



AEU Submission to the Australian Universities Accord Panel Discussion Paper

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Introduction

The Australian Education Union (AEU) represents more than 195,000 members employed in public primary, secondary and special schools and the early childhood, TAFE and adult education sectors as teachers, educational leaders, education assistants or support staff across Australia. The AEU welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Australian Universities Accord Panel Discussion Paper.

The AEU submission appropriately prioritises those matters arising from the discussion paper that are most relevant to our membership, particularly the members of the AEU TAFE Division. Therefore, the submission first deals with the relationship between TAFE and universities in the provision of vocational education, and then subsequently deals with matters pertaining to initial teacher education, and Higher Education and universities.

The relationship between TAFE and universities in Vocational Education

One of the terms of reference for the review is to address “the connection between the vocational education and training (VET) and higher education systems”. The AEU is the principal union representing educators in Australia’s public TAFE system (it also has members in dual-sector institutions) and therefore has a deep interest in this issue. Depending on the approach taken to VET by the higher education sector, universities can position themselves as part of the solution to the present crisis in this sector or as yet another contributor to the deepening of that crisis.

TAFE is the bedrock of Australia’s vocational education sector and TAFE institutions have a history of providing technical, further and general education at a high level of quality and consistency. TAFE has a long history of forging strong partnerships with industry to create pipelines of skilled apprenticeships and job pathways.

Since its inception TAFE has consistently offered people who are economically disengaged the opportunity through education to give their life orientation. The additional support that TAFE provides to learners is the very reason that many people who may otherwise be disengaged (such as people with disabilities) are able to engage in vocational education. There is substantial evidence, for example, demonstrating that TAFE is among the most successful approaches and responses that work for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students when accessing post-secondary pathways (see, for example, Halsey 2018).

A report published by the Centre for Future Work at the Australia Institute (Pennington, 2020) provides the first Australia-wide analysis of the economic and social benefits of TAFE. Its key finding is that despite years of significant funding cuts and “policy vandalism”, the TAFE system continues to make a strong and disproportionate economic and social contribution to the Australian economy. The report measures the continuing economic and wider social

benefits of Australia’s historic investment in TAFE, in terms of higher earnings and productivity for TAFE graduates and the resulting increased tax revenues and profits to employers, the additional economic footprint of TAFE purchasing and supply chains and the fiscal benefit of reduced social assistance and public healthcare expenditure arising from TAFE’s contribution to lowering unemployment and supporting a healthier workforce and society.

The annual total economic benefits of Australia’s historic investment in the TAFE and the current TAFE trained workforce are shown in Table 1 below. The total benefit from the accumulated historic investment in the TAFE-trained workforce is estimated at \$92.5 billion annually, approximately 4.5% of Australia’s annual GDP.

Table 1

TAFE Annual Economic Impact Results	
TAFE Economic Footprint	\$6.1 billion
Higher Earnings and Productivity (Includes Higher Tax Revenues)	\$84.9 billion (\$25 billion)
Fiscal Savings (Social Benefits)	\$1.5 billion
Total Benefit	\$92.5 billion
Total Annual Costs	\$5.7 billion

The TAFE system has increased the employability of the population, relative to those without post-school education, resulting in an increase in employment of around 486,000 positions. The report finds that the TAFE system also underpins a wide range of broader social benefits that are harder to quantify. TAFE promotes stronger economic and labour market outcomes in regional areas and helps ‘bridge’ access to further education and jobs pathways for at-risk groups of young Australians, including those who have a disability or are of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander background.

But for a prolonged period, the TAFE system has been under siege. TAFE has been increasingly positioned as merely one of many “providers” in a vocational education “market” made up of private and public “providers”. This has led to the norms, behaviours and practices of private enterprise becoming the standard to which governments have expected the public TAFE system to aspire. Further, the Halsey (2018) review into regional, rural and remote education confirmed that state governments had withdrawn TAFE delivery in the non-metropolitan regions of the nation, with the expectation that increased choice of providers would materialise in regional areas. The reality is that providers have retreated to the cities and largely abandoned regional areas. Where markets are thin, private, for-profit RTOs usually either reduce services or increase costs to compensate for lower levels of demand and other costs associated with operating away from metropolitan areas. The crisis of quality engulfing vocational education across the country is the natural trajectory of a market driven approach to vocational education. The market is not workably competitive because its actors are providing very different levels of service, with different aims. The inherent danger in contestable funding is that it doesn’t interrogate the true cost of delivery by different types of organisations

providing VET services and doesn't take account of the value and the benefits provided in return for that investment.

“Market reforms” to TAFE and vocational education, especially those of the last decade, have combined with sustained underfunding to force a national crisis for TAFE, and in some states and territories its future is in jeopardy. Campuses have closed and thousands of teachers across the country have been made redundant. This represents a devastating loss of knowledge and expertise.

For-profit private RTOs are now entrenched in Australia's vocational education system and have damaged perceptions of it. Prior to the recently finalised Interim National Skills Agreements signed in late 2022 there had been a concerted and continual drive from successive Federal governments over more than a decade to “marketise” vocational education and deprioritise TAFE, which resulted in a shift of public money to for-profit private providers, and disinvestment by governments in vocational education. This deliberate recalibration of vocational education as a contestable market resulted in the extremely rapid proliferation of opportunistic private training providers and the unrestrained growth in the for-profit sector, primarily at the expense of Australia's previously world leading publicly funded and delivered TAFE and vocational education system.

Seismic changes have occurred in the way that vocational education is resourced and delivered in Australia over the last decade and a half. There are now over 4,600 active registered training providers, but only 96 of these providers have more than 100 full time students. It is plainly evident that quality cannot possibly be maintained at a system level when that system is populated by thousands of tiny individual private providers, some of whom have participated in recruitment and enrolment practices that can best be described as skirting the edge of legality.

This almost complete surrender of the provision of vocational education to the market has resulted in a massive decline of TAFE as the pre-eminent provider of vocational education in Australia. In 2009, TAFE institutions taught 81% of all publicly funded full time equivalent students in Australia. By 2021, this figure had reduced to 52%.

This shift has seen private RTOs attain an increasing share of public funding. In 2020, states, territories and the Commonwealth spent a combined total of \$5.8 billion on vocational education, with over \$1.1 billion of public funds allocated directly to private providers and \$2.6 billion of government appropriations and program funding allocated on a competitive basis.

Public funding is not put to equivalent use in the public and private sectors. Private providers focus on courses that are relatively cheap to run but fully funded by public subsidies and neglect to provide higher cost trade and qualification-based courses, while public TAFE provision is concentrated on more costly and resource intensive courses in the skilled trades and on providing students with greater levels of support.

Universities have an opportunity to partner with the public TAFE sector as educational institutions that, unlike private providers, prioritise the provision of public as well as private goods. It is encouraging that the discussion paper identifies “strengthening the public TAFE system” as a goal (Australian Government, p. 30). The discussion paper also correctly identifies opportunities in relation to greater “harmonisation” between the VET and higher education sectors such as cross recognition of prior learning, integration of digital platforms, and greater

articulation and “reverse articulation” between VET and higher education qualifications. As noted in a later section of this submission, one area that provides opportunities for co-operation is regional, rural and remote education.

There are some significant potential problems that must be addressed however. As the discussion paper acknowledges, the two systems have “different approaches to learning, as well as different funding and regulation settings” (Australian Government, p. 30). The difficulties posed by these differences should not be underestimated. Mitchell Institute research, for example, shows universities receive almost twice the amount of revenue per domestic students as a vocational institution, such as a TAFE (Hildebrandt and Hurley, 2023).

