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Response to Australian Universities Accord – Discussion Paper

The University of Sydney Students' Representative Council (SRC) welcomes the opportunity to comment on the questions raised in the Discussion Paper and hopes to provide some insight into the student experience. Many questions in this Discussion Paper were considered by professional caseworkers who provide advice to undergraduate students at the University of Sydney, and others by student representatives. We base our comments on our significant collective experiences, both direct and vicarious.

Student representatives at the University of Sydney SRC maintain a long history of fighting for quality education and for social justice. The most successful way this has been achieved is through fighting student movements and union activity, such as in opposition to Voluntary Student Unionism. It will always be the primary objective of the SRC to strengthen these movements. We believe that the premise of this accord is flawed, as students have interests which fundamentally cannot be reconciled with those of major businesses and University executives. The SRC's submission to the Accord is considered in this broader context, and we believe that nothing short of free, fully funded higher education, and ongoing income support, as well as the other changes outlined below, will be adequate for students.

Q1. How should an Accord be structured and focused to meet the challenges facing Australia's higher education system? What is needed to overcome limitations in the current approach to Australian higher education?

The Accord must prioritise urgent responses to the challenges facing students; their experience drives the education sector. Responses to student matters require attention to the interrelatedness of university processes, such as the ramifications of system-generated enrolment changes on Centrelink support. Simultaneously, administrators require flexibility in procedures to enhance their responsiveness and prevent harm to students. A well-designed response should not impose limits to students' enjoyment of the tertiary experience, or restrict their progression through a diverse, enriching academic landscape. The Accord must be structured to simplify how students, faculty and administrative agents accomplish their respective tasks. It should analyse systemic challenges, and provide platforms for prioritising issues centered on wellbeing, systemic fairness, and efficiency. It should facilitate ways to solve these issues where problems can be grouped by area/topic; gathering community suggestions on the best approaches that can be tailored across the sector. It should equip all agents towards continuous analysis and improvement of outcomes, where information is a shared resource, and agents will be supported in enhancing their services and processes.

The main limitations in the current approach to higher education (including that of the Accord's discussion questions), and potential solutions include:

- The student experience is increasingly viewed in terms of adding utility to future employment (for example, the Job Ready Graduates Package). There should be a refocusing

on the diversity of components of the student experience that attract students to the tertiary sector and encourage progression & completion.

- Not enough consideration for student and staff wellbeing. There should be an integrated model which aligns personal agency with systemic facilitations, to enhance retention and productivity while reducing burnout.
- Administrative processes create barriers to continuity and completion, which then impact employability and employment opportunities. Enrolment procedures should be tailored to consider matters that arise during the semester timeline, to mitigate against harm to students.

Q4. Looking from now to 2030 and 2040, what major national challenges and opportunities should Australian higher education be focused on meeting?

Addressing current and future national challenges should be high on the agenda of universities in the coming decades. The climate crisis is already the most significant challenge to humanity and its effects will only be more keenly felt moving forward. Universities, as institutions of research, need to be ready to play a pivotal role in the development of renewable energies and at the barest of minimums, not contribute to the destruction of the planet. Currently, Australian universities are permitted to invest in the fossil fuel industry, profiting from the damage that they do to the environment. Universities discuss powering a green future, all the while many hundreds of millions of dollars, likely billions considering a large share of investments are hidden by opaque portfolio holdings, go towards Santos, Rio Tinto, etc. Even where direct investments have been reduced on moral grounds, indirect investments through fund managers continue. State and federal governments should not abdicate their responsibility for overseeing a transition, a transition that universities should have a role to play in.

In their capacity as institutions of research for social progress, Universities must be allowed to, encourage and incentivised to contribute research to a greener future. This means, on a basic level, protecting the ability of Australian universities to do research, something that university managements are moving away from around the country. The attempted abolition of 40/40/20 allocations in a shift towards teaching-focused roles is concerning if we share the view of universities playing a role in the research that will protect our planet. While university staff have consistently fought this demand during Enterprise Bargaining nationally, it is important that the Accords recognise Australian universities as institutions of learning and research for social good, not corporate degree factories that are run at a profit. The focus must not continue to be on preparing people to enter the economy, rather we must reorient around learning, critical thought, and research for good.

Q6. What are the best ways to achieve and sustain future growth in Australian higher education, given the changing needs of the population and the current pressures on public funding?

