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**Higher Education Intellectual Ethos 1989-2024 Research Report:  
A Review of Australian Universities Accord Final Report Document  
(25 February 2024)**

**25 February 2024**

**Introduction (Review of Task)**

To review the Australian Universities Accord Final Report Document for specific university policy changes:

1. Recovery of thematic coursework once taught prior to the 1990s or the early 2000s in the humanities, specifically history, broad fields of philosophy, and “political studies” (not a reference to “political science”);
2. Recovery of thematic coursework once taught prior to the 1990s or the early 2000s in the social sciences, specifically education, philosophy of science, and sociology;
3. Whether course alternatives have been suggested as replacement to the forementioned fields;
4. Whether research work at the university will be formally recovered in the forementioned fields.

This is a qualitative study of the loss and gain promised in the Australian Universities Accord Final Report Document for the forementioned fields.

**Rationale for History**

In previous eras the promise made to students was, not merely that universities would impart the contents of higher education, but students would be acculturated with a knowledge of what higher education was, albeit the semantics of such knowledge would not necessarily lead to the virtues of higher education. Currently policies views higher education narrowly as an economic driver. The 20th century had been an unfortunate battle over abandoning its idealism for the “practical” need of the large corporate world.

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## **The Historical Picture 1989-2024**

Education policy makers and the general public have not caught up with the trend in higher education scholarship, and are still thinking in the outdated models of the academic discipline. If we take the last four decades as being the era of the fourth wave of philosophical skepticism, there have been previous academic schools of thought that shaped on modern/postmodern general theory, phenomenology, and on cultural pluralism. Higher education bureaucratic advisors and their political masters have never been educated in the high-level historiography, sociology, and educationalist theories. The rare exception would prove the ruling here of the generalisation.

It is necessary, to understand the history, to hold the process together across tertiary, secondary, and primary levels of education. Although the uneducated populist thinker will object, the dynamic is significantly top-down; however, the process does also have a feedback loop where local influences feedback the global discourse with local character added.

Since “the Dawkins revolution” (1989), course fields were lost in the curriculum, designated as unnecessary, and teaching staff were consolidated into teaching broader introductory courses. The counter-argument against the clear thought that such policies impacted negatively was the skills-shortage argument. A leaner and consolidated higher education would deliver a better workforce, knowledgeable in skills required. The argument, though, has not even convinced skills-oriented tertiary teachers. There is a strong objection to the lowering of education standards in effort to produce factory-type workers. The ideology of 1989-2023 has been produce students with narrower sets of skills which are required for entry into corporate world. The counter-argument is that corporations would take over “further education” required for economic output. This suits the aims of corporations but there is no evidence that it benefits society as a whole.

The only way to reverse this reductionism is adequate funding from (1) the State to the University for course fieldwork lost before the 1990s or early 2000s. The course fieldwork lost or diminished tended to be in the disciplines of history, sociology, philosophy, and education. Missing are coursework in local history, sociology and history of education, intellectual history and political philosophy, and the history of education and broader theories of education. Secondly, universities need the freedom to foster these (previously) missing subject areas in spite of market demand, to enable a flourishing cultured citizenship (going back in *basic conception* to Aristotle). Finally, the public need

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to be informed on the virtues in learning these (previously) missing subject areas. Cynicism towards these aims do not hold to the academic standards.

### **The Research in Brief.**

In the review the Australian Universities Accord Final Report Document for specific university policy changes:

1. It is very unlikely to be a recovery of thematic coursework once taught prior to the 1990s or the early 2000s in the humanities, specifically history, broad fields of philosophy, and “political studies” (not a reference to “political science”);
2. It is very unlikely to be a recovery of thematic coursework once taught prior to the 1990s or the early 2000s in the social sciences, specifically education, philosophy of science, and sociology;
3. There is a sketch of a policy for course alternatives as replacement to the forementioned fields;
4. Australian higher education policy continues, largely to undermine research work at the university, of the forementioned fields.

The qualitative study of the loss and gain promised in the Australian Universities Accord Final Report Document does not go well for the forementioned fields.

### **The Research Report**

The Australian Universities Accord Final Report Document does *one* good thing to the potential of returning or remedying (previously) missing fields: a funding for encouragement to postgraduate studies [p. 7, repeated p. 135].

Although the university freedom for (previously) missing specialist coursework is not mentioned nor encouraged, there is the welcomed push to enlarge the diversity of teaching “size, shape, purpose and location to meet national and place-based needs” [p. 15]. What that actually means, though, is uncertain. There is a reference to “not ‘mainstream’ first year courses” but design along the lines of “the specialist enabling teams who teach them and teaching staff in the relevant Colleges.” [p. 105] That is encouraging but incomplete in the semantics. The statement “37.f.ii” is most confusing; does it suggest that less-than-excellent researchers are employed because they have a

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better ‘teacher’ fit? Does that mean teaching will be less research-focused and more instructional? So, much for living up to research skills learning policy. To be fair, the Australian Universities Accord Final Report Document does address this issue in the Ph.D. education. [p. 178] There is a good argument of “portfolio, project and multi-part dissertation formats and revitalising HDR coursework offerings such as those offered in the United States”. However, to be creditable it would need employment of those industry and community players: brilliant researchers and brilliant teachers, the once belonging to the university school, that have ended up underemployed or even unemployed since they were judged, individually, not to measure up to a university colleague on a precise criterion of research or teaching. Young academics straight out of their university education do not have the life experience to deliver the industry knowledge and skills. The reason why universities do not gain the experienced staff members is the prejudice against the employment of older workers.