The differing levels of esteem attaching to VET versus university qualifications could (deliberately or unintentionally) be a factor driving interactions between the sectors and prospective students. There are entrenched perceptions amongst students, parents and the wider community about the relative merit of various pathways. Vocational Education and Training (VET) focused pathways can often be perceived as inferior to university by students and their parents. The Expert Review of Australia’s Vocational Education and Training System (Joyce, 2019) found that there were numerous problems and issues which undermine the confidence of the public (including potential students) in VET pathways, including lower levels of government resourcing of VET compared to higher education. Hildebrandt and Hurley (2023) note that:

... growth in people going to university has come at the expense of TAFEs. In 1986, there were roughly the same number of young people aged 15 to 24 enrolled at vocational education institutions as there were at universities. By 2021, the split was 76% university and 24% vocational education and training.

The mixture of courses is important because about 40% of future jobs growth are in occupations aligned to courses in the vocational education sector. For example, some of the strongest job growth will be in aged care and childcare.

A key concern of the AEU, given the recent track record of universities in relation to outsourcing, is that they will treat VET, not as a public good, but as a commodity to be flogged as an income stream. Rather than engaging with TAFE in the public interest, they will outsource VET to cheap private RTOs to generate funds with little regard to the quality of course offerings or the outcomes for students.

A related concern is the reference to the provision of “micro-credentials” in the discussion paper (Australian Government, 2023, p. 17). The AEU believes that vocational education should be delivered with the aim of providing a significant and broad skills base to work in their chosen profession, not to provide students with a set of narrow skills or competencies to fulfil a specific employer need at a particular time. The AEU is also opposed to the idea that a substantive qualification, whether a higher-level certificate, a diploma or a degree can be cobbled together in any effective way from the completion of a series of disjointed micro-credentials completed by assessing individual competencies in an ad hoc way. The income-generating potential of micro-credential provision should not blind universities to their problematic nature.

The AEU has noted a shift from high quality nationally recognised programs to low-quality, non-accredited training as evident in the Productivity Commission's 2020 assessment of the National Agreement for Skills and Workforce Development's (NASWD) performance against its key targets. The Commission's report highlights how poorly the NASWD has performed against its key targets a) to halve the proportion of Australians without qualifications at Certificate III and above, and b) to double the number of higher level qualification completions. From 2013 onwards, both of these indicators have been on a downward trajectory, with Target B for completions faring incredibly poorly.

Subjects not delivered as part of accredited national programs and those with no discernible qualification attached are the primary area of significant enrolment growth for VET studies in the last three years is of significant concern for the consideration of young people's pathways. The subjects may or may not lead to careers and function primarily as an income boon for profit seeking private providers. There is no way to determine how useful these subjects are to those who take them or whether they contribute to the attainment of thorough capability-based qualifications.

There is a clear and urgent need to revitalise TAFE as the public provider of vocational education and to rebuild the esteem of students undertaking vocational education. Will universities be part of the solution or part of the problem.

The AEU believes that for the status of vocational education to be improved government needs to engage all social partners in discussions around the purpose and future of the vocational education sector, including the standards against which regulation of the sector needs to be conducted, and the level of public resourcing required to guarantee a robust and high-quality sector into the future.

Recommendations

- 1. That universities commit to treating VET as a public good, not as an opportunity to develop an income stream.*
- 2. That the primacy of TAFE as the public vocational education provider of full qualifications within a nationally accredited course of study should be recognised and that universities develop a partnership with TAFE based on a mutual commitment to providing public goods.*
- 3. That vocational education should be delivered with the aim of providing students with a significant and broad skills base to work in their chosen profession, not to provide students with a set of narrow skills or competencies to fulfil a specific employer need at a particular time. Substantive qualifications, whether a higher level certificate, a diploma or a degree should be based on a coherent program, not cobbled together from the completion of a series of disjointed micro-credentials.*
- 4. That the use of a contestable market as the preferred mode of delivering vocational education funding ceases, as it creates the incentive for the race to the bottom from private providers and the impact of that on the status of the vocational education sector as a whole.*

Initial Teacher Education

The AEU notes that the 2022 Quality Initial Teacher Education (QITE) Review identified the need for further reform to attract high-quality diverse candidates to teaching, to ensure their preparation is evidence-based and practical and induct them well into the profession. In response, the Australian Government established the Teacher Education Expert Panel in September 2022 to provide advice on implementing reforms and key issues raised at the Teacher Workforce Shortage Roundtable.

As the union representing teachers, educational leaders, education assistants or support staff in public primary, secondary and special schools and the early childhood, TAFE and adult provision sectors across Australia, the AEU has a primary strategic objective to “protect and promote quality teaching and learning” which, among others, includes the following aims:

- To enhance and support the professional and industrial status of AEU members in public education.
- To achieve minimum academic standards and entry scores for teaching degrees.
- To achieve minimum entry to teaching of a two year post graduate teaching qualification.
- To ensure access to professional development

The explicit purpose of each of these aims is to ensure that teachers are supported at each stage of their careers, including during their Initial Teacher Education (ITE). The AEU is committed to the pursuit of higher standards in all facets of public education and has consistently advocated for the application of uniformly high standards for the qualifications, induction and ongoing professional learning for teachers. The maintenance, and where necessary, the introduction of high standards in teacher education and ongoing development is essential to protect and enhance the status of the teaching profession. Our recent submission to the Department of Education, Skills and Employment on the Review of Quality Initial Teacher Education (AEU, 2021) forms the basis for this section of our submission in response to the Australian Universities Accord Panel Discussion Paper.

Australia needs a systemic approach to preparing teachers for a successful career in the classroom and a more rigorous threshold to ensure that every teacher entering the profession at any stage of their career is actually ready to teach. The top-performing countries in international assessments spend substantially more time and resources than Australia does to ensure that standards, programs and entry assessments are aligned and coherent.

Teacher Supply and Demand

Demand for teachers in the labour market is projected to increase significantly (AEU, 2021) and Australia is already experiencing a shortage of teachers (Longmuir, 2023).

There are a number of important factors that are currently having a negative effect on the attractiveness of teaching as a profession – for example, salary levels and workloads – that are not within the capacity of universities to address directly. It is recognised that changes to admissions arrangements, courses and degree requirements will not be sufficient in themselves to restore the attractiveness of teaching. However, universities should be part of the process by which a strategy to address teacher supply issues is jointly developed.

Comprehensive workforce planning is required to provide more focussed and better resourced delivery of ITE, to plan for future workforce requirements and to maximise the retention of graduates in the teacher workforce. The report *Valuing the Teaching Profession* (Gallop et al. 2021) outlined the broad contours of this problem in NSW, including: shortages in the areas of Mathematics and Science; looming retirements over the next 10 years; resignation rates among early career teachers; and the fact that the supply and demand for secondary teachers was not being accurately tracked by the Department of Education. The inquiry highlighted that the factors driving shortages are multiple and intertwined. Shortages are also evident in English and Languages and there are also location based shortages in outer metropolitan, regional, rural and remote areas and in many schools in neighbourhoods with low socio-economic status (SES).

The AEU's 2020 *State of Our Schools Survey* (AEU, 2020) shows that almost half (47%) of 787 public school principals surveyed experienced teacher shortages in the last year, and this increases to more than half of principals in remote schools (54%) and three quarters in very remote schools (75%). There was also significant differentiation by the socio-economic status of the school student cohort, with 53% of Principals at low SES schools reporting teacher shortages compared to 38% of Principals at high SES schools.

