

Reimagining participation: building a dynamic higher education system in Australia



Exploring Australia's higher education ambitions

The 2024 Australian Universities Accord recommends measures for ensuring equal access to education and addressing the skills gap in Australia to foster the nation's long-term growth



The [Australian Universities Accord](#) offers an ambitious new vision for the country's higher education sector. Published on 25 February 2024, it includes recommendations for improving higher education in Australia, such as achieving greater participation parity among different population groups and bridging the widening skills gap in the country.

"The accord is important because it ensures that higher education is on track and aligned to meet the skills that Australia is looking for," says Amanda Fritz, director of education, innovation and enterprise at the University of Western Australia. "It's not just about knowing where you are today or tomorrow or next year – it's future-focused on the next five or 10 years."

The accord specifies that the objective of Australia's tertiary education system must be to underpin an equitable and resilient democracy, drive economic and social development and promote environmental sustainability. Jobs and Skills Australia, which is the government's national advisory body for identifying skills needs and promoting workforce development, projects that over the next decade, more than 90 per cent of new jobs will require post-school qualifications – a requirement that the current system is not equipped to meet.

Blueprints for higher education reform

Through a series of ambitious targets, the accord aims for at least 80 per cent of the working-age population to attain tertiary qualifications. This includes increasing the number of young people with a university education, aiming for 55 per cent of 25 to 34-year-olds in Australia to hold a bachelor's degree or higher by 2050.

“If you don't have data, you're not making informed decisions”

The accord contains 47 recommendations to create a long-term reform plan for the higher education sector to meet Australia's future skills needs. An important recommendation is to increase participation targets for students from under-represented backgrounds, such as First Nations students, first-in-family students, students from low socioeconomic status and those living in regional and remote areas.

The accord recognises the need for outreach programmes to enhance participation and collaborative work between governments, tertiary education providers and industry to align local skills supply with demand. Similarly, it recommends bolstering alumni networks to strengthen the country's international standing. "The accord wants us to have a future-focused view and a good understanding of where universities need to provide education, in what disciplines and what skills we need to offer," Fritz says.

Other recommendations include establishing a comprehensive system of stackable and transferable qualifications and new accreditations for microcredentials. Such offerings make tertiary education more flexible for those already in the workforce and encourage upskilling or cross-skilling.

Strategies guided by data

The accord lays out a new objective for the tertiary education system in Australia. But it will be challenging to achieve its targets without harnessing the power of big data and analytics, say education and edtech experts. To achieve these targets, institutions must rely on relevant and accurate data to analyse the trends occurring in the higher education sector as well as within institutions and individual courses.

It isn't enough to simply have large quantities of data, says Andy Miller, director of product management for Anthology's student achievement products. "You have to take the data and turn it into actionable information. That allows us to make wise decisions. All of those data points – whether it's Anthology products or others – help students and institutions make those wise decisions," says Miller.

Anthology Reach, the company's constituent relationship management (CRM) system, facilitates "data-informed decision-making for practitioners who support students from application to graduation and beyond", Miller says. Anthology Reach enables organisations to curate and nurture their new and existing relationships with constituents. For higher education institutions, this includes prospective and current students as well as alumni. People worry that relying on data will turn their students into "just a number", says Miller. "But it's the opposite. With data, you can ensure targeted and intentional conversations to drive personalisation in a scalable way."

Andrea Lynch, dean of the Centre for Education and Enhancement at James Cook University, agrees: "Data gives you a foundation for understanding who your students are." Such an understanding gives institutions the ability to create an inclusive and equitable space for their students, especially if they are from under-represented backgrounds.

Targeted interventions informed by data are vital in attracting students from under-represented groups to meet the accord's target of participation equity in Australia. Data-informed personalisation is at the heart of understanding the needs of these students and ensuring that they have the support they need to succeed, Fritz says.

The same is true for engaging alumni communities, says Yvette Drager, senior education consultant for Asia Pacific at Anthology. "It all comes back to data," says

Drager. "If you don't have data, you're not making informed decisions. You can leverage information to tailor engagement to specific groups, which creates more meaningful dialogue."

Addressing the future skills needs

Data and education technologies also help universities better respond to students' needs and address gaps that could create roadblocks to success. "There is much to be gained in efficiencies," says Lynch. "We don't need people creating spreadsheets and coming up with a data set and handing that on to someone else. That doesn't seem very efficient when you can get all your data integrated into dashboards."

Fritz says that a strong CRM serves as a good foundational layer. This links to the student information system in addition to the curriculum management and learning management systems. "It is essential that they all integrate and that you're constantly gathering data," she adds.

