

Australian Catholic University

**Submission to the
Australian Universities Accord Panel
regarding its Terms of Reference**

December 2022

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Australian Catholic University (ACU) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the Terms of Reference (ToRs) for the Review of Australia's Higher Education System (the Review).

ACU notes the significant breadth of the review and the scale of the task before the Australian Universities Accord Panel (the Panel) to make substantive, meaningful and coordinated recommendations on all the matters put to the Panel for its consideration.

ACU approaches the review from a distinctive vantage point – as Australia's only truly multi-jurisdictional university and one which educates students in key areas of critical workforce shortage. This unique perspective provides ACU with first-hand experience of various Commonwealth and state/territory regulatory regimes, their interaction and their relative merits.

In that context, ACU offers the following views on areas of priority focus within the ToRs.

1. Meeting Australia's knowledge and skills needs, now and in the future

(a) Additional Commonwealth Supported Places to meet demand

ACU recommends the Panel focus on the growing quantitative skills shortage, noting the forecast workforce demand for Australians with university qualifications.

According to the ABS population projections, the number of 18-year-olds in Australia is projected to jump by 17 per cent – or 55,000 – by 2030 when compared with 2021.

At current rates of university participation, and when combined with the number of future jobs that will require at least a bachelor-level degrees, this will create demand for tens of thousands more university places by the end of this decade.¹

While acknowledging the current the fiscal environment, ACU notes that this demand – which reflects Australia's ambitions to be a highly-skilled economy – will require additional investment.

(b) Professional Placements

An important feature of many of the professions in which workforce shortages already exist – and are projected to worsen in coming years – is that they involve mandatory professional placements as a qualification requirement.

¹ Universities Australia, *Submission to Australia's Progress Against Sustainable Development Goal 4*, 5 August 2022 <<https://www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Sustainable-Development-Goals-Submission-to-DoE.pdf>>.

This includes professions such as nursing and teaching, in which more than 1 million Australians are employed.

ACU educates more nurses and more teachers than any other university in Australia, doing so in multiple states and territories. In the process, ACU interacts with multiple systems for the regulation and allocation of placements for these courses.

While Australia has a critical shortage of nurses, demand to study Nursing has also skyrocketed in recent years. Ordinarily, this would suggest that the future supply of nurses should be well-positioned to meet the growing demand.

Unfortunately, the availability of clinical placements – where Nursing students are supervised in a clinical environment such as a hospital – has not risen in parallel with the demand to study Nursing. Universities such as ACU are not able to enrol additional students in Nursing courses without being able to guarantee that these students will be in a position to undertake clinical placements.

Many universities are also facing extreme challenges trying to place already-enrolled students.

Earlier this month, for instance, Charles Darwin University (CDU) Vice-Chancellor Professor Scott Bowman AO expressed the frustration that CDU's College of Nursing and Midwifery was experiencing seeking to find clinical placements for its Nursing students.

“They're just working night and day to try and find these placements, ringing around hospitals, other aged care facilities to try and get places,” he told the ABC.²

“If we had our time again, we wouldn't take so many students.”

Professor Bowman stated that, due to the shortage of clinical placements, CDU had been forced to reduce its 2023 enrolments to 100, rather than its usual intake of 900, following an intervention from the regulatory body, the Australian Nursing and Midwifery Accreditation Council.

This is an experience that is being replicated – to a greater or lesser degree – at universities across Australia. ACU, fortunately, has managed to negotiate some additional placements with its health provider partners and will therefore be able to enrol a small number of additional Nursing students in the coming year. However, placements are scarce, associated costs are rising and CDU's experience is a fair reflection of a placement regime that is under severe strain and is not currently fit for purpose.

Every university offering courses in Nursing, Teaching or other such disciplines is required to devote significant and growing amount of time, resources and funds to finding and coordinating placements for students.

This placements bottleneck imposes a severe constraint on Australia's capacity to meet its skills needs for nurses and similar professions. It is vital that this bottleneck be addressed if Australia is to overcome skilled workforce shortages.

ACU therefore submits that, in order to meet Australia's skills needs now and in the future, the current inefficient patchwork of systems surrounding professional placements

² Jack Hislop, 'Nursing Students at Charles Darwin University face graduation delays as workforce shortage continues', *ABC News* (online, 5 December 2022) <<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-12-05/charles-darwin-university-nursing-students-facing-course-delays/101616830>>, accessed on 6 December 2022.

needs to be overhauled, with the availability, cost and efficiency of placements all addressed.

This may include a nationally coordinated approach, which identifies best practice from among the various jurisdictions and facilitates the adoption of uniform national placement arrangements.

ACU recommends that the Panel investigate and highlight the issue of professional placements, with a view to addressing this major barrier to universities educating a sufficient number of professionals to meet Australia's future workforce needs.

A failure to address this issue will have far-reaching and long-running implications for Australia's skilled workforce, economic productivity and the care and education of our fellow Australians.

2. Access and opportunity

ACU recommends the Panel focus not only on access to (and participation in) higher education among equity cohorts but also the support necessary to ensure their success at university.

This includes both:

- (a) smoothing students' pathways into university, such as through the allocation of enabling places or increased flexibility for universities to use their existing funding envelopes; and
- (b) "scaffolding" arrangements for students once at university, including associated resourcing.

3. Investment and affordability

ACU recommends that, when reviewing the current university funding model, the Panel maintain a focus on safeguarding national productivity and prosperity. To this end, it is important to secure national investment in higher education, research and innovation.

At the same time, it is vital – as a fundamental principle of fairness – to ensure that graduates are not burdened with excessive debt.

Specifically, ACU recommends the Panel look at reducing the burden on students who elect to study "Cluster 1" courses.