The (previously) missing fields are only mentioned instrumentally for STEM and Medical outcomes. Where the focus is: mathematics, (teacher) education, computing and librarianship, theology, dramatic arts, business, health and technology. The finding statement on funding is also confusing, being, at the same time, pointing out unfairness and yet frighteningly reductive without clear solutions for these missing or reductive fields:

Funding: Changes made to funding through the Job-ready Graduates package unfairly affected some students (particularly those studying humanities, human movement, society and culture, and communications) and reduced the amount of funding available to universities to deliver subjects that are critical to future jobs and innovation like science, engineering and mathematics. [p. 5]

The Australian Universities Accord Final Report Document makes not a single reference to sociology, nor philosophy. It rather makes unintelligent quip to “higher level subjects” curling-up to unintelligent scientism, with highly-limited references to mathematics and science (i.e. STEM, not even STEAM). The prejudicious reference is frequently repeated with the clear inference that the humanities and broader social science are *not higher-level subjects*. The gross prejudices of the writers are to be seen. It defies a clear understanding in the statement:

A review of this nature is, by necessity, tasked with looking long and critically at a subject to uncover its deficits and identify areas that would benefit from change. The findings contained in previous chapters provide an unblinkered assessment of

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the fault lines in Australia's systems of tertiary education and research. They should not be taken as an indictment of these systems, which generally are in good shape. [p. 269]

How can the higher education system be in good shape if there are missing fields and solutions to remedy the problem are thin? It is another case of the political class throwing the citizenship "a bone" in *persons* searching out a flourishing life.

### **The Extracts from the Document**

[p. 5] Funding: Changes made to funding through the Job-ready Graduates package unfairly affected some students (particularly those studying humanities, human movement, society and culture, and communications) and reduced the amount of funding available to universities to deliver subjects that are critical to future jobs and innovation like science, engineering and mathematics.

[p. 7, repeated p. 135] That to improve access to postgraduate coursework studies:

- the Australian Government increase the number of Commonwealth supported places available for postgraduate study in areas of national priority and skills shortages
- the Australian Tertiary Education Commission negotiate as part of mission-based compacts with universities that they prioritise Commonwealth supported postgraduate places over full-fee paying postgraduate places
- higher education providers charging high fees (above \$40,000 per Equivalent Full Time Student Load) for domestic full-fee postgraduate courses be required to re-invest a proportion of income earned back into scholarships and bursaries to support students from under-represented backgrounds to access these courses.

[p. 15] 37. That in its role as the steward, the Australian Tertiary Education Commission address the appropriate diversity of tertiary education providers of varying size, shape, purpose and location to meet national and place-based needs, including by:...

- f. considering revisions to the Provider Category Standards to:...
- ii. consider relaxing the current requirement to meet benchmark levels of research in at least 3 broad Fields of Education

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[p. 105] Enabling courses are not ‘mainstream’ first year courses. Rather, they are specifically designed between the specialist enabling teams who teach them and teaching staff in the relevant Colleges (faculties). This way, students learn essential subject matter, while simultaneously learning foundational concepts and skills for study. For example, a student interested in data science may take Information and Communication Technology, studying computational thinking, software applications and emerging technology in coursework, while simultaneously learning scaffolded skills in research, writing, teamwork and presentation, specially designed by enabling practitioners.

[p. 178] As part of reforming the structure and model of PhDs, the Review also encourages universities to innovate in both their PhD and their professional doctorate models. These innovations could include using portfolio, project and multi-part dissertation formats and revitalising HDR coursework offerings such as those offered in the United States. This would signal a shift away from the perception that PhD candidates simply provide academic firepower to a focus on the underlying education candidates receive from their degree, improving the knowledge and skillset for whatever career path they wish to pursue.

[p. 269] A review of this nature is, by necessity, tasked with looking long and critically at a subject to uncover its deficits and identify areas that would benefit from change. The findings contained in previous chapters provide an unblinkered assessment of the fault lines in Australia’s systems of tertiary education and research. They should not be taken as an indictment of these systems, which generally are in good shape.

## **Conclusions**

The challenge in correcting the views of the Australian Universities Accord Final Report Document is that the problems are what are missing; it is argument of negativity which in the social psychology of the country, fewer minds can grapple with the Document’s:

- no framing in sociology;
- no framing in philosophy; and
- no consideration of the historiography of higher education.

Missing is also the critique of how the idealistic or utopian valuing in the research-teaching nexus favours one part of the population against another part. According to the

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nexus policy, academics are employed to be researchers who excel in research and *equally* in teaching; and vice versa. What this means is that, over three decades, brilliant researchers and brilliant teachers have ended up underemployed or even unemployed since they were judged, individually, not to measure up to a colleague on a precise criterion of research or teaching. Rather than being efficient, the Australian higher education system has become the most inefficient in outcomes of broader humanities and social sciences.

### **Declaration**

I, Neville Douglas Buch, declare that this report is a fair and accurate description of the research process and findings obtained in relation to contracted work done on 25 February 2024



Here signed – Neville Buch.  
25 February 2024.