

The logo for Public Universities Australia (PUA) is displayed on a yellow rectangular background. The text 'public universities australia' is written in a bold, black, sans-serif font. The word 'public' is on the top line, 'universities' is on the middle line, and 'australia' is on the bottom line. The letters are closely spaced, and the overall design is clean and professional.

<https://puau.org>

The case for an independent education sector integrity commission

Public Universities Australia (PUA) has long been calling for an independent body to help ensure the integrity and probity of Australia's university sector, given increasing internal and public concern about the sector's declining academic and ethical standards that go against the National Interest. It therefore warmly endorses the concession that Minister Jason Clare made in a recent media release that there should be a body formed to monitor the application of outcomes of the current University Accord [1].

While this is a must and has PUA's full support, its mandate should not be limited to the outcomes of the Accord alone given its limited scope and engagement. Instead, it requires the remit to address the full range of problems that have led to the need for such an Accord in the first place. The case for such an independent body with broad scope has been well made elsewhere [2] and shares much of the same rationale that led to the creation of a National Anti-Corruption Commission [3].

Minister Clare's proposal, however, presupposes that the Accord will provide a comprehensive and accurate assessment of the sector's current key challenges. PUA submits that is at best an unreasonably optimistic view of the Accord and its capacity to address those challenges.

A current example of outstanding concern for the sector is the proposed merger of two South Australian public universities under State parliamentary review [4]. The merger contradicts the preliminary ambitions of the Accord in a number of areas including diversity and National Security - it goes beyond a state concern alone given that Adelaide represents the heart of defence technology research.

PUA notes, for instance, that the current University of Adelaide VC has recently acknowledged his management failings under a foreign interference inquiry, not only on the disproportionate treatment of students but specifically on National Security in Queensland, attributing these to the management of such a big campus where not everything can be uncovered [5]. Yet despite these failings and the small size of his former institution, he is championing a merger to create perhaps the largest campus in Australia in the very heart of Australia's defence research industry. Further, a major defence program has been initiated with an interstate university [6] potentially reflecting the geographic spread of shared values, where its present management also appears to have had similar challenges managing foreign interests [7].

Therefore, PUA also calls for the independent body to not be limited to the terms of reference of the Accord and to have sufficient scope to address current and future concerns of wider National interest at both a State and Federal level as they arise.

References

- [1] <https://www.themandarin.com.au/225797-independent-body-in-the-mix-to-lead-tertiary-ed-transformation/>
- [2] <https://johnmenadue.com/if-i-was-the-minister-responsible-for-higher-education-in-the-next-government-these-would-be-my-priorities/>
- [3] <https://www.ag.gov.au/integrity/national-anti-corruption-commission>
- [4] <https://www.parliament.sa.gov.au/en/News/2023/07/11/01/31/Establishment-of-Adelaide?fbclid=IwAR1m37Hal2W93gmOUBpN0sALmolyvBeHjGXZ3dxiJhDDxDstLY5uG23CiiY>
- [5] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R2ZubWODrIk>
- [6] <https://www.campusreview.com.au/2023/07/unis-partner-in-240m-defence-program/>
- [7] <https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2022-03/apo-nid317126.pdf>