"You've got to sort your data and understand what it is telling you," Fritz says. "It is crucial because there are so many touchpoints throughout the student journey. It's not just about getting them in the front door. It's about retaining them and getting them back."

The Australian Universities Accord emphasises the importance of lifelong learning and continual reskilling and upskilling. It has created external metrics that universities need to attain to realise the country's ambitions. "But how do you take those high-level goals and cascade them down into incremental steps for others to work towards?" asks Miller. "You can take that strategic thinking and use the CRM to break these into traceable, tactical steps to fulfil those goals throughout the student journey."

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Driving participation parity in Australia's higher education

Universities can channel data insights into recruitment strategies to improve access for non-traditional learners and under-represented groups in Australia

The Australian Universities Accord, published in February 2024, aims to increase tertiary education enrolment in Australia to at least 80 per cent of the country's working-age population. To achieve this, the accord emphasises the need to attain participation parity for under-represented communities by 2050. Under-represented groups include mature students, First Nations students and people who live in regional and remote areas who are more likely to face barriers to studying.

"The challenge is finding those students and having strong and accessible acquisition channels into the university," says Amanda Fritz, director of education, innovation and enterprise at the University of Western Australia. In her opinion, without harnessing the power of data, universities will struggle to meet the targets set out in the accord. "Without data, you don't know how to target and find those students or support them once they are enrolled," says Fritz.

Personalising the student journey

A crucial tool to find and retain these students is personalisation, says Fritz. "Personalisation and segmentation are important for universities. But you need clean data and good systems that can capture that data and understand your learners' behaviours," she adds. "Then you can capture every touchpoint they have along their journey and understand their wants and needs."

Such data can help marketing and outreach initiatives to focus on prospective students' priorities and speak to their concerns, says Andy Miller, director of product management for Anthology's student achievement products. "You can use data to tell a story. You can talk in an informed way about the student journey." Edtech solutions such as the Anthology Reach constituent relationship management system enable informed decision-making by harnessing student data from the point of application through to graduation.

The success metrics of existing students can be a compass for identifying prospective students who might be interested in pursuing tertiary education at the institution. "Understanding who our students are and how they perform also helps us to know where we can seek students with a similar profile," says Fritz. Her institution is strengthening its digital offering to attract more students from under-represented groups. "We're focusing on flexible delivery arrangements and online delivery to gain more traction among mature students, students who live in remote places, those who have other commitments in their lives and learners who are not able to attend classes during work hours," she says.

Enabling flexible pathways

The accord suggests that Australia needs more flexible and efficient ways for individuals to attain the qualifications required to address Australia's emerging skill needs. This will involve developing modular, stackable and transferable qualifications and microcredentials that facilitate flexible ways of learning. The accord highlights microcredentials as a flexible option for growing student enrolment numbers and equipping graduates with industry-relevant skills.

Fritz concurs that microcredentials are a good way to offer flexibility while promoting learning. In her opinion, stackable credentials will become increasingly important in the future. "We've been in the microcredential space for quite some time. At the moment, we are almost doubling our enrolments year-on-year," says Fritz. "Once a student has finished a microcredential, it's then about nurturing that relationship. The data we collect from them helps us to understand the patterns of behaviours from students in those courses."

In 2023, the University of Western Australia introduced microcredentials for learners from Year 10 to 12 as taster sessions for subjects they are interested in studying at university. "Most of them are delivered online to help students who have aspirations to study at university," Fritz says. "We are also seeing significant interest from regional secondary schools."

The University of Western Australia also offers microcredentials that align with skills gaps in specific communities. "The half-life of skills is rapidly decreasing. A skill that's relevant today most likely won't be needed in five years," Fritz says. For example, organisations such as the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry are interested in understanding how they can deliver flexible courses to their community to enable upskilling and cross-skilling.

Pursuing continuous development

To ensure that courses and programmes remain relevant, universities need to engage with the labour market and prospective employers. "We collect data from jobs that are posted out in the world to understand what companies want and the skills they are looking for," Fritz says. "The government wants us to be future-focused and have a good understanding of where universities need to provide education, in what disciplines and what skills we need to teach."

But to realise those goals, universities not only need data but they also need to be able to understand what it is telling them. "Data is everywhere, but it's about knowing how to sort it and read it appropriately to better support what you want to do and what you want to build in the future," Fritz says.

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Personalised and inclusive communication can enhance student retention

Institutions can improve access and opportunities in higher education through targeted support and personalised engagement with students



The Australian Universities Accord, published in February 2024, has proposed ambitious targets for increasing participation in tertiary education to address Australia's current and future skills needs. The accord states that to meet these targets, the country needs to grow the tertiary attainment rate among different population groups and provide more opportunities for lifelong learning for all Australians.

