



ACADEMY OF
THE SOCIAL SCIENCES
IN AUSTRALIA

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AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITIES ACCORD: TERMS OF REFERENCE

ACADEMY OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES IN
AUSTRALIA SUBMISSION TO:

**THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
ON BEHALF OF THE REVIEW PANEL**



Initial Submission to the Australian Universities Accord

Overview

As the first comprehensive review of the sector in almost 20 years, the Australian Universities Accord has the potential to ensure lasting reform of the higher education sector with as much if not more impact than the previous Bradley Review (2008) and the *Higher Education at a Crossroads* Review (2002). Specifically, the Accord provides an opportunity to:

- reset community, business, government and academic expectations about the value, values, and purpose of higher education and research
- to streamline and ‘right-size’ university funding, policy, and regulation on a long-term basis with clear goals and staged milestones
- to embed equity and diversity across the sector
- to rationalise and integrate the form and function of our universities, with consideration for their role in shaping Australian society and our place in the world.

The Academy suggests five issues to be key priorities for consideration by the Panel:

1. Reaffirm and reinforce **international links and global approaches** of Australian universities
2. **Regulatory frameworks and funding models** that ensure differentiation and value-add rather than impose a tendency to uniformity across Australian universities
3. A **research ecosystem** that allows universities to act **as producers of world-class knowledge, innovation, and capacity development** within a more efficient national research enterprise
4. Policies and funding that encourage universities to stay at the forefront of **teaching and learning science and technology**
5. **Ensuring equity and diversity** of opportunity and inclusion across university education, research, and administration.

These five priorities cut across the seven key areas in the scope of the review as follows:

Review key area (7)	Academy priorities (5)				
	Internatio- nal Links	Models & Regulation	Research Ecosystems	Educational Connections	Equity & Diversity
1. Knowledge & Skills	X		X		X
2. Access & Opportunity				X	X
3. Investment & Affordability		X	X		
4. Governance, Accountability, & Community		X		X	X
5. VET and Higher Education Connections				X	
6. Quality & Sustainability	X	X			
7. Knowledge, Innovation, & Capability	X		X		

Priorities, challenges and opportunities

In this submission, for each priority area the Academy (1) indicates the reason it is a priority, (2) points to selected issues and concerns, (3) suggests some possible options for progress, and (4) links to the main key areas.

Priority 1: International Links and Global Approaches

Universities have played an important role in Australia's approach to and engagement with the world, through research interactions and partnerships, through the education of foreign students, and through the offshore education of Australian students.

Over the past two decades, however, the revenue associated with international students appears to have become the actual focus for institutions. This was highlighted by the sudden onset of COVID-19 related border closures and policies that appeared to discriminate against foreign students living in Australia. At the same time, diplomatic tensions have led to increasing difficulties with collaborative research engagement across borders, while immigration policy and highly visible political intervention in research grant decisions have created avoidable challenges for Australian researchers looking to employ and collaborate with international colleagues.

For these and other reasons, Australia appears to have lost its way in terms of the short-, medium-, and long-term direction and benefits of international links and global approaches involving universities.

The Academy considers that there would be substantial benefit in an Accord that encouraged a move from short-term to long-term strategy, prioritising socio-cultural exchange and mutual influence over international student revenue and emphasising Australia's place in a global system of knowledge generation and exchange. In doing so, the Accord could be transformative in supporting Australia's diplomatic objectives, and universities could more obviously assist in re-establishing Australia's position and reputation as an open and collaborative global knowledge society.

This priority aligns with key areas 1, 6 and 7 set out for the Accord.

Priority 2: University Models and Regulatory Environment

Australia's 43 universities, and particularly our 36 public universities operate in a competitive market for students, staff, rankings, and revenue. These pressures, along with increasingly rigid regulatory and funding frameworks and standardisation of enterprise agreements and strategic planning have seen a progressive increase in uniformity across our higher education institutions.

