorate to the degree feared, and he hammered out what seems a fair enterprise bargaining arrangement. I followed his messaging closely during pandemic and he was fair, decent, and kind. Yet there is a but amongst that glowing assessment.

As much admiration as I have for Professor Glover he cannot speak for the students of his institution. They should speak clearly and articulately in their own voices, which I am certain they would if given the chance. So, if my suspicions prove correct and you hear from not one single student at this enormously important university, it's my strong view that the Panel must go to Western Sydney University and draw them out. It's similar with the University of New England though with a mild variation in the reasons. They also have a high equity cohort which should obtain voice if they are not heard from during submission consultation, but as opposed to a suburban metropolitan context its speciality is rural and regional delivery, it's the oldest non-metropolitan university in the country, it's a specialist in the burgeoning area of distance education, and it also had a bumpier time through and out of pandemic. I know from close firsthand experience that the perspective of students from that context is extremely interesting and well worth seeking out with a visit to regional Australia.

NUS, CAPA, and then then the wider network of student representative associations around the country have so little individual and collective capacity, that steps along these lines are necessary to engage students more fairly and by extension for the legitimacy of the Accord Process.

Recommendation 1: *That the Accord Panel conceive, negotiate, and implement an appropriate proactive direct-consultation method with Australia's university students and their representatives, as a mechanism to fairly compensate for systematic barriers to their genuine and fair participation in the Accord process.*

Rebuilding Advocacy and Representation

Before commenting further on national student representation it's necessary to take a detour through university specific advocacy and representation. Presumably anyone reading this submission knows the old story that in 2005 the Howard Federal Government narrowly obtained so-called Voluntary Student Unionism (VSU) legislation, meaning that relevant campus associations were suddenly starved of universal subscriptions. Even all these years later the consequences of that legislation, which was never repealed contrary to popular impression, continues to have an impact and is arguably the largest single factor in the flow-on messes that NUS and CAPA find themselves in. Some or other variation of this story is widely known. However, what's less appreciated are the fine-grained shortcomings of the 2012-implemented Student Services and Amenities Fee (SSAF), which mean it never facilitated complete and widespread recovery of quality and fairly-funded student representation.

As the name implies SSAF's main purpose was to reinstitute a revenue stream that would reanimate a range of student services which had floundered in VSU's wake. Without unpicking the details of the legislative package as a whole, including important legislative instruments which outline representation and advocacy protocols, the overall impact of SSAF was to re-conceptualise even advocacy and representation as a service. It meant that in situations where organisations had been strong enough to survive in-tact during the intervening starvation-years, either on their own steam, through individual university support, or else some combination, they tended to have their representative and advocacy functions funded by the new SSAF but significantly unaltered from what existed previously. However, overall that was a rare scenario for representative associations, which tended to either shrivel or else collapse after 2005.

The way the package was framed meant that in the substantial absence of representative associations with their own staff, universities tended to be free to set up quasi-independent entities which engaged advocacy professionals. One of the strengths of the legislative package was that it required institutions to spend some of the collected funds for that purpose. But there was nothing to say how many staff might need to be engaged proportionate to relevant student population, how genuinely independent the positions needed to be, how broad these newly created and historically-unmoored roles might be, and whether such roles might have any policy and education research capacity built in that must be devoted to supporting student representation. Historically these roles had developed as highly independent and intimately intertwined in the task of supporting student representatives to grow and thrive. In the new context that important link between what advocacy staff would hear on the ground and then the training and information they would give to student representatives was often severed. Services such as the one I was the head of were obvious exceptions.

In relation to the service I led, to this day and on the relevant website one can see annual reports with case statistics and year by year updates on the patterns seen in that year's casework. One of many reasons why the model survived and thrived against the odds was that we had already managed to entrench a local culture of appreciation for the quality of that work and its contribution, not only amongst student-clients and the students whom we professionally briefed but also widely throughout the University institution. Post-VSU support from everywhere from the governing Senate down was decisive in the service surviving and thriving. On campuses where this disappeared it was harder to convince officials to reinstate it, given what one was asking for was a leap of faith that independent-minded and strong advocacy and representation, could make a productive contribution to both students and the community as a whole. It demonstrably did so at the University of Sydney but that's a harder sell at sites where it was no longer present.