Funding shortfalls prevent the hiring of potentially tens of thousands of additional teachers and specialist support staff in Australia's public schools, and significantly increase workloads for teachers already employed which limits their ability to engage in professional development. It is this lack of full funding, and a lack of quality ITE aimed specifically at recruiting to schools in disadvantaged communities that prevent the development of the resources needed to uphold the qualification benchmarks expected for all schools - those that reinforce the higher level of knowledge, skills and expertise required to be a proficient teacher.

In order to address the intractable issue of shortages and out of field teaching, federally funded scholarships should be made available to train teachers in fields where demand exceeds supply. Such scholarships should be available for all teachers and, critically, should encourage the participation of those currently employed on insecure contracts by offering permanency upon completion to increase incentives for the take up.

It is essential that greater co-operation between state and territory education departments and universities occurs on issue of ITE enrolments and the need to address teacher shortages for specific subjects. The Victorian Teacher Supply and Demand Working Party is an example of a higher level of co-operation that could be instigated in all jurisdictions.

ITE Curriculum and Preparation for the Classroom

The ITE curriculum should reflect the changed and changing contexts in which teachers and principals now do their work. A broad evidence base is *essential*, and universities as research-based institutions are well placed to ensure this. However, it must be recognised that teachers collect huge amounts of data every day through their own professional practices, including essential qualitative data, which informs their teaching and learning programs. It must be imparted to ITE students as future professionals that constant measurement and data collection is not the meaning of "evidence-based" that would support a high-quality workforce and education system, or improved outcomes. Nor is "evidence based teaching practice" to be used as euphemism for the imposition of direct instruction approaches or programs that limit teachers' pedagogical autonomy.

It is essential that teachers are provided the time, professional development and support to explore a range of evidence applicable to their student contexts. This remains fundamental to exploration of successful teaching practice. Opportunities for teachers to collaborate and learn from one another, share experiences, resources and strategies is inherent in the success of such examination of evidence.

This is more important than ever as 30% of new educators (those with three or less years' experience) have told the AEU that they do not believe their ITE sufficiently prepared them for the complex realities of the classroom. Among the main areas in which teachers felt under-prepared were teaching students whose first language is not English (62%), dealing with difficult behaviour (55%), teaching students with disability (47%) and teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (43%). Twenty-six per cent of new educators said that their ITE was not helpful in preparing them to deliver strategies for teaching numeracy, rising to 39% among new secondary teachers. 35% of new educators said that their ITE was not helpful in preparing them to manage classroom activities – in under-resourced schools this increased to 41%. Thirty-nine per cent also said that ITE did not prepare them for collaborative working with peers.¹

This survey data is confirmed by the TALIS 2018 results which show that across nearly all elements new educators in Australia feel less prepared to teach than their peers in other OECD countries, despite a higher percentage having covered each element during their ITE (Thomson & Hillman, 2019).

Teaching, like other respected professions, must have a process for entry that includes rigorous preparation centred on academic study and professional experience, an in-depth test of subject and pedagogical knowledge, and a comprehensive teacher-readiness assessment. There must be no lowering of standards by reducing the duration of study or academic rigour required to gain teaching qualifications in Australia, regardless of prior experience. A suitable program of study and teacher professional experience (practicum experience) is a fundamental prerequisite for equipping future teachers with the knowledge, skills and attributes they will need to successfully teach in the increasingly complex 21st century school environments in which they will find themselves.

Increased support for ITE students is sorely needed, and this must include ongoing observation of, interaction with, and advice from experienced teachers during practicums as well as a significant increase in support from ITE providers. There needs to be financial assistance for ITE students to undertake further or additional practicum during their studies, including support with living expenses and the maintenance of student lodgings.

Teaching Degrees

The AEU is committed to a minimum five-year full time equivalent qualification for teaching qualifications, as was agreed by all Commonwealth, state and territory education ministers in 2013, and will oppose any lowering of qualification benchmarks from ITE providers, governments or registration authorities. A strategy and timeline should be developed to transition all postgraduate initial teacher education courses to two-year master's qualifications.

¹ AEU internal analysis of survey data.

For many years the AEU has advocated for the consistent application of high level undergraduate ITE, and we again reiterate our commitment to ensure that ITE providers uphold the qualification benchmarks that reinforce the higher level of knowledge, skills and expertise required to be a proficient teacher in contemporary public education. The process to register ITE programs must be rigorous and uphold the high standards expected by the teaching profession.

Initial Teacher Education Intakes / Alternative Pathways

Various sources have identified that initial teacher education courses in Australia are not attracting a comparable number of “high-achieving” students to other countries (AEU, 2021). Many students are entering teacher education ill-prepared and with completion rates show that many struggle to finish their degrees (Wilson, 2020).

Universities have a responsibility to ensure their students have every opportunity to successfully complete their course, but they also have a responsibility to ensure that high standards are maintained. This is particularly relevant for courses such as undergraduate ITE where large and increasing numbers of entrants begin their enrolment without disclosing their prior academic history which limits the ability of universities to identify where there is an increased need for assistance and to provide appropriate support.

If the trend towards the recruitment of ITE entrants with low or undisclosed ATARs continues it has the capacity to seriously undermine current efforts to raise standards and the status of the profession through teacher registration processes. The AEU has always held the qualifications of teachers to high standards and is steadfast in its position that there must not be any weakening of either the content or entry requirements to ITE programs. This position is well-supported by research that finds “the greatest gains in student learning were attributable to ... more experienced, better qualified teachers” (Darling-Hammond et.al, 2017, p.111) and that “a higher concentration of lesser qualified or novice teachers in schools serving disadvantaged students can have a negative impact on student performance, further diminishing their chances of success” (Schleicher, 2012, p.58). These findings serve as a clear warning of the potential impact of further expansion of alternative pathways such as Teach For Australia (TFA), which deliberately and explicitly aims to place under-prepared teachers into schools in disadvantaged communities.

The deregulation of higher education in Australia has meant that the academic standards required to enter many tertiary courses, including undergraduate ITE courses, are significantly lower than they should be, and lower than standards were in previous decades. A consequence of this decline in standards is a massive increase in the numbers of people undertaking ITE – in 2001 there were 54,000 people training to be teachers, in 2019 there were over 92,000 (AITSL, 2019). In order to bolster the capabilities of newly qualified teachers it is imperative that this long term but recently accelerated decline in ITE entry standards is urgently reversed.

From 2009 to 2019, total ITE commencements have increased by 4% whilst ITE completions have declined by 5% (Australian Government, 2021). At the same time, there has been substantial growth in the proportion of ITE students studying either partially or wholly online. The AITSL National Teacher Education Pipeline Report shows that enrolment in online ITE courses has grown significantly since 2006 and that by 2016 19% of enrolled students were undertaking part of their studies online and 25% of students were studying their ITE programs entirely online (AITSL, 2020). It also shows that those who studied externally via online programs only had the lowest completion rates, both for undergraduates (27%) and for

postgraduates (59%). This is highly inefficient, serving neither the interest of the entire economy in terms of workforce planning, nor the interests of candidates who are ill-suited to teaching when they could be pursuing alternative career pathways. For this reason, the AEU is very concerned about the continuing efforts of some providers to normalise online training as the primary mode of ITE delivery.

Wilson (2018) has conducted an analysis of the ATAR scores of secondary students admitted to ITE from 2006 to 2015. It shows a rapid increase of students admitted to ITE without providing an ATAR to their university over that decade, coupled with a marked decline in students with ATARs of at least 70 or greater entering ITE. The trend from 2013 onwards shows a marked decline in the number of students with ATARs of 70 and above admitted to ITE in conjunction with a long term trend from 2010 onwards, of places on ITE courses that have increasingly been filled with students with ATARs of less than 60 with a steady increase of those with ATARs of less than 50 also being admitted to ITE.

