Deakin University

Submission: UNIVERSITIES ACCORD (AUSTRALIAN TERTIARY EDUCATION COMMISSION) BILL 2025 AND A RELATED BILL INQUIRY

13 January 2026

INTRODUCTION

Deakin University welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback and clarity regarding the proposed Australian Tertiary Education Commission (ATEC) Legislation. As the landmark outcome of the Universities Accord, and with the greatest potential to instigate and oversee meaningful reform and evolution of the university sector – changes marked by prioritising the national interest above other factors – ensuring the ATEC and its foundation legalisation delivers on the body's promise is vital.

As it stands, Deakin remains a firm supporter of the ATEC. We have supported such a body since our earliest engagement, both written and verbal, with the Accord process, and remain as such. To paraphrase what we stated in our initial Accord submission: such an oversight body [ATEC] is an opportunity to bring national ambitions, prioritise, and most critically coordination, to our university sector which has achieved much, but must see change.

However, though supportive of an ATEC, and already engaged with the interim body in a productive and meaningful manner, Deakin holds several concerns regarding the proposed legislation. We posit that addressing these concerns, which range from a lack of clarity to missed opportunities to truly achieve the ambitions of establishing such a function, should be a priority. To outcome meaningful reform and evolution of how our sector is regulated and oversighted, we need to ensure the legislation, and its subsequent operation, are of required standard and focus.

We also note that our submission is made in concert with the feedback provided by Universities Australia (UA), having been engaged in their submission development process, as well as with the Australian Technology Network of Universities (ATN) submission.

We look to engaging with your inquiry process further and would welcome the opportunity to discuss our position in greater detail. Should such an opportunity be available, please do not hesitate to contact my Senior Strategic Adviser, David Reeves, on [redacted] or [redacted]

[redacted]

Professor Iain Martin
Vice-Chancellor

PURPOSE OF THE COMMISSION

Any meaningful critique and feedback on the proposed ATEC Legislations must be shaped by clarity concerning the purpose of the ATEC: what we wish it to achieve and the outcomes we wish it to deliver over the forthcoming years and decades.

Building on comments made by Deakin throughout the Accord and ATEC design process and supported by UA in its submission to this inquiry, a properly designed ATEC has the potential to be a groundbreaking reform for the higher education sector in Australia. If we get this correct now, not only will it have the capacity to reform and shift the performance of universities to increased heights and outputs, in turn it will bring significant benefit to a nation facing significant economic and social challenges in an ever more complex global environment.

However, the opposite is equally the case. A poorly designed ATEC merely risks serving as another regulatory lawyer; with powers to interfere despite risking ill outcomes.

As such, what framing must underpin the ATEC, and hence the legislation? Deakin proposes several key criteria which must be beyond doubt, but at present are not fully enunciated or clarified by the legislation.

We present these in concert with UA, though there are several key differences throughout:

1. **Appropriate independence from government:** If ATEC is to be responsible for the development of true best-practice and world leading higher education policy advice to the Federal Government, as well as acting as a first-line regulatory body in shaping the actions, priorities, and focuses of each institution via the compacts process, the appropriate level of independence from the Federal Government must be clear and secure. At present, though the Commissioners have independence, reporting directly to the Minister, the legislation is less clear on the broader Commission. They may be interpreted as straddling between independent Commissioners, and an organisational body responsible to the broader Department of Education. This is not an appropriate level of independence and requires clarification.

   Moreover, while government adopting policy recommendations would be a matter for the minister and ministry of the day, ATEC's advice coming from a place of independence will ensure ATEC does not fall into the trap of another semi-captured body reinforcing existing government or departmental thinking.

2. **Comprehensively resourced:** ATEC needs to be properly and fully resourced to achieve its mission. This covers both Commissioners, and the seniority of the team behind the Commissioners:

   a) **Commissioners:** Deakin argues that the choice of Commissioners is a hinge test for the ATEC: the correct decision/s will go a long way to ensuring success of the body. In particular, the head Commissioner must be an individual of expertise, breadth of knowledge across the higher education sector, and noted for a scope of thinking beyond merely what has been tried previously. In addition, an appreciation of the public policy environment, without capture to a specific agenda would be of tremendous value. Moreover, their experience must also reflect beyond a specific institution/type of institution, with an openness to a variety of backgrounds worth considering should it deliver the appropriate candidate. It is vital that appointees are not locked into a singular paradigm of successful universities / university systems.

      We would also argue strongly for an increase in the number of commissioners given the range and breadth of expertise required – a full-time senior commissioner and 4 part time commissioners would seem to be a reasonable balance to ensure effectiveness alongside ensuring range of experience.

b) **Seniority of team:** New Zealand's experience of establishing and operating a body similar to ATEC speaks to the importance of a senior team supporting the Commissioners. If the compacts process is to be more than a tick-box exercise, it must be overseen by senior, experienced individuals who have invested in relationships with the institutions, and a knowledge of their operations and environment. Many of New Zealand's establishment issues came from a too junior team, where relationships could not be nurtured at sufficiently senior levels. The importance of such seniority also speaks to criteria three.

3. **Subject matter expertise, not managerialism and generalists:** Expertise in higher education, and the requisite aspects therefore - such as funding systems, regulatory processes, internal operations of institutions, research v teaching and education, nuances between regional v metropolitan, large, research-intensive v smaller, teaching focussed, and the like – is a must have for ATEC.

   This is not a body to be skilled with generalists, or with a managerial culture. Without such senior, deep expertise, from economists to planners, big thinkers to those in the weeds of implementation, the ATEC will be unable to fulfill its multidimensional role and responsibilities. The reduction in policy expertise and depth across government departments over recent decades should serve as a warning in this regard.

   As such, consideration must be given to developing avenues to access such expertise from the sector itself, given this is the largest repository available. Whether via the sequestration of staffing from institutions, or via collaborative agreements for access, such expertise is essential and non-negotiable; as such, it must be sourced from the only remaining pools available.

4. **A long-term mission and responsibilities:** Naturally, while ATEC will cover a range of short-to-medium-term issues, its mission should be one of medium-to-long-term policy, planning, and implementation. This is to oversee the reform of the university sector and ensuring highest-possible performance in the national interest.

   a) **Delineation between, and overlap of, policy and planning v compacts:** As enunciated, ATEC has two major arcs to its mission: as a policy and planning body, and as an implementation and regulatory organisation via the compacts process. Both require deep expertise at the highest levels, and aligned, but divergent skill sets. How the former feeds the latter, and in turn the thinking in the former is informed by realised experience of the latter will be a key plank on which success in both is achieved.

   b) **Meaningful, mature compacts process:** Moreover, Deakin proposes that the meaningful, changed compacts process should be set in the legislation, with direct reference to the factors that may form part of the compacts process to deliver meaningful change. This may include features such as compacts highlights not just what an institution will be funded to deliver, but specific reference to what an institution is not being funded to do – indeed perhaps going as far as to say some funding is contingent on not doing certain things. Likewise, accountability measures and metrics against individual compacts. Included such detail in the legislation would ensure a meaningful process that forms a key aspect of the ATEC responsibilities.

5. **Clear intersection with existing regulatory bodies and arms of government:** As well as independence, how ATEC intersects with existing regulatory bodies and arms of government should be clear, concise, and easily navigated. For example, how the seemingly overlapping powers between ATEC and the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency are to operate in practice, and how this will be performed without adding unnecessary and productivity reducing replication of red tape. Likewise, how do the similar responsibilities for the Department and ATEC coexist in practice, and where is the separation line? There is a real risk of jurisdictional overlap with TEQSA in some areas, and this will need absolute clarity, and a long-term view as to how the two entities will operate synergistically.

6. **Responsibility to Parliament and the Australian community:** Given the breadth of mission, and requisite powers and responsibilities, ensuring ATEC is publicly responsible to the Parliament of Australia, and via it the Australian public, should be a key facet of its creation. In driving its independence from the Department and broader government, it must still be answerable – in line with bodies such as the Australian Research Council (ARC).

ATEC AS A KEY COMPONENT IN DESIGNING THE FUTURE OF OUR HIGHER EDUCATION SECTOR

Rightfully, Australia has much to be proud of concerning its higher education system and institutions. In critical areas, Australia truly is a world leader. As we have adopted from a system designed for the few to a mass component of the education system, Australia has scaled up the university experience and approach to suit an ever-diversifying cohort. Likewise, across many fields, our research competes with some of the best of the globe, and our breakthroughs may have a real impact. This success must not be lost or simply disregarded.

Yet equally so, it is a stark trap to fall for too rosy a view of the university sector in this country, and of our contribution to the nation. Behind the figures so often touted, the oft-murky dollar amounts thrown around concerning returns on investment or similar, our sector has real challenges to grapple with. And as goes this sector, so mirrors several challenges of the nation. As Deakin argued in our recent white paper *With the permission of the community, do Australian universities have a social licence* (see Appendix A), despite the individual metrics per institutions, and collation of such, ours is a sector used to defining our own missions, and having grown areas of expertise and preference from the ground up.