Within the networks I retain I am aware of all kinds of new variations on what I have just described, but there are some common refrains that come through everywhere I look. One is that in the context of an explosion of student numbers and newly arising issues with respect to plagiarism, misconduct, housing pressures, and finances, the services are over-run and either respond by radically narrowing the range of matters they will address or else they face some or other severe problem meeting demand. By 2023 it leaves little time for systemic thinking, briefing, and supporting of the development of elected student representation, even in those rare cases where the ongoing link is still active. It means advocacy accessibility and the quality flow of information from advocacy casework back to student representatives, is severely curtailed right at a time 1.4 million university students need that system to function more than ever. Meanwhile those staff members who would previously have assisted to build student representative capacity, confidence, breadth, and quality are either disconnected from that sphere or do not have the resources.

I am partially agnostic about what a specific solution to problems thus framed might look like. To a good degree I would trust my former colleagues to be able to frame the specifics. Yet whatever the specifics and the fine-grained detail of a solution might be, my view is that there should be SSAF reform in three key ways. The first would be to re-frame the legislative package as something more like a Student Services, Representation, and Advocacy Fee, with flow on legislative details adjusted to reflect the adjusted intent. The second would be to insert provisions that would establish a wider and more well-rounded independent advocacy role, such that one re-implements a need to give student representatives professional briefing and representative training. The third would then be to provide guidelines that lead to advocacy and representation resources being allocated at a sufficient level at any given campus.

The reason advocacy got retained in SSAF guidelines at all was the important contribution it makes to student well-being and representation. However, the specifics of the law and its implementation has gone so far awry that it needs correction. My own view is that such correction should happen in tandem with provisions that guarantee an appropriate portion of funds for representative association administrative functioning. The amount and the details of how this might all be framed is a matter that is surely best left to a finer-grained legislative design process.

Recommendation 2: *That amendments to Student Services and Amenities Fee provisions be developed and implemented, which would concurrently restore quality independent advocacy staffing levels, student association funding, and student representative support at universities across the country.*

Rebuilding Student Media

Designed and implemented well the above-outlined amendments to SSAF would reinvigorate campus student representation, advocacy, and some core elements of quality of campus life. There's an unfounded fear about potential messiness that might ensue, but really it's often the right kind of awkwardness that's generated. Here I think of the admirable courage and tenacity of women's rights campaigners who insisted there was a sexual consent and assault problem on campuses. What's largely forgotten now is that the movement that led to widespread acceptance that there's a problem and a need to take action to address it started with ill-received local activism and protest. I was aware of such actions and responses in relation to events at the University of Sydney, and because of early failed attempts to get consent modules built into student education. I remember well the resistance at the time. But eventually a dam wall burst and once it did a flood of incontrovertible and disturbing evidence has flowed out about what was really happening all along.

For any and all flaws institutions like the University of Sydney maintain a degree of small-l liberal tradition when it comes to free speech and debate. But just as crucial was the maintenance of some form of free student media. It is beyond resources available for preparing this submission to research what remains across the country of such media. It will suffice to say that the genuinely democratic model of *Honi Soit*, where editors are elected annually by the student body and publication has been continuous since 1929, is an exception that proves the general rule. Its existence is an anomaly that was one part of making the lives of women students coming through safer and better than they might have been. The absence in other places means equally pressing problems may fester and grow unchecked. Here I have an example in my new University, the University of New England.

Its student association newspaper, *Nucleus*, was established in 1947, but has only been published intermittently since VSU and no edition has been published online or in print for years. Meanwhile, within the town of Armidale, home to the University of New England's founding campus, the *Armidale Express* has become so reduced that its history of publication since 1856 is under threat. During the pandemic it was publishing twice a week and it's now down to a mere once weekly. Combine that situation with the ongoing absence of a genuinely functional student association, and it meant significant contemporary problems in the University didn't become public until the situation was so horrid as to be explosive. It's a matter of public record that the former Vice Chancellor was accused of criminal assault against a sixteen-year-old schoolgirl, in the wake of other disturbing alleged behaviour that has now been reported for anyone who wishes to look it up. Significantly, most of the original and researched reporting was conducted by the *Sydney Morning Herald*. The former Vice Chancellor denies the charges and the court matter is still pending resolution.

As much was bad enough, but in the same general period Safe Work NSW issued the institution with an Improvement Notice partly in the wake of an employee suicide. One will never know with certainty whether a more open culture, including the existence of a quality student representative association, genuinely critical and free student media, and more open and accountable governance, might have combined to catch issues earlier such that they never escalated into such a morass. But it's possible and perhaps even likely that it could have made a difference. As SSAF is currently framed it allows for funds to be diverted to student media, but there is no compulsion to do so. Given universities and not students have control over how to allocate funds from a range of options, it's only been in a relatively small sliver of examples that genuinely independent student media has continued to thrive. Even then it's constantly under threat.