The worst case scenario in Australia's deregulated and under-funded higher education system would be one where ITE applicants are treated as 'cash cows' by tertiary institutions, and an ever increasing number of ITE students are admitted with lower (or undisclosed) Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) scores with their fees used by universities to cross subsidise the more in demand and more expensive courses on offer (Deloitte, 2019). This scenario would have dire implications for the status of the teaching profession and for Australian school students in the future. Unfortunately, the current low and declining average ATAR scores for ITE courses are consistent with just such a situation (AITSL, 2017).

The AEU's position is that minimum entry requirements should be adopted for selection into ITE to recruit the top 30% of students into the profession, with equivalent measures for those seeking entrance to ITE from points/pathways other than completion of schooling. This standard is not currently maintained in recruitment to ITE and is actually declining. According to the most recent data from the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL), the number of students entering ITE via a secondary education pathway with an ATAR lower than 70 has grown from 25% in 2006 to 36% in 2017 (Deloitte, 2019).

The international best-practice benchmark for entry into teacher education is the top 30% of school graduates, and Ingvarson shows that high performing countries in international student assessments have strict controls over access to ITE. For example, in Canada ITE institutions "select trainees from the top 30 per cent of cohorts and pre-service teachers must have high grade point averages to gain entry to teacher training" (Ingvarsen et al., 2014). In Singapore ITE applicants are subjected to a meticulous screening process. Decent wages and conditions along with job security were also factors in bolstering demand in all of the countries studied. Demand for ITE places in Finland significantly outstrips supply: only 10% of applicants are accepted into primary teacher training courses and consequently there are very high course completion rates, especially considering that the minimum qualification to become a primary or secondary teacher is a master's degree (Ibid.).

Rigorous entry requirements focused on recruitment of the top 30% of school graduates, coupled with measures to ensure that students are enrolled in a form of ITE that continues to challenge and engage them throughout their course are necessary.

"Fast Track" Teaching Degrees

The AEU supports the entry of mid- and late-career professionals into teaching, but this must not be accompanied by lowering qualification standards that could undermine the pedagogical

knowledge and skills base required to teach effectively. As stated by the Melbourne Graduate School of Education (MGSE, 2017, p. 1) it is essential that graduate teachers display “achievement and persistence at tertiary studies and bring maturity and knowledge and skills that provide a solid platform from which to develop specific pedagogical understandings”.

Whilst entry to teaching at the mid or late career stage allows entrants to draw upon substantial knowledge and experience gained through extensive prior participation in the workforce, the science and pedagogy of teaching requires extended immersion and rigorous consideration of theories of learning, and understandings of student complexity and their needs. For this reason, the AEU strongly supports the current requirement for post graduate ITE courses to consist of a two-year master’s degree.

We are aware that the cost of a two-year master’s degree and the cost of not working while undertaking the program have been touted as major disincentives for mid-career professionals to become teachers. In order to ameliorate this the focus must be on ensuring that ITE students have access to adequate financial support during their studies to enable them to study for the required period of time, rather than on lowering standards to avoid the potential impact of time out of the workforce. Our position is that these costs should be mitigated by making scholarships and/or bursaries available to mid-career professionals who wish to teach, rather than the counterproductive approach of fast tracking through Teach For Australia or other similar programs which result in underprepared fast tracked graduates in the classroom, which may increase the ‘flow’ of teachers into the profession but actually increases short and long term attrition and ultimately reduces the ‘stock’ of experienced teachers working in Australia’s education systems.

Continued attempts to fast track mid-career professionals through ITE amount to an admission of policy failure and neglect by government – teacher shortages have been ignored for over a decade. Evidence from the implementation of such programs that aim to fast-track mid-career professionals into teaching such as TFA demonstrates that they undermine quality and retention. Wherever they have been implemented – in Australia, in the US and in the UK – such programs have been shown not to be effective in preparing mid or late career ITE students to enter the classroom, and that recruiting unqualified and inexperienced TFA associates to teach in the most disadvantaged communities is not just counterintuitive, it is damaging for all concerned; the model has not succeeded in its stated goals anywhere it has been implemented.

Increasing Teacher Diversity and Training More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teachers

The AEU’s position, supported by a large and credible body of national and international research, is that investment in equity in our education system is vital to improving Australia’s educational outcomes.

Workforce planning needs to prioritise a diverse workforce that is reflective of the community, and that supports entry to the profession whilst upholding entry and qualifications standards. Universities have an important role to play in developing strategies that promote and support diversity in the ITE student cohort. As noted elsewhere in this submission, it is vital that universities provide adequate support services (academic and social) for all “at-risk” student groups.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are under-represented in the ITE student cohort and have lower completion rates than ITE students generally (AITSL, 2020). Evidence from previous successful initiatives to recruit and train First Nations teachers provides a clear path forward. The More Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Teachers Initiative (MATSITI) was a national project funded by the then Federal Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) and managed by the University of South Australia. The overarching objectives of the MATSITI project were to increase:

- the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in teaching positions in schools;
- the capacity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers; and
- the retention of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers in teaching positions in schools.

The project commenced in 2011, and despite recommendations to support its continuation, based on robust research and evidence of positive outcomes, the project was finalised in 2016, with opportunities for its extension lost in changes to the machinery of government in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs, following the election of the Abbott government in 2014 (Rose, 2018).

An independent evaluation of the initiative (Johnson, et al., 2016) found that project partners intensified their commitment to achieving MATSITI's aims through their formal participation in the project and further, that partners and stakeholders raised their awareness of the "direct relationship between the presence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers in schools and improvements in educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students" (p. 6). The project resulted in a 16.5% increase in the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers between 2012 and 2015, "due to recruitment and improved levels of identification" (Ibid.)

To increase the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students undertaking ITE, a comprehensive workforce strategy of the scale of MATSITI and which builds on the outcomes of that program, needs to be developed and implemented. The overarching objectives of the strategy must be to increase: the number, capacity and retention of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in teaching positions in schools. This is critical to develop leaders and provide appropriate professional development that leads in a meaningful and appropriate way to a full qualification.

There are particular opportunities for university to partner with schools that serve disadvantaged students.

Recommendations

5. *That universities, Commonwealth, state and territory governments, education systems, teachers and their unions co-operate to develop a comprehensive teaching workforce strategy. Matters to address in the strategy include:*
 - *Attraction and retention of high-quality entrants and graduates in the teacher workforce;*
 - *Recruitment of teachers to schools that have exhibited recruitment difficulties including those in low SES areas and schools in outer metropolitan, regional and remote areas;*
 - *More focussed and better resourced delivery of ITE;*
 - *Improving ITE practicum experiences for students;*

