

# Transcript

## Session 2: Risks and opportunities – Equity in the post-Accord era

**SONAL SINGH:** So over to now Shamit, Kylie and Chris. So, we will first of all have Shamit Saggar, who is the Executive Director of the Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success at Curtin University. The session that Shamit is going to be talking about is going to be focused on risk and opportunities for equity in the post Accord era, what are some of the insights from an access perspective regarding this that can be taken into consideration. Over to you, Shamit, followed by Kylie, followed by Chris.

**PROF. SHAMIT SAGGAR:** Thank you very much, Sonal, and thank you for the invitation. Can I begin by pointing out that I'm joining you from Perth, Boorloo, on the west coast of Australia. This is the traditional land of the Noongar Whadjuk people. It is also land that was never ceded and it's my great honour to work with and collaborate leaders of those communities past, present and emerging.

So, just to clarify, so I'm heading up something called ACSES, Australian Centre for Student Equity and Success, and essentially it provides evidence and know how to help practitioners as well as university leaders to get further, faster on the equity programs, but also try to embed these. So, in shorthand, we call ourselves a kind of what works centre.

In this section we're going to be dealing with some of the sort of here and now and I'm just going to ground some of my comments in what came a moment ago and then just get into the nub of it and then sort of leave it to others to pick up some other points. So, I do follow really what Adi was saying I don't want to be too repetitive about this and also what Andrew was getting at, but also sort of the steering and the sort of tips that Maria was also suggesting.

I should also, before I go any further, just point out there's probably a slight constraint or full disclosure, ACSES, which I head up, is entirely paid for by the Feds, so it's not that we are at the end of a missive or a dictate about what we can say, but I'm always sensitive to people's perceptions on that.

Look, the big point is this, and if I can share this with the audience, which is that if you take an approach such as the one that we've got and we're working I think fairly closely in the course of last year and a half with the practitioners in Australia and increasingly with senior management in the 40 odd table A universities is that this is an example of working in a bipartisan way so that when the parties in any given political system, such as Australia, broadly agree on the direction of travel, then the question switches to

how, not what, and so we're a kind of how to get there and essentially if these programs could be and perhaps sometimes need to be more evidence based, a big coalition across the practitioners, the technocrats, that's us, the research community, but also senior management, then that's going to get you further is sort of the underlying philosophy.

But when that bipartisanship starts to sort of break down or there's some question marks around it, then of course you can see there's difficulty in sort of saying why don't we just get access to sort of help us and get EPHEA and others to sort of work with them and university Vice Chancellors there's basic first order questions about why we want a university sector the size we have and why we'd want to grow it, and I think Andrew was trying to get at this in his comments earlier on, so I'll come back to that.

Just to quickly recap, ACSES has three and now increasingly sort of a fourth leg. We've got lots and lots of things going in our research and policy portfolio. We've got research translation taking place, we've got the first-class cohort of fellows that have gone through and the new ones are now sharing their experiences and their know how.

In the trials and evaluation side of our work, which is quite novel and new in Australia, we now have got the fruits of the first full scale sort of trials coming through and we're sharing quite a lot of that know how not just with sort of trialists, but increasingly with the practitioners, but those of you who work with us will probably know more about that. And on the data side we've got a huge agenda around, you know, clearing up some of the ambiguities and difficulties with the data, but also harmonising and creating sort of a place where people can genuinely obtain strong comparative information.

And just in sort of hot news, and Adi mentioned this in passing, the Federal Government has rolled out what I consider to be a kind of big reset on disability in higher education and the organisation that I lead has got a significant part in that in terms of creating some capacity building in that area for the sector as a whole and specific groups to take advantage of.

But that's a sort of suite of activities you would expect a what works centre to be doing and it's great and insofar as there's an underlying baseline support, bipartisan and beyond, that makes a lot of sense, but what I'm going to get to, of course, suggests that that may be a bit of a sort of well, it's a questionable assumption is my point.

