

Australian Historical Association, Australian Universities Accord Submission

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 Universities Accord needs to reflect the continuing multiple roles of universities, roles that extend well beyond training a workforce and producing research for industry.

When the first of them were founded in Sydney and Melbourne the early 1850s, Australian universities expressed a commitment to investing in merit as the foundation of a good society and an economy that supported talent. They did this in deliberate contrast to the Old World, where birth and wealth often trumped talent. It was a successful move. Government and private investment in Australian human capital, especially schools and universities, functioned as economic stimulus, and prepared the nation to confront multiple challenges, from economists grappling with the depression of the 1930s and scientists seeking solutions to rabbit plagues through to ensuring there were enough teachers, engineers, pharmacists and medical doctors to support us. Many of the challenges we have faced were unexpected and unpredictable – much like the uncertainties facing us now. Australian universities have been a bulwark against such uncertainty by both teaching and doing research in areas that have no immediate utility, by valuing liberal and transferable skills and knowledge, and by allying with professions, industries, large projects and government strategies – right from their very beginning.

These broad purposes remain at the heart of the mission of Australia's universities today. Importantly, they remain public institutions, for even while they derive their financial support from a range of government and private sources, they operate under a kind of social license provided by the community, including the taxpayer.

The discipline of history has a key role to play in this context. History, in one form or another, has featured in Australian universities since the nineteenth century. Sometimes conceived as a field peculiarly suited to political and military leaders through the study of exemplary men and matters of state, by the late nineteenth century it had evolved into what some called a 'scientific' discipline based on the close study of original sources. Historians have been important in shaping our national narrative, understanding the trajectory of institutions, social patterns and the economy and, more recently, seeing 'more than human' options for a sustainable future, based on an analysis of our environmental past. Students of history sometimes entered professions such as teaching, but history was also understood as having a broader civic purpose in training an elite to run the state and business. In time, and especially from the 1960s, the study of history in tertiary institutions became accessible to a larger number of Australians in universities and colleges of advanced education. Academic historians have since the early twentieth century played a large part, too, in shaping the school curriculum, and in influencing the practice of history in the wider community through the major historical societies. They continue to do so today.

While the *Australian Universities Accord* recognises the part played by universities in 'ensuring strong cultures of scholarship and critical enquiry', and the wider role that universities play in contributing 'to the intellectual, cultural, community and economic

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development of the nation’, these are under-developed themes of the Discussion Paper. They should not be underdeveloped in the *Australian Universities Accord*.

Around the world, democracies are besieged by trends towards political authoritarianism and media manipulation of public emotions, climate change poses an existential threat to the planet, and inequalities grow worse with each passing year. An understanding of the past is indispensable for any effort to grapple with the problems of the present and plan for a better future. University history is in a strong position to build capacities for democratic participation and societal resilience.

Universities – through disciplines such as history – have a critical role to play in countering disinformation by educating tertiary students in respect for evidence, systematic inquiry and critical thinking, and in communicating meaning with clarity and impact. History programs in universities teach the next generation of teachers. They educate workers in the GLAM (Galleries, Libraries, Archives and Museums) sector and provide advice and expertise to such institutions. History graduates enter journalism and the public service where the discipline-specific knowledge and skills taught in history, and the generic skills available in humanities and social sciences study more generally, are critical in providing workers with a sense of span and perspective. Our own research into graduate destinations also suggests that while many graduates find work in familiar roles in education, the public service and GLAM, some take their history education into seemingly unrelated fields where they find a place for the forms of inquiry, thinking and communication that the discipline teaches.¹

Academic historians now play a major role in providing evidence-based narrative and analysis to commercial and public media outlets, the publishing industry, and to government agencies and NGOs. They collaborate with workers in the arts and entertainment industries and provide their expertise to community groups ranging from historical societies through to University of the Third Age and Indigenous land councils and corporations. These roles are perhaps especially significant in smaller regional universities, but they are relevant to the whole sector.