Pressure on public funding is a phrase used only to describe the funding for things deemed unnecessary or tangential. When \$350b+ is invested in eight nuclear submarines, no one describes it as putting pressure on public funding, rather as a necessity for regional defence capabilities. When marginal tax rates are flattened and many hundreds of millions of dollars are handed to the wealthy through the stage three tax cuts it is not described as putting pressure on public funding. There is no one institution more important to invest in in this country than our universities, in the education they provide to those young and old, and in the research they conduct for a socially progressive future. Universities must be prioritised in terms of funding and this funding must be used to make education accessible and equitable to achieve growth in our higher education sector.

There are currently a variety of factors restricting the growth of Australian higher education, the most important being economic. Young people are simultaneously living through a cost of living crisis and a housing crisis. It is difficult enough finding the time to study around the many hours spent at work that are necessary to be able to afford rent, food and necessities. When this is coupled with the idea of the astronomical debts accumulated over the course of a degree, many young people choose, or are forced to choose, not to attend university. Higher education should be free, with every effort made to make it available, accessible and desirable. This means addressing the reasons students choose not to attend university, namely: housing affordability, the cost of education, the cost of living crisis, etc.

Q11. How should Australia boost demand from people to study in the higher education system?

To boost demand from people to study in the higher education system, Australia must take active steps to make the process of applying for and completing study more accessible. This must be systemic, and well-advertised, so that any person who wants to access higher education in Australia does not face barriers in deciding to do so. These systemic supports must also extend to international students.

When considering whether to engage in higher education, future students should not have to factor in the impact of intersectional disadvantage when choosing to apply. This means that access to education must be equitable, with students knowing they will be supported to apply through various pathways to entry, as well as supported economically while they undertake their degrees. Students should also choose to engage in higher education without having to factor in the potential of a substantial and long term HECS-HELP loan debt.

Australia should introduce and prioritise policies which reduce the economic burden of committing to full time study. This includes but is not limited to increasing the support provided by Centrelink's student payments that provide an allowance that is only half amount of the poverty line. This will make engaging in higher education more attractive, as those considering it will not feel as if they will be disadvantaged economically by studying.

Changes which will assist with this include:

- Increasing the rate of student welfare payments to be at least the equivalent of the Henderson Poverty Line.
- Increasing the availability and affordability of student housing, based on the rates of student welfare payments rather than market prices. Reinstate RentStart bond loans for students.
- Increased bursaries for up-front costs such as laptops or course materials, made available to all students regardless of whether they have previous failed subjects.
- Increased economic support for students who are required to complete unpaid student placements, e.g., free transport, a stipend for food expenses, and income support for lost wages.
- Increasing the financial accessibility of childcare and respite care for students with primary caring duties for dependants.
- Available and financially accessible mental health support for all students, especially in regional and rural placements.
- Free or cheaper transport for all students, especially international students.
- Abolish the cap of hours able to be worked by international students.
- Fully subsidised and accessible medical, dental, and mental health treatments – without exorbitant waiting lists.

These systemic supports will reduce the number of students who are forced to abandon their studies due to economic inaccessibility. Knowledge of the reduced economic burden of study will additionally encourage those who may have been previously dissuaded from study. These changes will positively impact those from sections of society who currently engage less in higher education, such as rural, low socio-economic, mature aged and First Nations students, increasing the higher education attainment from these groups.

Q14. How should placement arrangements and work-integrated learning in higher education change in the decades ahead?

The SRC recognises the value that can be added to a student's education by having work-integrated learning. However, the cost to students should also be considered when deciding if a work-integrated placement is appropriate. Students are often not able to work while they are on placement, and may incur an additional transport cost, accommodation cost, and additional meal costs where meals from home are not practical. Students should receive adequate income support while on a placement to allow these opportunities to be equally accessible. This support could be through Centrelink or easily accessible scholarships and bursaries.

Students are currently forced to accept less than ideal placement conditions, as the options for alternative placements are very limited. Any increase in work-integrated learning must be matched with a program to increase the availability of places, together with a reassurance that students will be provided adequate supervision, accessible placements, and adjustments where necessary.

Q15. What changes are needed to grow a culture of lifelong learning in Australia?

To cultivate a culture of lifelong learning in Australia we must reorient higher education policy away from treating education as purely a commodity which serves to prepare graduates to contribute to the economy. This focus reduces learning to a product which can be bought and sold, which in turn undermines the quality of higher education as a whole and undermines the pursuit of a culture of lifelong learning.

