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THE VOICES OF AUSTRALIA'S
UNIVERSITIES – The peak body for
Australian Higher Education

The logo for Public Universities Australia, featuring the words "public", "universities", and "australia" stacked vertically in a bold, black, sans-serif font. The text is centered on a solid yellow rectangular background.

<https://puau.org>

Senate committee inquiry into the provisions of the *Universities Accord Student Support and Other Measures Bill 2024*

Public Universities Australia (<https://puau.org>) thanks *THE SENATE EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT LEGISLATION COMMITTEE* for the invitation to make a submission to its inquiry into the provisions of the *Universities Accord Student Support and Other Measures Bill 2024*.

The committee has determined that the scope of the inquiry is limited to the matters contained in the bill. However, since we believe the whole Universities Accord is flawed on so many levels (see PUA's statement: Universities Accord misses the mark¹), it is challenging for us to comment on this bill in isolation, particularly given that it represents the first step towards implementing the Accord as mentioned by the Minister (despite being a peak body for tertiary education, Public Universities Australia (PUA) was excluded from contributing to the drafting of the Accord).

While improving university finances is undoubtedly important, if the underlying premise for financing is incorrect, how can the societal beneficial outcomes of improved financing be realized? We suggest that implementing the finance structure first, affirms a focus on finances by the management of universities, and that this reinforces the unhealthy premise that universities are primarily about generating money. Granted, without sufficient finances, universities cannot fulfill

¹ <https://puau.org/2024/03/12/public-universities-australia-on-the-universities-accord-final-report-universities-accord-misses-the-mark/>

their core functions of research and teaching, but it is essential to remember that financial resources should support the academic mission rather than become the primary focus of that mission.

The Need for Radical Reform in Australian Higher Education

The Universities Accord has attracted sustained criticism from academics. While the government touts the Accord as a significant step forward, it does not aim at implementing free or very low cost university education for domestic students as exists in other democracies including: Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Finland, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Lithuania, Malta, Norway, Slovakia, and Sweden. We also argue that the Accord falls woefully short of addressing the fundamental problems plaguing our universities. PUA and other organisations have stressed that Academic Values and Principles need to be the foundation and reference for any future university policies, and that universities and policies that fail to accord with core academic values ultimately fail in their fundamental public service.

At its core, the Accord ignores the importance of academic staff autonomy and the unique role played by academics in good universities. It fails to address the power imbalance between management and academics, and prioritizes instead economic goals over broader societal needs. The Accord's focus on building skills for the economy contributes to social inequities within the sector, and neglects the need for a systemic policy environment that gives all stakeholders a voice.

Moreover, the managerialist drive for centralization in higher education is fundamentally at odds with the values of good universities, which rely on academic autonomy and free thought and speech to foster diverse excellence. The Accord's proposal perpetuates this damaging trend, thus undermining academic freedom and creativity.

The Consequences of Inaction

Currently, public discourse on universities is largely controlled by the managements of universities, and the effect of this is that there is little public or political awareness of deeply concerning 'facts on the floor' of universities. Instead, a constant stream of glad tidings and spin is generated by publicity cogent managers, the only notable exception being the call for more money including through the device of having essentially unconstrained access to international students. We see, however, that academics are now outnumbered by administrators in our universities, and see in this a clear opportunity for achieving higher academic standards and outcomes for the same or even less money than is currently spent. Government and the public at

large, are denied consideration of this possibility, by the overwhelming stream of spin released by self-interested managers.

Hidden by the barrage of publicity released by university managers, are the deeply concerning and, we believe, more honest appraisals by actual academics. Importantly, PUA, other academic organizations and great numbers of individual academics, report: degraded standards, destruction of academic and intellectual infrastructure for purposes of both cost cutting and silencing opposition; and establishment of ultimately unsustainable and unproductive processes in our universities.

We observe profound failure of many academic units to properly serve society as a result of managerial actions. Large amounts of money are currently generated, but both students and academics complain of diminishing resources and reduced quality delivered. Academic values are being stamped upon by non-transparently appointed and unelected university executives and managers, who prioritize income and careerism over quality education. The public is being misled, and good academics are being driven out while managers without scruples arrange for anything to be taught by anyone as long as the money flows. University managers are quite simply unaccountable for research and teaching outcomes despite their autocratic control of resources. We see that it is only a matter of time till those many failures compound to large scale collapse in the capacity of Australian universities to serve Australia's needs.

If our critical concerns are not addressed, we predict catastrophic collapse of Australia's higher education system stemming from widespread recognition of what will have become the effective uselessness of the education delivered, and softness of the research performed. With justified loss of public confidence in our universities, will come collapse in enrollments of both local and international students. While students are currently often short-changed in universities where managers have exchanged academic values with those of commerce, future students will look elsewhere for proper training, and research funds will flow elsewhere for sensible expenditure. The consequences will be dire: domestic students will take the brunt of the damage. Our universities will be mere shadows of their former selves, unworthy of support and refractory to resurrection. Government will have little choice but to seek alternative means for higher education and research.

While we warn of these possibilities, we stress that they can be avoided by resolute action at this time.

