



QUEENSLAND UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY RESPONSE TO THE AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITIES ACCORD DISCUSSION PAPER

April 2023

Acknowledgement of Country

QUT acknowledges the Turrbal and Yugara, as the First Nations owners of the lands where QUT now stands. We pay respect to their Elders, lores, customs and creation spirits. We recognise that these lands have always been places of teaching, research and learning.

QUT acknowledges the important role Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people play within the QUT community.

QUT is firmly committed to working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to embed Indigenous knowledge in our curricula, expand recruitment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff and students, and to undertake partnerships and research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

About QUT

[QUT](#) is a major Australian university with a global reputation and a 'real world' focus. Our courses equip our students and graduates with the skills and mindset they need to realise their full potential in a rapidly changing world.

With more than 50,000 students across two inner-city campuses in Brisbane, QUT offers academic programs in fields spanning business, creative industries, education, engineering, health, law, science, and social justice across five faculties.

We have a long history of providing accessible and practical learning experiences —embedding work integrated learning and focusing on developing entrepreneurial skills. We offer executive education and professional development flexible learning through QUT Online and multiple pathways into our undergraduate programs through QUT College.

In addition to strong demand for our courses from traditional school leavers, we have a history of welcoming students who are variously first in family, from outer metropolitan, regional and remote areas, and combinations of these. Our commitment to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students is evident in the many outstanding alumni who have gone on from QUT to be leaders in law, the arts and education. The QUT vision as the university for the real world permeates our research and teaching and translates to excellent graduate employment outcomes and strong links to industry and the professions.

We are an ambitious institution, with research programs aligned to the needs of government and industry and which connect fundamental enquiry into societal outcomes. Our interdisciplinary teams create high-impact research in areas as diverse as climate change mitigation, digital media, materials science and biomedical innovation.

Our courses are in strong demand internationally, but we seek to balance demand across countries and throughout our courses to ensure that the educational experience is enriching for all.

1.0 Summary

We acknowledge the Accord Panel will receive a full array of submissions and ideas. QUT advances some areas of emphasis for the Panel's consideration which we believe will yield a fairer, more accessible education sector. Overall, we support the streamlining of approaches to government funding arrangements and welcome ideas that can be achieved with the appropriate expertise and oversight rather than arguing for a particular model of oversight for the sector.

Some of the important elements of those arrangements include:

- Implementation of multi-year university agreements, to encourage differentiation and focus and to simplify oversight and regulation;
- a sustainable support system for university research – with particular attention on the direct and indirect costs not met by competitive grants to ensure the maintenance of an outstanding national research enterprise, independent of the international student revenues that currently underpin it;
- support for universities to implement targeted, intentional, and specific programs to improve access, retention, and completion of higher education for students with higher barriers to access, including those who are first-in-family, economically disadvantaged, Indigenous Australians, students from outer metropolitan, regional and rural areas, and those living with a disability;
- an uncapped income-contingent, Student Learning Entitlement to support access to the lifelong learning needed by both workers and industry in an era of multiple careers and fast technology change, and;
- recognition of different pathways to and through universities and improved articulation with other elements of the tertiary sector.

We have not sought to provide a comprehensive response. We support the Universities Australia submission along with the wider calls across the sector, especially in relation to student contributions and support, a realistic level of indirect costs of research, and the removal of the most urgent inequities of the Job Ready Graduates Package.

2.0 Principles of a new funding model for education and research

Recommendation 1: The next university resourcing model should recognise the need for alignment of teaching and research quality and:

- Provide certainty for students, staff and universities through multi-year funding agreements;
- consider the cost of teaching and service delivery for students with diverse backgrounds and pathways;
- support a research funding model that recognises and rewards high quality research supervision and outcomes and the direct and indirect costs associated with competitive funding from government and industry;
- support universities to serve their communities, and;
- support and sustain the infrastructure needed for world class research and education.

These recommendations address questions 1, and 47.

The higher education sector needs a sustainable resourcing model to deliver increased and expanded education programs focussed on national skills and supporting an increasingly diverse student body entering tertiary education while also undertaking world-class, high-impact research programs at scale. This model should allow universities to undertake the fundamental aspects of teaching and research with confidence in their funding under a multi-year agreement.