What does this mean in practice? It means a sector where too often, research mission or teaching portfolio is driven by institutional preferences and desires, indeed by rankings, publications, and prestige. In cases, commercial decision-making overrules the core deliverables of a university, as our supposed non-tiered system means each university is driven to conformity, and where we stand out, if we do, is a feature of our preference. While this may mean each and every university contributes to national needs, priorities, and requirements, often this is as much an outcome of coincidence than any strategic intent. It will be vital that in the nation has the ability to step back and say – what kind of university system do we need and desire and how do we ensure that individual institutions can craft diverse but equally valued contributions. We have an opportunity to do this which, if lost, will be a source of great regret.

The Australian public has noticed, they have cottoned on cynicism about the true quality of academic standards and teaching, ideologically driven approaches to speech or research communication, and a system where clarity of language is often found wanting when controversy or messy events occur. The summation, found in polling commissioned by Deakin, is almost a third of Australians expressing no trust in our sector, and more than half being at-best apathetic. Hardly inspiring numbers. Add to that, a view that university is too expensive, delivering too little gain for the investment, being held by a significant minority. Whether these criticisms are all fair and whether perception or reality almost now does not matter – without fronting these challenges our sector is not going to be able to flourish in the way the nation needs and deserves.

Why does this matter to a submission concerning the ATEC legislation? Because a healthy, performing, and contributing higher education system is one that speaks to the needs of the nation, and responds to the demands of Australia as it navigates a particularly difficult period economically, socially, and globally. In effect, just as the Strategic Examination of Research and Development (SERD) has proposed a top-down, agreed priorities and national needs-based approach for research funding, our sector should be driven by those same questions and concerns across all operations. Above we referenced compacts as a platform not only to indicate what a university may be funded for, but equally an explicit statement of what they will not be funded to do. This is but a microcosm of such an approach.

To achieve the sought after sectoral reform and change, ATEC must be a lead player. It holds the levers on a redesign of funding models in both education and research; it will advise on post-18 system alignment; it will form the agreements which each of us will require to operate and must be held accountable to delivering. And if we wish to reorient the higher education sector to those national challenges, as so often expressed in speeches but still to be realised in policy and practice, then ATEC's must encapsulate the system – both regulatory and funding – that underpins it.

Do so, and this sector can out-achieve its recent decades, setting new standards and new global benchmarks. Most importantly, we will be at the heart of Australia's greatest challenges, from improving our dire economic complexity, to a new generational economic compact that closes the gap between generations, to being social cohesion leaders and tackling the big conversations.

ATTACHMENT A: Do Australian universities have a social licence?

With the permission of the community, do Australian universities have a social licence?

A white paper for the university social licence challenge and what is to be done

Professor Iain Martin, Vice-Chancellor, Deakin University
David Reeves, Senior Adviser to the Vice-Chancellor, Deakin University

DEAKIN UNIVERSITY

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"Australia now must examine the performance of its higher education system. We must ask the people and companies of Australia, whose taxes provide the resources for higher education, what demands and expectations the country has of its institutions and whether the institutions are responding to those demands and expectations. We must ask the institutions themselves what they see as their role in the social, cultural and economic lives of Australians, and ask them to examine how effectively they are discharging their roles."

– The Hon John Dawkins, Minister for Education, 1987

Acknowledgement of Country

Deakin University acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of all the unceded lands, skies and waterways on which Deakin students, staff and communities come together.

As we learn and teach through virtually and physically constructed places across time, we pay our deep respect to the Ancestors and Elders of Wadawurrung Country, Eastern Maar Country and Wurundjeri Country, where our physical campuses are located.

We also acknowledge the many First Nations from where students join us online and make vital contributions to our learning communities.

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The current challenge – where we are and why it matters

John Dawkins was not the first to query, out loud, the purposes and reasons for a university in a prosperous, modern economy and society. In Clark Kerr's original 1963 *Godkin Lectures* – which would become *The Uses of the University* – he stated that American institutions were "at a hinge of history: while connected with their past, they are swinging in another direction."

As Kerr elaborated, the changing nature of American universities, who they served, and how to do so, challenged notions of tradition, while a lack of clarity gave rise to little comfort on direction. As President of the University of California, Kerr was noted as an oft-lone voice of big ideas and, critically, living to such ideas. This was a credit to him personally, but a detriment in career terms.

Subsequent decades were to prove Kerr's diagnosis unnervingly prescient, if not all his proposed remedies.

As Australia's higher education system navigates the rapid changes of the 21st century, in a country bearing little, if any, resemblance to that which they were each created to serve, a similar fortune-telling has rarely been more relevant. However, where Kerr spoke of the hinge of history – a somewhat more neutral terminology – Australia's must be sharper in its naming of the difficulties.

Our sector is facing a crisis of confidence, not just a crisis of confidence in the sector but also a crisis of confidence in the value of the sector to the broader community.

We are not the only group considering this critical issue of social licence – the University Chancellor's Committee is undertaking a body of work, alongside many other initiatives which we commend. This piece is not a reaction to these issues but rather a series of concerns and actions that have been at the forefront of our minds in recent years.

Australian universities have made an art form of speaking to themselves: about the issues they are concerned with, the priorities they set, and in language they prefer. But this is an occasion for blunt clarity. Australia's university sector, and hence each university, has a social licence problem.

The Australian public is questioning the value we deliver, expressing concern about our operations, and is sceptical of our motives.

Far from the expert arbiters of fact, an integral foundation on which a high-value, knowledge-rich economy is built, too often we are perceived as self-interested, pursuing goals that benefit a sliver of the Australian community regardless of broader factors, and immune to appeals to the national interest. In a public poll commissioned by Deakin University, undertaken across June and July in 2025, 27 per cent responded that universities focussed on narrow, sectional interests over common community and national ones, while just 12 per cent endorsed the opposite.

Where our actions touch the broadest measure of the Australian public – core teaching and education – a cynicism has arisen that we have eroded quality and standards to save money, expand executive salaries, and target wealthy global markets. In the same poll, almost 40 per cent believed universities were focussed on revenue and global rankings more than on the core quality of teaching. The same proportion of respondents believed revenue was more important to universities than student outcomes. Meanwhile, student debt has ballooned and has become the most significant disincentive to undertaking university education.

Our sector must be the epitome of value to the community and nation: the value of the local campus to its community as an economic and social building block; the value of our service to the country in good times and bad; and the direct value to our students, as we work with them to build the brightest future for individual and society. To achieve this, we would need to spend far more time listening and speaking directly with our students and community, rather than at them.

Our place in the cohesive society

Moreover, either through action or inaction, we are readily accused of being politicised; the playthings of left-wing, inner-urban cultural elites, who possess social and economic capital. Whether accurate or not is hardly the point; such a characterisation is grossly simplified and purposefully distorts realities. The fact that a significant percentage of the population holds to at least some of these negative views, if not each and every one, is enough.

The current breakdown in social cohesion informs this crisis of confidence: a fractured social and economic model where the cost of living has worsened and the inequality between generations has widened, and concerns continue to escalate over Australia's future prosperity. To say we have lost our social licence is an exaggeration, but reading the recent political and public tea leaves, our social licence is weak and at risk of dissolving completely.

Furthermore, there is an obvious distinction between the two methods of university communication. One method involves generating fuzzy, warm feelings towards universities in a nebulous sense – a common criticism of how universities usually communicate, and the second is building genuine trust and confidence. The latter is what matters. An old political maxim holds best here: it isn't whether a voter says they think X or Y; it is whether X or Y is a top priority that will decide their vote.

To hammer home the point and convince the doubters, here is the figure that matters: 31 per cent of Australians hold little trust or faith in public universities today, and a further 12% are not sure. That represents a significant minority, almost a third of the population. This is not a majority, providing a platform to work from. But that number is far too high.

Should Australian universities care?

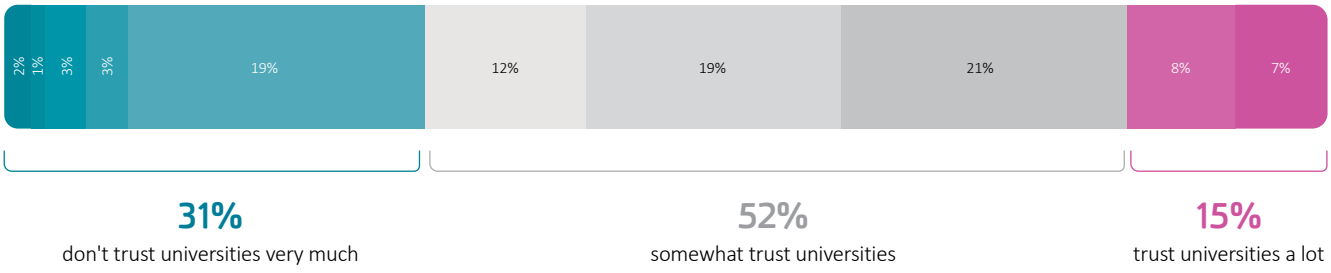
Yes, we should. Because, as the sector readily understands, we have a critical role to play.