- *Funding, including to enhance and support practicum, incentives such as bursaries, scholarships, or discounted HECS-HELP contributions for graduates from in demand subjects and permanent ongoing employment for insecurely employed teachers who undertake additional study in areas of shortage;*
 - *That a more thoroughly regulated and coordinated approach to ITE funding and accreditation in Australia is implemented, one which reviews the number and output of ITE providers to ensure high quality provision of ITE;*
 - *That universities commit to ITE that includes rigorous preparation centred on academic study and professional experience, an in-depth test of subject and pedagogical knowledge, and a comprehensive teacher-readiness assessment.*
6. *That university providers of ITE take note of the results of recent surveys of new educators and review their approaches to the following areas where a significant number of these teachers expressed a view that their ITE did not sufficiently prepare them for the realities of the classroom:*
 - *Teaching students whose first language is not English;*
 - *Dealing with difficult behaviour;*
 - *Teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students;*
 - *Teaching students with disabilities;*
 - *Teaching numeracy;*
 - *Managing classroom activities;*
 - *Working collaboratively with peers.*
 7. *That university ITE programs foster opportunities for students to collaborate and learn from each other, and share experiences, resources and strategies.*
 8. *That universities support calls from the AEU for an ambitious Commonwealth program that funds pre-service teachers to undertake additional extended practicum and provides schools with the resources to enable experienced teachers to mentor effectively.*
 9. *That universities affirm their commitment to a minimum five-year full time equivalent qualification for teaching qualifications, as was agreed by all Commonwealth, state and territory education ministers in 2013.*
 10. *That a strategy and timeline be developed to transition all postgraduate initial teacher education courses to two-year master's qualifications and that universities support the AEU's call for government to provide financial support for students undertaking a two-year master's degree in teaching.*
 11. *That minimum entry requirements should be adopted nationally for selection into Initial Teacher Education (ITE) to recruit the top 30% of students into the profession, with equivalent measures for those seeking entrance to ITE from points/pathways other than completion of schooling.*
 12. *That a range of measures are adopted by all ITE providers to ensure candidates for entry, in addition to high academic standards, display motivation, aptitude, capacity and commitment.*
 13. *That there is an urgent review of the use by some providers of predominantly or exclusively online delivery for ITE, including a more thorough published comparison of attrition, retention and compliance with the graduate and proficient career stages of those who received their training through primarily online delivery and those who did not.*
 14. *That in order to protect the quality of school education, Commonwealth, state and territory governments should not fund or accredit – and universities should not support – “fast-tracked” initial teacher education programs such as Teach for Australia.*

15. *That universities explore ways to continue to provide support for recently graduated students over the first years of their employment as teachers.*
16. *That universities develop strategies to increase the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in the ITE cohort.*
17. *That universities support re-invigoration of programs such as the MATSITI Project to increase:*
 - *the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in teaching positions in schools;*
 - *the capacity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers; and*
 - *the retention of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers in teaching positions in schools.*

Ongoing Professional Development and Support

In addition to initial teacher education, universities have an important role to play, in cooperation with educational systems and schools, in supporting the induction of early career teachers, and the ongoing professional development of teachers. Focused induction, mentoring and professional development programs are required to equip all teachers with the support required to progress through the professional standards, governments have a responsibility to ensure that schools in disadvantaged communities receive a greater level of support and investment to ensure that all schools can attract highly qualified and skilled teachers. There are too many examples of inappropriate, ineffective professional development. Some of this stems from universities looking at this activity as primarily a means to generate income, offering pre-packaged, one-size-fits-all, one-and-done, commercial programs, often via an on-line platform. Universities have an opportunity to work with systems and schools to develop professional development that:

- Is strategic and is based on a coherent, research-based vision of effective learning and teaching;
- Addresses the needs and situations of specific schools and teachers;
- Engages with teachers as professionals and is informed by their views;
- Encourages on-going cooperative and mentor-mentee relationships.

Benefit can be found in combining online and in person delivery modes, and high completions are evident in mixed delivery courses, particularly for post graduate students. It is essential, however, that in person study must be the primary component of every course as it is necessary to build professional networks, develop a collaborative approach and to provide the support that individuals need to develop as good teachers.

Recommendation

18. *That a consortium of universities, state and territory education departments, unions, and professional subject associations develop and nationally implement a national professional development program with Commonwealth funding to deliver professional development to teachers at all stages of their careers.*

The nature and roles of Australian universities

This review of Australian higher education presents as an opportunity to assess and re-evaluate the principles, assumptions and developments that have shaped Australian universities. The AEU notes the following trends:

- A prioritisation of the economic roles of higher education over its other roles, that is, their role in delivering “private goods” over “public goods”
- The adoption of neo-liberal, market-oriented models of management
- A decline in public (government) funding as a proportion of overall higher education funding
- An internationalisation of student enrolments
- A dramatic expansion of student participation, which has, however, failed to deliver greater equality of social opportunity
- A significant casualisation and job insecurity of the university workforce
- The erosion of academic freedom, collegiality, and research independence.

The corporatisation of university management has seen the generation of income assume priority over the core functions of universities, with students treated as cash cows and staff experiencing casualisation, job insecurity and, in some cases, wage theft. Universities have become less democratic with elected staff and students on university governing bodies replaced with appointed corporate elites.

There has been a reduction in government support and funding and, in some degree areas, significant increases in student fees.

As Marginson (2016) notes, universities serve to provide both “private” and “public” goods. Public goods include, for example, research that increases our understanding of the world, a better-informed citizenry, greater tolerance and cross-cultural understanding, increased social inclusion, and contributions to art and culture. Due to their nature, public goods are often incapable of or unsuitable to being delivered on a for-profit basis. The role of government is to ensure the provision of these goods where the market is incapable or unwilling to do so.

A number of factors have in recent times influenced a trend to prioritise the provision by universities of private goods and marginalise the provision of public goods. These include an emphasis on the private economic benefits of higher education, the adoption by universities of neo-liberal, market-driven models of management, and the reduction as a proportion of higher education funding provided by government and consequent increase in income derived from market sources. Further:

... in the last half century in Anglo-American social science, there has been a sustained and influential assault on notions of the public good or public interest, which has partly obscured the public dimension in higher education. (Marginson, 2016, p.83)

At root these factors can be traced to the hegemonic status of economic analyses (including human capital theory) of the nature and role of higher education. As Marginson observes, an economics-based approach deals well with the *private benefits* of higher education but has several important and fundamental flaws. Economics-based approaches are “poorly equipped to deal with larger collective goods” (p. 87) and ignore the normative dimensions of education

and of policy relating to it. The relationship between public and private goods is treated as a “zero sum game”. Goods are seen as either public or private – leading, for example, to government funding policies based on purported analyses of public versus private costs and benefits. An increased focus on individual economic benefits is seen as necessarily involving a reduced focus on general public benefits. This fails to recognise that “under some circumstances, public goods and private goods are not alternatives but additive” (p. 86).

As Marginson (2016) observes, where teaching and research activities are subjected to competitive market mechanisms and the public role of institutions is “framed in terms of the needs of the capitalist economy” (p. 95) then “the expectations created by its politically public character ... are continually undermined by the market dynamic” (p. 98).

The economic conceptualisation of higher education as primarily the deliverer of private economic benefits (to individuals and the economy generally) has also shaped (distorted) how universities have responded to the greater “massification” and “internationalisation” of student participation, stunting opportunities to use these developments to create greater social equality.

Marginson (2016) notes that “while there are well-established methods of understanding private goods in higher education, no comprehensive system has been developed for identifying public goods and public good in higher education” (pp. 104-105). He observes that “higher education can do much to build more equal and generous societies”; however, “this will happen only if higher education is allowed to do so, and it chooses to do so” The opportunity to re-think higher education to secure this goal should not be wasted.

Recommendation

19. That the role of universities in providing public goods – building a better, more equal and generous society – be re-prioritised and supported.

An Australian universities “Accord”

Key questions that need to be asked and answered in relation to an “accord” relating to universities include:

- Who is and is not a party to the accord?
- What is the role of each party to the accord?
- How will power be distributed amongst the parties to the accord?
- How will disagreements and/or conflict between parties to the accord be dealt with?

