

26 November 2025

Committee Secretary

Senate Education and Employment Legislation Committee
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

By email: eec.sen@aph.gov.au

Dear Committee Secretary,

**Inquiry into the quality of governance at Australian higher education providers
Hearing on 12 November 2025
Answers to questions on notice and further information to clarify responses made at the Hearing**

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the Senate Education and Employment Legislation Committee on 12 November 2025 in relation to the inquiry into the quality of governance at Australian higher education providers (**Hearing**).

This letter:

- responds to questions that Nous Group took on notice at the Hearing; and
- provides further information to clarify responses made by Nous Group at the Hearing.

A. Questions on notice at the Hearing

1. *Senator Pocock: How much does Nous Data Insights charge universities to access UniForum benchmarking data?*

Answer:

The fees that Nous Data Insights (**NDI**) charges universities for its UniForum benchmarking services are commercial-in-confidence.

Disclosure of this information would cause real or significant harm to NDI (and Nous Group more broadly) and may significantly diminish our competitive advantage.

In particular, this information may provide competitors with insight into NDI's business model and pricing structure.

[REDACTED]

2. *Senator Faruqi: Over the past 5 years, how many contracts has Nous Group had with the Australian Government Department of Education (or preceding departments) and what was the value of those contracts?*

Answer:

Between 1 July 2020 and 12 November 2025, Nous Group Pty Ltd (**Nous Consulting**) had 39 active contracts with the Australian Government Department of Education (or preceding departments), with an aggregate value of AUD 9,759,869 (excluding GST).

3. *Senator Faruqi: Over the past 5 years, how many contracts has Nous Group had with State and Territory departments of education and what was the value of those contracts?*

Answer:

Between 1 July 2020 and 12 November 2025, Nous Consulting had 141 active contracts with Australian State and Territory departments of education, with an aggregate value of AUD 23,104,436.

These projects were predominately focussed on schools, early childhood, vocational education and training, and organisational performance within Australian State and Territory departments.

4. *Senator Faruqi: What is the value of Nous Group's current contracts with universities?*

Answer:

As at 12 November 2025, Nous Consulting and NDI together have 31 contracts with 19 Australian universities with an aggregate value of AUD 5,938,688 (excluding GST).

5. *Senator Faruqi: Why were concerns about external consultants not included in Nous Group's analysis of public submissions prepared for the Commonwealth Department of Education in relation to the Australian Universities Accord?*

Answer:

Nous Consulting was engaged by the Australian Government Department of Education under the Deed of Standing Offer for the Supply of Research and Evaluation Services (RES Panel) on three projects in relation to the Australian Universities Accord:

- Analysis of submissions on the priorities for the Australian Universities Accord Review Panel to consider under their terms of reference;
- Analysis of submissions to the Australian Universities Accord Discussion Paper (ESE23/7072); and
- Analysis of submissions in response to the Australian Universities Accord Interim Report (ESE23/101825),

(each an **Accord Project** and together, the **Accord Projects**).

For each Accord Project:

- our scope of services was to undertake a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the submissions received on the priorities for the Australian Universities Accord, the Australian Universities Accord Discussion Paper and the Interim Report, in order to identify and summarise key issues and to analyse trends based on stakeholder type; and

- our analysis and findings were structured in response to the documentation on which the Australian Universities Accord Review Panel was seeking comment – all of which pertained to the ‘Key Areas for Review’ in the terms of reference:
 - Meeting Australia’s knowledge and skills needs, now and in the future
 - Access and opportunity
 - Investment and affordability
 - Governance, accountability and community
 - The connection between the vocational education and training (VET) and the higher education systems
 - Quality and sustainability
 - Delivering new knowledge, innovation and capability.

Across the three Accord Projects, Nous Consulting reviewed approximately 800 submissions.

Based on our scope of work, and considering the Australian Universities Accord’s terms of reference, we note that concerns about the use of external consultants was not identified as a key issue or theme on the Accord Projects, particularly when compared to issues such as increasing the demand for higher education in Australia, and creating better alignment (of studies) with the changing needs of economy and society, which appeared prominently and consistently across the submissions.

6. *Senator Faruqi: How did Nous Group manage any conflict of interest between its work analysing public submissions for the Australian Universities Accord and its other university work?*

Answer:

As described in our response to Question 5, on the Accord Projects, Nous Consulting’s role was to undertake a synthesis of the submissions to identify and summarise key issues and to analyse trends based on stakeholder type.

In accordance with the Australian Government Department of Education’s instructions, this was undertaken in an objective and factual manner. We note that key issues and themes were identified according to their relevance to the Australian Universities Accord’s terms of reference, the Discussion Paper and Interim Report (respectively) and the frequency of mentions in the submissions. This was a fully transparent process for the Department. Further, the submissions were published by the Department and Nous Consulting’s role did not require (or permit) us to comment on the merits of any submission. These factors naturally limited any conflict of interest or potential bias.