Over the past 40 years, universities have been an integral part of Australia's economy, helping drive a record rise in living standards and prosperity, placing the nation among the best in the world. If the modern, multicultural Australia is to balance diversity with cohesion, create clarity of values and jointly held ideals, and a shared vision for our prosperous and secure future, universities must be at the centre.

From removing barriers to new skills and employment, to conducting the research that powers new industries and breakthroughs, and upholding the social infrastructure of a healthy democracy, we have a significant role to play.

But we can only fulfil this role if the public has faith in what we offer: our statements, aims, ambitions, and actions. Where the public has such faith, the political system will reflect such value, supporting it through funding and priority of place. Where scepticism turns to cynicism, cynicism turns to suspicion, and finally, suspicion turns to aggressive opposition – we become fractured from our purpose. Perversely, such fracturing is precisely when a healthy, trusted university sector is needed most, yet least able to play its role.

Trust in Australian universities



Without clarity of purpose, what licence to have?

In 1987, at the height of his reshaping of Australia's post-secondary education system, then Minister for Education and Training John Dawkins posited a straightforward, but complex, challenge at the heart of a shifting system.

Central to Dawkins' query was the very purpose of Australian universities: what the nation and its people demanded and expected of them, and in turn, how universities saw their role to respond.

In framing his reforms in such a manner, the expectation was clear: Australian universities exist to serve the expectations and interests of Australia, its people, and its economy. They may do so through various pillars, be it core teaching to provide the critical skills and empower economic mobility, as socio-economic pillars of outer metropolitan, regional, and rural communities where a university campus is more than a series of lecture halls and labs, but often a health service, a meeting place, an economic amplifier. And of course, through research for Australia's economic and social benefit. If we are to be a skills and knowledge-based economy, we require skills and knowledge.

However, in the nearly forty years since this statement, and the commensurate reforms, a strong case can be made that our sector has lost clarity of such shared purpose: lost in a cycle of sectoral competition and pursuit of global reputations, rankings, and similar self-aggrandisement.

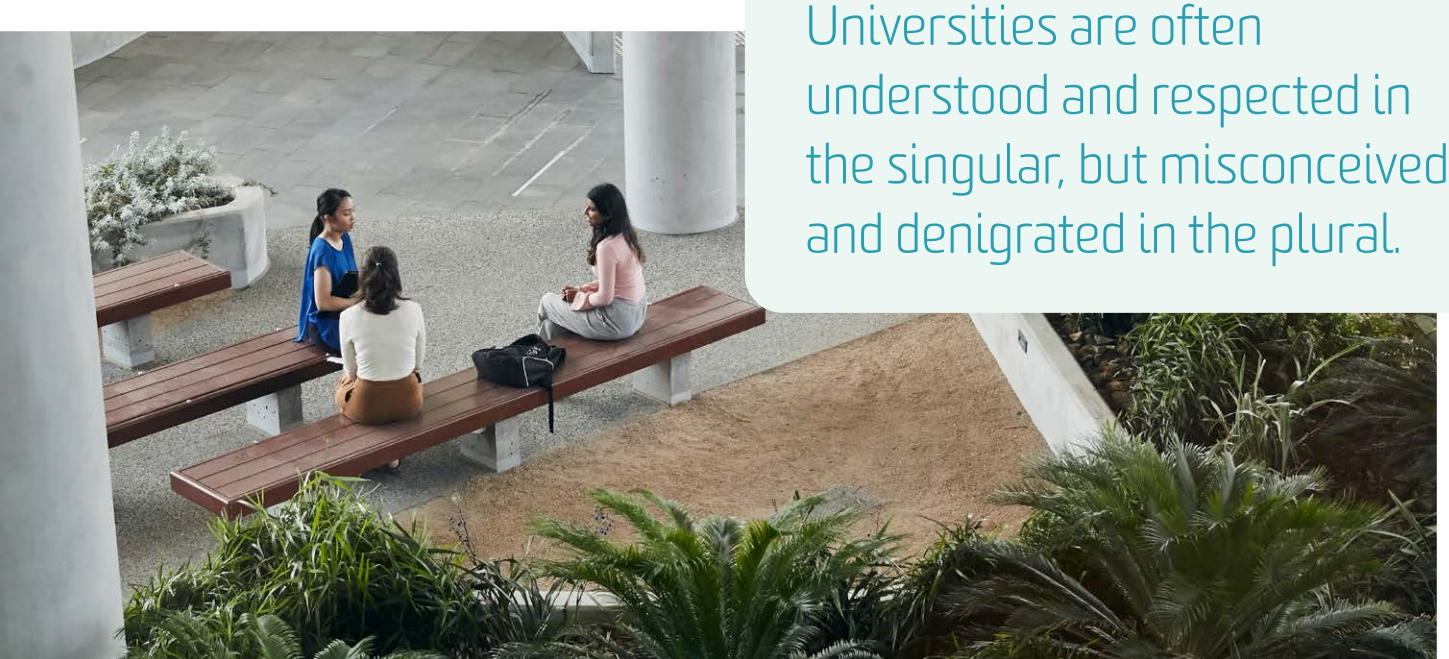
Consequently, we are suffering a downturn in public confidence and political support. As identified by various voices, such as University of Canberra Vice-Chancellor Bill Shorten, the scepticism and cynicism concerning universities in Australia has grown markedly. Despite the self-confidence of the sector, our value is not self-evident to many. While individual institutions, even campuses, may be cherished social and economic foundations for local communities, the wider sector holds little such affection. Universities are often understood and respected in the singular, but misconceived and denigrated in the plural, and it is the latter that is reflected in wider public and political views.

As we argued throughout the Universities Accord process, 21st-century Australia is a vastly different country from that of the 1980s. The nation that we, as a sector, serve, and the larger context of the world within which we engage and compete, has evolved to such a degree that to attempt operating within a framework established four decades prior is folly.

Instead, we must reconsider, re-plan, and remake. Hence, we posed a series of questions about the very nature of the sector itself: what is the overarching purpose, our mission, our values and ethos? What do we want from a modern, successful, engaged university sector? These are not merely questions of policy or funding, teaching or research. Instead, they re-contest the essential role of universities in 21st-century Australia, and the licence granted by the Australian people. Being in receipt of such significant public financing, we exist to serve. What does the nation – its government and its citizens – want from the sector and why?

We don't have all the answers, but without a bold, clear statement, can social licence and the permission of the public be meaningful?

Universities are often understood and respected in the singular, but misconceived and denigrated in the plural.



Social licence – overarching principles

The Australian university sector has achieved much in the past 50 years. We have grown to enable nearly 50 per cent of all school leavers to attend university compared to less than 10 per cent when Dawkins made his statement in 1987.

We responded to changing skills needs as new industries and opportunities arose; nurtured a system where attending a regional university does not mean accepting some form of second-class education; developed a research system that is truly globally competitive; and have led the world in internationalisation. We should be proud, rightfully.

Despite this, we have a perception problem. And that has evolved to a problem of social licence. As politicised and compromised as that very term has become, it is still a relevant and useful concept. And our sector does have a social licence issue.

What is perception, and what is reality? We must address the perception and the reality will follow, ensuring we work with the Australian public to rebuild our social licence – the very set of permissions that enable us to operate.

Many models look to understand social licence, but at the heart of most are four principles that together form how we consider our *Pillars of University Social Licence*.

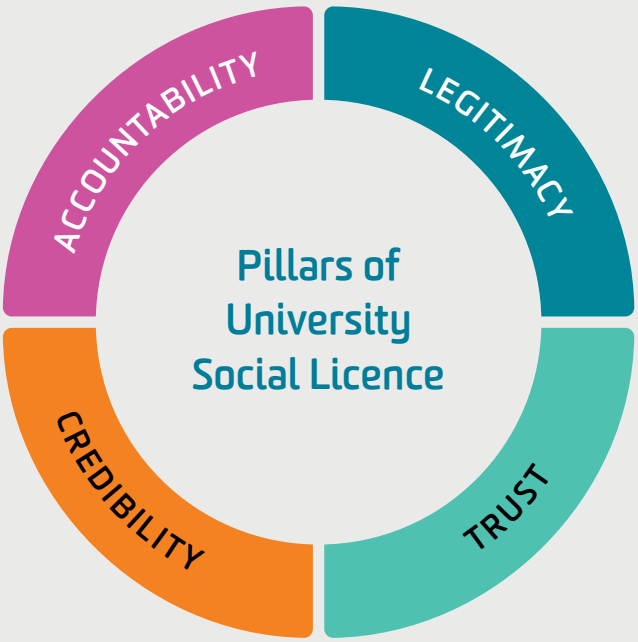
As an advanced, modern, knowledge-driven economy and society, no well-informed commentator would question the importance of a high-performing university sector. Indeed, they proclaim its centrality, highlighting the need for a sector of strength, coherence, and engagement with the national needs and priorities – measures against which we must be judged.