It has become increasingly difficult to plan for the future within the current system which has added a series of multifaceted and interrelated schemes, often at short notice, that add significant administrative burden with limited documented benefit. Differentiated agreements would allow each university to achieve strategic outcomes aligned to the needs of their communities. Multi-year agreements would facilitate more efficient allocation of resources to the benefit of students, universities, and other stakeholders.

The model should consider the growing cost of teaching and service delivery to a diverse student body. QUT has a sizeable portion of students from outer metropolitan areas, which have amongst the lowest socio-economic indicators in the nation. These outer metropolitan areas are often overlooked despite the low overall participation in education and poor health outcomes. In many cases, they include significant populations of Indigenous Australians¹ and Pacifica communities. These areas may also have poor internet connectivity and transport infrastructure, and students who live within 60 km of the CBD may still need to travel to campus to access the internet. Current policies and initiatives for rural and regional funding initiatives do not cover these and other students who may enter via multiple different pathways into tertiary education.

Just as the full cost of teaching and student support needs to be addressed, so too do the indirect costs of research. Since its establishment as a university, QUT has grown its research performance and reputation on both investigator-driven and industry-engaged research, without the historical advantages or the same level of international-fee income as other research-intensive universities. The gap between the direct costs

¹ The Queensland Local government areas with the highest population of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander citizens are: Brisbane (22,940), Moreton Bay (18,616), Townsville (16,269), Cairns (16,153), Logan (14,520), Gold Coast (13,593) and Ipswich (12,509). That is the population in Southeast Queensland alone (82,178) exceeds that of the Northern Territory (61,000 in the 2021 census).

and indirect costs of our competitive research income is at least \$40 million pa² and growing rapidly as our research performance increases.

We have done this by aligning our research and education and focussing on our strengths. Our academics collaborate with the best of their peers here and internationally as evidenced by our leadership in ARC Centres of Excellence and Industrial Training Centres; and we have, for example, the only joint prestigious Max Planck Centre hosted in an Australian University, and collaborations with the University of Tokyo in clean energy and Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in Business and Entrepreneurship.

We are not seeking any special arrangements or designation, just a commitment to an appropriate level of direct and indirect research funding for the many areas where we have excellent people and capacity to contribute.

We also believe collaborations between researchers are not best organised at the institutional level, but rather through continued (and ideally increased) investment in the existing programs (ARC Centres, CRCs, NHMRC, MRFF, etc.). We support the Universities Australia call for increased government investment in R&D to match the OECD averages and recommend this involve additional investment into existing agencies (ARCs, CRCs, NHMRC) alongside increased support for indirect costs rather than creating new schemes with added complexity.

There are two urgent needs in relation to the pipeline of students for a research-qualified workforce. The first is to provide adequate stipends for domestic students that address the current cost of living pressures and assist in the attraction of industry professionals into PhD programs. The current provision of research supervision support and scholarships or stipends has the flexibility to increase stipends but at the expense of offering fewer scholarships overall.

The second is to address the overall risk framework resulting in extensive delays and backlog of visa applications for international research students, which is damaging our national research effort in many areas of science and technology which do not impact on national security concerns.

The final area of the research system that requires attention is in the overall support and opportunities for early career researchers. The completion of a PhD is not sufficient for individuals to be competitive for an independent research career; and the current opportunities for early career researchers are limited to 200 fellowships per annum from the ARC, limited numbers from the NHMRC, insecure employment opportunities on external grant funds of more senior investigators and internal university funding from international fee revenue. This is not a sustainable model for the future given the current scale and needs of the university sector itself, let alone other industries requiring research trained staff.

² Based on the conservative estimate of 50c in the dollar for indirect costs of competitive research grants whereas at present from the Research Support Program we receive 21 c in the dollar for each competitive grant

3.0 Removing Barriers to Participation and Success

Recommendation 2: New arrangements for student support should:

- Recognise the true cost of commencing university including relocation costs;
- accommodate the increasing needs and cost of personalised support;
- raise the HELP repayment threshold to the average wage and reform the HELP indexation arrangements, and;
- remove the lifetime cap on the Student Learning Entitlement.