The capacity of universities to serve their communities is hindered by the tension between the quest for international competitiveness and the responsibility to serve the Australian community. In historical research, this tension is most evident in pressures around publication. The quest for international standing leads many university managers to pressure academic staff to publish research, even on Australian subjects, with approved (usually British, European or United States) publishers and journals in preference to Australian outlets. These outputs are inaccessible to ordinary Australians without access to university databases. They result in expensive books – sometimes costing hundreds of dollars – that are well beyond the means of most members of the public; or, in the case of articles, the research appears in academic journals locked behind the paywalls of multinational publishers. Government funding for open access arrangements would at least alleviate the latter problem, but so long as university managers maintain a structure of rewards that pushes researchers towards overseas publishers, most

¹ Emily O’Gorman, Nancy Cushing and Rochelle Chand, *History “Opened Many Doors”*: The Australian Historical Association’s History Graduates Survey, June 2022, <https://theaha.org.au/history-opened-many-doors-aha-history-graduates-survey-report-2022/>

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Australians will never encounter the work produced by the nation's academics whose research they are funding with their taxes.

It is crucial that the Universities Accord recognise the role played by universities, through disciplines such as history, in strengthening democracy, constituting the public sphere, enriching cultural life and fostering lifelong learning. The Universities Accord should include a commitment by institutions to ensure that their research output is accessible to the public.

Q3 What should the long-term target/s be for Australia's higher education attainment by 2030 and 2040, and how should these be set and adjusted over time?

The *Australian Universities Accord: Discussion Paper* places considerable emphasis on preparing students for the workplaces and industries of the future but in truth we can know little about what these will actually look like. Both generic and discipline-specific skills taught in the study of history are sufficiently flexible and transferable between different kinds of occupations. Consequently, history represents an excellent investment by both the student and the government. Generic skills include close analysis and evaluation of texts and situations; examination of their implications for people, organisations and environments; the ability to persuade, using narrative, and to engage critically with other narratives they encounter. These skills are useful – and used – by graduates who academic historians have trained, in every workplace. They will help Australians tackle the multiple challenges that will emerge in the coming decades.

Discipline-specific skills include the capacity to regard phenomena in historical context and understanding of the forces producing stability and change over time. A nuanced understanding of the past helps people to move beyond seeing every situation they face as completely novel; that there are lessons to be gleaned from past experience, but that these lessons can only be drawn through careful attention to context. Higher levels of university participation will promote the development of these transferable skills among a workforce that is certain to face dramatic change requiring a capacity to adapt to new circumstances and challenges.

The Australian Historical Association strongly supports a concerted effort towards higher levels of participation in tertiary education, and particularly in humanities disciplines such as History whose core function is to provide graduates with flexible and transferable skills.

Q5 How do the current structures of institutions, regulation and funding in higher education help or hinder Australia's ability to meet these challenges? What needs to change?

Government decisions in recent years have posed a particular threat to the humanities in general, and history in particular, in Australian universities. The under-funding of research (such as through inadequate payment to universities for overheads) has meant that fees derived from teaching, and especially from international students, have been used to cross-subsidise research. The distortions created by over-reliance on international student fees are well known throughout the sector. History tends not to be among the most popular subject choices of international students, meaning that universities have had a clear incentive to direct resources to growing enrolments in other areas where there is much greater potential growth. With respect

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to domestic fees, the Job-ready Graduates scheme brought more money into the university per student enrolment in history, but only at the expense of the students themselves (once they are in the workforce). It also sent out the false message that humanities courses do not prepare students for careers, which may well be acting as a disincentive to students to enrol in history courses.

Under-funding of universities has had devastating impacts on career structures for emerging historians. Here, we draw on the AHA's research in progress conducted by Associate Professors Martin Crotty and Paul Sendziuk. In terms of overall staff numbers (continuing, fellowships and contracts of 1-3 years, but not honorary and not casual) there were 346.5 Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) historians in paid employment in universities in Australia in 2016. In 2022 there were 318.7. This is a decline of just over 8 per cent. In terms of continuing staff and staff on fixed-term contracts spanning more than three years, the total number was 295 in 2016; it is now 271.6. Again, this represents a decline of 8 per cent in six years. A similar process has been evident in New Zealand, but the decline of history positions in universities there in the same timeframe has been just 4.6 per cent, and among continuing and fixed-term contracts running more than three years, 6 per cent.

At present, there is a mismatch between the substantial government investment in doctoral training and miserly government support for postdoctoral positions. Success rates for the Australian Research Council's DECRA scheme have declined to about 15% and those who are successful increasingly are the fortunate few with continuing academic employment. They are usually several years out from PhD graduation, so that the scheme's bridging role between a PhD and academic or other professional employment is undermined. The result is that large numbers of PhD graduates, often having endured years of precarious employment as casual teachers, are forced to leave the sector. The disintegration of career structures in history means that there is inadequate renewal of the academic workforce. While that has produced demoralisation among early career researchers, it also means that universities are not receiving the benefit of fresh perspectives and new talent.

