

Australian Catholic University

Feedback

Australian Greens Consultation The University of the Future: Higher Education Built on Democracy and Equity

January 2022

1. What policy proposal excites you the most?

As a public university with a distinct mission that expresses a fundamental concern for social justice and the dignity of all human beings, Australian Catholic University (ACU) firmly believes that university education should be accessible to all. This reflects our strong commitment to realising the transformative power of education.

The discussion paper canvasses a number of policy proposals to support accessible university education for all Australians. ACU sees merit in some of these proposals, such as reviewing study support payment levels to ensure they remain fit for purpose and investing in university infrastructure to provide more accessible higher education facilities across our universities.

An increased level of Commonwealth funding for universities, reducing the burden on students, would also be welcomed.

2. What does ‘democratising universities’ mean to you?

‘Democratising universities’ means:

- facilitating an equal opportunity for all Australians to access higher education;
- a commitment to widening university participation and outcomes for all socioeconomic groups; and
- promoting an inclusive university environment.

At ACU, we actively work towards these objectives, and encourage an inclusive learning and working environment that respects and values individual difference.

In recent years, ACU has intensified its efforts to ensure a university education is accessible to equity groups and areas that are under-served by higher education. This encompasses not only regional areas, but also some outer-metropolitan areas and areas of high population growth.

ACU’s decision, for example, to open a new campus in Blacktown last year – at the height of the pandemic – aligns strongly with the university’s mission and commitment to supporting equity in, and access to, higher education. Western Sydney is currently significantly under-served by higher education providers: while 50 per cent of Greater Sydney’s population lives in Western Sydney, only 18 per cent of university places are located in Western Sydney. This represents a genuine geographical barrier to participation in higher education.

ACU’s course offerings at Blacktown will also reflect areas of demand in the local community, including the university’s recognised world class research and teaching strengths in health and education. This will help meet the growing demand for locally-trained nurses, midwives, allied health professionals and teachers to staff the hospitals, health clinics and schools of Western Sydney.

Improving educational access is a complex policy area which is multi-faceted and influenced not only by immediate cost factors but also by environmental and socioeconomic considerations. This includes educational barriers from school-level, family influences shaping students’ aspirations, and geographic barriers, which require other long-term policy interventions such as educational outreach activities and targeted support services. Initiatives such as the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program have already made progress in these areas and warrant further support and enhancement.

Fundamentally, we must avoid myopic views of the role of universities in society. There is a risk of this occurring when debates on universities and university funding narrowly focus on the immediate “economic” benefits they produce. Universities’ contributions to society are much broader than this.

The focus on stopgap measures to fill current skills shortages, and policies tying critical university funding to the delivery of outcomes that may be influenced more by political imperatives rather than evidence-based reasoning, is counter-productive in this respect.

Universities’ contributions to the community span teaching, research and community engagement, all of which are important to the social, cultural and economic development of the state, and to the nation more broadly. Furthermore, the interconnection between universities’ activities in teaching, research, and community engagement is important and multi-dimensional, as are the flow-on benefits to the community from higher education.

Overall, greater recognition, support, and communication of the benefits and contributions of Australian universities to the community, economy, and national development is needed. This will be increasingly important as the nation seeks to recover from the ongoing impacts of the coronavirus pandemic on individuals and all aspects of society.

At ACU, for example, providing a holistic higher education to students is a priority. Community engagement is an integral part of the ACU student experience, and our students have the opportunity to participate in a community engagement activity as part of the University’s Core Curriculum.

By “community engagement”, we mean activities that build capacity and affirm human dignity through sustainable and reciprocal collaborations with communities who experience disadvantage or marginalisation. This supports students to develop compassion, empathy and understanding of the diverse communities we live in, gain real-world experience and transferable skills, learn to think critically and reflectively, and consider ethical perspectives and alternative viewpoints in decision making, all whilst contributing to social justice and the common good. We consider these are important qualities, skills and experiences to equip our students with, to help them successfully navigate their futures and make positive contributions to an ever-changing society and workforce.

In terms of funding arrangements, ACU considers that maintaining the HECS-HELP scheme, alongside a return to demand-driven funding, would provide the most effective architecture to support equitable access to university education in Australia, while also promoting sustainable and efficient resource allocation.

ACU notes recent remarks by Labor Education spokesperson Tanya Plibersek, who admitted that, as a student, she had protested against the introduction of HECS in the 1980s. She went on to acknowledge that she had since changed her view, arguing the HECS-HELP scheme has provided many more Australians – including many first-in-family students – with the opportunity to go to university, effectively democratising access to higher education. ACU shares this view.

HECS-HELP removes upfront financial barriers to university entry. As an income-contingent loan scheme, repayment is subject to an individual’s future earnings and thus capacity to pay. The scheme recognises the value to both the nation and individuals of higher education: a better-educated and highly-skilled workforce on the one hand and a significant premium in earning capacity on the other.

The demand driven funding system (2012-2017) enabled universities to nimbly respond to student demand for university places, while also having regard to workforce needs and institutional capacities to teach more students. This replaced the previous capped funding system, where the number of undergraduate university places – for every course at every institution – was centrally allocated by Commonwealth.

The impact of the demand driven funding system (DDS) across Australia has been significant, extending the opportunities (and flow-on benefits) of a university education to more than 220,000 Australians who would otherwise have missed out on a higher education, many being first-in-family to access university.

The DDS delivered many benefits for students, universities, industry and the community, including:

- increasing participation in, and access to, university;
- better meeting the skills needs of the economy;
- driving competition, diversity, innovation and efficiency within the sector; and
- sharpening universities' focus on students and learning and teaching quality.

There is a strong case for returning to a DDS.