The accord also suggests that reaching these goals can only be achieved by making the higher education system more equitable. One of the accord's recommendations focuses on achieving participation parity among under-represented groups, which includes students from remote and regional areas, First Nations students, mature students and first-in-family students. However, not only is enrolment in these groups low but they also tend to have higher rates of attrition. Students from these groups will need appropriate support to succeed throughout their learning journeys.

Academic quality and resources are important factors in improving participation parity in Australia's tertiary education sector. Equally important is having access to relevant information about students, which empowers staff members to influence students' university experiences and improve their chances of successfully completing their studies.

"Everyone has a role to play in student retention," says Andrea Lynch, dean of the Centre for Education and Enhancement at James Cook University. "Having

accurate information about students and being able to manage their queries ensures that students are not bounced from service to service," says Lynch. "All of that contributes to student retention. If students have a need, we're able to either meet that need or advise them what they might need to do."

Data-enabled student support

Lynch says there is much that universities can do to support students. "We have the research on risk factors. We have a historical lens that we can apply to identify the students who don't transition easily to higher education and the reasons why they might fall through the cracks."

But educators and institutions need a 360-degree view of students across a range of data points to identify whether a student is in trouble and at risk of dropping out. Edtech tools such as Anthology Reach help the university community, including students, educators and administrators, to have unprecedented access to valuable data, says Andy Miller, director of product management for Anthology's student achievement products.

The Learning Management System (LMS) Trends Report, which is available on the Anthology Reach platform, empowers students to analyse their own performance. "It helps students develop an internal locus of control and a sense of self-efficacy," says Miller. For example, the platform helps students see the amount of time they have spent on courses, how they are performing compared to the rest of

the class and whether the skills they are acquiring are relevant to their career ambitions. Such insights need to be combined with staff support, Miller says. "A lot of times, students from under-represented backgrounds need help and guidance to usher them through and place those data in the context of decisions they need to make."

Achieving equity of attainment

Lynch echoes Miller's view on how data can be instrumental in supporting vulnerable students. "We can use our data to identify points when the students need someone to reach out, so people feel that the university actually cares," she says. With data, educators can be better prepared to engage with their students even before they enter the classroom. "I can build a picture of who my students are before I step into the space," says Lynch. "I can then be intentional in my pedagogies and curriculum design to make sure that I'm inclusive of the broad diversity of students."

However, the specific needs of each cohort vary between classes, subjects and courses within a university. "If we're intentional about how we respond in terms of our student population, then we're able to make sure that our support systems are sensitive to the diversity," Lynch says. "There are things you can know about your students through data – whether they are first-in-family, if they come from a low socioeconomic group or from regional or remote areas – and then you can make sure that you have provisions in place for them."

“We can use our data to identify points when the students need someone to reach out”

“We don't lean into one data set to understand the quality of the learning experience”

Institutions can use data to evaluate the quality of education and make decisions about improvements that have meaning for students, Lynch adds. With data, teachers and administrators can also raise the bar on course quality. She cites the example of a course with high pass rates but low student satisfaction. "We don't lean into one data set to understand the quality of the learning experience."

One population group might be doing well in a course but others may not. "We can get some more data and understand what's going on there because there should be an even distribution of success," Lynch says.

Miller agrees that technology promotes efficiencies within the education system. "Historically, before we had the LMS Trends Report, if I wanted to know how a student was doing in their courses, I would have to email their faculty. If they didn't respond in a timely manner, I'd have to follow up. Eventually, I might have to go knock on their door," he says. "You're talking hours of effort, let alone weeks of delay, to get information that is now at your fingertips."

By harnessing data, administrators can gain insights on how their institution is functioning. "Administrators are able to understand trends and patterns. They can aggregate these data sets to refine their processes, from admissions to assessment," Miller says. "As you progress, the pool gets smaller and smaller. How do you make sure that you are not unnecessarily gatekeeping students from progressing through that journey? Data helps to identify where the bottlenecks are in the student journey, from application to graduation."

Unlocking institutional goals through alumni engagement

Universities should leverage technological solutions to generate mutually beneficial engagement with their alumni

The Australian Universities Accord, which charts a new path for the country's higher education system, makes special mention of alumni networks and the value they bring. One of the recommendations included in the accord is improving alumni engagement programmes internationally to strengthen Australia's international research networks and partnerships.

Currently, Australian universities have millions of alumni, both inside and outside of the country, who are an untapped resource of expertise and knowledge. By strengthening ties with alumni, institutions can forge stronger links with professionals, companies and governments to help grow their networks beyond their campuses.