Under-funding is also the background to the problems of casualisation of the academic workforce and, in the worst instances, of wage theft. Research by the AHA has revealed that casual labour is widespread in the teaching of history in universities, and among the problems faced by those involved in it are job insecurity, poor working conditions, unpaid labour, lack of recognition and career progression, and pressures on personal well-being and mental health.² Universities have largely failed to create satisfactory career structures for emerging historians, with the inevitable result of vast pools of wasted expertise and talent.

The Universities Accord should make a definite commitment to better career structures for doctoral graduates, the building of career pathways through more investment in postdoctoral schemes, and the development of an academic workforce.

Q8 What reforms are needed to promote a quality learning environment and to ensure graduates are entering the labour market with the skills and knowledge they need?

² Romain Fathi and Lyndon Megarrity, *You Matter: The Australian Historical Association's Casualisation Survey Report*, November 2019, <https://theaha.org.au/you-matter-the-australian-historical-associations-casualisation-survey-report/>

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The general under-funding of universities, and the distortions effected by the cross-subsidisation of research with student fees, have undoubtedly undermined the quality of student learning. The damaging nature of this pattern of funding is magnified by the structure of rewards, recognition and status being so strongly slanted in Australian universities towards research activity and achievement. As a result, leading researchers have often been removed from the lecture hall and tutorial room to undertake full-time research and project - management, to be replaced by casual workers and teaching-intensive staff.

History education in universities has historically benefited from the teaching-research nexus. Some of the most esteemed and successful researchers have also been the most highly regarded teachers. This congruence was encouraged by an environment with a strong culture of research-led teaching. The development of a research-orientated honours (fourth) year was a powerful driver of this culture. In many instances, it provided undergraduate students in history with research capabilities well beyond their overseas counterparts in British and American universities.

While learning and teaching remain strong in many history programs, the reduction in the numbers of staff and courses, and the weakening of the teaching-research nexus, has undermined student learning. University history programs that are often reduced to just a handful of permanent staff, supported by large numbers of casual teachers, struggle to teach the widening range of skills that are required by students for their lives as citizens and workers. There are clearly opportunities for better connections with industry, especially in the GLAM sector, but cultural institutions that are already under resourcing pressure are sometimes unable to take on the responsibility of providing learning opportunities for university students in history.

The Universities Accord should commit institutions to certain resourcing levels in the provision of education and limit the extent of cross-subsidisation of research by teaching income. The Accord should also commit universities to the teaching-research nexus by providing disincentives to teaching-only positions and excessive use of casual labour in university classrooms, and financial incentives to developing opportunities for students to gain experience of industry. Good teaching should be rewarded: universities should undertake to develop workload models and promotions policies that do not privilege research over teaching performance.

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

The study of the arts, humanities, and social sciences (HASS), with its emphasis on equipping students with the ability to find, analyse and synthesise information, provides an excellent foundation for lifelong learning. Arts, humanities, and social science graduates are job-ready precisely because they are not trained in a narrow field: they develop highly transferable skills that will always be in demand in workplaces.

Responding to the discussion paper, the AHA believes that micro-credentials could be useful in assisting history teachers (and other history and heritage professionals) to develop new knowledge in a particular subject area, especially as coursework masters programs are now beyond the financial reach of many teachers. Short, targeted tertiary study will be critical to

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the effective implementation of new school curricula and in ensuring that the latest historical research is reaching its target audiences and users.

Online learning – whether through large providers like Open Universities Australia or through individual universities – is often an entry point for those undertaking tertiary study later in life, or for those who are first in their families to study at university. However, despite its importance in nurturing a culture of lifelong learning, online teaching is often poorly remunerated and inadequately accounted for in staff workloads, which reduces the quality of the student experience. It also demands its own distinctive pedagogy, and therefore support for research and innovation. Urgent investment is required to enable staff to provide a high-quality education in online settings.

The Universities Accord should commit to the wider provision of microcredentials and short courses for the benefit of industry stakeholders such as history teachers. The Accord should also commit to the adequate provision of, and the cultivation of an attitude of respect for, online learning opportunities for those already in the workforce.

Q19 What would a more effective and collaborative national governance approach to tertiary education look like?