Due to the nature of modern higher education policy, Universities have been allowed to increasingly operate as a business, with the product being degrees, rather than knowledge and learning. In turn, we have seen this focus lead to increased casualisation of teaching staff, reduction in full time academic roles, reduction in student support services, reduced tutorial time, with a focus on larger scale classes. These changes, while good for business, do not assist in the cultivation of a culture of lifelong learning. If higher education is reduced to 'getting a degree', rather than the pursuit of knowledge, students will not finish their degrees with a passion for knowledge, rather they will simply finish with a degree.

Due to economic barriers, higher education is not accessible to all who wish to access it. Changes must be made to remove the economic burden of higher education, including removing student contributions; increasing student welfare rates; increasing the availability of bursaries for the cost of materials; affordable student housing; increasing the availability and accessibility of affordable childcare and respite care; and affordable mental health, dental and medical treatments. These changes will assist in encouraging students who may otherwise avoid higher education to study, including mature aged and low-socioeconomic students.

The 2020 Jobs Ready Graduates package (JRG) stands in opposition to growing a culture of lifelong learning in Australia. The policies for the JRG focus on shaping higher education to benefit the economy first, discouraging students from studying areas they may otherwise be interested in by artificially inflating the student costs of some degrees. The JRG package additionally sees students punished if they fail more than 50% of their units, removing their access to government subsidies if they do so, as well as limiting the time students can take to complete degrees to seven years. Policies such as these seek to discourage marginalised and struggling students from studying, rather than supporting them to succeed. This does not assist in cultivating a culture of lifelong learning in Australia.

Q16. What practical barriers are inhibiting lifelong learning, and how can they be fixed?

There are a variety of practical barriers which inhibit lifelong learning in Australia. These barriers both discourage the uptake of and inhibit the completion of higher education. These barriers impact some sections of society at higher rates than others, due to the stratification of society on economic and identity-based lines.

To reduce barriers to accessing and completing higher education, the Australian government should introduce policies which:

- Invest in public schools, in order to give all students an equitable education, and an equal ability to work towards higher education attainment.
- Decrease student contributions to degree costs to \$0, for all degrees, to reduce hesitation around higher education access due to worry around lifelong debt.
- Increase the rate of student welfare payments to support students to focus on study, rather than having to work long hours or live in substandard conditions.
- Increase the availability and affordability of student housing, to support students to affordably live within a reasonable proximity (60 minutes) to where they study.
- Increase bursaries for up-front costs such as laptops or course materials, to reduce barriers to accessing all aspects of education.
- Increase economic support for students who are required to complete unpaid student placement, so they do not need to also engage in paid work at the same time.
- Provide financial support to make local childcare and respite care facilities accessible for students with dependants to remove this barrier for their education.
- Introduce free transport for all students, including international students, to support access to university campuses.
- Abolish the cap of hours able to be worked by international students, to reduce the number of students exploited by illegal pay conditions.
- Introduce fully subsidised and accessible medical, dental, and mental health treatments, without extensive waiting periods, to support students to maintain good health and wellbeing while studying.

These changes will have particularly positive impacts in demographics which are currently negatively impacted by economic disadvantage across their lifetimes, including women, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, migrants, students with disabilities or carer responsibilities, and other marginalised groups.

Q28. What is needed to increase the number of people from under-represented groups applying to and prepared for higher education, both from school and from other pathways?

Education must be accessible to all cohorts. We have outlined how to address this in our response to question 11.

The impact of HECS and other fees is a significant deterrent to people considering a higher education. We address these concerns in our response to question 49.

A flexibility of qualification may also increase participation from students who are not yet able to commit to a full length Bachelor's degree. For example, students who complete the first year of a university degree could be able to convert that to a certificate of study, while students who are able to complete two years might be able to convert that to a diploma. This flexibility will encourage students to attempt tertiary education to see if they feel able, with their current circumstances, to complete a degree.

Q29. What changes in provider practices and offerings are necessary to ensure all potential students can succeed in their chosen area of study?

The SRC notes that students' success is frequently hampered by systemic limitations; matters external to the classroom experience essentially block their progress. Much of this involves administrative processes that aren't efficiently resolved, as seen with matters of academic integrity, examination and course results, and appeals of faculty decisions. Without timely resolution, students are often stalled without alternatives in the interim, lose motivation to continue, or even lose funding for their studies.

Most crucially, providers need to increase their capacity in student services administration, especially with frontline staff who triage problems, provide referrals, and other initial support. More staffing should be dedicated towards integrity matters, and combined with process-workarounds that allow students to continue their coursework or recover their efforts at a later point. Counselling, pastoral care and egress who assist with hardship, need to be included throughout, to mitigate systemic escalation and the spread of problems. These directly impact the student experience and are determinants of success.

