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The Universities Accord, Education and the need for a Royal Commission

The Government formulated Accord with the University sector has released its interim report [1]. At the heart of the Accord lies an interpretation of what education is, and what its value to Australia is assumed to be, views that are inevitably narrow, constrained by the Accord's terms of reference and the composition of its Panel. The inability to accept criticism, directly engage with and listen to other parties in good faith is characteristic of nearly all the problems in the sector, as is the unjustified pretension of university managements to speak on behalf of their staff and students, the most recent manifestation being the referral of a current university management to the Independent Commission Against Corruption in NSW [2]. These matters are not unique to UNSW: they are systemic, if not endemic – behaviours that persist after the sacking of 40,000 irreplaceable academic staff essential to delivery on the expectations of the present government across the sector, along with endemic wage theft. [3] Not coincidentally, shortly before news of the ICAC referral broke, PUA had already warned of these underlying causes [4], some features of which the Accord shares. Entrenched problems with university governance are the principal cause of the declining quality of education and of the importance attached to fund raising through education, particularly international student fees. Yet the Accord is not directly addressing governance in any depth. In contrast to the university sector, routine governance practice in real corporations, and in reviews, is the implementation of provisions to both support and protect whistle-blowers and other perceived insider threats [5]; the fact that universities tend, instead, to view whistle-blowers and critics as threats to their 'brand' who need to be silenced should be an obvious red flag.

The Panel's terms of reference limit lasting outcomes. Security, for example, is not remarked upon. The merger of two South Australian universities, one linked to UNSW through a new major defence funding initiative despite VCs at both institutions having experienced challenges managing security in previous postings and one the subject of the current ICAC referral highlights the Accord's difficulty. Education and how it's delivered are inextricably a

major national security concern for one simple reason: the role of soft and *reverse* soft power. The bulk of international students in Australia come from states that are arguably autocratic [6] both in their working governance and in their culture, with practices that are not aligned with both societal and corporate governance, a factor that contributes to a significant number of our international students seeking not merely to study in but to migrate to Australia. That motivation consequently reinforces the role of non-technical teaching in both soft power projection and reverse soft power mitigation. International students now represent more than 50% of enrolments in many engineering and business courses (anecdotally in some cases exceeding 90%), despite representing in 2019 about 27% of the total higher education student population, varying from 2% to 50% across institutions, having risen from ~24% in 2018 [7]. The pandemic reduced the numbers present in Australia and could have provided an opportunity for the sector to breathe and re-assess its purpose. Presently, there are ~448,274 international students across the total education sector in 2023, according to AUSTRADE [8], below the 619,000 or so in 2019. However, it's up 20% on 2022 and on track to recover to pre-pandemic levels quite rapidly.

The Accord discusses ways of increasing those numbers, rather than recommending a reduction to more manageable levels. It even suggests the extraordinary possibility of a levy, a discrete tax that has major funding implications for universities. The income being generated from international students funds VC wealth and, allegedly, some research, because Australian governments won't fund domestic research to average OECD levels. The ways in which universities have been forced to seek revenue streams outside of government funding and fees raises questions about the legitimacy of their charity status. Yet there is no acknowledgement in the Accord, for example, that existing funding levels and other material assets held by individual universities could be better used, that senior management and Vice Chancellor salaries and obscene perks are neither sustainable nor justifiable nor acceptable to many in the Australian community, all the while many of their remaining staff remain chronically under-employed.

"Tool training" education, at the expense of the Humanities and wider societal obligations, drives the market as technology dominates economies and national power, which is both striking and concerning. Through their excessive focus on international students to the detriment of domestic students, Australian universities have become gateways for both training and technology transfer out of Australia, particularly as they seek to expand and establish more teaching R&D facilities offshore. This problem is exacerbated by Australia's own internal policies and actions: the bulk of genuine high technology companies in Australia need to migrate offshore to raise investment as well as to recruit labour as local interest in training wanes (due in good part to unsustainable training and employment opportunities), a crisis that is sometimes masked by inward looking publicity around start-up hubs that have been used to hide the winding down of key manufacturing sectors more broadly. The familiar Australian fragility of this approach has recently been reflected in the space sector, which has lost government funding [9] at a time that coincides with the collapse of a significant European leader [10], a possible prelude to a sector wide crash. This is only one of numerous examples spanning decades of Australian short-sightedness in policy and investment resulting in missed, but potentially enormously profitable, opportunities. The Accord panel appears to know little of this Australian fragility and its ambivalent relationship to education and training.