In particular, following the Job-Ready Graduates (JRG) changes, the student contributions for most Arts and humanities courses more than doubled. This places an undue burden on such students and sends an unfortunate message about the value government places on the study of the humanities.

ACU submits that this should be a priority of the Panel's review of JRG and the calibration of the clusters and bands.

More broadly, ACU recommends the Panel prioritise the rationalisation of the increasingly fractured Commonwealth funding of universities.

In recent years, the same (or less) funding has been made available to universities by the Commonwealth through a proliferation of different "buckets" of funding. For example,

the Commonwealth has introduced performance funding, a National Priorities and Industry Linkage Fund and the Indigenous, Regional and Low SES Attainment Fund.

Each of these comes with its own regulatory burden and reporting requirements, consuming limited university resources, reducing those available for core university activities.

ACU recommends the Panel focus on options to simplify university funding arrangements, including providing universities with longer-term, multi-year certainty over their funding arrangements. Such funding certainty is also likely to have benefits in terms of the budgetary confidence that will allow for the establishment more secure ongoing employment arrangements for university staff.

4. Governance, accountability and community

ACU recommends the Panel investigate the firm division of responsibilities between the two tertiary education regulators, the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency and the Australian Skills Quality Authority.

While ACU is not a dual-sector institution, it would nevertheless advocate for greater porousness, connectivity and regulatory harmony between the two agencies. Indeed, ACU recommends the Panel consider whether higher education and vocational education should be regulated by a single authority.

5. The connection between the vocational education and training and higher education systems

ACU recommends that the Panel maintain clear distinctions between strong, effective and highly functional self-accrediting universities and:

- (a) non-university higher education providers; and
- (b) vocational education and training (VET) institutions.

ACU recommends that the Panel prioritise maintaining the strong, vibrant and diverse university sector that currently serves Australia well and has built an international reputation for its quality and excellence.

Specifically, ACU would urge the Panel to avoid encouraging the development multiple categories of university, such as a reversion to teaching-only polytechnics proposed in some quarters.

Similarly, ACU does not see a significant national benefit in the expansion of the Institute of Applied Technology model that has been rolled out in NSW following the 2021 review, *In the Same Sentence: Bringing Higher and Vocational Education Together*.³

If the Panel is minded to look more fully at the interplay of higher and vocational education providers, ACU would support a more comprehensive, national review of the tertiary education landscape and the regulatory arrangements for the various providers.

³ David Gonski and Peter Shergold, *In the Same Sentence: Bringing Higher and Vocational Education together*, March 2021 <https://education.nsw.gov.au/content/dam/main-education/about-us/strategies-and-reports/Final_VET_Sector_Report.pdf>.

ACU supports any measures identified by the Panel that will lead to the strengthening of the VET sector, bearing in mind its recent troubled history. At the same time, ACU would emphasise the importance of avoiding any measures that may have the potential to diminish the reputation or functionality of Australia's university sector.

7. Delivering new knowledge, innovation and capability

ACU recommends that the Panel approach this ToR with the aim of enabling Australia to compete meaningfully with the top 10 Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development countries in terms of research, innovation and industry engagement.

This requires Australia to maintain a diverse higher education sector, focused on excellence predicated on inclusivity and fairness.

ACU looks forward to providing the Panel with a substantive submission in the new year, together with an opportunity for ACU's Vice-Chancellor & President Professor Zlatko Skrbis to meet with the Panel in the near future.

Attachment A: Australian Catholic University Profile

Australian Catholic University (ACU) is a publicly funded Catholic university, open to people of all faiths and of none and with teaching, learning and research inspired by 2,000 years of Catholic intellectual tradition.

ACU operates as a multi-jurisdictional university with eight campuses across four states and one territory. Campuses are located in North Sydney, Strathfield, Blacktown, Canberra, Melbourne, Ballarat, Brisbane and Adelaide. ACU also has a campus in Rome, Italy.

ACU is the largest Catholic university in the English-speaking world, with over 33,000 students and 2,300 staff.

ACU graduates demonstrate high standards of professional excellence and are also socially responsible, highly employable and committed to active and responsive learning. ACU is the number one university in the country when it comes to graduate employment outcomes three years after graduation, with a 95.5 per cent employment rate.⁴

ACU has built its reputation in the areas of Health and Education, educating the largest number of undergraduate nursing and teaching students in Australia⁵ and serving a significant workforce need in these areas. Under the demand driven system, ACU sought to focus and build on these strengths.

ACU has four faculties: Health Services; Education and Arts; Law and Business; and Theology and Philosophy.

As part of its commitment to educational excellence, ACU is committed to targeted and quality research. ACU's strategic plan focuses on research areas that align with ACU's mission and reflect most of its learning and teaching: Education; Health and Wellbeing; Theology and Philosophy; and Social Justice and the Common Good. To underpin its plan for research intensification, ACU has appointed high profile leaders to assume the directorships, and work with high calibre members, in six research institutes.⁶

In recent years, the public standing of ACU's research has improved dramatically. The last Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) assessment (in 2018) awarded ACU particularly high ratings in the fields of research identified as strategic priorities and in which investment has been especially concentrated. For example, ACU more than doubled the total number of top scores of 5 (well above world standard) in the 2018 ERA. In health sciences, ACU did not receive a single score below 5 while in education, ACU is one of only four universities in Australia to achieve a top score of 5 in the 4-digit fields of research. ACU's rapidly growing reputation in research is in line with its steady expansion.

⁴ QILT (August 2020), *2020 Graduate Outcomes Survey – Longitudinal (GOS-L)*

⁵ Department of Education and Training, *2019 Higher Education Data Collection – Students, Special Courses*. Section 8, table 8.3

⁶ Australian Catholic University, *ACU Research*, acu.edu.au/research