



The vision set out in the Unis Accord needs input from industry

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The final report from the Universities Accord expert panel is clear-sighted about both the challenges and the enormous opportunities Australia's tertiary education system presents. The report sets out a vision for a bigger, better, fairer higher education sector and a path towards a more integrated tertiary education system.

The Albanese government has put its focus squarely on knowledge, skills and capabilities as a key driver of our continued success and growth as a nation.

Most people agree, now, more than ever, we need a tertiary education system that can rise to the constantly evolving challenge of generating new knowledge, sparking innovation and developing the thinkers and nation builders of the future.

But most also agree we have some work to do to get there.

The accord panel proposes significant expansion of the system: going deeper, by reaching traditionally under-represented groups of students, and wider, by better supporting provision across regional Australia and strengthening links with industry and governments. It has a plan to put funding on a fairer and more stable footing and to create a new governance structure to keep a clear line of sight (and dollars) between the "big picture" vision and the diverse group of universities and other providers charged with delivering it.

There is much to commend. But, to achieve this vision, policymakers and system leaders will need to keep looking outward and upward – not inward.

Whatever shape the system takes, whoever pays and wherever the students come from, there is one constant – the rapidly evolving skills needs of the economy must be front and centre.

A tertiary qualification can be a ticket to opportunity, enabling a more substantial contribution to society through the application of higher levels of knowledge or skills. This can have benefits for individuals, enterprises and the economy overall.

Issuing more tickets means more Australians, more young people and those from disadvantaged backgrounds or regional areas have a chance to be part of this story.

But, as in any transport network around the world, for the system to function well that ticket must mean something, retain its value and, most important, take you somewhere, efficiently and, hopefully, smoothly.

A transport network also must be well-managed, but that doesn't always mean slavishly following 10-year plans from head office.

There's no point investing in a line to a place no one wants to go, and changing demand may require interim solutions – like buses – to get people where they need to be fast.

Those taking a journey also need signposts and assistance to find their destination. If you turn up to the station and can't find your platform, if your train is too crowded to get on, or your ticket expires before you've finished your trip, the time and money you (and the system) have spent is wasted.

In the same way, the investment we make in students and the investment they make in themselves can be realised only if the knowledge, skills and capabilities they acquire through education and training are useful and valued, allowing them to get on board, to bolster, grow or perhaps even transform our economy.

As a nation, we ask students to line up and work hard for their ticket to opportunity. In doing so, they are essentially taking a leap of faith. They hope their study and effort will result in a ticket that delivers on its promise of taking them somewhere. They trust that governments, tertiary education providers and industry have worked together to make that happen for as many students as possible. We all want that.

But the fact is, none of the accord's vision will be realised unless there's a strong level of integration between the learning on offer and the opportunities to apply that learning across the economy. That happens only with an evidence-based, industry-aligned approach to policy and provision.

The accord panel recognises this, but our job now is to make sure it doesn't get lost in bureaucracy or implementation.

The proposed Australian Tertiary Education Commission must be outward-looking, industry-connected and agile in approach. It must look beyond institutions' interests to keep its eye on the prize – the productivity and prosperity opportunity tertiary education can bring for us all.

Similarly, Jobs and Skills Australia's evidence on the evolving skills needs of the economy should provide valuable and timely insights in steering the system into an unknown future. The relationship between JSA and system leadership should be direct and collaborative.

The point is, the leaders and decision-makers in the bigger, better, fairer system must be deeply connected to what's happening in the economy because no one wants to fund or buy a ticket to nowhere.