Groups that are currently on or outside the margins in terms of decision-making in higher education include students, academic and general university staff, and groups that represent the social sphere of public life. As noted above, market based economics has assumed a hegemonic status in the thinking of those who currently determine higher education policy. Democratic forums within universities have given way to “expert panels” (with very specific managerial/economic skill sets). There is an urgent need to introduce alternative visions and voices.

The importance of clarifying the roles and power of various parties and of the processes for dealing with disagreements is well illustrated in the discussion paper in section 3.4.2 Investment in Types of Research. The question is posed in that section whether investment in

experimental development and applied research should be prioritised over pure research. There will be competing views. Will all these views be represented? Which parties will exercise the greatest influence? How and by whom will the final decision be taken?

A similar problematic suggestion in the discussion paper is for an increase in the provision of “micro-credentials” (p. 17). While these present as an attractive means of generating an additional income stream and would be strongly supported by some employers, their educational value and value to employees is highly questionable. (See comments below in the VET section of this submission.)

A further issue to be considered is, given that a number of issues dealt with in the discussion paper will have significant implications for those outside of the university sector, how will universities interact with these “outside” entities. The discussion paper describes accreditation requirements in certain professions (including presumably teaching) in highly pejorative terms (ie. “stringent and rigid”); the professions may take a different view.

The AEU represents teachers in the public schooling sector and TAFE. Planning relating to the articulation between the schooling, VET and university sectors must include input from and negotiation with the schooling and VET sectors, not be simply driven by the higher education sector.

Recommendations

20. *That further work be done to in relation to the notion of a university accord. Specific issues to be addressed include:*
 - *The nature and role of the accord;*
 - *Identification of the parties to the accord;*
 - *Defining the relative roles of the parties to the accord;*
 - *Power relationships amongst the parties;*
 - *Procedures for resolving disagreements between the parties.*
21. *That the university sector recognises that there are a number of issues where they must pay due deference to the status, position and views of other stakeholders.*
22. *That universities take steps to increase the inclusivity, democracy and representativeness of university councils and other forums.*
23. *That inclusivity (rather than “expertise”) be a guiding principle in the development of a university accord.*

University Funding

The funding of higher education should recognise and re-prioritise higher education as a public as well as private good. The critical role of government funding in supporting and protecting higher education’s role in providing public benefits must be recognised and government funding increased to support higher education participation for all capable students. University funding from all sources should cover the total cost of providing each course, including the costs of research. Where universities seek to deliver courses or undertake activities mainly for the purposes of generating alternative income streams, the wider social and educational implications of such activity should be carefully assessed.

It is the AEU's view that the successive Australian governments have progressively abandoned their responsibility to ensure the provision of public goods by the higher education sector. In our view, a key feature of any accord must be a specific setting out of this responsibility and the funding obligations that ensue from it. A substantial funding commitment is needed by the Federal government to counter cuts to public funding of higher education over many years.

In reviewing university funding, the review must address the reliance by universities on international student fee revenue. In relation to international student enrolments, Hildebrandt and Hurley (2023) note:

Revenue from international students has been fundamental to the strength of the university sector over the past two decades.

Before the pandemic, Australian Bureau of Statistics data showed international student revenue grew to 11 times the 2001 level. Enrolments have grown by about four times over the same period. It is difficult to overstate how important this revenue stream has become. Universities receive two to three times the funding amount for an international student than for a domestic student. This extra funding helps subsidise other activities, particularly research.

But this revenue is concentrated in certain (more prestigious) universities. Many of the smaller and regional universities – with higher levels of disadvantaged students – miss out on this important revenue stream. With limited opportunities for more government funds, future policies around international education – and how this resource is shared – will be critical for the university sector.

Hurley (2022) elaborates:

The most prestigious (the so-called “Group of Eight” universities) account for more than half of the revenue universities receive from international students ... This is because these universities ... can charge more due to their prestige, higher rankings, greater resources and favourable location...

The disparity risks encouraging a form of what researchers call “residualisation”. This occurs when students from more economically and educationally advantaged backgrounds are able to enrol in more prestigious, well-resourced universities.

Revenue from high-paying international students is used to subsidise other activities across these universities, such as research. The extra revenue enables greater investment in infrastructure, which also increases a university's attractiveness as a study destination for local and international students.

The smaller universities, which often cater for more disadvantaged cohorts, miss out. Lower enrolments and less resources also mean these smaller universities face additional challenges such as limited subject offerings and less student support services.

It is a similar problem in the vocational sector, where only 5% of international students study at TAFE colleges. This means TAFEs don't receive much needed revenue...

Finding ways to ensure the benefits are spread more evenly would go a long way to making the sector more equitable.

As noted by Croucher (2022) and McCarthy and Jayasuriya (2022), in addition to issues relating to the distribution of revenue from international student enrolments, there is the issue of the potential instability of this source of revenue.

Universities ... transfer funds from teaching overseas students to fund research grants. They then seek to attract overseas students based on research rankings. The risk here is that a decline in international student enrolments means a decline in research revenue – if one side fails so does the other. (McCarthy and Jayasuriya, 2022)

Recommendations

24. *That a university accord specifically identifies the obligation of government to adequately fund and support the provision of public goods by universities.*
25. *That Federal government funding for higher education be significantly increased.*
26. *That a review be undertaken on the current provision by Australian universities of courses for international students. Among the issues to be examined are:*
 - *The quality of educational programs offered to international students;*
 - *Access by international students to essential facilities and services;*
 - *Access by international students to safe, non-exploitative employment while studying;*
 - *The unequal distribution amongst universities of income generated by international students.*

Student Fees

As Norton (2022, p. 4) points out, “student contribution reform is more urgent than other issues because some students are already incurring HELP debts that impose an unreasonable burden on them and unnecessary costs on taxpayers. Expensive degrees are leaving students in decades of debt.

A key step in the reform of higher education is to replace the Job-Ready Graduates system that was introduced by the Morrison government in 2021. The policy has been ineffective in achieving its purported purposes (eg. addressing skills needs) and has had a number of detrimental effects (see IRU, 2022). It had a disproportionate impact on equity groups and reduced government funding for Commonwealth Supported Places by roughly 15%. Though this was partially offset by increases in student contributions, it led to an estimated 5% cut in total “base funding” per place (IRU, 2022, p. 2).

The AEU notes that some form of student contribution is likely to be an ongoing and significant feature of Australian higher education. Creating a system to replace the Jobs-Ready Graduates will not be an easy task. Additional government funding will be required (IRU, 2022). The development of an alternative system should be guided by the principles identified in the “university funding” section of this submission. Students should be able to make choices in line with their strengths and preferences and the system should focus on ensuring access, equity and success for all (IRU, 2022, p. 5).

Recommendations

27. *That the Job-Ready Graduates policy be replaced by a system that allows students to make choices based on their strengths and preferences, and which maximises access and equity, and minimises the chances of onerous debt for students.*
28. *That the Federal government accept that reform of the current HELP loan system will require additional funding and commit to providing that funding.*

Research

As McCarthy and Jayasuriya (2022) argue, debate about the purpose and value of research in Australia is “much needed”:

Australian researchers want to be able to do their work with secure, adequate funding. And they want to be able to do it independently of government. Meanwhile, governments want to be able to “use” the research to suit their own priorities. It is easy to see how the two don’t easily align.

As noted in the section of this submission dealing with university funding, government funding of research is inadequate, resulting on a dependency of universities on income from international student enrolments to fund research. There is a clear need for greater government expenditure on research.