Given the centrality of free media to the ongoing flourishing of open societies and democracies, legislation should be redesigned to encourage a reflowering of different forms of independent student media. Any short term and occasional discomfort would be outweighed by the multitude of short-, medium- and long-term benefits.

Recommendation 3: *That amendments to Student Services and Amenities Fee provisions be developed and implemented, which would encourage the re-establishment and re-development of a wide, varied, quality and rich democratic and independent student media landscape.*

National Advocacy and Representation

Nothing thus far permanently or fully resolves the core problem with which this submission commenced, being the question of the thinness of national student representation which threatens the very legitimacy of any Universities Accord. Instead, what has been proposed are three practical, pragmatic, and eminently achievable steps that might improve the Accord process and then take modest steps to re-build fair representation, advocacy, and free student media at the local university level. Over time it's entirely plausible that that would organically evolve and could either reinvigorate NUS and CAPA from the ground up, or alternatively lead to some or other reformed or re-formed bodies. I am open about what might be the best outcome for students in such a scenario, given so many factors can't be well-predicted so far in advance. I can, however, say that the amount of time required for that to organically unfold would be too long in our contemporary context.

Students can't wait for real representation and national leadership to evolve over years within an agreed Accord Process. They need immediate renewed and genuine leadership over the range of education, research, employment, housing, environmental, social justice, and welfare matters impacting them now. One of the reasons myself and my team were so stretched by the end of my tenure, was not just the proliferation of local committees and representative responsibilities students were then covering, but also that doing our jobs well implied staying abreast of the tidal wave of government discussion papers, think tank policy proposals, international reports, higher education research, and other reading required just to stay adequately on top of the field. Such demands multiply at the national level. Students need national representation to have the resources to engage professional staffing support, and for that to be re-established in a quality and substantial way. It needs to happen now.

One fair option would be to cordon off a proportion of SSAF from each student nationally, to go directly to national bodies such that they could then fund genuine research, advocacy, and representation. Such an amount should then be indexed to preserve its relative value year on year. I refrain from proposing a specific starting figure, given that inevitably invites stale and unhelpful early conversations about what a fair amount would be. Whatever the figure it would be miniscule compared to tuition fees and should be taken out of existing SSAF. One could conceive robust governance and electoral protocols being negotiated with national undergraduate and postgraduate representative bodies in exchange for proceeding down this path, perhaps involving the universal right to direct vote for university representatives to go onto governing councils, and certain minimum standards with respect to what will be delivered.

My own current view is that an affiliation model of national representation should be retained and renewed, so that there is an accountability link all the way from the leadership of national student bodies back to every last student on every last campus. Constitutional reform to achieve that end might be challenging, given the renewed funding model I've just proposed pulls in another direction, and suggests that national representative revenue streams should substantially come direct from students and not via affiliate bodies. There are challenges with making such a model work. However, those challenges are not beyond the possibility of quality resolution. Whatever the specifics of such a model in implemented form, in principle it's sound and fulfills a gaping present need.

Recommendation 4: *That amendments to Student Services and Amenities Fee provisions be developed and implemented, which would divert a modest but fair proportion of each student's fees to fund their national representation.*

Student Housing

I have long regretted that I did not move out of home earlier and as an undergraduate. When I first studied at university in the 1990s it was already difficult to do so in a city like Sydney, but not yet excruciating hard in the way that it is for many today. When I first worked on campus at the University of Sydney and finally moved into a two-bedroom unit with my partner in Sydney's inner west, it cost us \$225 per week in the early 2000s. On today's market that same basic unit would likely cost \$600 per week or more. The modest equivalent within walking distance of campus might be about \$800 per week. Even at relatively more affluent institutions that is wildly unaffordable for many, including for international students and those moving from far away. It's now an endemic problem across metropolitan and regional institutions alike. Within previous case figures, remembering that this would only have gotten worse since my last employment in the field, tenancy and accommodation issues had surged from being virtual non-entities within case mix to being amongst the top issues students sought assistance for. As much was a direct reflection of the changed environment.

