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OF WOLLONGONG
AUSTRALIA

Professor Mary O’Kane
Chair, Australian Universities Accord
Higher Education Division
Australian Government Department of Education

Friday 1st September, 2023

Dear Professor Mary O’Kane and the Australian Universities Accord Panel,

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the University Accord’s Interim Report. This submission is from the University of Wollongong (UOW)’s Student Advisory Council (SAC).

We would like to thank the Accord Panel for their commitment to redesigning a higher education system that enables every student to succeed and we strongly endorse the immediate action of the five priority areas, particularly the cessation of the 50% fail rate as it was having a punitive impact on our student body.

The SAC represents all students studying at UOW’s Australian onshore campuses. We are a formal advisory board to the Vice-Chancellor, with student leaders proactively engaging with staff and students to positively impact decision making and the student experience. Formed in May 2018, the SAC provides UOW’s leadership with greater ability to hear and respond to the wider student voice. We put forward the following four key ideas for consideration of the Accord Panel to inform the Final Report:

1. Students to be engaged as partners, with the student voice shaping the future of the Australian higher education system.
2. Addressing student poverty.
3. Purpose and use of the Student Services Amenities Fee (SSAF).
4. Increasing the employability of international students, improving their student experience.

(1) Engaging students as partners, with the student voice shaping the future of the Australian higher education system.

In section 3.2.4 *Enhancing and Empowering the Student Voice*, of its interim report, the Accord panel highlights the power imbalance between students and influential stakeholders such as universities, peak bodies, government and industry. However, the interim reports focuses largely on reactive measures to capture student feedback and complaints, rather than proactive measures that enable students to inform change to the broader student experience.

Many universities have successfully embedded the student voice into their governance and decision making, through advisory councils and various other forms of student representation. Whilst these models are still maturing, there is an absence of a national student voice in informing higher education policy and ensuring a national approach to student representation at a university level.

There are a number of examples of formal national and state-based structures that elevate the student voice in educational policy and decision making. These include, the NSW Minister’s Student Council ([DOVES](#)) who provide advice on education and school based policy, as well as feedback to aid in the planning and development of department programs. Another example is the [Student Partnerships in Quality Scotland](#), a publicly funded agency that supports universities nationally in improving the quality of the learning experience.

Whilst some of the challenges for students to successfully access and succeed in their university studies are systemic, as outlined in the Accord Discussion Paper, others are situational and will evolve over time. The higher education policy and system needs to be responsive to the changing and evolving needs of students. Therefore, we believe that there is a need for an enduring student voice at a Federal Government level to address these challenges as they arise over time.



Recommendation 1

A National Student Advisory Council is established to inform the development of current and future higher education policy and programs as part of the Tertiary Education Commission.

The National Student Advisory would be a direct communication channel to government and would be representative of students from a diverse range of backgrounds and higher education institutions.

(2) Addressing student poverty

Section 2.3.3.1 *Addressing the need for adequate financial support*, of the interim report highlights the challenges experienced by students in balancing study with the cost of living, specifically identifying rising rents and the need for students to undertake higher levels of work.

Whilst there are a range of financial support schemes that students can access, such as Youth Allowance, AUSTUDY and ABSTUDY, as well as institutional level scholarship schemes and national scholarships (such as the Tertiary Access Payment), this presents a complex system of financial supports that students need to navigate to secure a definitive picture of the income that they will receive to engage with their studies.

It is particularly important to note that financial pressures can greatly impact the Federal Government's national efforts to increase access and participation to university amongst underrepresented student cohorts. Unresolved cost burdens can see students from underrepresented backgrounds, including students from low-income families, leave university due to work-study imbalances, or even face outright educational entry barriers. These burdens can be further inflated with unpaid work experience that is required of some degrees, diminishing a student's ability to financially support themselves.

For international students, financial support is further complicated by the cap on part-time work arrangements, and for HDR students the base scholarship combined with work restrictions disadvantages both the student, as well as impacts the pipeline for researchers and innovation in Australia.

In Germany, a universal basic income is provided to university students, as part of a research project to understand how this would impact student engagement. This provides students with the capacity to engage with their studies, reduces the need for full-time work and mitigates against current issues of placement poverty. This connects with the concept of a Universal Learning Entitlement outlined in the Accord Discussion Paper. It is essential that this financial aid supports studying students, while also ensuring sustained academic progression.

Recommendation 2

Working with students as partners, to develop a universal basic income for university students, including HDR students, to engage in their higher education studies.

Remove capped working arrangements for international students.

(3) Reviewing the guidelines for SSAF

Section 3.2.3 *Institutions have a duty of care to students*, of the interim report discusses the distribution of the SSAF to student unions and organisations, which is at the discretion of universities and creates an uneven power dynamic. Whilst universities must consult students in allocating SSAF, more could be undertaken in ensuring the effectiveness of SSAF funding in enhancing the student experience.

SSAF funding should be utilised to enhance the student experience, as opposed to utilising the funds for core services that the university should itself provide. Whilst the SSAF Guidelines articulate the areas that SSAF should be spent on, the areas that include *'the health and welfare of students; employment and advice on careers; and study skills development; and orientation'*, there should be an agreed base minimum service that universities are required to provide



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through their recurrent funding, allowing SSAF to be utilised as a “value-add”. Relying on SSAF to fund core services poses a significant risk to the continuity of services should SSAF funds decline (due to a decrease in EFTSL, which can be caused by financial pressures).

The Student Services, Amenities, Representation and Advocacy Guidelines identify that students should be consulted on SSAF expenditure in the following ways:

- (1) publishing identified priorities for proposed fee expenditure and allowing opportunities to comment on those priorities by students, student councils, and student associations and organisations; and
- (2) meeting with democratically elected student representatives and representatives from major student organisations and councils at the university to consider the priorities for use of fee revenue.

We believe that SSAF priorities should be identified in partnership with students, prior to publishing the identified priorities, and there should be increased emphasis on SSAF funded projects being designed and implemented in partnership with students. More broadly, there is a need for further consideration to address the imbalances in decision making on SSAF expenditure.

There have been some examples of good practice at UOW, where there are more robust processes for SSAF consultation that exceeds the requirements of the Guidelines. This includes initial surveying with students to determine the priorities and the establishment of a Students as Partners Framework to implement student partnership across the institution. The existing Guidelines do not provide a robust mechanism for student consultation for SSAF expenditure.

Recommendation 3

Review the SSAF guidelines with an increased focus on student partnerships, positioning SSAF as a value add to enhancing the student experience, and ensuring sustainable revenue to support SSAF funded services that improve the student experience.

(4) Improving employability of international students

Section 3.2.3.3 *Institutions have a duty of care to students*, of the interim report, speaks at length about the induction of international students and enhancing preparedness to live and study in Australia. There was reference here to the Government’s Migration Review, which outlines the need to provide faster pathways to permanent residence for graduates, and to invest in education to address industry attitudes to hiring international students and job brokerage to provide international students with employment opportunities during study and post university completion.

Recommendation 4

Extend the proposed National Job Broker program to including objectives around increased employment opportunities for international students and adopt the recommendations from the Government’s Migration Review.

Thank you for considering this submission and for the ongoing work on the University Accord. Please contact me if you have questions or wish to discuss any of the points made herein.

Kind Regards,

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