Let me just turn to the point about ATEC and the Accord. So my reading of all that, and Adi I think more than successfully summarised all the activities, at the mid year, which confusingly in Australia is the end of the calendar year, all those announcements put together plus the ones going on previously according to me, at least, represents a very significant down payment on the vision of the Accord. There's lots of activities and initiatives. Some of them are still in progress, but I would consider this to be, in my

experience, domestically, internationally quite a lot of progress that's been made in that period of time.

So the bit that's missing, of course, is ATEC and this is where you've got interparty division with the Opposition education spokeswoman going on the record saying that the Coalition will not implement that. Well, you heard that. I think that's a matter for party politicians to decide where the emphasis lies, but I've always made the point, and people have heard me say this before, that the ATEC thing is crucial for two reasons, and we may end up having another version of ATEC if it's not sort of formally legislated by the Coalition, for two reasons. One, it's very difficult to manage a higher education sector without an ATEC type body because you've got the states running the universities and their sort of underlying governance and legislative sort of base sits with the states. So the coordination is very, very difficult even though Federal Government pays for a very large slice of higher education through the Commonwealth support programs, but also for targeted hypothecated equity funding past as well as future one reason.

The other is that I think the universities have always themselves looked for some sort of buffer organisation, buffer body that could help that. So I think that's going to be quite difficult to have without an ATEC type body. I suspect that is sort of perhaps going to go on the backburner to come on the front burner, but that's just my sort of initial intake on that.

The key thing I think for ATEC is that to me it represents and I know Andrew has got a different view on this, but it represents a coherent link between on the one hand having managed growth and having equity elements baked into that, but also the missing link which we haven't talked about so far which is universities being legitimately held to account both for their growth ambitions, but also how that equity is part and parcel of that. That can be through hypothecated support for disadvantaged students, but it also can be through mainstream funding levers. I think the ATEC, though I don't want to speak for it, will be an ideal organisation to flesh out the coherence of that sort of three way sort of element, which I think will sit at the heart of these mission based compacts in the future where the details of that will matter.

Very quickly moving on, we're now entering into the election campaign. Andrew says it's not normally a big deal, but it's likely to have a disproportionately larger aspect of our federal election campaign this time around. There are some pocket book issues. There's the indexation of student debt, and so on, which I think will be picked up, there's the 20% point.

But I think in any case you can see across party lines there's significant support in Australia for those who are disadvantaged by virtue of geography, rural and regional students or would be students, but also the disability community, where anyone can see that there's larger proportions of students in universities, or hoping to go to

universities, who are reporting some form of prima facie disability. I don't think that's going to go away. I think government is going to be, as it were, on the hook to respond via universities with more intelligent, more nuanced ways of doing that. I think the announcements made recently by the Federal Government is again a good down payment.

But the Coalition I think is different in the sense that it probably takes beyond Andrew's point about a sort of transactional approach, I think it also takes a more consumerist approach. This is, I think, at the heart of their announcement of a universities performance index. I'm not entirely certain exactly what will go into that. But if we're interested in the sort of recruitment and retention rates of different universities, it's a very small leap from then to ask about the retention rates and success rates for those who are most disadvantaged, particularly where we can measure it with some degree of accuracy, and then it's a very small leap beyond that to say do the programs that are attached to those students, you know, the purpose of them is to live their performance, as it were, are they working and that comes back to the work that we've been doing alongside the practitioners and senior management. So I think it's more than transactional. I think it's a consumerist approach.

A quick footnote. Andrew made this point about that the minority government scenario of confidence and supply. Well, it may be a bit more than that. I agree with that point. Again, I think the Teals may well be interested in issues to do with equity and that kind of performance, but of course the Coalition sorry, the minority government itself may take a different form. I mean, it's not just given that there would be a supply and confidence type of arrangement, there may be more stable ways to build together a coalition along the lines of different coalitions that have been put together in the past.