For each Accord Project, Nous Consulting’s team comprised consultants who had:

- a track record of synthesising themes and insights from large volumes of material; and
- experience in the higher education sector, which was necessary to clearly understand the detail and nuance of the submissions.

The Australian Government Department of Education was aware of our team’s experience, and this was a reason why Nous Consulting was engaged for the Accord Projects.

In relation to conflicts of interest generally, at Nous Group, we pride ourselves on acting with honesty, integrity and transparency. We are committed to always taking an ethical approach to our work. In particular, we act with honesty and transparency to proactively identify and manage any conflicts of interest.

We have implemented robust, repeatable, and embedded processes across all of our projects, and provide annual conflicts of interest training to all staff, to ensure any conflicts of interest are identified, reported and managed.

If a conflict of interest is identified, Nous Group manages the conflict by taking one or more of the following actions: disclosing the conflict, implementing information barriers, resourcing changes (such as using different teams), deciding not to proceed with the proposal or project, and consulting senior leaders across Nous Group for advice.

At the Hearing, Nous Consulting said that the team members involved in the Accord Projects were not involved in work with the universities at the time. We wish to clarify the record and confirm that the Nous Consulting teams across the Accord Projects included team members who had previously worked at a university and/or on projects for universities whilst at Nous Consulting, and that the Australian Government Department of Education was aware of our team's experience (as noted above).

7. *Senator Faruqi: In the last 5 years, in Australia, how many times has a university approved Nous Consulting having access to its UniForum results?*

Answer:

Between 13 November 2020 and 12 November 2025, 8 Australian universities requested and approved Nous Consulting having access to that university's UniForum results for the purposes of 28 Nous Consulting projects in total.

Under the UniForum program, a university may share its UniForum results with third parties (such as Nous Consulting) for the purpose of supporting business improvement initiatives. The shared UniForum results comprise comparative data on a de-identified and aggregated basis, which does not identify other universities or their personnel.

All third-party requests for UniForum results are submitted by the relevant university, reviewed by Nous Data Insights to ensure they meet responsible use requirements, and approved by that university. Each third party and the relevant university are required to enter into an agreement, under which the third party agrees (amongst other things) to maintain the confidentiality of the shared UniForum results and to only use the shared UniForum results for the specific business improvement initiative specified in the agreement (**Third Party Access Agreement**).

Like other third parties, Nous Consulting has entered into Third Party Access Agreements where a university has requested and approved Nous Consulting having access to its UniForum results for a Nous Consulting project.

8. *Senator Faruqi: What prevents Nous Data Insights from sharing its underlying UniForum methodology or the formulas used to calculate UniForum benchmarking results?*

Answer:

Nous Data Insights benchmarks professional resourcing using a robust set of methodologies and formulas, comprising:

- An activity-based collection model and associated benchmarks; and
- A survey - to understand staff views on the effectiveness of services (based on standardised survey methodology).

Nous Data Insights developed the UniForum data collection and benchmarking methodology, with input from the founding university members of the UniForum program.

As part of UniForum’s program governance, Nous Data Insights provides UniForum member’s Executive with updates on changes to the UniForum methodologies. This transparent process for UniForum members includes opportunity to discuss, challenge, debate and refine the methodology and provides universities with ongoing confidence that the benchmarks are meaningful, reliable and rigorous.

We note that Nous Data Insights owns the intellectual property rights in the UniForum methodologies and underlying formulas, which are commercially valuable.

9. *Senator Faruqi: How many universities in Australia currently subscribe to the UniForum program?*

Answer:

As of 12 November 2025, 11 Australian universities participate in NDI’s UniForum (Professional Services Analytics) program, including the Service Effectiveness Assessment.

B. Further information

10. *Freedom of information request regarding Nous report*

During the Hearing, Nous Group responded to comments made by Senator Faruqi in relation to a 22-page Nous Consulting report that was the subject of a freedom of information (FOI) request to Australian National University (ANU).

Nous Group wishes to correct the record in relation to its response:

The FOI request related to a “Getting Ahead of the Curve” report (Report) prepared by Nous Consulting.

ANU consulted Nous Consulting, as an interested third party, in relation to the FOI request, in accordance with the *Freedom of Information Act 1982 (Cth)* (FOI Act).

Nous Consulting made submissions to ANU recommending redactions to the Report, including because the Report contained Nous Consulting’s methodologies, analysis, and insights into the Australian higher education sector, which constitute valuable intellectual property (i.e. trade secrets and commercially valuable information). Under section 47 of the FOI Act, it was submitted that disclosure of this information would have caused significant harm to Nous Consulting’s commercial interests and competitive advantage.

Ultimately, ANU was responsible for deciding whether to release the Report. We understand that ANU decided to release a redacted version of the Report in accordance with section 47 (trade secrets and commercially valuable information) and section 47C (deliberative processes) of the FOI Act. We note that information may be withheld from disclosure under section 47C of the FOI Act if it would disclose ANU’s deliberative processes.

Yours sincerely,



Timothy Orton
 Chief Executive Officer and Managing Principal
 Nous Group