Strengthening connections

Alumni bring value to nations, not just institutions, says Yvette Drager, senior education consultant for Asia Pacific at Anthology. "Alumni create people-to-people links and reinforce professional linkages between institutions, organisations, businesses and governments," she says.

But universities need data to actively cultivate and maintain relationships with alumni, says Drager. "Connecting with alumni starts with analysing the data to understand their backgrounds, their extracurricular activities and, importantly, their career aspirations."

Using such information to tailor personalised communications makes these interactions more meaningful and increases the likelihood that alumni will engage with the institution. "When institutions provide targeted engagement and use the data to segment who they are speaking with, we know that individuals are three times more likely to donate, they're 12 times more likely to volunteer and 17 times more likely to attend an event," Drager says. "That's just by having targeted communications."

The interactions must be mutually beneficial. By understanding alumni, institutions are better able to communicate or offer opportunities to their graduates. "This really comes down to the data that we have about our alumni," Drager says. "We have found that this is where tools, like our Anthology Reach constituent relationship management (CRM) system, come into play – to encourage alumni to participate in any community activity, such as donating, mentoring current students or participating in an event."

To offer benefits to alumni, institutions need to understand their graduates, their interests and their career trajectories, says Drager. It is vital to have a two-way data model, which enables institutions to keep track of graduates and for alumni to keep their

data up to date. "There has to be a reason why they want to keep their information and to continue to be part of that community," she says.

Automating data management

It is impossible for staff at every institution to manage all of their alumni details manually. "We talk about having a digital system or CRM from 'birth to bequeath'," Drager explains. "When you have a solution that contains the student's life cycle, you can look at alumni very differently because not only do you know if a person took a specific degree, you know their subjects, courses and the extracurriculars that they undertook while at university."

Such information allows institutions to understand and tailor communications to their alumni. "Solutions such as Anthology Reach are about enabling institutions to collect and analyse data about alumni demographics, career trajectory and their engagement patterns, as people who have engaged in the past are more likely to engage again in the future," Drager says.

It is possible to predict engagement patterns from a graduate's time at the institution, says Andy Miller, director of product management for Anthology's student achievement products. "From an alumni office perspective, identifying the students who were highly engaged as students will help you identify those who are more likely to be engaged alumni."

Data also helps universities refine communications, he says. "You're not necessarily going to go to your music or computer science alumni if you are looking for support in a healthcare initiative. Such seemingly simple things are much more streamlined through a CRM, so you can quickly and easily distil who to reach out to and for what reasons."

An institution's alumni are not only a resource for mentorship and community building but they can also be prospective students. Drager offers the example of an alumni group that graduated with a bachelor's degree in IT many years ago. "One of the strategies is to consider their career progression," she says. "The institution has data showing the courses they've taken, but it also knows that the technologies that they learnt about in their degree are very different to what is relevant today," she explains. "There's a skills gap and institutions can offer short courses and professional learning opportunities to the alumni community to share knowledge to the network and to collaborate on projects themselves."

The Australian Universities Accord emphasises the skills gap within the country's workforce. Through alumni interactions, institutions can identify skills gaps among professionals and refine their courses based on learner and industry needs. Alumni engagement also

“Universities need data to actively cultivate and maintain relationships with alumni”



helps education providers support the accord's plan to upskill and cross-skill working professionals by offering microcredentials and modular, stackable qualifications.

Australia's global networks

Alumni engagement can also transcend Australia's borders. At the beginning of 2024, there were more than 680,000 international students studying at Australian universities, according to Australia's Department of Education. Many of these students, like the millions of international students before them, will ultimately leave Australia and offer an important network to bolster the country's international standing.

They are able to promote and improve the international perception of their alma mater and Australia, says Drager. "Having a digital platform that facilitates communication between those individuals across borders really allows universities to maintain strong connections with them."

Bond University is a notable example of alumni community building, she says. "It has a significant number of international students who leave Australia, but they engage with that alumni group who continue

to be part of the university community even when they are overseas." Alumni groups around the world host events and activities and become mentors for the students currently enrolled at the university, she adds. "They've done a really good job of understanding the needs of alumni members and they provide targeted outreach and communications to them," she says.

Edtech solutions such as Anthology Reach also offer institutions a web-based presence for their communities. "It allows institutions to manage event participation and membership into particular alumni groups," Drager says. "It's about creating these communities and that includes things like discussion forums, virtual meeting spaces, directories of information and the ability for people to have a profile and for others to contact them."

That is where technology solutions come into their own. "It's good to have a database of emails but if you don't have constituent engagement, you're not going to be able to drive any of the benefits out of the international alumni community," says Drager.

[Find out more about Anthology Reach.](#)



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