This uniformity, sometimes obscured by a focus on minor points of differentiation, is not in the interests of a low-population nation like Australia. It leads to significant differences between organisations in the quality of research or teaching, while leaving substantial gaps in availability of strategically important but less visible training and research areas.

The Accord provides an opportunity to reconsider what is needed by way of regulation and funding to allow universities to develop genuinely different strategic and operational aims and purposes, with these aims and purposes being appropriately communicated, supported, and celebrated within Australia.

This priority aligns with key areas 3, 4 and 6 set out for the Accord.

Priority 3. Research Ecosystem and Future Innovations

The generation, integration, application, and communication of knowledge through basic and applied research and through various partnerships is a critical function of Australian universities and plays an incalculably valuable role in shaping and securing Australia's future.

However, funding for university-based research is fragmented across the major government funding councils, institutional and philanthropic funders, government and industry contracts, and state and territory bodies, as well as across international sources. Each of these funding sources has a different and distinct bureaucracy, as well as different priorities and approaches towards knowledge generation and transfer, training and commercialisation, collaboration and reporting.

Whereas some of this diversity in funding and purpose is vital, the fragmented and disjointed research ecosystem in which Australian universities currently operate is highly inefficient in terms of human and financial resources, and likely not optimally serving the interests of researchers or Australian society.

Noting the several related reviews currently underway, the Accord and the Australian Government must give consideration to how to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the research ecosystem. Such consideration could involve more explicit public-private funding, a greater focus on funding some but not all universities for research, and a longer-term approach to positioning Australia's excellence in particular aspects of research and scholarship.

This priority aligns with key areas 1, 3 and 7 set out for the Accord.

Priority 4. Educational Connections and Learning Developments

Education is the key to the health and wellbeing of individuals, communities, societies, and nations, and Australian universities have played an essential role in serving this function for almost 100 years.

However, the world is changing, with rapid developments in educational science and technology meaning that universities are now competing in a more crowded educational marketplace involving private-sector training as well as many more online and international offerings.

Further, the difficulties faced by universities in interacting with primary and secondary schools and with vocational education and training bodies, and the sometimes-reactive approach to curriculum improvement and academic staff development by university governance and management are all issues that are limiting Australia's higher education sector from delivering on its potential.

To continue to serve their function of training and educating Australia's future professionals, innovators and citizens, Australian universities must evolve in ways that allow them to play an even greater and more proactive role in educational connections and learning developments.

The Accord provides an opportunity to consider policies and funding that would allow Australian universities to move to the forefront of learning developments. This could be achieved through appropriate government policy and funding, as well as social compacts with universities, to better position Australia's universities in terms of being ahead of the game in terms of learning and teaching science and technology.

This priority aligns with key areas 2, 4 and 5 set out for the Accord.

Priority 5: Equity and Diversity

Assuring equitable access to higher education opportunities and support for all Australians, regardless of background, postcode, religion, race or ability is vital. This is not only because it is a moral imperative for any developed society, but because it is a necessary condition for the long-term sustainability of Australia's social and economic future.

At present, however, the fragmented nature of funding of and ongoing support for students within and across institutions, community perceptions about the risks and benefits of higher education for those from diverse backgrounds, and the sometimes seemingly superficial embrace of equity and diversity policy and activity by university governance and management all appear to be issues of concern.

The Academy considers that a renewed approach is needed to advance equity and diversity in universities. This could involve appropriate legislation and regulation, targeted funding with appropriate success indicators, and active information and encouragement of relevant communities to engage with higher education.

This priority aligns with key areas 1, 2 and 4 set out for the Accord.

Concluding note

At a high level, the Academy observes that a successful Universities Accord will require a future-focus that is in the interests of Australia as a whole, with explicit legislative, regulatory, and financial drivers.

It will also require an explicitly planned and appropriately implemented approach that crosses layers of federal and state government, university governance and management.

Finally, it will require active communication to ensure community and individual understanding of the place, value, and direction of universities in Australia.