However, when speaking about the perception of the sector, the questions commonly raised relate to credibility, trust and accountability. If those are the questions raised, then they are the ones we must address. If we respond to them coherently and openly, and engage with the concerns in good faith, we will only increase the legitimacy of our sector.

In all cases, these pillars are only as effective and impactful as the values behind their implementation, most importantly, openness and responsiveness.

If we do what the public, government and nation expect of our universities, and we approach issues on these fronts, we will once again be able to forcefully make the case of universities as the public good that they are and must be. But this has to be readily communicated and explained to the public, in a meaningful way, as adjudged by them. We need to recognise that the perception articulated by some has become the reality for many. We must stop talking in our echo chambers, within and beyond our campuses.

But how do we take the *Four Pillars* and apply them across our institutions, and in turn our sector? We need to consider this question across each of the fields that make up a modern Australian university.



Education, teaching and learning: our core responsibility

For the Australian public, education and teaching are our primary responsibility – end of debate.

Hence, rebuilding the faith, trust and licence of the public to our institutions begins here. Put simply, we must place more effort into talking about our education, ensuring it is high quality and that we hold it in the highest esteem. So long as we use language like teaching buyout, minimal standards, and the like, we will have a culture that does not reflect this. Going further, it may be argued that we will be championing a culture that works in opposition to our interests.

Leadership culture

Australian university leaders must be equally comfortable championing education as they are research. Shifting the culture to one of championing signals that, from messages mainly sent from Vice-Chancellors, senior leaders, and Chancellors, the hymn sheet needs to change. Almost all our current university leaders will have a postgraduate research qualification, but how many have a postgraduate education qualification?

As ready as many are to proclaim the latest increase in global rankings, we must have a generation at ease discussing and highlighting measures of educational culture, performance and experience. Where current measures are not up to snuff, we require a culture that champions the development of more fit-for-purpose measures and then speaks with ease about findings.

In the current culture, a fall in rankings is seen as a failure in need of immediate action. Continual poor performance in measures of student undergraduate experience, and perceived quality? Explained away. This is the issue; the priorities have been reversed. The corrosive impact of rankings, based mainly on past reputation, on what the broader community values cannot be ignored- all the major rankings are effectively measures of research and, by necessity, wealth. The public knows this and feels disconnected from it.

Our environment: a safe place where ideas and issues are debated and challenged, not shirked

Our universities must be safe places for our student community. That is not up for debate. But what does safe mean? Too often, that word, or similar phrases, are thrown around with little understanding of what they are being used to refer to. One person may see this as conceiving physical safety, while others extend the word far beyond such a premise.

Deakin proposes two simple, related propositions that, taken together, meet the needs of our communities and the expectations of wider society:

1. Our universities must be places where students feel they can undertake a high-quality education, one valuable to them, enabling growth in their lives, with confidence, physical and psychological safety, and respect.
2. That education must be challenging intellectually; it will make students consider their beliefs and conceptions, and at times will be uncomfortable – exploring new knowledge, ideas, and perspectives. It will treat them as adults capable of complex, conflicting arguments, thoughts, and debates. At all times, it is the ideas and issues being critiqued and debated, not the person, and done with intellectual and academic intent, marked by respect for one's ability to mount a cogent case and argument.

Paraphrasing Kerr, we must make students ready for challenging ideas rather than making challenging ideas safe for students.

If we are to have the belief of the broader society and nation, we cannot be viewed as institutions where 'dangerous ideas', to use the common parlance, are off the table because they are politically uncomfortable. As readily as our personal political or philosophical views cannot interfere with academic research (see below), they cannot inform our approach to undergraduate education.

Helpfully, we have a good basis to build from on this issue. Thirty-eight per cent of the public believe we are strong at promoting freedom of speech. The worry is that more than half the population aren't sure or convinced; they don't necessarily think the opposite, but it isn't an endorsement by any stretch.

At the heart of Kerr's phrase is the point that a university education equips a student with the skills of how to learn, how to analyse, and how to think – never what to think. Such a value must never be up for debate; anything less is infantilisation of our students. Teachers are not activists for a cause, and students are not recruits for a campaign. Instead, we are proponents of academia's noblest value: the pursuit of knowledge and understanding via critique, interrogation and consideration.

In turn, however, by centring such an approach, we also push back against those who are critical of us with ill intent, who criticise us as politicised, but do so from an ideologically blinkered position. Conflict of ideas is good; it will be uncomfortable, and we must protect it.

Proactive debates and dangerous ideas

Taking a provocative stand, one could argue that it is not merely the role but the responsibility of universities not just to foster but actively facilitate these so-called 'dangerous' discussions.

Our sector is often criticised for shying away from debates on emotionally charged or overly controversial issues, particularly those in which we are uncomfortable. The risk of reputational damage and the conflicting demands from activist sets is real. But if we don't engage in those difficult issues and debates, what moral platform will we have to demand more from our leaders and our civic society?

In a university setting, if an issue is approached with intellectual integrity, in line with the two standards above, is any issue off the table? These standards will be the filtering tools we need, removing those with hateful or anti-intellectual agendas. The requirement for intellectual integrity, a foundation of reason and evidence, along with respect, if not waffling ideas of politeness, etc, is a strong protection. Discomfort is not only natural; in the realm of ideas, it is the mark of health.

Education quality with equity

As the core tenet of our responsibilities – in the view of the broader community – the quality of undergraduate education, particularly domestic undergraduate education, must be prioritised. We need to be comfortable in being self-critical of practices, where improvements can be made, we should be open and honest in how these are being carried out, and most of all, we must leverage that reformed leadership culture to demonstrate our improvements and quality.

Excellence of experience

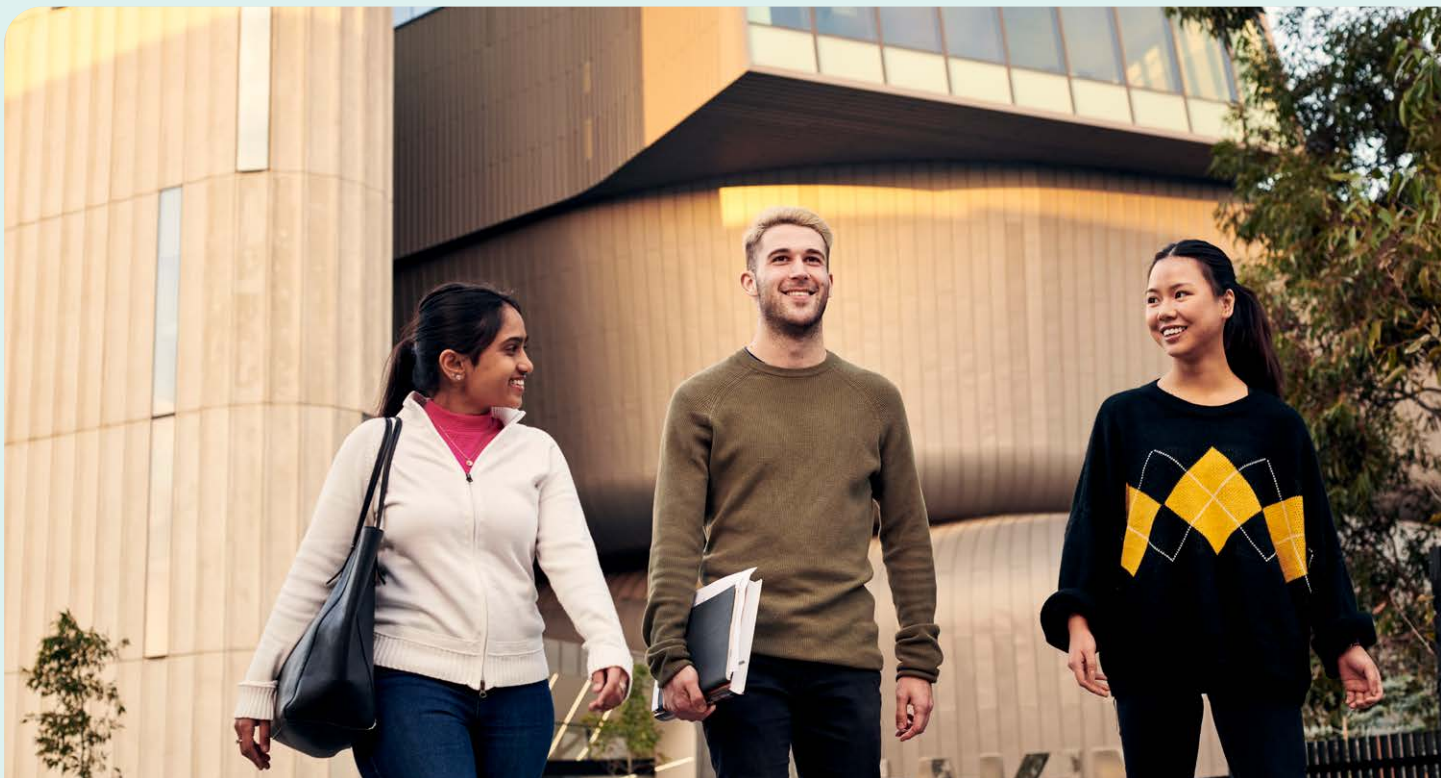
Excellence is delivering the optimal outcomes for students; providing an environment where they can utilise tools and systems to realise potential and demonstrate achievements from their sustained work.