3. How do you think we can best achieve our policy goals?

To effectively achieve the underlying intent of the discussion paper, namely to promote a university system “built on democracy and equity”, ACU considers it important for the Australian Greens to consult with the university sector and focus on policies that are practical and likely to have broad-based support.

To this end, ACU commends the Australian Greens for developing this discussion paper and engaging in an active consultation process.

If the Australian Greens wish to have a real impact on higher education policy, it will be necessary to ensure its policies are well thought-out and coherent.

ACU has historically offered the federal Opposition – including key shadow ministers and their policy staff – a briefing day, at which the university has made available its most senior executives (including our Vice-Chancellor) to provide confidential policy and operational insights and to answer questions about higher education policy. These briefing days have been developed in the interest of supporting good policy development and in recognition that non-Government parties do not have the departmental resources that are available to the Government of the day.

Greens Leader Adam Bandt is the local MP for ACU's Fitzroy campus – the university's largest campus – and we would be delighted to host Mr Bandt, your Education and Treasury & Finance spokespeople and policy advisers at any of our seven Australian campuses.

4. What are some of the challenges we are likely to face in campaigning for better universities?

ACU is concerned that the discussion paper gives insufficient consideration to the fiscal sustainability of its proposals, which diminishes the prospect of them being adopted by the Government of the day and implemented in practice.

Universally free higher education, for instance, is a laudable goal but, despite arrangements that may exist in some other countries, ACU does not believe that it is likely to be considered affordable nor have broad support in Australia.

The reality of competing political and budgetary priorities means that, were the Commonwealth to fully-fund university places, universities would:

- (a) receive *less* funding per-student;
- (b) receive less funding overall; and/or
- (c) be funded to educate fewer students, an outcome that would disproportionately favour higher socioeconomic students.

This outcome would risk reversing the significant progress the sector has made in widening university access across all socioeconomic and equity groups, and progressively improving educational quality.

5. How do we guarantee universities' independence while also ensuring they are democratic places that serve the public good?

The Higher Education Provider Category Standards (Standards) establish the regulatory framework upon which Australia's higher education providers, including universities, operate. The Standards, appropriately, reflect the following guiding principles with respect to Australian universities and their operations:

- Fundamental principles of institutional autonomy must be maintained for universities.
- The nexus between teaching, research and scholarship should be inviolable for universities.
- Universities fulfil, and should be expected to fulfil, important community service and community engagement obligations. These broader contributions to the community and society – locally, regionally, and nationally – should be considered an essential element of universities' unique social licence.

These principles were affirmed by the review of the Standards undertaken by Emeritus Professor Peter Coaldrake AO in 2019 (Coaldrake Review) and subsequently endorsed by the Federal Government. The Standards continue to serve an important function in ensuring the Australian higher education sector, particularly its world-class university sector, operates within a regulatory environment that upholds the independence of universities' while also ensuring they continue to serve the public good.

It is important that we maintain this balance and that a risk and standards based approach to quality assurance continues to be adopted when it comes to regulating universities' activities. The current regulatory provisions also recognise and support differentiation between higher education providers, and are guided by the principles of risk, proportionality and necessity.

The underpinning legislation – the *Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency Act 2011* (Cth) (TEQSA Act) – is the product of significant consultation and legislative refinement and promotes a light-touch approach to regulation which, appropriately, explicitly requires that TEQSA (as the national regulator of the higher education sector) does not burden a provider “any more than is reasonably necessary” when exercising its regulatory powers (TEQSA Act, s14). These provisions should be retained.

6. What do you think Australian universities can do to contribute to scholarship that is anti-racist?

Some general comments and observations can be made on Australian universities and their role in the contexts of promoting an inclusive higher education environment and balancing issues of scholarship, free speech and respectful scholarly debate.

Universities have an important role to play in promoting inclusive higher education. This encompasses extending the benefits of higher education across all socioeconomic groups and ensuring higher education is responsive to students' needs, including for equity groups and individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds (see response to Question 2).

The discussion paper raises some specific issues regarding supporting indigenous Australians' participation and representation in universities and, more broadly, a fairer representation of diversity on university campuses.

With respect to the participation of First Nations people in higher education, ACU endorses and implements the Indigenous Strategy developed by Universities Australia. The latest evaluation of the sector's implementation of the Strategy shows that strong progress has been made, but significant work remains (see Universities Australia Indigenous Strategy Annual Report (March 2021)).

At ACU, our learning and teaching centre provides support for academics to embed Indigenous perspectives into the curriculum. With respect to First Nations student support centres, ACU has transitioned staff from fixed term contracts that were contingent on receiving external funding to roles that provided continued employment and job security. Additionally, Indigenous Student Success Funding received is utilised to support student enrolments, unit success rates and course completions of Indigenous students.

With respect to issues bearing on academic freedom and freedom of expression, ACU notes that Australian universities are bastions of free speech, academic inquiry and scholarly debate. In democratic societies, universities in their everyday operations - whether it be teaching, learning, research or community engagement - play an important role in encouraging independent thought, the open contest of ideas and open debate.

The exercise of free speech, however, is not limitless. Important issues bearing on free speech and academic freedom have particularly been discussed and debated in recent times in the context of the independent review of freedom of speech in Australian higher education, undertaken by the Hon Robert French AC, former Chief Justice of the High Court of Australia (French Review).

7. Should we link government funding to our desired changes like greater security of employment?

Any tying of government funding to particular government policies would infringe upon the fundamental concept of university independence, including universities' capacity to manage their own financial resources and operations.

In 2020, the Federal Government announced its intention to make a percentage of universities' Commonwealth Grant Scheme funding subject to "performance" metrics. ACU opposed this policy at the time it was proposed for a number of reasons and, as a result of the coronavirus pandemic, it has not yet been implemented.