These recommendations address questions 12, 15 and 16

Starting university brings with it many upfront costs which our students are finding increasingly difficult to meet with the growing cost of living in the city. To encourage mobility and differentiation by providers, the Government could take steps to fund genuine relocation expenses regardless of initial place of residence, including an up-front bursary for rental bond assistance. Attention could also be focused on reducing the lead-time from application for Commonwealth support to receipt of funds (particularly for ABSTUDY).

Mental health challenges, including high rates of depression, anxiety and stress of students are a significant and increasing concern. Academic pressure, financial stress, social isolation, and uncertainty about the future are just some of the factors contributing to these challenges. Students from marginalised backgrounds, from outer metropolitan areas and/or those facing socio-economic challenges can face additional barriers to accessing mental health support, as well as Indigenous Australians and international students. Despite the increasing awareness of mental health issues, stigma and lack of resources hinders the provision of effective support to students.

QUT has been increasing our support to address the mental health challenges of students by expanding a triage model of support with a goal of no wait times; continuing to enhance mental health access throughout the student experience; and enhancing student wellbeing touchpoints through personal networks, residential life, and curriculum. This level of personalised support needs to be considered in overall funding models if we are to provide opportunity to all our student cohorts to be successful in their educational endeavours.

While support during their time as students is critical, providing support for students as they transition out of the university is equally important to ensure they can be successful in their chosen professions. Graduates face increasing financial pressures in their early years, often without the safety nets that have supported them through their studies.

To help graduates, the current threshold for repayment of HELP loans should be increased to the average wage, in line with the policy's fundamental design rationale. The current repayment threshold – particularly since it triggers a repayment obligation against every dollar of taxable income, not only the portion above the threshold – is preventing young Australians from establishing themselves, contributing to the economy, starting families, and launching businesses. In the current housing crisis, the repayment burden on low incomes is making it harder for graduates to find rental accommodation, so HELP-induced homelessness is a very real prospect. None of these effects are in the national interest, and they are affecting real people

right now. Serious consideration should also be given either to permanently reforming the indexation mechanism or to providing one-off relief in periods of sharply rising inflation, such as the current economic environment.

The lifetime cap on the Student Learning Entitlement should also be removed, to support access to the lifelong learning needed by both workers and industry in a future of multiple careers, whole new jobs and even industries, and even faster technology change than we are already undergoing today.

3.1 Ensuring Fair Access to Work Integrated Learning for All

Recommendation 3: The Australian Government’s funding of higher education needs to include realistic financial support of students undertaking compulsory placements.

Recommendation 4: The Australian Government should undertake a cross-portfolio review of the appropriateness of the minimum required placement hours to understand how these requirements could be reduced to alleviate pressures on students undertaking these qualifications.

These recommendations address questions 14, 30, 31, 39 and 47.

QUT arranges more than 10,000 student placements in any given year, amounting to more than 1.2 million hours of placements undertaken by our students per annum. Each of these students must navigate their individual circumstances to take advantage of these placements – working around their financial circumstances, their caring responsibilities, their normal employer’s tolerance for time away from work, and their domestic obligations. For required placements, when these barriers are insurmountable the inevitable result is that students are unable to complete their degrees, which is not only personally costly and disappointing to students but also a considerable loss to industry and the professions, including in critical areas of workforce shortages. For optional placements, these barriers have the potential to further disadvantage students whose entire university experience is juggling their study with the ability to support themselves throughout the process.

The funding of higher education needs to include realistic financial support of students undertaking compulsory placements. It will not solve every challenge faced by students on placement, but it will address a good portion of them directly and help with some of the others.