It's difficult to conceive that universities individually or else within a sector-wide Accord could shift the global situation much. However, this is now such an acute existential issue for students that I believe a long-term Accord should ameliorate the most acute areas of need. One part of a solution might be a system where every international or distant student at every institution in the country was guaranteed accommodation of a certain quality and at a certain price point with their enrolment. This cannot be beyond the imagination or implementation capacity within universities, particularly given one is likely talking about a cost-recovery scenario where overall institutional costs might be zero or minimal. The status quo at present where a student coming to a metropolitan centre can feel forced to share black-market accommodation with many more people than can legally, safely, and comfortably live in a residence just to make it affordable is unjust.

This situation in places like Sydney exposes students to health and safety risks, damages their studies, and leads to reputational damage as and when they return news to their home origins. This form of insecurity also corrodes the potential for the community development goals that sit at the heart of this submission. Students who are scrambling and struggling just to get by in sub-standard and insecure accommodation, are not typically in a position to fully engage in club, society, representation, and community development that is so beneficial to the overall university experience. Local, State and Federal levels of government have a role here. But my view is that universities could and should be doing more than they presently are, starting with the most precarious end of the student accommodation spectrum with modest guarantees that would make a difference.

Recommendation 5: *That provisions be developed for the guarantee of quality low-cost student accommodation for, at a minimum, students who are moving beyond certain defined domestic limits to study at the relevant institution, and those who are international students relocating from overseas.*

Income Assistance

Any fair Accord with students must address income support. I restrict myself to commenting on the contemporary situation with postgraduates. It's here where I have the most experience, even if I note that analogous problems exist with undergraduate students as well. Also, I leave aside the question of the adequacy of government payments. They are woefully inadequate, but I will leave it to others to devise comment and solution to such problems. One key problem for many coursework postgraduates is that they don't have fair access to support at all. As some relevant background, at a local level I was involved in campaigning to have Austudy and Youth Allowance extended to postgraduate masters and doctoral students in both coursework and research programs. Here one must remember that Austudy provisions were introduced in 1973 when relatively few completed university degrees let alone went on to postgraduate studies. By the 2000s that had radically changed. Postgraduate qualifications were either highly desirable or necessary in a swathe of professional fields. The campaigning, led by CAPA but supported by affiliate organisations such as the one I worked for, was successful in obtaining Austudy and Youth Allowance for professional coursework masters programs, with a commitment to progressively extend assistance to all masters degrees.

The commitment was given under the Rudd-Gillard government and prior to the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) of 2008. Professional coursework masters and doctoral income support was implemented, such that those studying Juris Doctors, or Doctor of Medicine, or Master of Social Work or any one of a number of such professional postgraduate degrees could obtain income support. However, in the wake of the GFC the rest of the agenda was not implemented. It should be now. Students pursue postgraduate studies in all manner of fields, but typically do so as either a bridge to higher degree research or else a path to employment prospects. The payment eligibility distinction between professional and other master's and doctoral coursework degrees is unhelpful and unjust, in a context where all manner of different non-professional programs might be needed for one's professional development. The world has changed so profoundly since the 1970s that extending payments updates the program to fulfill the fair widening-participation intent which it was always designed to meet.

It has been argued cogently that the original introduction of income support measures was as important if not more so than abolishing fees when it comes to widening Australian university participation. It should now be extended to fulfill an updated version of that mission.

Recommendation 6: *That to continue to widen participation in higher education and give access to sufficient development opportunities, all coursework masters and doctorate programs should be made eligible for relevant Austudy or Youth Allowance payments.*

Research Stipends

By the time a research student commences their masters or doctorate they will have typically studied for four to six years full time equivalent, completing a 3–4-year bachelor program plus 1 year of honours and/or a 1-2 year masters. For the bulk of students who are not wealthy it's a long period to already be living on low rates of income support, perhaps supplemented by low paid part time work and familial support where it's available. For those who come out the other end of this process with admission to a research student candidature they have proven themselves academically. But they then face woefully low rates of stipend availability in some areas, allied with stipend incomes so low as to threaten the very viability of important research. For those who win a stipend the standard income rate is currently below the Henderson Poverty Line. In 2022 that line was \$616.62 per week for a single person including housing, or \$32,064 per year. The standard stipend rate in 2022 was only \$28,854.