As SSAF determines how much of and what types of services can be provided, universities must prioritise the needs identified by students and student organisations, and match funding to service delivery and enhancement. Particular attention is needed towards resourcing areas that assist with student hardship and crises and provide pastoral care. Providing affordable accommodation linked to the fortnightly allowance of Centrelink student support payments, rather than market rent, for students within the current Australian housing crisis will also protect against future hardships caused by market fluctuations.

Q31. How can the costs of participation, including living expenses, be most effectively alleviated?

As the cost of living increases, it becomes more difficult for people with dependents or other financial burdens to participate in higher education. One key way to alleviate the cost of participation is to address the most expensive cost for students – housing. Current student accommodation costs are based relative to commercial rent in the surrounding area, which for students at the University of Sydney is far beyond a reasonable level of student income. Vast amounts of students spend the majority of their income on housing, putting them into a position where they are living well below the poverty line. A key problem is that the university and purpose-built student accommodation providers make a profit out of housing. It is entirely inappropriate for

Universities to provide housing in this manner, and the cost should be as low as possible, based on the level of student income support, rather than as a proportion of commercial rent in the surrounding area. See other notes about accessibility for higher education and ways to alleviate living expenses above.

Q39. What reforms are needed to ensure that all students have a quality student experience?

Access (waiting times and quality) to student services and supports is about the accountability of the institution to the student. Students primarily need efficient and responsive services to sort issues related to their enrolment, continuity, and completion. Like many other providers, the University of Sydney has experienced a restructuring of services during the pandemic, and an overall reduction of administrators. Combined with the reduction of face-to-face assistance, the result has been one of delayed response and mismatched communication, which does not afford students timely resolution of their matters. This precipitates many systemic problems which can result in discontinuation of students, and loss of revenue for the university. To ensure a quality experience, providers must resource each area of need with an appropriate number of staff. Then, they must engage staff and students in reviewing how these services perform, to identify shortcomings and prevent administrative complications.

Many students face common hardships, including the cost of living and accommodation. Students are forced to choose between safety and affordability, and between continuing with education or other alternatives. To encourage tertiary participation, providers must address the factors that enable students to enrol and continue with their studies. One way to address this is via the student associations. Along with the other primary functions they provide, they should be resourced to deliver food assistance, housing assistance, and alternative pastoral care to students, thereby fostering community, ensuring safety, and encouraging success.

Q40. What changes are needed to ensure all students are physically and culturally safe while studying?

Universities are unsafe institutions for anyone from women, disabled students, and any other student from a diverse backgrounds. Many people have authored entire reports on this topic, that reveal the rampant rate of sexual harassment and assault on University campuses. It must be acknowledged that teaching good behaviour and citizenship cannot begin at Universities, given the integrated nature of Universities in society. However, Universities must take accountability for the behaviour of their own students, and the private ownership of the Residential Colleges at the University of Sydney has allowed discriminatory, unsafe behaviour to occur at the Residential Colleges for decades. These colleges should be immediately transferred to public ownership, and their elite structures eroded to prevent unsafe behaviour and provide affordable student accommodation for all, particularly those from low SES backgrounds. Universities, and the government who have commissioned the Accord, have a responsibility to go beyond mandatory online consent modules and reporting systems to reach an absolutely zero instances of sexual harassment and sexual assault on University campuses.

Q42. What settings are needed to ensure academic integrity, and how can new technologies and innovative assessment practices be leveraged to improve academic integrity?

The most effective way to ensure academic integrity is to instil the love of learning in students and provide them the support to be able to study for the sake of education rather than to participate in job training. The vast majority of students value their degree and the academic integrity of their

university as much as any academic does. Most students who breach academic honesty rules do so either accidentally or because they do not see a more viable option.

The University of Sydney requires all students to complete their online Academic Honesty in Education Module at the beginning of their degree. While students can re-complete this module at any time during their degree, there is no compulsion or encouragement to do so, unless a student is found to have breached referencing requirements in an academic honesty investigation. Many students do not understand the nuances of cooperation rather than collusion, or the rules of recycling their own work. Students who are not native English speakers sometimes struggle to effectively paraphrase from a source document. Online proctored examinations also lead to some confusing academic honesty rules, where an “open book” examination allows students to access electronic devices but only to access locally saved devices. Many students have not understood that this meant they could not access their own notes if they were saved on the cloud, a practice that is encouraged to avoid having notes corrupted or lost.