The lack of any specific funding allocation for work integrated learning (WIL) also creates a significant obstacle to expanding professional opportunities in outer metropolitan and regional areas for universities. Students are often unable to afford the financial costs of relocation and living expenses associated with completing placements in rural, regional, and remote locations. Even local placements pose challenges as students are, in the face of rising costs of living, struggling to balance work and study and often lose income when required to complete unpaid placements. To address these challenges requires a change in funding approach, either through funding universities to better support students on placement or via direct funding to students engaged in required placements. Compensating students for the hours spent on required placements at the applicable Award rate will result in their enhanced ability to balance study and working obligations, increase retention, and support those students keen on pursuing placements in rural, regional, and remote locations.

QUT's Professor Christine Morley was commissioned by the Australian Council of Heads of Social Work Education (ACHSWE) to undertake a national online survey in late 2022, *Exploring socially just and sustainable models for field education in social work for the future: A National Survey of Social Work Students, Educators and Practitioners*, Australian Council of Heads of Social Work Education. (Morely, et al., 2023) Three-quarters (74%) of students who participated in the survey answered "Yes" to the question about whether they knew other students who had deferred or withdrawn from their Social Work degree due to placement requirements. Most students (85.5%) who completed the survey had to reduce or withdraw completely from paid employment to undertake a placement.

The expectation that students can afford to study full-time without working, and thus complete full-time placements, is difficult to sustain in Australia, where minimal financial support is provided by the government to meet students' living costs. The implication of such an expectation is to restrict accessibility for students with caring responsibilities, who have limited financial means and/or greater pressures on their time.

The Australian Government could also lead a cross-portfolio review of the appropriateness of the minimum required placement hours to understand how these requirements could be reduced to alleviate pressures on students undertaking these qualifications. For example, during COVID-19, the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) granted flexibility to higher education providers to reduce the length of placement time by up to 20 percent. Many students, practitioners and educators commented that the shorter placements did not necessarily compromise students' learning. Practitioners agreed that shorter placement would not have detrimental effects on student learners, and this was also supported by staff from higher education providers (Morely, et al., 2023).

4.0 Creating Opportunity for Indigenous Australians

Recommendation 5: Extend the demand driven CSP guarantee to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, regardless of domicile and ensure sufficient funding for universities (including ISSP) to provide effective support.

These recommendations address questions 28 – 33

The Report of the [*Review of Higher Education, Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People*](#) (the Behrendt Review) noted that Indigenous Australians are significantly under-represented in the higher education system, contributing to the high levels of social and economic disadvantage they often experience. Producing graduates qualified to take up professional, academic and leadership positions across community, government and corporate sectors will help address this disadvantage.

Research points to prior educational attainment and school progression as continuing roadblocks to both access to and success within universities. In addition, a lack of career guidance and a lack of information on university pathways in schools and communities are widely noted as barriers.

Further, social and financial issues continue to be deterrents, including a lack of social support, physical and mental health related issues, struggles with dislocation from home and community and lack of preparedness for academia including time management and study skills. Pastoral care, professional health and wellbeing services, studies assistance and material support are all key. Accommodation and child-care are also important, especially given the predominance of mature aged Indigenous Australian students. Some individual students also struggle with a lack of direct or vicarious experience of universities and being first in family, and experience balancing family and community commitments.

Indigenous Student Centres are strong positive contributors to student success, especially in providing a safe space for first in family students for whom much of university life is strange and can be alienating – when working well, centres provide a safe space that strengthens students ability to effectively navigate and receive support from elsewhere in the university as well, including general student services and from within faculties.

One of the few benefits of the previous government's Job-Ready Graduates Package was the guarantee of a Commonwealth Supported Place on a demand-driven basis to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students living in remote and regional Australia. This measure should be extended to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, regardless of domicile if we are to make significant progress to meet the gap. In Queensland the highest numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians are in the Brisbane, and Moreton Bay Local government areas, closely followed by Logan, the Gold Coast and Ipswich. The participation in higher education from these areas is still much lower than the overall population.

Just as universities play an increasing role in appropriately resourcing Indigenous Australian initiatives, the Commonwealth plays an integral role through the provision of Indigenous Student Success Program (ISSP) supplementary funds to universities. Between 2017 and 2021 the national ISSP funding pool increased from \$67.5m to \$72.3m – representing an increase of 7.2%. Over that same period, enrolments of Indigenous Australian students nationally increased from 18,463 to almost 23,000 – an increase of more than 24%.

