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Senate Education and Employment Legislation Committee
Public Hearing for the Committee's inquiry into the
Universities Accord (Opening the Doors of Opportunity) Bill 2026

Opening statement from Vicki Thomson, Chief Executive, The Group of Eight

Opening the doors of opportunity. That's why we're here today.

It's why there are more than 100,000 applications every year to Group of Eight universities. It's why 60,000 people come to work at our universities every day.

But most importantly, it is why we must ensure that students from all backgrounds can not only access higher education but succeed once they get there.

The Group of Eight supports the Government's ambition for a more sustainable and equitable higher education system.

We support more fully funded student places, demand-driven places for equity students, and needs-based funding that recognises the true cost of supporting students through to completion.

But opening the doors of opportunity is about more than moving places around the system.

The question before this Committee is simple: are we opening doors for more students, or simply telling students they have to walk through a different door?

That is the test we have applied to this Bill.

We believe this Bill has the ***potential*** to expand opportunity.

But there are a small number of amendments we can make now that would create a fairer, more transparent and more sustainable system

Students must be at the centre of the new system.

Equity in higher education means more than access.

It means real choice.

It means opening the doors so students can pursue their ambitions and have the best chance of success.

If a student from any background - regional, remote or disadvantaged - has earned the marks to attend a university of their choice, they should have the opportunity to do so.

Restricting students by narrowing their study choices or limiting where they can learn doesn't strengthen the system, it weakens it.

Students who are turned away from their preferred university may alter their study plans, defer enrolment, choose a different qualification pathway, relocate, or not participate at all. There is also a risk of increased and unnecessary churn in the system where students start at another provider only to transfer to their first choice a year later.

That comes at a real cost. An extra year of study can leave the average student with around $8,000 in additional debt.

That is the real cost of opportunity lost.

Funding should follow students and student demand. If we've learned anything from Job-ready Graduates, it is that trying to steer students through restrictions rather than opportunity does not work.

We also support accountability and effective stewardship.

Government has a legitimate role in setting national priorities.

But success will depend on getting the balance right between accountability, transparency, ministerial oversight and institutional autonomy.

Powers that determine where students can study and which institutions can grow must be exercised transparently and be subject to appropriate scrutiny.

If the system becomes less responsive to student demand and more responsive to short-term fiscal or political considerations, we will not achieve the ambitions of the Accord.

Directing students away from universities that are meeting student demand risks making the system less responsive to students and ultimately undermining participation and success.

We do not want to construct an artificial choice between strong research universities, strong regional universities and strong equity outcomes.

We need all three.

That is why we have worked constructively with the crossbench on amendments that would improve transparency, protect student access to funded places, limit overly broad ministerial discretions and provide for review of the allocation framework.

Finally, there remains a fundamental gap.

This Bill does not address the single biggest distortion in the current funding system: Job-ready Graduates.

Whatever changes we make today, we must not lose sight of replacing it with a fairer, more coherent and more equitable funding model.

We support the objectives of this Bill and want these reforms to succeed.

With a small number of sensible amendments, we believe it can.

***Check against delivery*