Admirably, in 2022 the Vice Chancellor of the Australian National University raised the above-mentioned rate by over \$5,000 to take it \$34,000. His reasoning was that the rate was manifestly inadequate. He was right but more needs to be done at a government level. The rates referenced are standard figures set for the Federal Government Research Training Stipend. In turn and if one goes far enough back to the early foundation of that stipend under predecessor schemes, it was originally set at 85% of a research assistant wage and was tax free. In other words, it was set at a point that recognised that higher degree research is the equivalent to full time employment, and indeed in many circumstances candidates undertake research activities broadly like research staff.

Those who have managed to prove themselves through 4-6 years' worth of study and have likely survived earlier financial hardships, should finally have a proper wage for their higher degree research so they can truly flourish. Note that I have refrained from calling for Austudy and Youth Allowance to be extended to research students, even though CAPA and my previous organisation were successful in getting a Federal Senate Committee recommendation to that effect in the 2000s. Things really needed to go further than that. Research students are the workhorses of Australia's research and innovation push, and as such a central driving force in the whole country's flourishing. It's a minimal thing to ask that they finally receive the equivalent of a real and proper wage, commensurate with the enormous contribution they make.

Recommendation 7: *That higher degree research stipend numbers be radically increased to meet the needs of the expanded research student population, and that rates be adjusted such that they are the equivalent to a real and fair wage and not below the poverty line as is currently the case.*

Tuition Fees and Debt Relief

A fair Universities Accord process implies that manifest injustices past and present will be remediated. In societies like Australia which have gone wildly down one direction with respect to tuition fee increases, it further implies a reversal of such excesses. My own view is that Australia should move back towards free university tuition, given Germany did so after briefly dabbling with HECS-style charges, given New Zealand is in the process of doing so, and given Australian higher education is expensive against other comparable countries that do charge fees. Australian students typically pay more in Commonwealth Supported Place rates than their counterparts in the United Kingdom. In the United States the Biden administration has made some inroads into making the first years of college education free. Meanwhile in Chile, with the most privatised higher education system in the OECD, a former student activist who got into parliament campaigning for free education and against their high-fee regime has become President. People forget that before a bungling campaign Jeremy Corbyn's Labour in the United Kingdom had a wildly popular policy of free university education and debt relief.

Change in this area has been claimed as impossible but it is not, as actual and implemented international examples and potential future ones already show. Making tuition free and providing debt relief is a question of political will and the will to implement fair intergenerational arrangements. To build a scenario that is, sadly, all too real, it is wildly unfair that a student studying today might have more than a hundred thousand dollars of debt depending on degree program and path, graduate to earn a salary that is at a rate that's been stagnate for decades, but then faces the herculean challenge of saving a deposit for an average home that's 12-15 times annual average earnings, all the while paying exorbitant rental on a place that's the third investment property of a near-retiree who received a free tertiary education, whose properties are part funded by express and generous tax concessions, whose share portfolio is supplemented by enormous franking credits, and who purchased their first home when average prices were 2-3 times annual average earnings.

This situation is socially divisive as well as manifestly unfair. One modest step back towards a fairer arrangement might be to choose the New Zealand route for undergraduate education. In that context they first made one year of university free for new commencers, then two years some period later, and then more is to come. Postgraduate education is harder because the Postgraduate Education Loan Scheme (PELS) was implemented in 2001, giving access to loans for domestic students and so stimulating the demand side of the education equation, but without price controls in relation to supply of degrees. The result was a predictable and progressive explosion of demand and price that has proceeded apace for decades. In this sphere some form of national pricing authority similar to the situation in Private Health might be worth exploring, as a first measure towards getting degree costs back down.

Discussions and debates in this area often get overcomplicated and lack a kind of cut-through rationale for action, and so I close this section by attempting to offer one. It's now largely unquestioned that all children should have access to free or virtually free public education for 13 years. Private schools might be more predominant than at one point and there might be all kinds of pressures on this system, but all the same it's been generally accepted for decades that public free access is necessary to facilitate a fair chance to participate in the modern economy, and to fulfill one's duties in the contemporary world as a citizen. But the world has gotten immensely more complicated over the same decades. Extending the rationale in 2023, there's a solid principles-based argument that one needs to stretch access to free public education through at least an undergraduate degree, to achieve the same equity and equality outcomes which were once universally agreed.