Despite significant increases in Indigenous Australian enrolments in the sector, the annual pool of ISSP remains stagnant in real terms, resulting in universities being expected to deliver the same level of support services to increasing numbers of students. Indexation for the ISSP funding pool urgently needs to change to align with the increase in Indigenous Australian student enrolments.

While we recommend a place for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island students, we remain committed to enhancing access and participation of Indigenous Australian students from regional and remote communities. Notwithstanding the high urban population, approximately 25 per cent of Indigenous Australians attending QUT come from regional and remote locations, both from within Queensland and interstate. Leaving family and community and relocating to attend university in a large metropolitan location can be an incredibly daunting and challenging experience for this cohort of students.

To alleviate some of the pressures associated with this, QUT is currently implementing the Indigenous Australian Accommodation Program (IAAP) which is a twelve-month transition support program available to Indigenous Australian students who are relocating from regional, remote, or interstate to QUT for their first year of study. In partnership with Student One accommodation, the program provides subsidised accommodation as well as a culturally supportive environment with a pastoral carer (Oodgeroo Unit's Indigenous Program Coordinator) who journeys with program participants throughout the year delivering life skills workshops, social and cultural events and activities. Forty-one students participated in the program in 2022. Consideration of additional government support for similar style programs would ensure more widespread offerings, in line with our aspirations for overall growth in Indigenous Australian student representation.

5.0 Urgent Reform to the Job Ready Graduate Measures

Recommendation 6: QUT recommends urgent reform to the JRG, including:

- Removal of the Low Completion Rate exclusion, which unfairly targets those most in need of our assistance and discourages students who may be struggling but are determined to succeed, and;
- revision of the distorted Job-Ready Graduates Student Contribution schedule, to lift the arbitrary penalty imposed by the previous government on students undertaking study it deemed undesirable, aligning all student contributions to a set proportion of the estimated sector-wide cost of delivery, for continuing as well as commencing students.

These recommendations address questions 48 and 49.

QUT is not alone in recognising the Job-Ready Graduates (JRG) package resulted in universities receiving 17% per cent less in Commonwealth funding, and only a 9% increase in student contributions (Universities Australia, 2020) for a combined change in funding per place of a reduction of 6 per cent on average per student (O'Neill, Pratt, & Carr, 2023). This reduction in fees means that all universities are being forced to deliver more teaching to more students for each dollar received from the government (Norton, 2020). There is a limit to the efficiencies that can be found to teach more students with less funding, including servicing the increasingly specialised needs of students, adapt to focus support on new industries and undertake breakthrough research.

We join in the calls for urgent reform to the JRG Package on two key issues: the inequitable and regressive low completion rate exclusion from access to CSPs (the 50% fail rule); and the discipline cluster funding arrangements. Neither measure is fit for purpose, and both should be urgently withdrawn. The funding arrangements could be replaced, if need be, by a set of holding measures *pro tempore*. This could include a temporary flat cost-sharing system based on the current best estimates of cost of provision. A full review is then needed to establish a fair, effective, and sustainable basis for setting discipline funding levels including the split between Commonwealth and student share.

The case for urgency is clear: every census date that passes with the current model in place is an injustice to students and an impediment to institutions' capacity to deliver high quality education across the board. The Government could consider implementing a debt forgiveness measure to cancel the surcharge that was experienced by those students undertaking courses that experienced the most impact.

6.0 References

- Morely, C., Ryan, V., Briskman, L., Martin, R., Higgins, M., Watts, L., & Hill, N. (2023, February 6). Exploring socially just and sustainable models for field education in social work for the future: A National Survey of Social Work Students, Educators and Practitioners, Australian Council of Heads of Social Work Education. Australia.
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- O'Neill, D., Pratt, L., & Carr, K. (2023, March 31). *Dissenting Report from Labor Senators*. Retrieved from Parliament of Australia: https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Education_and_Employment/JobReadyGraduates/Report/section?id=committees%2Freportsen%2F024542%2F73901
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