It is in this context that the Accord claims the benefits of "soft power", a term invented in the 1980s by Joseph Nye at Harvard University in the United States to co-opt rather than coerce

political opponents to change directions based on appeal. The Accord's use of this concept is extraordinary, because its use is either unexpectedly naïve or wilfully distracting. Aside from student numbers maintained to satisfy local industry needs, it appears to expect that international students will return to their countries having been automatically transformed through their Australian education into pro-democracy graduates based on a good time (the positive 'student experience', which for many is far from positive) and having been able to observe how well democracy works here (imagine using Trump's shenanigans as the basis for society elsewhere as a model example – or the RoboDebt scheme, with its overtones of sheer intransigent authoritarianism!). What also occurs, but which is unmentionable, is "*reverse soft power*", where students being educated in "tool training" in numbers too large to ignore unwittingly influence the society and culture they venture into; autocracies have an advantage because they closely control their image, whereas democracies depend increasingly on things such as quality education to exert their influence. Indeed, in Australia some embassies are known to monitor and shape their nationals' views throughout their education, not to mention such influence before they arrive here, thus ensuring a degree of immunity from any Australian non-technical "education". Such practices are one form of overt foreign interference [13,14], another topic that is scarcely discussed by the Accord. All of this, whilst our immediate Pacific neighbours are excluded from any discussion.

If one wanted indicative evidence of the impact of soft power, then a simple examination of the rise and proliferation of autocracies versus that of democracies [15] should be instructive. Jason Clare's own claim in his Press Club announcement on the Accord [16] parroted the purported soft power of a Western education. However, the data do not seem to support this as an effective tool in the grand scheme of things: despite spreading steadily worldwide through much of the 20th century as the preferred form of government, democracy has now been in decline for much of the same period during which Western education has been more accessible to international students. We might usefully reflect upon the reasons for that apparent correlation. It could be argued that that education has, through technical and business education rather than through any assumed social enlightenment, instead provided the tools for graduates to empower autocracy and benefit from its favour. Education has rarely been successful as a formal soft power tool, even with students in receipt of generous scholarships to attend elite British and American universities. In Australia, given the lack of positive support provided by universities to their international students as well as the erosion of the Arts & Humanities that are so central to any education in the sense of pro-democratic soft power, the explicit interest of universities in international students has been only in their money; other community discourse has considered how much of a financial contribution they also make to the domestic economy, but there is never so much as a whisper about anything else those students might themselves gain by being here. This dependence, the misappropriation of their fees, and chronic cost-cutting by successive governments have brought with them all the challenges of financial sustainability of our entire university sector, as well as greed that saw ethically challenged solutions and misconduct grow, probably causally baking in disparities [17]. International students are capable of seeing the hypocrisy of this situation and the autocratic behaviour within the University sector itself, which is scarcely a convincing advertisement for democracy.

If education is, indeed, to be an effective soft power tool, that cannot occur through technical education, or "tool training", and certainly not through business studies. It is the Humanities that teach broader critical thinking and direct consideration of matters essential for

democracy, including freedom of speech, the right to hold one's views and to express them, equality and respect, the reasons why individualism matters within a collective and why free elections are supposed to allow every individual to express their views instead of being dictated to by the few. Indeed, as John Dewey and many others have argued, a foundational basis for any democracy is a broad general education that is equally accessible to all. This was, for example, the principle at the heart of Gough Whitlam's free university education for domestic students. The Humanities should provide teaching in reasoned ethics, pluralism, and they are vital in equipping us all to assess broader societal and cultural impacts, including by and beyond technology. The Accord speaks of enabling Australians to be able to confront our current and future challenges: in purely practical terms, this does require technical and scientific knowledge and skills, but in knowledge and wisdom in how to use that knowledge, and how to avoid preventable crises, it is the Humanities that prepare us, not "tool training". And yet incredibly, this pivotal role of the Humanities has escaped any consideration in the Accord. It is likewise non-existent when considering international students, the vast majority of whom enter "tool training" fields such as engineering, IT, and business. If there is any correlation between the education we offer to international students and the political and social situations to which they return, is it any wonder that autocracy is growing, not slowing? Is it any wonder that democracy is being eroded rather than strengthened, enjoying a profound loss of confidence specifically among younger generations? Was Jason Clare serious when he spoke of soft power, or was it simply another "whim of words" - an apt characterisation of much of the interim report itself? Where is the courage of conviction that democracy is important, and that a liberal Arts education is one of its greatest guarantors?

The Accord interim report does not reflect any "transformative" rethink of education. There are aspects of the Accord which are sensible and consistent with a recognition of the growing role of technical colleges and especially TAFE, including the need for universities to return to more of a service model supporting the TAFE system. But the omission of any consideration of the Humanities, and of the wider role of security and the substance of soft power, is nothing short of negligent and is arguably a cause of its lack of vision.

Finally, it's worth reiterating a common thread. There has been dissent towards the review process from various excluded stakeholders, predominantly the academics whom the Accord, along with university management, are supposed to serve. The very choice of words reflects this problematic exclusivity: "Accord" means to give or grant one stakeholder power, or a treaty, or at best to nod in agreement with another, thus establishing an unequal power relationship between stakeholders from the outset. In order to accelerate genuine progress and to reflect the values of the traditional university, however, the review needs to be instead a "Concord" between *all* university stakeholders. Renaming the review accordingly may not be such a bad concession, and it might provide hope to those who remain unconvinced by it. But ultimately, as the recent NSW ICAC referral and the SA parliamentary inquiry both highlight, there is need of a Royal Commission with the broadest possible terms of reference to investigate the sector and restore to it a modicum of transparency and accountability to the entire community, if any lasting improvement is to be achieved.

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