Recommendation 8: *That tuition fee reduction and debt relief measures be explored and implemented, including a progressive return to free undergraduate education, significant and serious price amelioration measures in postgraduate coursework education, and widespread debt relief.*

Employment

Between recent pursuit by the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU), the Fair Work Ombudsman, and Auditors General amongst others, universities have been under sustained pressure regarding millions in underpayment to casuals. Decent proportions of those underpaid were postgraduates. Given my previous work and current studies I have been pleased to see some injustices rectified. The problem is that it does not go nearly far enough. Speaking at a broad level the injustices that have been fixed have tended to be calculation errors where some or other demonstrable mistake in mechanical application of agreement terms has been made. The scale of the errors are mind-boggling, with extreme power differences between casuals and their employing institutions helping to explain how errors went unchecked. But there are other substantive issues still to be fully explored underneath.

Chronic under-classification of casual and sessional employee roles comes up time and again for students, but in the absence of more checks and balances to ensure that such large employers have their classifications checked by sufficiently robust auditing oversight, one reasonably suspects this kind of problem will keep repeating. Meanwhile, the other substantial postgraduate-relevant employment area which is still not resolved is the issue of genuine and fair academic career opportunities post-graduation. Not every doctoral graduate wants to enter academia. By now the doctorate is recognised as a highly desirable qualification in certain senior areas of civil service, in business and entrepreneurship, as well as in academia. All the same genuine and fair academic career paths should still be available.

The Discover Early Career Research Award (DECRA) has become so competitive and there are so relatively few places relative to demand, that there's a fair impression it's partially turned into a mid-career style of award. Meanwhile local institutional pathways for secure and supported early career options are thin in some fields, particularly in the Humanities and Social Sciences. Any student-sensitive Accord outcome should grapple with these current employment challenges, and grapple to turn them around. Pleasingly, there is some progress to note insofar as some institutions have implemented substantial steps to engage long term casuals as ongoing staff. That is a step in the right direction, but the scale and scope of action needs radical expansion.

Recommendation 9: *That measures be implemented to address persistent and ongoing gaps in the treatment of casual university staff, to increase the conversion of ongoing casual and sessional roles to ongoing positions, and to create more early career researcher pathways across the full range of institutional intellectual inquiry.*

Reinvigorating the Humanities

The Humanities deserve special attention because of Job Ready reforms which more than doubled Humanities tuition fees for undergraduate students, making them virtually full fee paying and virtually free of any government funding. That situation should be resolved as part of fee reduction efforts indicated above. However just doing that doesn't necessarily resolve some of the underlying prejudices which led to this situation in the first place, with the leading one being that we need Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) graduates but not those with degrees in fields like Philosophy and Literature. Intriguingly, the Job Ready process got self-contradictory as it tried to carve out languages as a Humanities exception, correctly reasoning that one needed to have languages to do business, diplomacy, and engagement across the world, but missing that the fluent acquirement of a language and associated cultural competency often requires in-depth Humanities study.

What's happened since Job Ready passed is that universities languages departments have suffered cuts along with other areas of the Humanities. It's a form of self-defeating self-destruction. As Humanities and languages capacity trickles out of universities so does invaluable expertise and capacity of real practical value to society. Drawing on examples I am familiar with, Philosophy study was supposed to be a useless exercise and yet in direct or indirect ways I tend to use skills and critical thinking capacity from that study virtually every day of my life. Graduate outcomes results show that in this and other areas of Humanities post-graduation employment rates are comparable with STEM, making the whole Job Ready premise an elaborate furphy. Meanwhile in my current areas of graduate study I'm seeking to understand one part of the migrant home-formation process in Italy, as one of the advanced world's migration hot spots. As much is strongly worthwhile and contributes to society.

I don't yet know what I will find, but in what is sometimes called The Age of Migration I am continuing to give back just as I have my whole life. To have it suggested that this kind of contribution is somehow not worthwhile leads me to push back hard. If I was to exaggerate an argument in the other direction just a fraction, I would say that STEM has given us the power to destroy the world multiple times over, either at the push of a nuclear button or else more slowly through reckless and destructive ongoing use of the technology we now possess, but it has not given us the wisdom to manage and control that power. It's put iPhones in our pockets that let us communicate instantly with every corner of the world and access mountains of information instantly, but we have used that capacity to invent social media interactions which are presently ripping apart the civil foundations of shared society. Meanwhile, so immature is our collective ability to use that technology for human flourishing that one in five mobile searches is for pornography, not other mind and knowledge broadening endeavours.