It speaks directly to ensuring our students can trust that if they come to university in Australia, they will have a consistently high-quality experience. Skilled teachers will teach them in a manner that engages their intellect and challenges their capabilities and reasoning. In such a manner, it will be beyond question that it is a worthwhile, valuable experience and use of time.

It is true that in such an environment, excellence will clearly look and function differently across different settings, communities, and educational contexts. This must be recognised within the system's drivers. However, across these environments and based on such drivers, it is excellence that is delivered, and accountability must be welcomed as a marker of such a commitment.

Where student surveys point to underwhelming undergraduate experiences, this reinforces that earlier negative conception. In turn, those with agendas opposed to universities – whether cultural, economic, or ideological – have fertile ground. Likewise, when complaints are raised about cost-cutting that impacts the core educational experience, such as the use of out-of-date materials, we must meaningfully engage and address these concerns. Further, as the requirements of modern degrees and changes to job opportunities drive students towards degrees increasingly combining the theoretical and the practical, the need for best-in-class materials and an experience that engages effectively only increases. It may even be argued that we must extend this to engage in not just learning, but the very social connections and fabrics students increasingly require, but ever increasingly struggle to foster themselves. This will be a cultural challenge, one that demands the buy-in and cooperation of our entire workforce. It is also mission critical.

Ultimately, the quality of education and the quality of student experience are inseparable – they are interrelated in any prioritisation of excellence, which in turn informs the nation's demands on our practices, institutions, and the sector.



Excellence as the watchword of equity

Unfortunately, too often where our current system challenges itself to questions over quality, excellence and equity across the system, it does so based on mutually exclusive characteristics. Indeed, at times, there is a strenuous focus on avoiding matching the two. For example, defining excellence by a measure of a student's ATAR rather than considering their true underlying potential, while considering equity as nothing more than enrolment statistics, whether those students sink or swim.

This 'definition' of equity, which has too often been that adopted in practice, if not in principle, may hit a few superficial metrics, speaking more to the institution than the aspirations and needs of the students. Without excellence as the watchword of equity, along with meaningful measurements and systems that hold to account, we will have a system of neither equity nor excellence.

The statistics of debt without a degree, churn and dropout rates that exploded during the advent of the demand-driven system point to this problem. It set a trend that eroded the trust and licence of our sector. If we are not seen as trusted to prioritise quality education and support frameworks for Australian kids, on what grounds can we be trusted? Again, whether this is the reality or the perception is irrelevant – we must ensure that we do this and are being seen and understood to do this.

Of course, this is a blunt generalisation, rather than a careful reflexion of so much good work across the sector. But, again, we are fighting a state of negative perception and need to be responsive to that. Merely proclaiming 'nothing to see here' won't carry the day.

Equity: how well do we really understand and account for it?

Rather, reflecting the above paradigm for excellence, equity is the other key parameter, the second side of the coin. While much energy is spent arguing across the differing interpretations of equity, here we define equity as a post-secondary system in which students find clear, supported pathways that enable them to meet their potential, and match their determination in striving for their aspirations.

Equity in such a system must acknowledge that a student's starting position at 18 years old does not reflect their full potential, it is a measure of past performance, not what may be learned, mastered, and applied in a post-secondary environment when properly supported. This goes beyond enrolment metrics or recruitment approaches, to the systems, markers, and compliance systems that reward institutions for meaningful success.

But we must be even bolder and pose those questions that raise the possibility that we have failed to date, even with the best intentions. Do we truly grasp the meaning of supporting equity, or are we merely attempting to squeeze diverse students into an outdated educational and service paradigm? Arguably, we have designed approaches that still favour the traditional on-campus, school leaver; even institutions that have significant mature age and online cohorts, continue with service and teaching approaches that are linked to 9-5 and that are less responsive to the real-life needs of learners. Does this perpetuate a broader assumption that we still don't understand our students and their lives?

Do we truly grasp the meaning of supporting equity, or are we merely attempting to squeeze diverse students into an outdated educational and service paradigm?

This reveals the uncomfortable reality of the Australian higher education system, one driven towards homogeneity and sameness, despite needing to serve such a diverse array of cohorts. Even so, the 'traditional' system still serves the majority of students extremely well. However, for an equally large proportion, it is at best an adequate retrofit. If we aren't brave enough to speak about this, caring not for fear or favour, we cannot begin to evolve, reform, and ultimately serve the Australian public in a manner they trust.

Likewise, by balancing the dual objectives of true equity with an unwavering commitment to excellence, our sector will buttress its social licence. No matter a student's background, they will receive the highest quality education possible, measured against external benchmarking and compliance systems.

A word on academic standards

A major bugbear and criticism of the Australian university sector over recent decades has been the general and steady degradation of academic standards.

Two distinct streams have been raised. Firstly, the lower expectations and requirements placed upon international students, regarding the English language, and the prevalence of contract cheating. Such allegations abound in the public domain, as do the firsthand accounts of fellow students as well as tutors on casual contracts. Secondly, the decreasing requirements for work, pre-reading, and testing of domestic students, and now with additional questions over the intersection of original work and AI assistance.

Such reports are not mere speculation. A full third in Deakin's poll nominated combined concerns of quality and relevance as reasons against and barriers to a university education. That does not make it a fact that such standards are a problem, but it does highlight that it is widely believed to be.

The criticism is so well established that it is now generally accepted as fact. Even the most ardent supporters of our sector, who deny significant slippages in academic standards, must acknowledge that we have been painfully slow to respond to challenges to those standards. Contract cheating and AI are two key examples. Too often, it takes a regulator and a big stick to get us to act, and it shouldn't be this way.

This, in turn, undermines the authority with which we speak. In all cases where such charges have been made, university hierarchies have denied any such instances. Yet, the individuals making these allegations are members of our communities: the academics teaching courses, the casual workforce who claim pressure to grade more leniently and avoid failing students, and fellow students, often domestic, who point to clear examples of inadequate English. Likewise, long-term academics recall the gradual reduction in pre-reading and depth they once required – especially in the social sciences.

When those who criticise come from within our communities, their whispered reasons- such as grudges, alternative agendas, or a lack of understanding of academic standards — often seem relatively insubstantial. In this paper, we repeatedly emphasise that authenticity and clarity are core to social licence. Academic quality is no different; the readiness to not engage with the central charges of well-meaning and valued members of our communities and to prefer obfuscation or generic dismissal, only sustains a public narrative of declining standards. Just as excellence should be the watchword of equity, there can be no excellence without clear, fair, and high academic standards.

Our sector needs to be more comfortable with transparency concerning questions of quality, how we assess standards, and our rigorous pursuit of the highest academic benchmarks. If we require better standards across the sector, let us work together with stakeholders to develop them further. Likewise, in how we discuss such matters internally, transparency can only support our more noble cause.

Failing on the above will continue to undermine social licence and shortchange those we serve: our students and nation.

The value question again

Is it really worth attending university? Nearly a third of people don't believe it is, raising questions about quality, relevance, and more. Our sector must be forthright in accepting the challenge of questions about value directly. How does a university education help our students build a productive, secure, and profitable future? How can they trust that what we teach matches their needs? What external validations can we reference? For instance, what are industry saying, and how can we quantify the return on investment, including but not limited to, earning potential? These are some of the challenges to the value of a university education, demanding more than a marketing campaign. We can't be dismissive, flippant, or seek to wave away with a quick comment or social media message. We must bake in our answers, proof points, and demonstrations throughout the entire university experience.

Research: powering the knowledge economy and Australia's future innovation

The research profile of the Australian university sector is one of global relevance, identified as shouldering a heavier research and development burden than those of comparable systems in the OECD, according to the recent *Strategic Examination of Research and Development*.

By global measures, Australia's universities are not just the largest contributors to research driving innovation, but we are the overwhelming participants. Research is also the favourite topic of many leaders in our sector, who trumpet the latest this or that global ranking informed by research metrics.

However, reflecting our troubled social licence, our research activities have developed in an organic, bottom-up manner, speaking to the priorities and opportunities of individual institutions. In the race for global rankings, such a lens to consider research activity through has only been amplified.