As of 2018, universities spent about A\$12 billion a year on research. About \$6 billion came from the government while \$6 billion came from universities’ own funds, of which \$3 billion was from overseas student fees. (McCarthy and Jayasuriya, 2022)

As noted by Jeffrey and Dyson (2022),

The overall success rate of applications for ARC [Australian Research Council] grants dropped from just over 30% in 2002-07 to exactly 20% in 2017-22 ... Success rates of 20% or less are not indicative of a healthy research environment. Many superb applications are going unfunded.

Another matter that requires attention is political intervention in the determination of research grants. Research proposals must pass a “national interest test” and be vetted. Former acting education minister Stuart Robert, for example, vetoed six grants in late 2021, including one on student climate protests (McCarthy and Jayasuriya, 2022).

The role of security agencies in the ARC process is also a deeply concerning development, thanks to the secretive nature of vetting. In late 2020, Tehan blocked five grants on national security grounds. On top of all this, the national interest test is a highly time-consuming and frustrating process, as there is often a cumbersome back and forth between the ARC, university and researcher to clarify the statement. (McCarthy and Jayasuriya, 2022)

Successive governments have also taken a narrow view of what constitutes “valuable” research.

For example, in late 2021, the Morrison government announced \$240 million in grants for universities who could commercialise research. The new Labor government wants to see research conforming to the national reconstruction fund priorities, which is

geared at projects that expand Australian industry. Its focus is on areas including mining, transport, medical science, renewable energy, defence technology and robotics.

Clare has specifically told the ARC he wants to see “impact with industry”. This emphasis is concerning because it sees research as a commercial, economic or “value-added” property, rather than something centred on discovering things in an independent, scientific way.

Governments also of course choose which industries they want to support based on their political priorities, which tend toward short-term objectives, based on the electoral cycle. (McCarthy and Jayasuriya, 2022)

Recommendations

29. *That universities and the ARC privilege public interest and pure research at least equally with research driven by government, corporate or commercial imperatives.*
30. *That government funding of research be increased to reduce the dependency of universities on income from international student enrolments to fund research.*
31. *That the “national interest test” in the ARC research grants process be abandoned and measures taken to ensure that assessment of research proposals are free of political interference.*

University Staffing

High-quality teaching and research are built on the contributions of passionate and dedicated staff. The delivery of quality education and world leading research is undermined when university staff do not have secure and well-paid jobs. As Croucher (2022) notes:

To ensure that students receive the best education, we need to ensure universities have the best workforce possible. There is discontent and more than a little trauma within academic and professional staff ranks after two years of the pandemic and huge challenges, such as shifting university education online. On top of this, much of the university workforce is employed on short-term and casual contracts. Australian higher education risks losing some of its best and brightest who decide they can no longer put up with such precarious employment. The anger over pay and conditions is shown in recent strike actions around the country.

The National Tertiary Education Union estimates that less than 1 in 3 university workers have secure employment. The union has also identified a “growing list” of universities that have been caught out engaging in wage theft by underpaying casual staff (NTEU, 2023).

There is a clear need for the introduction of measures to ensure casual conversion for higher education employees. and legislation to criminalise wage theft and chronic underpayments.

Recommendations

32. *That the remuneration of university staff be increased and working conditions improved.*
33. *That urgent action be taken to develop a process for the conversion of temporary university staff to permanent employment.*

34. *That the Federal government introduce legislation criminalising wage theft that includes strong criminal penalties.*

Equity

As noted by Marginson (2016) universities can be a significant force in creating “more equal and generous societies”; however, “this will happen only if higher education is allowed to do so, and it chooses to do so”. Despite enormous growth of student participation over the last thirty years, universities have failed to deliver greater equality of social opportunity. As noted in the section of this submission dealing with the nature and roles of Australian universities, key factors have included a neo-liberal ideology that has mounted “a sustained and influential assault on notions of the public good or public interest” (Marginson, p. 83) and that socially beneficial goals have been “continually undermined by the market dynamic” (p. 98). This is the basis for the AEU’s call for a re-invigoration of the concept of universities as providers of public goods.

Recommendations

35. *That universities actively promote social equity through enrolment and employment policies, support services, courses and research.*
36. *That universities employ a “social equity impact test” to all activities. Specifically, that universities be required to undertake assessment of the educational and social equity implications of any income-generating activity (including course provision); that:*
- *The results of these assessments be made public;*
 - *The results of these assessments be taken into account when determining whether or not to proceed with an income-generating activity.*
37. *That universities increase funding and provision of First Nations teaching, research and services.*
38. *That universities provide adequate support services (academic and social) for all “at-risk” student groups.*

Regional, Rural and Remote Education

The Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education (Halsey, 2018) found that, on all measures, students living in regional, rural and remote areas “have in the main lagged behind urban students for decades”; that there is “a persistent relationship between location and educational outcomes when data for the various measures is aggregated”. Unfortunately, the university sector has progressively reduced its direct engagement in regional, rural and remote areas, relying mainly on online provision to cater for students in these areas.

While online courses have an important role to play in serving students from these areas, there are several important problems:

- These courses tend to be generic, pre-packaged units that do not take into account the specific situations of students or the challenges posed by their circumstances;
- The motivation for offering the courses can be as much about generating income as it is about educational outcomes;

- Some of these courses are provided by third parties (see section of this submission dealing with “outsourcing of online courses”);
- Online sessions are not a completely adequate substitute for face-to-face engagement with a teacher;
- Students are unable to access support, work cooperatively with others or build personal relationships.

There is a clear need to address the educational disadvantage faced by those in regional, rural and remote areas. Universities could partner with TAFE institutes to ensure that online provision is supplemented with on-site support.

Recommendation

39. That universities explore partnerships with TAFE institutes to provide education to students in regional, rural and remote areas.

Outsourcing of online courses

As noted elsewhere in this submission the diminution of governments funding and the corporatisation of university management have seen the generation of income assume priority over the core functions of universities. Universities have prioritised the provision of private goods to “consumers” over the provision of public goods. The pressure to generate income has led in some instances to unethical practices.

Two recent reports in *The Guardian* (Smee, 2023; Cassidy and Smee, 2023) claim that:

Students are paying thousands of dollars for online courses they believe are run by prestigious universities but have actually been outsourced to for-profit companies that use aggressive recruitment tactics and refer to students as “customers” ... [S]ome have used out-of-date pre-recorded lectures and involve “no actual [live] teaching”, according to one academic. Assignments are marked by gig workers who also oversee online “discussion boards”, which take the place of tutorials.

Australian universities now offer more than 850 courses, mostly online postgraduate diplomas or masters degrees, where the course management, administration and marketing is contracted out to third-party online program management companies. (Smee, 2023)

Concerns about these courses include the “lack of any academic discussion, tutorials or other engagement”, the use of out-of-date materials and the lack of course-specific expertise of some of the co-ordinators (Smee, 2023) and that they led to “distressing” workloads and poor quality standards (Cassidy and Smee, 2023).

The outsourcing of teaching also undermines the pay and conditions of university academic staff.

Recommendation

40. That universities adopt a code of ethical practice in relation to the offering and provision of courses that clearly prioritises educational over commercial objectives and identifies acceptable and unacceptable practices.

Conclusion

The AEU welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Australian Universities Accord Panel Discussion Paper. Public education is a public good and comprehensive post school education available to all benefits the whole of society. Equitably resourced and administered public education provides lifelong benefits through improved health, wellbeing and employment options, improves society by increasing equity and social cohesion and provides a myriad of economic benefits in terms of increased productivity and economic activity. It is the glue that holds together civil society and the economy, by developing the capacity of people to lead fulfilling and productive lives.

Our submission is based on the proposition that universities should embrace this process as an opportunity to re-prioritise their role in providing “public goods” and to critically examine current policies and practices that diminished or damaged their capacity to do so. Our prioritisation of the interaction between universities and TAFE in the delivery of vocational education and our focus on the urgent need to establish and maintain rigorous ITE programs reflects the AEU’s priorities for this review.