I wrote a piece in The Conversation about a week ago that pointed out the very successful current Irish model, but also an historic recent historic British model which allowed both sides to have 100% of their sort of core issues and sort of, as it were, agree to disagree within a stable coalition. So it's something to be looked at. The past may not necessarily be a good guide to how we have coalitions and minorities in minority parties running Australia after this election.

That then leads me to a point about where student equity might be going in the future. These are influences, you can see where they would work out, you know, for more transactional and so on and so forth. I think there is a role for a technocratic approach, which we take. I think there will still be interest, quite a lot of interest, to see how universities are performing by themselves, but with the support of more evidenced programs and the innovation that can bring.

But I think there's a missing link here and I think this is where the Accord was sort of starting to get to and I think it's entirely open to any party in Australia to pick this up, which is to situate higher education reform, particularly expansion, across higher

education, but also tertiary, as it were, as being a classic economic supply side reform. We didn't see very much of this in the debate around the Accord. We saw a lot about what it means for universities and sort of students who want to go to university, but very little about what it means for Australia's future economic dynamism.

Many countries around the world are investing in their knowledge economy. Australia I find difficult to imagine would be exempt from that. It's not just more people going to university, but increasingly, as we want to get larger communities going, those traditionally disadvantaged and underserved, we'll have to think more creatively about how we make that happen.

So I think it's in the interests of Australia's future prosperity to sort of straighten out these issues and to try to create as broad a coalition as possible and I'm perfectly relaxed about whether that comes from the centre left or the centre right, as long as it is a broad tent that unifies us in terms of the importance of that because then the benefits flow not just to the disadvantaged students, though they are very high, but they flow to Australia as a whole and that's got quite a lot to do with the reasons why we expanded higher education to have a massive higher education system in the 70s and 80s onwards. So I think we perhaps need to go back to that.

The last word, and I will sort of give way to my colleagues in a moment, I'm going to end where sort of I started, which is that the sort of bipartisanship is clearly fraying and there are kind of legitimate and familiar ways in which it's fraying to do with Andrew getting at this point about the loss of confidence, and I totally agree with that. The problem is, as Maria said at the very beginning, there's been a sort of huge change in the atmosphere what was her words, she said something about we live in unpredictable times. Well, that's for sure.

The reason why we live in unpredictable times I'm now straying slightly into the area of the following speakers in the last session has to do with the populist revolt particularly in the United States. Now, the reason why that's important is because higher education has been weaponised. It's been weaponised for very specific reasons to do with the fact that those on the populist right, and right I put with a small R, have seen universities particularly as being sort of central targets and as part of an elite betrayal of ordinary Americans.

Now, take what you want of that. You can make up your own view. But sadly, universities have been drawn into that and you can see that not just in the assault, as it were, in the DEI program, which are in the foreground, but you can also see if you're observing this closely in the United States quite a lot of Republicans in Congress now going back to an agenda in the last Congress which is about starting to tax the endowments of top schools. It seems like an odd point in favour of student equity to talk about top rich schools, but then you examine the evidence about how they recycle a lot of that funding into equity programs, almost \$1 in \$2 is essentially recycled by

those top rich schools. The tax rates of the endowments are suspected to go up from just under 2% to close to around 20%. So watch that area.

And then lastly, if you particularly have been observing the position of Columbia University, you'll see the levers that are being used around research funding, academic governance, the specific programs, Middle Eastern programs, South Asian programs, and then disciplinary enforcement on campuses. Even the most casual observer can work out that this is a full-frontal assault on the higher education sector.

But this isn't about anything to do with student equity. This is to do with a betrayal of higher or the betrayal thesis that higher education is part of an elite betrayal and I think that weaponisation should be analysed and looked at very closely, if only because of the indirect effects it has in Australia and the chill effects.

I won't go on about that because I think others are better placed to talk about that. On that note, Sonal, I'll stop and ask Chris and Kylie to come in.

