

Submission to the Department of Education on:

The Australian Universities Accord Terms of Reference consultation  
Review of Australia's Higher Education System

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The Design Institute of Australia is the peak professional association for designers in Australia, representing professionals in all design disciplines for nearly seventy years. Our policy and advocacy priorities reflect the environment designers are operating in, for example embedding circular economy principles and protecting intellectual property. We are headquartered in Melbourne, with active branches in each state and territory and representation on international design bodies.

Australia has a vibrant and engaged design community that has achieved international recognition for its creativity in a broad range of fields.

The design industry is also important to our economy. IP Australia estimates that the contribution to Australia's GDP of design-related industries and workers was approximately \$67.5 billion per annum by 2018, or more than 3.5% of GDP – equivalent to the size of the construction industry.

The DIA vision for design education in Australia is for a diverse and innovative offering of a choice of courses varying in focus and curriculum, a range of teaching and learning approaches, varied research orientations and distinct graduate outcomes.

The top priorities for the Design Institute of Australia (DIA) out of the identified areas for review are:

- Meeting Australia's knowledge and skills needs, now and in the future
- Access and opportunity
- Delivering new knowledge, innovation and capability

### **Meeting Australia's knowledge and skills needs, now and in the future**

Over the past several decades the minimum qualification for design roles has shifted from diploma level vocational education to university degrees, with some roles requiring graduate level qualifications. Designers are working in fields with more complexity and

better regulation, so the skills gained through a greater focus on education rather than training equip graduates to adapt and develop throughout their careers.

An emerging trend in higher education is for design to be taught as a foundation practise, as distinct from the specific disciplines such as graphic design, industrial design or interior design. This is particularly the case for new and emerging fields such as service design. This approach mirrors developments in the sector where some designers are applying their skills to areas outside the field they graduated in. The university sector will need to reckon with the tension inherent in moving away from specialisation into more future focused learning with the need to produce job ready graduates. Many areas of the design sector are regulated to protect consumers from a range of potential harms, including physical harm from unsafe products or materials. Inadequate knowledge of the standards framework can have real consequences. The relationship between higher and vocational education could be repositioned to address issues such as this, with design students enrolling in VET qualifications after they have completed their university studies for example. Another approach would be for university student funding models to be extended to microcredential offerings. Policy settings should also support those universities that choose to shift to a model of foundation studies paired with later specialisation.

### **Access and opportunity**

Design is defined as a human-centred practice. Its creative process is distinguished from the fine arts by being always built around the user and their needs. Therefore the diversity (or lack thereof) of designers is a crucial issue not solely for the sector but for the broader community.

The DIA strongly supports measures to aid access to design education through a range of pathways and flexible study options, along with expanded opportunities for postgraduate study, professional development and lifelong learning. Policy and funding settings for universities and vocational education institutions should support the aspirations of a diversity of emerging designers and produce sufficient graduates to equip Australia with the breadth of design skills necessary for a prosperous and sustainable future.

Access and opportunity measures should not be restricted to supporting school leavers. Mid-career workers are an important cohort whose industry experience not only increases their own value in the labour market once they graduate, but also enhances the learning of their classmates.

Measures that offer tailored assistance such as the Teach for Australia and Nexus programs are essential to allow experienced workers to access higher education. These programs in particular are an important means of addressing the national design teacher shortage. For this cohort, adding incentives such as fee waivers would be important to ameliorate some of the financial pressures of a mid-career change. A pathway where prospective teachers could continue to practice design would also be attractive.

Strategies such as flexible intake and course loads, financial assistance and matching services to connect students to workplaces could be extended to address other known industry shortages. This could benefit those wanting to move into new or emerging design fields and ensure that these workers are adequately prepared with a quality education.

The mature student cohort is likely to increasingly seek learning opportunities that are alternatives to degrees such as microcredentials that can be selected to fit their time, budget and career priorities. For some this will become a pathway to a degree or graduate study.

### **Delivering new knowledge, innovation and capability**

Higher education funding reform needs to be considered within the context of tax, industry policy and employment settings. For example, the R&D tax incentive should allow industry to make contributions to universities for both specific research projects and to support the work of a centre generally. A business might choose to contribute funds, knowledge or materials to a centre whose program broadly aligns with their industry. That relationship would then be in place for formal partnership grant applications or scholarships. Many of these relationships already exist but modifying the R&D tax incentive would facilitate more businesses making commitments.

Modernisation of intellectual property protections available in Australia also needs to be vigorously pursued by IP Australia to enable more successful commercialisation.

Beyond existing measures such as joint programs or industry scholarships, universities should be encouraged to make greater use of expertise within relevant industries. Insight into contemporary problems and regulatory and consumer trends shaping future markets and lifestyles could benefit both teaching and research commercialization. Bodies such as the DIA also have connections with major centres of design throughout the world.

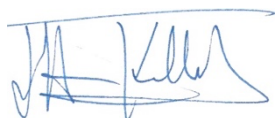
However, it needs to be easier for industry to find connections into universities.

The National Priorities Industry Linkage Fund could deepen its impact by including specialist teacher training and industry placements to the mix of partnership activities.

Industry partners could be invited to explore the specialist equipment held in university labs, and provide assessment of experimental tools and materials.

Funding to universities needs to more accurately reflect the cost of these kinds of engagement activities, including in preparatory activities such as grant writing, and recognise the value of these steps as underpinnings of commercialisation, even where there is a lack of success.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment.



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<sup>i</sup> Falk, M. R., Campbell, M. et al. 2020. Design's Role in the Australian Economy. IP Australia, Canberra