List of recommendations

The relationship between VET, TAFE and universities

1. That universities commit to treating VET as a public good, not as an opportunity to develop an income stream.
2. That the primacy of TAFE as the public vocational education provider of full qualifications within a nationally accredited course of study should be recognised and that universities develop a partnership with TAFE based on a mutual commitment to providing public goods.
3. That vocational education should be delivered with the aim of providing students with a significant and broad skills base to work in their chosen profession, not to provide students with a set of narrow skills or competencies to fulfil a specific employer need at a particular time. Substantive qualifications, whether a higher level certificate, a diploma or a degree should be based on a coherent program, not cobbled together from the completion of a series of disjointed micro-credentials.
4. That the use of a contestable market as the preferred mode of delivering vocational education funding ceases, as it creates the incentive for the race to the bottom from private providers and the impact of that on the status of the vocational education sector as a whole.

Initial Teacher Education

5. That universities, Commonwealth, state and territory governments, education systems, teachers and their unions co-operate to develop a comprehensive teaching workforce strategy. Matters to address in the strategy include:
 - a. Attraction and retention of high-quality entrants and graduates in the teacher workforce;
 - b. Recruitment of teachers to schools that have exhibited recruitment difficulties including those in low SES areas and schools in outer metropolitan, regional and remote areas;
 - c. More focussed and better resourced delivery of ITE;
 - d. Improving ITE practicum experiences for students;
 - e. Funding, including to enhance and support practicum, incentives such as bursaries, scholarships, or discounted HECS-HELP contributions for graduates from in demand subjects and permanent ongoing employment for insecurely employed teachers who undertake additional study in areas of shortage;
 - f. That a more thoroughly regulated and coordinated approach to ITE funding and accreditation in Australia is implemented, one which reviews the number and output of ITE providers to ensure high quality provision of ITE;
 - g. That universities commit to ITE that includes rigorous preparation centred on academic study and professional experience, an in-depth test of subject and pedagogical knowledge, and a comprehensive teacher-readiness assessment.
6. That university providers of ITE take note of the results of recent surveys of new educators and review their approaches to the following areas where a significant number of these teachers expressed a view that their ITE did not sufficiently prepare them for the realities of the classroom:
 - a. Teaching students whose first language is not English;
 - b. Dealing with difficult behaviour;
 - c. Teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students;
 - d. Teaching students with disabilities;

- e. Teaching numeracy;
 - f. Managing classroom activities;
 - g. Working collaboratively with peers.
7. That university ITE programs foster opportunities for students to collaborate and learn from each other, and share experiences, resources and strategies.
 8. That universities support calls from the AEU for an ambitious Commonwealth program that funds pre-service teachers to undertake additional extended practicum and provides schools with the resources to enable experienced teachers to mentor effectively.
 9. That universities affirm their commitment to a minimum five-year full time equivalent qualification for teaching qualifications, as was agreed by all Commonwealth, state and territory education ministers in 2013.
 10. That a strategy and timeline be developed to transition all postgraduate initial teacher education courses to two-year master's qualifications and that universities support the AEU's call for the government to provide financial support for students undertaking a two-year master's degree in teaching.
 11. That minimum entry requirements should be adopted nationally for selection into Initial Teacher Education (ITE) to recruit the top 30% of students into the profession, with equivalent measures for those seeking entrance to ITE from points/pathways other than completion of schooling.
 12. That a range of measures are adopted by all ITE providers to ensure candidates for entry, in addition to high academic standards, display motivation, aptitude, capacity and commitment.
 13. That there is an urgent review of the use by some providers of predominantly or exclusively online delivery for ITE, including a more thorough published comparison of attrition, retention and compliance with the graduate and proficient career stages of those who received their training through primarily online delivery and those who did not.
 14. That in order to protect the quality of school education, Commonwealth, state and territory governments should not fund or accredit – and universities should not support – “fast-tracked” initial teacher education programs such as Teach for Australia.
 15. That universities explore ways to continue to provide support for recently graduated students over the first years of their employment as teachers.
 16. That universities develop strategies to increase the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in the ITE cohort.
 17. That universities support re-invigoration of programs such as the MATSITI Project to increase:
 - a. the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in teaching positions in schools;
 - b. the capacity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers; and
 - c. the retention of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers in teaching positions in schools.

Ongoing Professional Development and Support

18. That a consortium of universities, state and territory education departments, unions, and professional subject associations develop and nationally implement a national professional development program with Commonwealth funding to deliver professional development to teachers at all stages of their careers.

The nature and roles of Australian universities

19. That the role of universities in providing public goods – building a better, more equal and generous society – be re-prioritised and supported.

An Australian universities “Accord”

20. That further work be done to in relation to the notion of a university accord. Specific issues to be addressed include:
 - a. The nature and role of the accord;
 - b. Identification of the parties to the accord;
 - c. Defining the relative roles of the parties to the accord;
 - d. Power relationships amongst the parties;
 - e. Procedures for resolving disagreements between the parties.
21. That the university sector recognises that there are a number of issues where they must pay due deference to the status, position and views of other stakeholders.
22. That universities take steps to increase the inclusivity, democracy and representativeness of university councils and other forums.
23. That inclusivity (rather than “expertise”) be a guiding principle in the development of a university accord.

University Funding

24. That a university accord specifically identifies the obligation of government to adequately fund and support the provision of public goods by universities.
25. That Federal government funding for higher education be significantly increased.
26. That a review be undertaken on the current provision by Australian universities of courses for international students. Among the issues to be examined are:
 - a. The quality of educational programs offered to international students;
 - b. Access by international students to essential facilities and services;
 - c. Access by international students to safe, non-exploitative employment while studying;
 - d. The unequal distribution amongst universities of income generated by international students.

Student Fees

27. That the Job-Ready Graduates policy be replaced by a system that allows students to make choices based on their strengths and preferences, and which maximises access and equity, and minimises the chances of onerous debt for students.
28. That the Federal government accept that reform of the current HELP loan system will require additional funding and commit to providing that funding.

Research

29. That universities and the ARC privilege public interest and pure research at least equally with research driven by government, corporate or commercial imperatives.
30. That government funding of research be increased to reduce the dependency of universities on income from international student enrolments to fund research.
31. That the “national interest test” in the ARC research grants process be abandoned and measures taken to ensure that assessment of research proposals are free of political interference.

University Staffing

32. That the remuneration of university staff be increased and working conditions improved.
33. That urgent action be taken to develop a process for the conversion of temporary university staff to permanent employment.
34. That the Federal government introduce legislation criminalising wage theft that includes strong criminal penalties.

Equity

35. That universities actively promote social equity through enrolment and employment policies, support services, courses and research.
36. That universities employ a “social equity impact test” to all activities. Specifically, that universities be required to undertake assessment of the educational and social equity implications of any income-generating activity (including course provision); that:
 - a. The results of these assessments be made public;
 - b. The results of these assessments be taken into account when determining whether or not to proceed with an income-generating activity.
37. That universities increase funding and provision of First Nations teaching, research and services.
38. That universities provide adequate support services (academic and social) for all “at-risk” student groups.

Regional, Rural and Remote Education

39. That universities explore partnerships with TAFE institutes to provide education to students in regional, rural and remote areas.

Outsourcing of online courses

40. That universities adopt a code of ethical practice in relation to the offering and provision of courses that clearly prioritises educational over commercial objectives and identifies acceptable and unacceptable practices.

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