The national interest – a guiding thematic

If we are to recapture the trust and faith of our Australian community, then we must consider how research may serve our wider stakeholders and our nation's priorities.

Australia is a global middle power; the world's 14th largest economy, underpinned by just the 54th largest population. Ours is an economy with a significant history, particularly since the 1980s, of overperforming in Gross Domestic Product (GDP), GDP per capita, and various other measures, compared to our population scale. A combination of raw mineral wealth, natural advantages in agriculture, and, for the last decades, the strength of a knowledge and innovation culture underpins this. But such overperformance also points to the constraints of the Australian research landscape – we do not possess the endless resources of global powers and must adapt in respect of this.

As such, where our research power, underpinning innovation, commercialisation, and often prosperity, has traditionally been an organic, ground-up development, we must now turn to a top-down consideration of the national interest. How can our research activities support the national interest and achieve outcomes that will benefit the communities we serve, as well as the people and country we are responsible for?

But a word of caution as well. Such national interest must not be read as unbridled service to government priorities or interests. This is not a political statement, nor does it conceptualise national interest solely through an economic lens. Rather, it acknowledges the obvious truth that our sector, as publicly funded and publicly responsible, should prioritise the national interest in our strategies. Often, this will mean focusing our research and innovation efforts on achieving specific outcomes. At other times, it will mean championing the unpopular ideas or researching the controversial questions to foster a well-informed public debate. Importantly, it affirms that the humanities and social sciences have a core role to play and must be promoted and protected, while we rightfully pursue STEM and future industries. Nonetheless, it directs our strategies towards areas where benefits extend beyond our own institutions and sectional concerns.

Research integrity

At the heart of our social licence is the concept of universities as fearless seekers of knowledge, immune and removed from political, ideological, or philosophical limitations. We must be places where the safety of an idea is never confused for a lack of discomfort, as ideas and knowledge are explored, critiqued, researched, and challenged.

We must be able to fearlessly challenge the current understanding of the world around us and explore these ideas without fear or favour. A significant segment of society may find this confronting; indeed, not everyone will agree on such a clear statement. But we must be able to explain and argue this without swaying- this is the heart of the university.

It is vital that, when considering our social licence, we do not let this principle be diluted. Many would argue that you should only explore things that you are comfortable with, rather than engaging in potentially challenging work that may disconcert many. However, such an approach betrays research integrity, and consequently, the trust and licence we need to hold. In a society divided along many lines, where social cohesion faces significant challenges, to bend this principle is to abandon our neutrality, our status as factually driven knowledge seekers, and to take sides.

Research integrity is critical- we must be able to demonstrate that we are doing the right thing. However, research integrity is not limited to a culture that approaches difficult issues and is comfortable drawing complex and discomforting conclusions. It must be about how we conduct the research process, as much as the research itself.

Our current system is often characterised by a focus on volume, exemplified by the 'publish or perish' academic pathway. As a sector, we have overlooked the apparent shortfalls and disservices of such a system. Instead of prioritising quantity, we must expect and champion quality – research of the highest grade, or the most meaningful interrogation, and potential impact. In turn, valuing quality means recognising excellence in how we develop our workforces: promotions, awards, commendations, and grants.

To call out one area – excellence in Business research is seen almost exclusively through the lens of publications in a rarified and arbitrary set of journals, rather than reflecting genuine impact on business beyond the walls of the university. We must be brave enough to break from some of these arbitrary and self-imposed shackles.

Activists v investigators

It has become a common refrain in criticism of universities: we have become places for activists to prove themselves correct and seek to further their agenda. Underlying such criticism is a dark notion of the facts being fit to the finding, not the finding flowing from the facts.

It has become a common refrain in criticism of universities: we have become places for activists to prove themselves correct and seek to further their agenda.

We readily push back against such ill-informed drivel. Too often, such criticism is another measure from those with a cultural dislike and agitation towards universities. Such a dislike may come from the right – tribes of leftist agitators – or the left – failing to conform to supposed righteousness.

But as readily and as forcefully as we push back against such narratives, we should remain open to the fact that some incidents have occurred, including those that have recently played out publicly. To bend the Karl Popper tolerance paradox to this issue, to defend our sector successfully, we must be intolerant of any of our own whom would seek cover to commit these very sins. We have public examples of researchers saying they will not reference or acknowledge those they disagree with – this is the absolute antithesis of everything we should stand for.

What does this mean in practice?

We should encourage and reward our researchers for adopting an ethos where they design projects and experiments to prove their paradigms and positions wrong rather than just seeking confirmation. The former represents genuine exploration, while the latter a chronically flawed approach. This mindset should extend beyond the walls of our silos, promoting it within the wider community, not merely as a university exercise.

The honest broker

Our researchers must, to a greater extent, focus on being what Roger A. Pielke Jr described as "honest brokers", in his book *The Honest Broker: Making Sense of Science in Policy and Politics:* advocates for the outcomes of their work rather than as advocates for a position. That is when trust is earned, and credibility is gained.

We must recognise that in a liberal democracy, we have a space to engage in discussions and debates on the most pressing public policy challenges. We should never fear such a role, but equally, we must understand what our role is and how it intersects with other participants. Prime amongst such other participants are those elected to represent the people, the members of parliaments.

Our role must be to provide the best possible information that explains the strengths and gaps of our work. Where the evidence from our work is clear, let it be presented. Where questions remain or understanding is limited, these should also be acknowledged, along with a discussion on how to interpret the impacts. This doesn't mean that academics shouldn't contribute to policy through proposals, but we must recognise our role and how to be effective and trusted.

That result of failing to approach the public policy process from this starting point is too often seen. Usually, when policymakers adopt a position or policy with which our sector disagrees, whether at the institutional level or among individual academics, that outcome is dismissed by claiming it ignores the evidence. However, such criticism proposes that public policy is merely an outcome of the academic process. In a democracy, it is not. As disappointing or uncomfortable as this may be for many in the academic community, policy in a democracy is the balancing of various factors towards available options. It accounts for the interests of the community as a whole, a community that often finds itself in contrast or opposition depending on how it is grouped or divided.

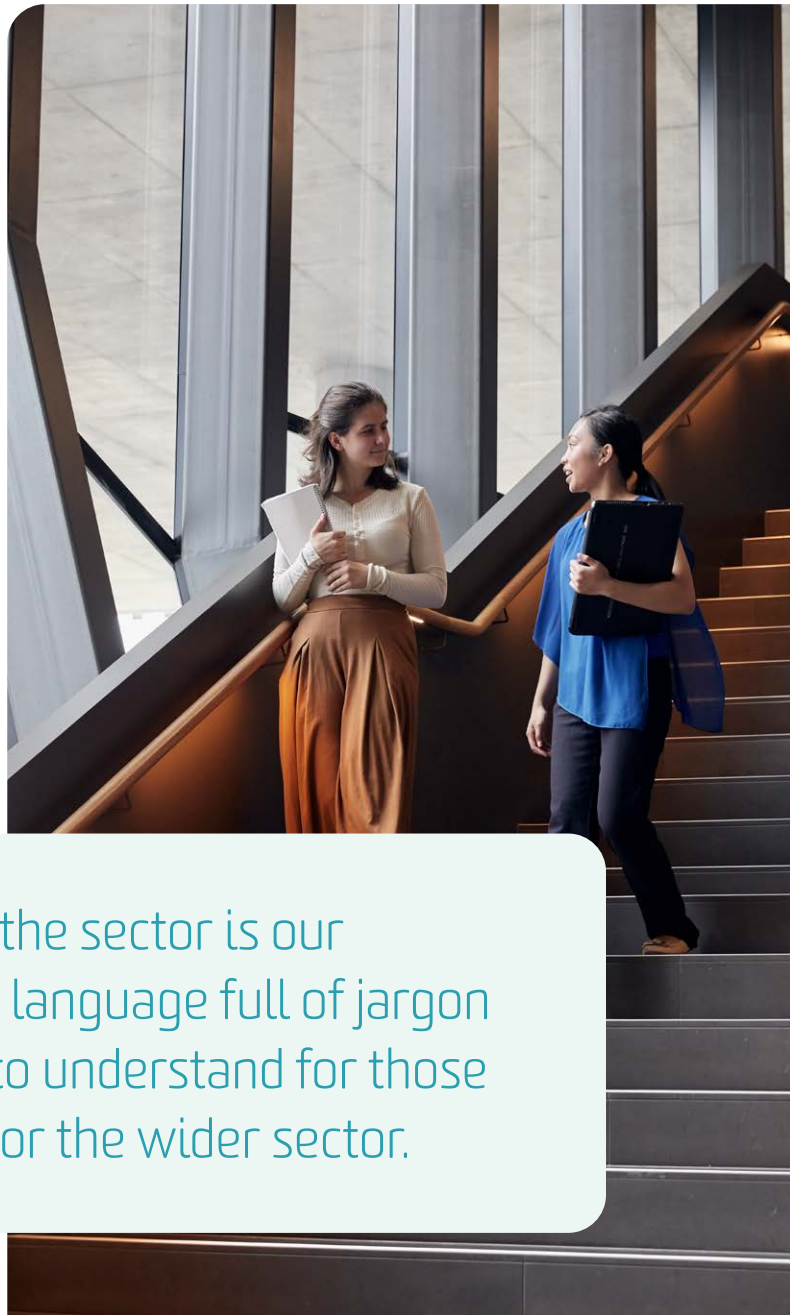
Put simply, there is far more to policy than science or academic findings.