The governance of universities is subject to the complexities of Australia's federal system. Universities are created by acts of the state parliaments and subject to various requirements outlined in pieces of federal legislation, mostly relating to standards, qualifications frameworks, overseas students and financial support for students.

Until recent decades, Australian universities were supported by an independent body, the Australian Universities Commission and then (after universities were combined with Colleges of Advanced Education) the Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission. There were some flaws to this kind of arrangement, such as tendencies towards micromanagement. However, a key advantage was that instead of the cumbersome and inefficient regulatory system within which universities now compete, the system was conceptualised and managed as a whole. We recognise that university leaders may balk at being thus managed, though it seems likely that there would be new benefits to such a body that the Accord could address.

Universities are distinctive providers of tertiary education because the staff who teach also usually conduct research. Yet in recent years, the widespread casualisation of teaching, coupled with increasingly punitive workloads for continuing staff which reduce time for research in order to devote more time to teaching, have eroded the research-teaching nexus. It is vital that the research-teaching nexus be maintained, so that all university teachers remain on the forefront of knowledge development. All scholars must be given time to research as well as teach.

The past few decades of higher education policy have pitted universities against one another as competitors, rather than supporting opportunities for collaboration, especially in teaching. This means that opportunities are missed for institutions to share, for example, units of study teaching niche areas of history that are important for the nation, but difficult for an individual institution to carry in their own. The Accord should provide systems that will reward such collaboration instead of discouraging it.

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The Universities Accord must establish a new approach to national governance of tertiary education which centres the research-teaching nexus, and which fosters collaboration between institutions in both teaching and research.

Q23 How should an Accord help Australia increase collaboration between industry, government and universities to solve big challenges?

As Australia grapples with the impact of climate change, which will require urgent innovation to achieve greater sustainability and societal resilience, history and the humanities will play an important role in fostering citizenship and crafting inclusive narratives to help navigate these challenges. History is markedly successful at collaboration with industry, government and other organisations. The discipline typically sees its value as being able to speak into current issues and most historians do so in several ways. Some recent examples include the emergence of environmental history as an important arena for better understanding of present-day environmental challenges, as well as the ways that our human history has been entangled with the more-than-human world; and the ways historians were able to provide timely advice about the management of previous pandemics to experts in government who were managing the COVID19 response. Historians have also provided important historical context for community groups seeking social change, such as former child migrants and victims of forced adoptions. These patterns of collaboration and engagement could be encouraged by subsidies for collaborative PhD scholarships and research projects.

Some caution in this area is needed, however. The rise of far-right organisations should signal to us that not all collaboration is a good idea. A crucial component of the value that the humanities and social sciences offer Australian social, intellectual and economic debate is located in critically analysing and describing key problems: not by joining them, but by finding a way past them. The 1957 Murray Report on universities, prepared during the Cold War, considered this to be one of their most important roles. The accord should similarly consider this as central to our mission.

The Universities Accord should build on established, discipline-specific models of collaborative research to foster collaboration between industry, government and universities, and acknowledge that collaboration will be required to enhance societal resilience, as well as research for industry.

Q24 What reforms will enable Australian research institutions to achieve excellence, scale and impact in particular fields?

Some universities have introduced ‘teaching-focused’ or teaching intensive roles, which in effect are teaching-only roles. Often these are introduced as a way to alleviate the worst excesses of casualisation. But these are usually accompanied by an intensification and increase in teaching loads, effectively making research impossible. Continuing staff on traditional 40:40:20 workloads are also seeing an intensification of teaching and teaching administration, due to the widespread job losses and restructuring that took place during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The pandemic was also used by university managements as a way to reduce research time for many academics: conference funding and sabbaticals have been reduced or eliminated. While

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these might seem small, for HASS academics, including historians, uninterrupted research time is one of the most precious components of research, and the most difficult to secure. If universities are to achieve excellence, then university researchers need protected time to conduct research, collaborate with colleagues and industry partners, and lay the groundwork for impactful research outcomes.

The Universities Accord should send a clear signal to higher education providers in Australia that the research-teaching nexus remains valuable, and that efforts to preserve it should NOT contribute to increased casualization of the tertiary education workforce.

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?

Since their founding moments, universities have undergone considerable changes, not least in recognising that the merit on which Australian higher education was founded harboured favourites. Qualities that merit did not cover, especially those associated with gender, race and sometimes family background, made universities both places of opportunity but also spaces for discrimination.

