

Response to the Australian Universities Accord Interim Report



AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL OF DEANS OF
INFORMATION & COMMUNICATIONS TECHNOLOGY

Australian Council of Deans of Information and Communications Technology (ACDICT)

ACDICT appreciates the opportunity provided by the Accord Panel and the Department of Education to provide feedback on the Australian Universities Accord Interim Report. ACDICT is an inter-university representative body for the broad field of information and communications technology (ICT) teaching and research. Our membership comprises 26 regional and metropolitan universities, each represented by a leader of their computing faculty, school, or program. This Accord response reflects the opinion and comments of these ICT higher education providers and focuses on the germane needs of ICT and related fields of endeavour.

ACDICT members recommend ensuring that the educational system can firmly meet the following requirements.

1. Build and sustain rapidly evolving digital capability for Australia

This not only underpins the development and growth in competitive equity and advantage for Australian organisations but builds our sovereign capability, national resilience, and security against cyber and other technology-based threats. Capacity in creation of new computing technologies is a key factor which underpins the desired structural change of the economy. Study at the front end of ICT and computer science is resource-demanding. The educational system should be able to attract, retain, and graduate the next generation of the digital workforce with appropriate and timely skills and knowledge to provide measured digital capability building for Australia.

2. Ensure Australia is equipped to be proactive rather than reactive to skills shortages in the fast developing area of computational technologies

Proactivity requires that universities increase their metabolic rate and diversify their offerings in terms of delivery, duration, and content. ACDICT is committed to providing a broader range of education opportunities to a broader range of cohorts and population groups in order to take full advantage of the potential of underrepresented and minority groups to positively impact the diversity, capacity, and capability of Australia's future digital workforce. ACDICT is also striving to provide educational opportunities for the current digital workforce to enable them to deepen or broaden their skill and knowledge base. For this to be successful we need greater understanding of the range of education offerings that are possible and a commitment to sustain and broaden funding to support all students to achieve their learning goals.

3. Provide mechanisms for thriving integrated design of the educational systems at different levels

It is essential to have confidence that initiatives towards future proofing and building sustainability and resilience in the higher education sector are supported, funded, and sustained by the government. ACDICT aims to provide a more inclusive and appropriate education framework that presents educational experiences that are in the right place, at the right time, and delivered by and for those who are well prepared and supported to engage. This requires a greater understanding of access and equity issues and solutions, a deeper understanding of the mental health impacts on students, academics, and professional staff, greater accommodation of the myriad backgrounds, life experiences, and connections to place that students have, and more seamless pipelines within and between post-secondary education providers.

Three Biggest Reflections on the Interim Report

Reflection 1. ACDICT commends the strong drive to increase equity in cohort participation and success, with a particular focus on first nations, first in family, and low socio-economic participants; but there is an omission with regard to gender and broader cultural equity in STEM. Computing in particular has a severe gender imbalance. The loss of international students due to COVID and their slower than expected return have had a disproportionate impact on computing disciplines, where previous international enrolments commonly represented over 90% of Masters level students. ACDICT calls for greater recognition of the impact of even small changes in international initiatives, migration requirements, and socio-political events. In terms of domestic student cohorts, we see a large impact on completions and enrolment due to the high cost of living and the lack of appropriate funding, which force students to focus more on working to support themselves and their families. This has a disproportionate effect in regional areas, where educational attainment and engagement are already behind the national average and place Australia in the lowest five of all OECD countries. (By comparison, metropolitan population degree attainment ranks Australia in the top eight OECD countries.) Regional student cohorts are also more likely to come from low SES groups and are hence more sensitive to cost of living rises and inadequate financial support mechanisms that do not facilitate a minimum wage to support students while they study.

Reflection 2. Health and wellbeing of staff are not well addressed in the report: university systems should recognise that ICT teaching staff in particular require more time simply to remain current in their field, given the velocity and variety with which technologies change. There is a need to support the mental health of all in the sector, not just of students. Burnout is now endemic among ICT academic and professional staff. This is due in part to trying to diversify delivery while maintaining and growing support mechanisms for the 'new normal', integrating and addressing the rapid changes in the field, managing shrinking budgets resulting from three years of income loss, plus the need to pay closer attention to academic integrity and to reform assessment across the board as a result of rapid advances in generative AI. The pressure on academics and professional staff to do much more with less can lead them into a downward mental health spiral with subsequent impact on the quality and reputation of the sector. We are concerned that unless this is addressed with some urgency, Australia will experience a significant decline in academic teaching and research quality and capacity that will harm the sector and the country as a whole.

Reflection 3. There is a growing recognition of the importance of regional education pathways and of the need to more closely align with the needs of industry in order not only to grow attainment but also to support industry to mature in its development and application of technology and be competitive in the global market. We wholeheartedly embrace this within our organisations and believe that this is of critical importance in growing a sustainable digital workforce.

Areas of Substantive Agreement and Concerns

Area 1 (agree). There is a call to maintain and grow the CSP's, and not only for traditional degrees. Funded shorter course opportunities would benefit marginal groups and provide a rapid skills growth in current areas of demand.

Area 2 (agree). Reducing the 50% pass bar for continued funding, and/or support for universities to remove the early census deadlines and increase resources to support students with divergent academic needs and life events.

Area 3 (extend). ICT is critical to the future of every industry and AI and cybersecurity in particular are a critical focus for the nation. There should be support to ensure that every graduate is equipped with the skills and knowledge required to understand information science, computational decision making, identify, report, and prevent cyber threats from emerging and impacting. This calls for a more cross-disciplinary approach to course design and funding.

Area 4 (concern). While we support greater access and equity to support skills growth in regional areas, we are concerned about the potential impact of establishing a National Regional University.

We are concerned about the impact on current regional universities in terms of the cannibalisation of market share, a reduction or dilution in number and quality of teaching and research academics in regional universities leading to potential closure of existing providers, the potential for a national university to not appropriately address the germane needs of distinct individual regions, and a likely inability of existing universities to be competitive in seeking grants to support the teaching, research, social service, and support that are vital to the wellbeing and prosperity of local communities. ACDICT's regional university representatives would like to propose a national initiative to provide a collaborative framework whereby they can work to strengthen regional education opportunities as a collective (including VET, the Australian Computer Society, etc.), with a centralised, shared services model and joint offerings leading to well defined pathways into any participating provider. We would like to engage in a design thinking approach to frame a sustainable, future-proofed model that strengthens and expands existing regional provider networks rather than introducing a new player that would not have the wealth of experience and community support of existing organisations.

Measures of Success for Accord Outcomes

Measure 1. Greater access to and attainment of higher education skills and knowledge across Australia with increased funding and bonus points not only for those from regional areas but for those choosing to study in a regional area.

Measure 2. Greater support for significant reduction of the skills gaps in technical and digital professions, target locations, and industry sectors. Commonwealth supported guarantees for all undergraduate courses to facilitate rapid skills growth and increase the attractiveness of further education for those who cannot invest three years or are unsure if higher education is the best option for them.

Measure 3. Increased collaboration and integration of community supported, mission based, and nation-building endeavours by the sector.

Measure 4. Greater equity and appropriateness in student financial support to ensure that all are able to fully engage in and attain the qualification that they seek to study.

Measure 5. Improved mental health outcomes among academic and professional staff.