Nevertheless, we strongly believe that the best way for the university sector to develop genuinely evidence-informed policy is to be the honest broker. Such honesty will ultimately lead to better policy outcomes. As mentioned earlier, this approach might come as a cultural shock to some, causing short-term discomfort and frustration. However, in the medium to long term, it will deliver significant rewards. The authors have lost track of how often we have collectively groaned in frustration at reports of scientific advances that are too ready to draw sweeping policy conclusions, fail to acknowledge the need for further work, and then act as judges if policymakers do not follow them.

How we communicate

A constant bugbear for many in the sector is our tendency to communicate using language full of jargon and technical terms, often hard to understand for those outside specific academic fields or the wider sector. At its worst, work appears written to be difficult to understand, purposefully dense, as if to prove intelligence. No matter the reason, we are undermining ourselves if our language and communication create a barrier between us and the broader public.

Thankfully, the solution is straightforward, but its simplicity will make an important contribution to our social licence. When we communicate with each other and those outside the university, we must use clear and transparent language. Language that is understood beyond the university walls is essential for better understanding and broader engagement with our findings and ideas. We need to stop signalling academic credibility by using vocabulary that only members of the academic tribe can decipher. Being easily understood is a powerful way to engage the bigger issues, the opposite acts as a barrier.



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The operations of a university

Taking cues from media commentary to gauge public perception, then a clear theme emerges: issues, perceived and real, with how we operate.

A significant portion of the issues raised publicly and politically highlight core operational problems rather than the crucial education and research concerns mentioned earlier. Even more so, our political leaders, stakeholders, segments of the media, and the public are explicitly linking their dissatisfaction with our operations to a diminished social licence. Therefore, we must confront these issues head on, seek early "wins" in rebuilding our reputation, and in the short, medium, and long term, show our dedication to rebuilding social licence.

The model employer

Too often, debates about employment conditions, approaches, and practices focus only on what is legal. This not only causes unrest and dissatisfaction within our immediate communities but also signals a set of values that are at odds with the wider community's expectations. How we employ people is central, and we must recognise this.

As institutions in receipt of substantial public funding, our obligations run deep and include our employment practices. The increasingly casualised workforce on which too many have relied on is not suitable. Regardless of the reasons, as we discussed during Deakin's engagement with the Accord process, current casual workforce practices have strayed far from their original purpose, and this is to our sector.

Instead, we must work as institutions and an entire sector to meaningfully reduce casual labour. Safe, properly remunerated, and roles with good conditions must be the norm. This will require partnership with governments and unions, but we should welcome this to create pathways for positive change in employment. It will neither be easy nor comfortable for any of the three parties, but it is essential.

Similarly, it is incumbent that we simplify our enterprise agreements, protecting conditions and removing uncertainty for the security of staff, and the benefit of the institution. The wave of underpayments across the sector has tainted the views of many. Very few, if any, of the cases were the result of a deliberate decision to underpay, but how many cases were at least informed by unclear agreements, providing certainty for neither employee nor employer? This is not code for removing conditions, protections, or the like, quite the opposite. It shouldn't require a speciality in employment law to understand your rights, obligations, and conditions. We need simpler and clearer employment agreements.

Similarly, this clarity must extend to recognition, reward, and promotion frameworks that are clear, attainable, readily implementable, and sustainable. We should expect much from our staff, setting the highest standards for them. In turn, we must acknowledge and reward such achievements while ensuring we do not compromise the long-term future of our institutions.

Executive renumeration

Salaries for senior leaders in the sector have long been a lightning rod for public debate. It is an issue that routinely generates headlines and provokes commentary. However, our sector hardly helps itself in our need for secrecy, preferring to hide behind obscure reports and hard-to-interpret disclosures. Transparency is the answer – a genuinely simple solution.

How should transparency work regarding senior remuneration? By being transparent! Indeed, Deakin already does this with our Vice-Chancellor's salary. Institutions must publish the full details and breakdown of remuneration packages for all senior staff. This is a key issue for the public; it cannot be understated, and we must explain why we pay what we do.

Furthermore, the recent recommendation for the salaries of Vice-Chancellors to be determined by the Commonwealth Renumeration Tribunal is a positive move towards transparency and accountability, and one we strongly support.

A perception of waste

Give the people what they want, as the saying goes – William Randolph Hearst famously stated: "you furnish the pictures, and I'll furnish the war." Media must report issues of interest to consumers if they are to stay commercially viable. For our sector, a constant focus of media reporting is on the perception of waste: consultants, costly travel, bloated marketing campaigns, sponsorships, and lavish events – all spending that is far removed from our core responsibilities and value to the public and the nation.

Each item, in many cases, may be defended. While consultancy spend, in particular, is at rightly concerning levels across a sector that possesses far more expertise than any overpriced and fleet-footed consultancy can hope to. However, it is not the perceived waste in isolation that erodes our case and trust. Instead, it is the comparison of such spending with ongoing, quite public, reductions in academic staff numbers, increased casual staffing, and actions that appear to undermine the core quality and standards we uphold.

The solution here is more nuanced. Each institution must consider its unique circumstances. However, we should all broaden our view of the environment in which such expenditure happens – and focus on what we genuinely value: education, knowledge, teaching, research, and discovery. To borrow the wise words of the immortal Sir Humphrey: "Economy begins at home, Minister."

Hiding in plain sight: the maddening obscuration obsession

Crisis communication experts have a long-standing, well-developed guide on how to navigate and communicate during the most challenging times. At its heart is a mantra of being accessible, delivering a clear message, and not hiding. As with many aspects of social licence, clarity is crucial.

As a sector, we must learn the same lesson: admit mistakes and stop hiding behind legal speak. Especially when it's most painful, that's when we need to be brave. The heat is coming, and it needs to be copped. The public and our political partners and leaders have what may be colloquially well-defined 'bullshit' detectors. Why do we think our legal jargon can slip past them unnoticed?

We need leaders who show humility, can communicate beyond their campuses, and demonstrate an understanding of life beyond the University. Many are already doing this exceptionally well- let's celebrate them and use them as examples. As the well-known political saying goes: "If you muck up, fess up. Only then can we fix it."

Oversight with clarity - governance

It is impossible to discuss our operations and how they relate to rebuilding our social licence without mentioning our governance models.

As is well known in the Australian landscape, overall responsibility rests with the Council, especially in terms of strategy, direction, and similar areas. Therefore, for our sector, which faces challenges in the broader perception, University Councils must be prepared to accept responsibility and handle tough feedback.

In short, governance arrangements must be clearly articulated, fit for purpose, and understandable, including to the internal communities of the institutions. The skills mix recruited, the minutes of discussions, the metrics used to assess the performance of Council members, and meaningful measures to hold them accountable for decisions, outcomes, and overall performance should all be considered. This process should be supported by regular external reviews of effectiveness, and where issues are identified, clear change programmes should be implemented.

It is worth highlighting the progress made and where good work has occurred. The University Chancellors Committee, under its current and recent former leadership, has advanced the setting of standards and expectations centrally, along with providing guides for a more modern approach to governance. These are notable and should be viewed as a positive step.

As public benefit institutions, we must uphold the highest standards of governance ourselves, rather than depend on external parties to do so. We need to listen to the voices of those we serve and those we represent and genuinely consider their feedback. This may be uncomfortable, but just as we expect our staff and students to be receptive to feedback and critique through well-established and accessible channels, this expectation must also apply at the highest levels.

Beyond institutions to a healthy sector

Much of the discussion above includes various changes and lessons for the sector, while calling for action by individual institutions. But what about cross-sector needs?

First and foremost, we all need to advocate for our own institutions; this is only natural. But we must also think bigger and be champions for the entire sector. We should temper what may be in our own interest if that undermines broader social licence. The reality is that the actions of a few have often shaped how we are perceived, and the time has come for the wider sector to call out this behaviour and, clearly, stand against it.

Focus on the big issues; no more what about me

Sector funding

The community and politicians see universities as sounding like a broken record. As long as the belief that all we do when visiting Canberra is to ask for funding persists, we are likely to fail in our mission. We receive considerable funding, focus on our own priorities, and appear to believe the answer to every issue is 'more, more, more.' This runs counter to effective strategy.