The Accord offers an opportunity for further reform, enabling the university system to serve the public, not only the economy. A new Accord needs to help universities to strengthen democracy, enrich culture and expand horizons. It can only do that if a larger number and more diverse range of Australians are brought within its orbit. The universities, including the discipline of history, have been impoverished by the exclusion and then under-representation of many groups, due to disadvantages based on class or ethnicity.

Foremost among those who have not been adequately represented in tertiary education are First Nations peoples. When the historians Henry Reynolds and Noel Loos encountered Eddie Koiki Mabo at the University College of Townsville (now James Cook University) in the 1960s, it was in his capacity as a gardener taking time out at lunchtime to read historical documents in the library about his people. While the exclusion of First Nations from universities was unjust, the universities were themselves also damaged by this absence.

There are greater opportunities for First Nations people today and universities have worked hard to support First Nations applicants and students. Nonetheless, much work remains to be done and it is critical that promoting their participation in universities is a major priority of any Universities Accord.

The argument can be extended to other groups of Australians. Older Australians may well be discouraged from participating in university education by the costs. Many participate in community organisations such as the University of the Third Age, but this organisation depends on the voluntary effort of academics and participants who do not have ready access to resources such as university libraries – which is critical in developing historical understanding. Both older Australians and the universities themselves have much to gain from greater participation of this cohort in lifelong learning.

The underrepresentation of these groups among academic staff necessarily has an impact on the success of underrepresented groups in higher education more broadly. The scorecard for

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history, given the institutional constraints within which we work, has been mixed. Women now constitute 52.8 per cent of staff in history in Australian universities, and nearly half of all continuing and fixed term (three years plus) positions. Historians from Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander backgrounds represent 4.1 per cent of staff. Better higher education pathways and support for First Nations students will lead to a higher number of First Nations historians, and the result will be a better historical profession and a better university sector.

The Australian Historical Association strongly supports a concerted effort towards the inclusion of groups presently under-represented among participants in higher education.

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

Whenever higher education successfully expanded to include new demographics, living expenses were crucial. Records in the National Archives of Australia from the 1950s show that students who needed to perform too much paid work could not concentrate well enough on their studies. We have seen little to suggest that things have changed, though students have demonstrated considerable resilience in their attempts, which they also often combine with voluntary efforts through internships or other ways to augment their formal learning.

The solution in the 1950s was to provide students with a living allowance that would minimise their paid work. This is likely still a good solution, though additional innovations might be possible, including sponsoring student internships – better connecting future historians to industry, government and heritage organisation – and introducing industry-partnered research grant funding at pre-PhD level, in honours and master's degrees.

The Australian Historical Association strongly supports increases to student allowances and scholarships to enable students to minimise paid work while undertaking tertiary study.

Q34 How should the contribution of higher education providers to community engagement be encouraged and promoted?

Academics respond to the performance parameters applied by their institutions. If greater emphasis in performance appraisal were placed on community engagement, academics would engage more with their communities.

History has shown, however, that policies to change academics' behaviour can be very blunt instruments, and can have a series of unintended and undesirable consequences. In a more general sense, consistent messaging from the Commonwealth government that academics are valued members of the community who make an important contribution, accompanied by policies that support that belief, will encourage academics to engage publicly.

The current competitive grant programs are designed with the model of the science and medical disciplines in mind. They are less well-suited to humanities disciplines such as history, which deal less in discrete, quasi-scientific experiments, and more in the complexities introduced by human subjects. Grant criteria that recognise the particular characteristics of the humanities disciplines would produce less esoteric research, which engages with broader community concerns and assists in the vital task of strengthening our democracy.

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The Universities Accord should explicitly recognise scholarly community outreach and engagement as an important and meaningful component of academic work.

Q41 How should research quality be prioritised and supported most effectively over the next decade?

The veto by Coalition ministers of research grants that were successful under the peer review process undermined faith in the independence and rigour of the grant assessment system. The Australian Historical Association is heartened to see that the Labor government has undertaken not to veto grants that have been successful in the peer review process. Further steps can and should be taken, especially the removal of ministerial veto powers.