**SONAL SINGH:** Yes, Kylie from an EPHEA perspective as the EPHEA President, please?

**DR KYLIE AUSTIN:** Yes, look, I think I'm probably going to take a little bit of a more practice focused lens to Shamit. You know, in terms of what we've heard already today, you know, Andrew talked a lot about transactional policy and, you know, governments trying to get universities to do what they need them to do and equally, from a practitioner perspective, drawing on Maria's thinking, you know, what can we do as practitioners in an environment like that when the Government is using higher education policy as carrots and sticks to influence basically how our students are accessing and progressing through their higher education studies.

As someone who, you know, works with and leads, you know, teams that are really at the coalface working with students, I'm going to focus just some of my very brief comments because I want to give Chris the opportunity to talk around how we support students to, you know, progress with their higher education degrees once they gain access to university.

EPHEA has provided a lot of submissions around widening participation, support and subsequently we do have a new publication coming out around the accountability of universities and embedding EDI, which we'll share with you all in the coming weeks.

But in terms of support for students, look, I think we've come out in very strong favour of things like needs based funding because of the benefit that we think it will provide to students not just gaining access to university, which has been the key focus of policy over the last 10 to 15 years, but we have moral responsibilities, both as practitioners

and universities, to ensure that if students are accessing higher education, we have provided them with every opportunity to succeed.

I think there are some really great principles in the needs based funding which I'll quickly just touch on, but I think regardless of whether needs based funding is in or whether it's not in, depending on governments, I think these are principles, as practitioners, we should be strongly advocating for in our higher education institutions, ensuring that we're taking a support first lens to higher education participation.

So the first one is, look, I think one of the great things that we're seeing in the language around needs based funding is that it's driven by student need and we're seeing a lot of reasons why people don't stay or don't complete their university studies is due to stress, due to higher increase in mental ill health, and also we just completed a study with ACSES that 1 in 2 students are in financial distress and 1 in 4 students are experiencing food insecurity.

So I think we really need to acknowledge what it is that is preventing students from completing their university degrees and co design these solutions with students so that the student voice in implementing these policy agendas is really critically important to ensuring that we're actually meeting the needs of the students, we're not meeting only university or policy agendas.

The other thing as well I just wanted to call out is I'm really glad to see the Government accepting that the definition around low SES is problematic, I think that's a really positive step, and that we need to see definitions around equity that include rather than exclude. You know, as practitioners at the coalface, when you have a student sitting in front of you in significant need, we shouldn't be constrained by what our funding pots enable us to do in terms of the level of support that we can provide to a student. So really holistic approaches I think is really important.

Having funding that systemically addresses barriers to university, so whether that is, you know, project funds to enable universities to embed universal design, or improving teaching and learning, or I saw a great paper over the weekend about a university addressing their administrative barriers to higher education you know, that needs to be a focus regardless of what funding or policy is at play.

Continued self determination of funding by First Nations people so First Nations people are making decisions in terms of how funding is spent for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students is so critically important.

And my final point before handing over to Chris is that one of the things that I was really pleased to see is the focus on regional communities in I think this will provide you a nice leeway, Chris, to bounce off, you know, really great to see a focus on

regional communities rather than just regional students, you know, when looking at things like needs based funding.

I think there's a number of different models about how we support regional students to access and succeed in higher education and I once again read a great paper over the weekend by one of your colleagues, Chris, about RUSHes as a third space and that partnership and relationship with universities and working together to increase outcomes for regional students. There was a great paper I read over the weekend about that those two things need to kind of coexist together. But in addition to that, universities also have a lot of regional campuses and they're not providing face to face teaching and learning at those campuses and so funding to incentivise universities to do that I think is really critically important.

I'm going to leave it there just because I want I think that's a really good segue for Chris to jump in.