Instead, by strengthening our social licence, support will naturally follow. This includes funding arrangements and levels. Now is the time to break the cycle and look ahead to a future where our strongest advocates are beyond our campuses – not driven by dollar signs and institutional bubbles.

International education

There is a significant social and economic benefit for Australia from our engagement with the global community, including through international education. Bringing in their skills and contributions enriches our community, while international graduates carry cherished memories and a positive view of Australia worldwide. As a sector, we have a legitimate interest in the debate over international education and in addressing many misconceptions.

However, we have shot ourselves in the foot through our own actions; prioritising perceived self-interest over sound national policy, and too often accepting misconceptions that support our position, while presenting a condescending attitude towards those we oppose.

Rather than working within established immigration policies, we speak as though we have the right to create them for our own purposes. Rather than viewing international education as part of a broader mix with domestic education and assessing at what point the benefit to national and social interests diminishes or might even cause harm to the domestic education experience, too many have pursued uninterrupted growth. We continue to portray international education merely as a source of trade income, ignoring extensive evidence that many international students finance their studies through work, often illegally, in Australia, which involves the circulation of currency within the system.

Quality of outcomes for international students

The social and moral responsibility of universities in international education must also include the accountability we have towards our international students.

The quality of the degree offered; how we structure the students' educational experience in the classroom and within the broader university community; and the true value of such qualifications for future opportunities are all areas where our sector is open to legitimate criticism. Speaking bluntly, too many in our sector have not prioritised the quality of these degrees, the calibre of the partners involved in delivery, and the wider social and intellectual experience of students. The CBD office tower 'proto-campuses', with offerings solely for international students, run entirely by so-called 'education partners', and completely disconnected from the institution's broader campus profile and student body – often situated in different cities and states- exemplify this issue. Hard questions must be asked about the true utility of these initiatives from a moral and social responsibility perspective.

As an institution, Deakin is proud of our international education; it is a mutual partnership with the world. We have invested in quality, allocating funds to ensure our systems are best practice. Likewise, we intentionally pursued a level of international enrolments in line with national interest, not the pursuit of ever-increasing revenue. We are not perfect, nor are we alone in this, but unless there is consistent honesty within our sector, it will continue to undermine our good work and reputation.

Universities are but one in the post-secondary system

The strong focus on university at all costs for school leavers has been, and still is, a mistake. It has damaged the respect for other pathways, affected the national labour force needs, and left many with substantial debts for an education that did not match their future skills and opportunities. This wasn't our policy, but as a sector, we were strong supporters of it.

Even now, as respect for vocational and mixed post-secondary education has somewhat regained traction, the often-quoted figures regarding the percentages needed to complete a university qualification should be viewed with some scepticism. What does not warrant such scepticism, however, but rather calls for our sector's full backing, is the promotion of partnerships across post-secondary opportunities and alternative pathways.

If the dream remains a more integrated post-secondary system, a dream from which significant benefits may flow, then our sector must be bold in supporting not just the ambition, but the practical work to realise it. For some universities, such a system would be an immediate, natural fit. For others, it remains more distant. But as a national priority and opportunity, we should support what the nation needs.

Actions and recommendations

Diagnosing the core issues of our sector's social licence dilemma isn't sufficient; concrete actions must follow.

Essentially, this paper calls for greater focus. Using honesty and clarity, we seek to prompt, indeed shock, our sector into meaningful action. Its goal is to spark open, transparent conversations and encourage the hard work necessary. It isn't about providing all the answers; that responsibility lies with the collective, both within and outside our sector.

Therefore, as the first and primary recommendation of this paper, our work should serve, and is intended to serve, as a direct challenge to the newly formed Australian Tertiary Education Commission (ATEC):

A focus on social licence should, and must, be part of the upcoming compacts agenda with every institution. ATEC must take leadership, in collaboration with our sector, to place these matters at the heart of compact agreements – beyond the fine print of funding and course caps.

1. It would be easy to suggest some form of 'Annual University Social License Scorecard' or a similar bloated regulatory tool; our sector already has many of these. And they often fail to deliver, instead becoming bureaucratic nightmares of basic reporting on even simpler questions. We must aim higher than that, which is why we support ATEC and compacts.

That collaboration with ATEC can then proceed alongside other efforts, with the sector itself leading the work. To kick off these efforts, we outline our core actions, those recommendations that form the foundation of the sector's initiative to reshape perceptions and build a strong social licence from which our sector can thrive.

1. **Cultural:**
    a. **A sector united to change:** unless our sector recognises that our social licence from the community is not guaranteed, acknowledges the existence of a problem, and commits to addressing it collaboratively and in a coordinated way, we will keep struggling with our social licence. A head-in-the-sand mentality is unacceptable, and sector leaders must make this clear both within our sectoral walls and in our external communications and engagement.
    b. **The national interest is our guiding light:** it is all too easy for sectional or institutional interests to take precedence. But we are institutions founded for the public good and receive substantial public funding. We must set aside narrow, sectional priorities and publicly commit to advancing the nation's priorities, interests, and opportunities. This does not mean serving the government of the day – in fact, dissent is often in the national interest for a healthy political culture. But it does mean focusing on how we can serve and contribute, rather than just what we prefer to value.
    c. **A renewed leadership culture:** Sectoral leaders must establish a new culture that prioritises a core focus on education, teaching, and learning; communicating this focus widely and mentoring the next generation of leaders to embrace this culture. Such a culture is outward-looking, championing how we serve our communities and their fundamental experiences with us.
    d. **Sector peak bodies must be involved in creating the framework for such cultural change:** mentorship programmes, guidelines, and standards that reflect this cultural shift.

2. **Standards, excellence, and ideas:**
    a. **A safe pace for uncomfortable debate:** sectoral policies, standards, and guidelines –embedded in all institutions – that position us as leaders in the physical and psychological safety of our students. The same standards and policies should apply to the intellectual exploration of ideas and issues, championing the uncomfortable rather than making ideas safe for students. These standards reaffirm our role as places of discussion, debate, and disagreement, free from political or philosophical restrictions.
    b. **Championing quality:** whether in core education and teaching or research activities, our sector must clearly commit to quality, communicate this clearly, and be responsive to criticism. This involves welcoming meaningful regulatory approaches and measures of our activities. Likewise, our approach is one of proactive critique, not relying on others to identify our mistakes, but always seeking improvements that demonstrate quality: for our students, our staff, our communities, and our impact on the nation.

3. **An open and transparent approach:**
    a. **Communications grounded in clarity, honesty, and accountability:** whether in the decisions made by our governing bodies, accounting for changes and reprioritisations, or in response to tough times, how we communicate matters. And if we want to rebuild social licence, we can no longer hide behind legalese, weasel words, or jargon. Clarity, responsibility, and authentic, accessible communication are non-negotiable.

This is the clarion call of the work the sector must do together. It needs more voices, discussion, and planning to identify the changes and actions we should undertake. These six are a starting point, but just that, the beginning: talking the talk, but even more importantly, walking the walk.

Many of these challenges to our social licence require not just institutional changes but sector-wide recognition. Without that initial step and ongoing effort, we cannot hope to earn and maintain the trust and license of the nation.

Concluding remarks

Our sector holds a privileged position. Every year, thousands of new students step onto a campus for the first time, and equally thousands don the cap, receive their degree, and look towards a working life in an industry shaped by the research and innovation agenda we pursue. It is a privilege to play this role in the lives of many, a role that is in the service of our nation.

Yet, from the constant drone for more money, to a focus on our own interests instead of addressing national priorities, and a leadership culture that needs to be braver and bolder, it is relatively straightforward to provide the diagnosis. Indeed, as authors, we are left confused and concerned that for too many voices in influential positions across our sector, such a diagnosis has taken until now. But it has, and here it is.

Still, if that is the diagnosis, what is the treatment? We don't pretend that is nearly as straightforward, nor as easily expressed in words rather than actions. Just as we readily acknowledge the previous content is not the full extent of issues, factors, and what fuels the problem, many a competing PhD thesis could be completed undertaking such analysis, critique, and findings- we also agree that our responses are a starting point. More work needs to be done, and indeed we have called for it here.

But the sector must begin this work. We need to start with honesty: the values of openness, accountability, and responsibility aren't just empty words – if they are treated as such, the work becomes meaningless. These values underpin every critique and recommendation above and must be central to our sector's efforts.

As such, we hope this text plays a role in kickstarting the critical task. Indeed, success will be when this piece becomes seen as redundant in years to come, a historical record rather than a living testament to issues that have been avoided. Returning to Kerr to conclude, his prescient observation remains as relevant today as it was in 1963: as universities, we must have clarity of our role, what the community demands of us, and how to serve.

Rightfully, we should be proud of what we achieve each day. As institutions and a sector, we compete globally, and Australia benefits. Yet, we only do these things and have such impact with the permission and goodwill of the public. We can and must underpin our legitimacy in being critical to Australia's future through a clear commitment to credibility, trust, and accountability.

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