More to uni than being ‘job ready’

We need to ask the question: what are universities actually for?

Duncan Maskell

The Australian universities accord process, launched by Education Minister Jason Clare last November, sets a substantial and exciting challenge to all involved in education. The question posed is “what do we need to do to set our higher education system up for the next decade and beyond?”

Chair of the accord panel, Professor Mary O’Kane, echoed the minister’s level of ambition by asking for truly big, even radical ideas.

As it deliberates on the contents of its report the panel will need to reconcile ambitious ideas with the political and fiscal appetites of government and society, a process that must start with a strong idea of what universities are actually for.

The straightforward answer is that they are a vital part of the social picture in Australia. We are a nation that has become great through education – profoundly connected to broad, enriching university education – and we have one of the better-educated populations in the world. This is why international students want to come here.

But we can do so much better. Societies and economies are increasingly knowledge-dependent and the better educated ones will be better set to succeed. Every part of our education sector – schools, TAFEs, technical and research-intensive universities – needs to be strengthened and supported. They are all essential elements in a complex educational landscape.

A vital part of this is the need to appreciate much better that universities’ unique contribution is giving students – and through students, society – the complex intellectual infrastructure needed for tackling the future’s great challenges.

This vital role is much broader and more important than the answer too commonly advanced: that universities are primarily, indeed perhaps solely, there to provide improved economic outcomes and to provide solutions to immediate financial imperatives for the country.

This viewpoint has become the dominant narrative and has three interlinked propositions: that higher education is primarily concerned with serving the immediate demands of the national economy, that it is an individualised transaction in which students maximise their personal “human capital”, and that if there are not enough workers with the requisite skills to fill employment gaps, universities are failing in their duty.

These things are of course important, but I believe that if they are the only, or even the predominant, things that are required for higher education, then it is impoverished in both its philosophy and delivery. This restricted narrative threatens to turn our universities into dry, transactional institutions, rather than places of human transformation, creativity and discovery.

Undoubtedly universities produce discoveries and educate people that drive the economy – but this is only part of what they do; universities are also foundational to building social cohesion, cultural richness and political stability in society. Their internationalisation is a significant driver of soft diplomacy, more important than ever in a fractious world.

What’s more, shaping our higher education solely to the economy’s current skills needs is dangerously short-sighted. When I was an undergraduate, the technologies and skills that shape most people’s current jobs had not yet been invented: the internet, mobile phones, the laptop, iPads, email, social media, Zoom, and this list provides but one small sample with which this point can be made.

What universities must provide above all else is an education: expanding minds, helping people understand and adapt to the world in which they function, instilling the ability to think rigorously and thus to interrogate arguments and evidence, fostering creativity and curiosity, and enabling people to be comfortable with critiques of their own views and to accept uncertainty about what they appear to know.

Of course, as we struggle with sluggish growth, high inflation, low productivity growth and severe skills shortages, we need our higher education sector to be educating people in occupations of pressing need: engineers, nurses, teachers, care workers.

But – and this point is crucial – the purpose of universities is not reducible to these important immediate needs. If we take the easy option of pushing all universities only to respond to the economy’s skills needs, we will actually end up selling short our society, in a potentially catastrophic way.

We need a diverse landscape of education. There is a place for many types of tertiary education and a broad, enriching university education – profoundly connected to a culture of basic and applied research – needs to be a big part of this landscape.

This focus lies at the heart of the University of Melbourne’s academic
mission, as it does with many other Australian universities, with our undergraduate and postgraduate degrees aiming to foster open-minded inquiry, curiosity, analytical and critical thinking, all taking place in the context of valuable diverse perspectives. We need rounded graduates, including many who can think conceptually at a deep level.

This is essential to establishing the deep intellectual foundations in the graduates that the nation needs to face the unknown challenges of the future.

Duncan Maskell is Vice-Chancellor of the University of Melbourne.

Universities give students deep intellectual foundations to tackle future challenges. Photo: Penny Stephens