**CHRIS RONAN:** Yes, I'm happy to. Thanks, Kylie. It is a really good segue.

So a couple of things I'm going to take a little bit of a different tilt, but I'll circle back to Kylie's point on communities. The first one is I was at the Universities Australia conference and I found it immensely frustrating that there was a lot of opinions from higher education, people about what ought or should happen in regional Australia in terms of driving equity, but it's really just higher education people talking to themselves and this sort of, I guess, intrinsic looking approach and sort of this universities are the sole drivers of student equity is sort of a provocation that I want to make because I think universities are not the sole driver of student equity, and nor should they be because it's actually unfair on the institutions for government and for others to place that burden and that expectation on universities.

So linking back to Andrew's earlier point around, I guess, that universities are falling out of favour at the moment, I suppose, across society more broadly, I think in terms of the question is it a focus on equity that the Governments have, well I think yes, but it might be manifesting in different ways that the higher education sector may not like but also I think it goes to this more holistic look at student support and how we can drive those equity pieces.

So the current Government through the HECS reform, and we heard about that earlier, that's focusing on the individual and driving, I guess, the support for the individual. Now, whether you think it's a good or bad policy is sort of irrelevant, but it's not focused on universities.

In the community space, to put my Regional University Study Hub hat on, you know, the current Government have funded communities directly. Now, that also supports equity and also supports the outcomes that the Government is seeking. So these are



two drivers that are adjacent to higher education and related, but aren't necessarily about pumping money into universities. I understand that might be an unpopular opinion, but I think it's important to look that there are other ways of doing this and that, I guess, partnerships piece and how universities who do play a really critical role intersect and interact with all those other pieces.

So to look at student support (inaudible), for example, in this (inaudible) have full campuses in place. They are doing a great job, whether it's in regional communities, metropolitan communities. So are the Regional University Study Hubs because they are place based, but Australia is a big place and not everywhere has a university full-service campus, not everywhere has a Regional University Study Hub. So there's challenges that exist just by that sense of geography and how can we think differently about supporting students in place rather than institutions reaching out to them.

So if a university has 85% of their students as online students, are they best suited to be supporting those students in its entirety? I would argue probably not. Yes, there's a role for them, and this is the nuance, I think, that comes in in terms of really high quality and inclusive pedagogy around the learning and teaching piece, but to support students, it's far broader than that and that is the sort of, I think, thinking that needs to come into it. So place based and not just about RUSH, it's not about sort of growing the RUSH project or the suburban hubs. It's actually just thinking differently and that involves schools as well, I think, in terms of the play space mentality.

So universities as well in this piece shouldn't be expected and can't do all the work in widening participation and I think that's been a real problem and a challenge with HEPPP is actually the expectation that's been placed on HEPPP is yes, to support that retention piece and students to succeed, but also to go out and widen participation. In a regional context, that often has meant, you know, support people to change who they are, where they live to fit higher education and really what we want to do and what I think the CUC and the other RUSHes are doing is just nudging higher education to be a little bit different and to change that system to better fit regional communities to better fit people in place. So I think that's just some very, very quick points and provocations that I think it's good to challenge.

Just to finish up and then I'll hand back to Sonal, there's a lot of misinformation about what the RUSH, the Regional University Study Hub projects are and how they operate and I saw this at the UA conference as well. Most of the discourse happening in higher education is from people who have never been to the RUSHes, have never experienced how they work and they all are vastly different.

The key themes are that they are about place, they are community led, owned and run. So it's not the CUC running them, it's not the university running them, it's the community itself, and that goes back to that play spaced piece. Institution neutrality is



really important, so any course, any provider, but that's also around choice and local staff who are embedded in communities.

So I know we're sort of running short on time and I can talk underwater with a mouthful of marbles, so I'll stop, but I think these provocations are worth thinking about and don't take them as a critique of what the practice is in higher education, but there's other ways of thinking and doing and how we can work together in a more ecosystem approach. So I'll hand back to Sonal.