The Special Consideration and the “Discontinue Not To Count As Fail” Grade application processes at the University of Sydney continue to be an administrative nightmare for many students. Extensive delays of sometimes months, erode students’ confidence in engaging university administrative processes that provide appropriate support for difficult circumstances, such as illness, injury, or misadventure. With fewer in-person supports available now than ever before, “student wellbeing” needs to become more than just a catchcry; it needs to be the primary consideration with university administrative processes to support students to utilise the appropriate courses of action where they need extra time to complete an assessment. Similarly, students who rely on Centrelink student payments are not able to complete their assessments to the best of their ability. With Centrelink student payments at approximately 67% of the poverty line, some students are forced to live in substandard accommodation, miss meals, and work several hours to pay for basic living expenses, all significant distractions from their study.

The reduction in availability of university tutors and inadequate support for students with developing English language skills encourages some students to access “tutoring” services from providers who use their home languages. These services are well marketed and present what appears to be legitimate educational support. Even when students become aware that the resources they are accessing are a breach of academic honesty, the high cost of repeating a subject and the associated shame and embarrassment of failing, might make the risk of getting caught and the loss of academic integrity, seem worthwhile.

The setting that is needed to ensure academic integrity is where a university can provide an education that is accessible. Academic staffing levels need to adequately provide students with assessment feedback and opportunities to engage help from university tutors. Administrative systems need to be adequately resourced so that students can engage appropriate processes, such as special consideration, when needed. Universities need to provide affordable accommodation, based on Centrelink student income amounts rather than market rates. Universities also need to lobby the Government for improvements in the rates of payments so that students are more able to focus on the task of learning. All these measures will allow students to be able to commit to academic integrity.

Q49. Which aspects of the JRG package should be altered, and which should be retained?

The condition in the JRG that stipulates that domestic students must pass 50% of their units of study to continue receiving a Commonwealth Supported Place, effectively denies students who fail subjects, access to higher education. While it is worrying that students would fail this many units, it

is by no means uncommon, nor does failure of this many units prevent students from completing their degrees, especially where their circumstances changed in the future, and they become unlikely to fail any further subjects. The students most likely to fail courses are students with disabilities and carer responsibilities; students who have work commitments; students who have chronic health issues including mental illness; students who are ‘first in family’; migrant students or with CALD backgrounds; Indigenous students; and students from regional areas. The criterion appears to be based in part on a spurious underlying assumption that exclusion will incentivise improved outcomes. However, the opposite is likely true, particularly as the 50% metric is far earlier than the existing “show good cause” system operating through universities, in which students receive academic and pastoral support until it is clear on-going study is ill advised.

The SRC believes that the condition that students must pass 50% of their units of study should be removed from the JRG.

The increased fees and HECS debts that came with the Job Ready Graduates Package (JRG) shift debt and risk, and the concomitant anxiety, away from the Government and towards the individual student. This is likely to deter some students from higher education generally or from specific degrees. Beyond its deterrent effect on the most disadvantaged students, this debt will exacerbate the already corrosive economic impacts of the HECS-HELP system. Debt is, in and of itself, an economic relationship people generally want to avoid, regardless of the creditor. Debt has a substantial impact on mental health and decision-making, and has significant economic impacts, especially when debtors’ repayments come through the taxation system and are therefore unavoidable. As their wages are reduced by an amount equal to their repayment, graduates finance debt instead of amassing savings or spending their disposable income on improving their quality of life. This not only manifests as an opportunity cost, as they are unable to use that money to invest or secure their financial wellbeing, but also makes it harder to live comfortably, own a home, start a family, or achieve other basic dignities and entitlements of our society.

There is a generation of Australians indebted to the Government and with less disposable income, potentially for their lifetimes, during the worst economic downturn in recent memory and during a century which is likely to feature further unemployment crises, increased costs of living, and lower social security nets. Beyond the significant anxiety of the debt itself, these increased repayments and tax burdens will be an unnecessary economic penalty for a cohort that needs government support, not hindrance.

In the past, the government has justified HECS increases by pointing to the long-term benefits that accrue to graduates, arguing that the ‘users’ should pay. However, we believe that any ‘benefits’ are better captured and returned to society by progressively taxing individuals earning high levels of income, of whom many are likely to be graduates, and greater taxation of corporations who benefit from the education of future employees.

The SRC believes that JRG and HECS should be repealed, and education funded through a progressive taxation system, where there is no individual cost to the student.