One should not misunderstand my intent here, as the open discussion and enjoyment of mutually consensual erotic life should be celebrated, not prudishly condemned because of unjustified discomfort with the human body and its sexuality within the western mindset. I just don't think that's what's going on here. Study and diffusion of the Humanities, broadly understood and widely applied, is part of what gives one hope that we might yet renovate all manner of social, political, literary, and other institutions to thrive. From this perspective we desperately need poets, writers, philosophers, film makers, and much else besides that might be able to fire human imaginations in more productive directions in order to tame STEM. Whilst it's tempting to then go one step further and assert the supremacy of the Humanities over STEM, in fact it was and always should be a partnership in flux and without such unhelpful, artificial, and simplistic hierarchies. The artificial dividing lines and the denigration of something so central to human and broader flourishing must stop and remedial steps should begin.

Recommendation 10: *That any and all reasonable steps are taken to restore the fair and crucial role of the Humanities and languages in Australia's universities, including but not limited to ensuring sharp expansion of program and staffing capacity, reversing any and all artificial disincentives to study including regressive tuition fee structures, and promoting renewed scholarship.*

Reinvigorating Languages

One intriguing side issue to come up within the Job Ready package was the peculiar treatment of languages. On the one hand they were cordoned off from the rest of the Humanities, in the sense that they were not defunded and student price-penalties for enrolling in them do not apply. Minister Tehan's reasoning related directly to their employment-generating capacity, in the sense that he recognised that his own lack of a second or third language was an impediment to his diplomatic career. All that is well and good, but the impression widely held within languages areas is that despite intending to encourage more studies things have gone the other way. Staff have been lost and my understanding is that enrolment is soft.

If that impression is correct, then it invites reflection on how it might be turned around. After all, even the previous anti-Humanities conservative government could see that one needed more citizens with higher level foreign language skills, if people were going to be prepared for future jobs and able to communicate across an increasingly multi-polar and complex world. Even they could see it was in the national interest. But one can't so easily disconnect a language and language learning from that language's literature, its poetry, its film, and its broader culture. It's necessary to obtain a good modicum of that in order to be able to communicate effectively. Merely learning foreign words is not enough.

A renewed approach to languages should begin from this more nuanced premise. It should imagine that the process of obtaining additional languages is a long-term, literature and culture rich, sustained empathy building exercise that inherently implicates the Humanities. Such studies should be encouraged together, and the rich benefits that come celebrated rather than scorned. My own current area is Italian Studies and for my purposes nothing short of exemplary fluency across reading, writing and comprehension will suffice. To get there has implicated reading Dante's *Divine Comedy*, a masterpiece of early modern vernacular literature with an early use of the first-person 'I' and a story of trial and overcoming that speaks across ages and across cultures.

Petrarch's vernacular love sonnets are sublime and influenced Shakespeare amongst many others. Boccaccio's *Decameron* was a surprise best-seller in the middle of lockdown, given its short stories are narrated by the youth of Florence sheltering from the devastating 1348 plague. I would challenge anyone to read it seriously and not find resonances and learning given what we have recently been through. Meanwhile Ariosto's *Orlando furioso* is a sixteenth century epic poem with such provocative, liberating, and scandalous women-centric erotic overtones in its middle, that it needed to be buried there and covered over with the second half of this enormous tale. Its fearsome women knights and hyper-intelligent strong princesses seem more and not less relevant now. There is much to be learned by students now through keeping all this on curricula.

On yet another Italian Studies front there's a whole under-explored Australian history in Italian yet to be fully written because there are simply not enough scholars and expertise. The story of Italian migration more fully understood and more fully told is an integral part of Australian history. We should study it in order to learn from it, particularly with one million Australians of Italian descent and around 400,000 presently studying the language at some or other level. Italian is an Australian language and should retain a strong presence in universities. But then similar can and should be said for Hindi, Urdu, Arabic, Mandarin, and a plethora of other foreign languages, before even starting on the necessity to increase knowledge of Australia's Indigenous languages.

These are all Australian languages and are implicated in different but related Australian cultures, which we have not fully explored let alone fully understood and celebrated. Studies in such areas play a role in continuing to bring communities together. For these and many more reasons, the study of languages and the development of Humanities around them should be deeply encouraged. Indeed, I can hardly think of a more worthy area for focus and development within the context of an aspirational forward looking Universities Accord.

Recommendation 11: *That a comprehensive, nationally coordinated, well-funded and high-quality languages and cultures promotion program be implemented, such that scholarship and study of non-English languages blossoms and expands across the period of a transformational Universities Accord.*