A Call for Radical Reform

We propose a radical overhaul of our universities' governance structures, putting decision-making power back in the hands of well-credentialed and democratically elected scholars. In principle, we must restore to academics the trust and autonomy to teach and conduct research without undue interference, and guarantee adequate time, funds, and support for their work.

To address the administrative bloat that is hindering academic work and that has resulted in the absurdity that managers now outnumber academics, we recommend reducing administrative positions by two-thirds and redirecting savings towards employment of academics and academic support. This would not only reduce administrative waste, but also increase academic capacity. We are confident that this can be effective, because a time is in our living memory when academics appreciably outnumbered administrators, and it was possible to maintain high standards and academic productivity.

To further address the current degradation in academic standards, and to foster a culture of creativity, innovation, and excellence in our universities, we believe that autonomy guided by academic values must be restored to academics. In support of this, we recommend that academic values be enshrined in the Acts that govern universities as well as in university policy documents, as a guide for decision making throughout the university. These values include: rigour in expertise; commitment to the creation and dissemination of knowledge; collegiality; freedom of speech; robust intellectual discourse; freedom of academic research; and truth in all academic works. Details for implementation of this recommendation are in the PUA submission to the Tasmanian parliamentary inquiry on the University of Tasmania².

The Urgent Need for Action and Limited Value of the Recent Accord

The need for radical reform in Australian higher education has never been more pressing, not only because of the steady degradation towards collapse that we describe above, but also because of numerous instances of unacceptable management misconduct that are currently rife in our universities.

We urge Senate to take immediate action to address the critical issues plaguing our universities and to launch a Royal Commission into management misconduct in the sector. Only then will the

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https://www.parliament.tas.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0032/57686/lcs20utas20inquiry20620december202022.pdf

abused feel able to speak truth to power, and it is only then that Government can be properly informed unencumbered by the current prolific management spin. It is only by these means that the public can restore the primacy of it's own interests above those of self-serving and unaccountable managers in the operation of our universities. And it is in this way that the world-class standard of our institutions that is increasingly at risk can be ensured, providing students with a high-quality education and contributing to the betterment of society as a whole.

We believe that it is our responsibility to demand change and push for a future where our universities are governed by academic values, and not managerialist interests. It is owed to our community, our students, and the next generation to act now and to secure a brighter future for Australian higher education.

Just as a school, hospital, courtroom, or orchestra cannot function effectively without the expertise of teachers, doctors, judges, and musicians respectively, a Universities Accord cannot be effective without the input of academics. In contemporary Australia, professorial and doctoral titles have become devalued, and they are now often conferred inappropriately by university executives and chancellors to each other and their administrative subordinates, independent of academic training or achievement and without meaningful academic scrutiny. PUA has explained the problems created by faux titles³. Consequently, if one sets aside these titles, there was extremely limited academic representation on the Accord Panel. This lack of representation is particularly concerning when considering the Accord's focus on qualifications, and this is where the Accord, and thus this Bill, become critical.

PUA has the following specific comments on the bill

The benefit to the nation (financial and otherwise) of a highly educated workforce by far outweighs the costs of free higher education. This could be financed by reducing the exorbitant salaries of managers, by reducing especially the size of the higher management bodies, by reducing the use of outside consulting firms and by stopping managers from using university funds to wage war against academics critical of management in court rooms.

In addition, we note that students who graduate with significant debt, are not only hindered by that debt from entrepreneurial business development, but are also compelled to demand higher returns and profits in order to justify and service such debts. In this way, university fees increase the cost of doing business in Australia, which can only be an unhelpful burden on the economy.

³ <https://puau.org/2023/08/17/statement-against-faux-professorships-and-other-titles-that-devalue-genuine-academic-qualifications/>

Finally, we urge the Senate to reflect on how university managers consistently fail to provide Government with arguments such as those outlined above, because it is not in their interests to potentially limit their own incomes. It seems inconceivable for managers to propose ways of achieving more with the same or potentially less money in the way that PUA has done. Instead, managers have made the uncreative and predictable demand for more funds and more access to international students, devoid of apparent understanding of academic standards and values. However, from academics such as those represented by PUA, Government can reliably expect a trained and deliberate truthfulness, guided by academic values.

SCHEDULE 1—HELP INDEXATION

Part 1—Main amendments relating to HELP indexation

Part 2—Change of indexation calculation method

Part 3 – Consequential amendments relating to Part 1 of this Schedule

Part 4 – Consequential amendments relating to change of indexation calculation method

Part 5 – Application of amendments made by Parts 1 and 3 of this Schedule

SCHEDULE 2—SSAF CHANGES

SCHEDULE 3—FEE-FREE UNI READY COURSES

SCHEDULE 4—COMMONWEALTH PRAC PAYMENTS

SCHEDULE 5—ADELAIDE UNIVERSITY

SCHEDULE 6—TRANSITIONAL RULES

There are no specific issues with the above schedules listed in the Bill, but it needs to be emphasized that any investment in higher education should support the academic mission of our universities. This is not currently the case, as the Universities Accord sidesteps the central problems of tertiary education in Australia.

30 August 2024

Public Universities Australia