The current model of research funding via the ARC and other competitive grants and block funding for HDR students has:

- Given great incentive for universities to recruit HDR students;
- Increased incentives for university administrators to encourage academics to apply for competitive grants, and added to the growth of the ‘research grant industry’ within universities;
- Increased the already substantial time that academics spend on time-consuming grant applications with low success rates;
- Decreased the time available for historians to complete research projects satisfactorily;
- Placed great emphasis on the winning of grants and less emphasis on the knowledge that is uncovered through research and the impact that knowledge can have in the wider world;
- Increased incentives for historians to pose quasi-scientific questions about relatively confined topics, and further decreased their capacity to produce ambitious, wide-ranging studies of the kind that are read by large audiences.
- Concentrated large sums of money in the hands of small numbers of researchers while providing few means by which academics can apply for smaller sums often better suited to their projects.

The Australian Historical Association reiterates that teaching and research are the twin pillars that enable universities to discover knowledge that benefits wider society. Australian society is better served by a university system that guarantees a discrete amount of funding for research.

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

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The rapid advance and sophistication of AI technologies requires careful handling by university leadership. The introduction of new technologies always has the potential to provoke panicked and/or kneejerk responses that may not be effective in the long term. We believe there is a need to educate our students about the use of AI to ensure that they produce knowledge that is humane, accurate and insightful. We must also educate our students to identify misinformation, which is likely to increase as AI develops further.

The Universities Accord should create incentives for the preservation of quality student assessment practices, and should ameliorate existing disincentives for the creation of novel teaching practices that can combat the worst effects of AI on tertiary education.

Q47 What structure of Commonwealth funding is needed for the higher education sector for the system to be sustainable over the next two decades?

Commonwealth funding to the university sector has fallen from approximately 80 per cent of university funding in 1989 to approximately 40 per cent today, an amount that is low by OECD standards.

The requirement beginning in the 1990s for universities to gain a significant portion of their funding from overseas students has transformed them. While the competition for international revenue has made university campuses more dynamic and diverse places, it has also led university leaders to pursue policies to attract foreign students (such as campus building programs and insufficiently rigorous English proficiency standards) at the expense of investing in staff and quality teaching programs.

In addition to reduced contact hours, plummeting investment in permanent staff, and an emphasis on new building projects, universities have responded to international university rating systems, which measure quality in very blunt terms that are unrelated to the needs of the Australian community.

Research output is one of the few data points that can be measured internationally, so university rating systems have relied on this metric for comparisons. This measurement technique led Australian universities to introduce incentives for academics to maximise their publications above concerns about the demand for such research, or its broader significance, quality or potential impact. When the distortion of this ‘publish or perish’ system began to register, ‘impact’ metrics were implemented.

These twists and turns in policy, which are a product of universities responding to government policy and international rating systems, create inefficiencies, significantly damage morale and distort the civic mission of Australian universities.

The chronic shortfall in government funding of universities has caused universities to seek alternative funding sources, which have led to a series of distortions and abrupt corrections. These are not only inefficient and expensive to correct, but sap universities of their capacity to fulfil their vital civic role in Australian society. In order to remain places of innovation and impactful research, universities need to receive substantially more funding from the Commonwealth. Further, we cannot assume that international students will continue to choose

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Australian universities indefinitely, especially if the quality of our core offering—teaching based on a bedrock of rigorous research—declines.

The Universities Accord must establish an increase in Commonwealth funding for universities to safeguard our core offering – teaching based on rigorous research.

Q48 What principles should underpin the setting of student contributions and Higher Education Loan Program arrangements?

Our student contribution program should be underpinned by a principle of equity, including intergenerational equity. If students are compelled to take out significant loans to complete a higher education, those loans will be compounded by the substantial housing loans or rental costs. This is not a sustainable way to run a society.

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

The imposition of higher student fees for Arts and Humanities degrees was deeply misguided policy because it sought to discourage student enrolment in the humanities, arts and social sciences. Yet the changes did not deter students from pursuing their chosen courses: it merely saddled them with larger debts. Given that many students who are first in their families to attend university choose to study HASS degrees, this policy penalised the very students who stand to benefit most from university education. Moreover, a disproportionate number of these students are women.

The doubling of university fees for Arts students is grossly inequitable and should be abolished. While the effect of the policy is yet to be fully felt because of grandfathering arrangements, it is well-recognised that Arts degrees attract many first-in-family undergraduates from less privileged families who are unable to absorb a doubling in the cost of Arts degrees.

The Universities Accord should reverse the Job-Ready Graduates reforms: not only were they based on a false premise, the policy has increased the debt burden of students, especially women and first in family students, thus contributing to increasing social inequality. In particular, the potentially distorting effects of the package on the humanities disciplines ought to be removed.