

29 August 2023

Mary O’Kane
Chair, Australian Universities Accord
Higher Education Division
Australian Government Department of Education

Re: Taree Universities Campus – A Regional University Centre response to the Australian Universities Accord Interim Report

Dear Mary O’Kane and the Australian Universities Accord Panel,

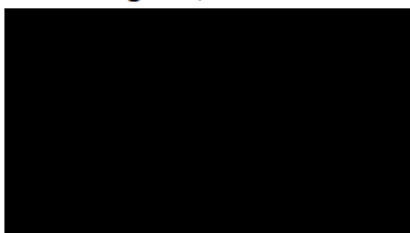
I hope this correspondence finds you well. On behalf of Taree Universities Campus (TUC), I would like to express our appreciation for the ongoing efforts of the Australian Universities Accord Panel in driving positive changes within the higher education sector. We were pleased that the five immediate recommendations for priority action, and some of the issues raised for further discussion, really aligned with our view of a more reformed future higher education system in Australia. In addition, the recognition that Regional University Centre (RUC) program, to which TUC belongs, really is making a difference for students in remote and rural areas is uplifting for our staff and volunteers who continue to work alongside our community.

Further to this, thank you for the invitation for TUC to provide a written response the Interim Report. We have carefully reviewed the Interim Report and its recommendations, and we would like to contribute our thoughts regarding proposed measures of success to track the outcomes of Accord recommendations, again drawing on our experience as a RUC and prioritising equitable access.

We believe that assessing the effectiveness of the Accord recommendations requires a comprehensive and multidimensional approach that takes into consideration multiple aspects. Therefore, in our response we believe some attention is now needed for how to best gauge the success and impact of the Accord recommendations. Incorporating these measures of success would provide a comprehensive assessment of the Accord's impact on student experiences, career trajectories, and the overall university climate to name a few. By analysing both quantitative data and qualitative feedback, we will be able to gain a deeper understanding of the transformative effects of the recommendations and make informed decisions for the future.

Thank you once again for your dedication to advancing the Australian higher education system. We look forward to the continued collaboration and positive changes that the Accord will bring.

Kind regards,



Taree Universities Campus is appreciative of the ongoing efforts of the Australian Universities Accord Panel in driving positive changes within higher education. The Interim Report is an action orientated report documenting numerous large and significant changes proposed for the higher education in Australia, often at times using a ‘top-down’ approach.

The five immediate recommendations for priority action, and many of the issues raised for further discussion or future action, have been constructed thoughtfully by the Panel, and we deem they collectively point to a very positive direction in the future emphasising equitable access to education as a national imperative.

Insights into what equitable access in regional areas could look like:

- more universities offering more courses in an online format with work placement and practicals close to the students home or study centre;
- address the digital disadvantage in regional areas. The Australian Digital Inclusion Index (ADII) scores across three areas - Access, Affordability and Digital Ability. The 2021 measure for our MidCoast LGA was 61, the regional average is 67.4, while NSW and National average (with metro areas brought to account) raises the ADII to 71;
- incentivise universities to work with regional communities with responsive place-based approaches. Examples include:
 - facilitating face to face lectures in regional university study hubs on a weekly or monthly basis;
 - develop accredited courses in Indigenous Cultural Knowledge representative of the Country the student is studying on, with qualifications equivalent to Cert III or higher.

We believe that assessing the effectiveness of the Accord recommendations requires a comprehensive and multidimensional approach that takes into consideration multiple aspects. Therefore, some attention is now needed for how to best gauge the success and impact of the Accord recommendations in quantitative and qualitative assessments.

Three comprehensive measures of success to effectively track the outcomes of Accord recommendations are proposed:

1. Student Engagement and Well-being Enhancement

To assess the effectiveness of the Accord in creating a supportive and inclusive learning environment Taree Universities Campus (TUC) suggests employing a multifaceted approach to assess the impact of the Accord on student engagement and well-being. This includes quantitative metrics like analysing student satisfaction survey results to measure contentment with academic and non-academic services. Qualitative feedback through focus groups and interviews will provide insights into students' sense of belonging and academic engagement. Concurrently, tracking mental health indicators and university counselling (or well-being) centre utilisation will offer insight into students' emotional well-being.

Moreover, participation rates in extracurricular activities such as clubs, societies, and community projects will reflect the degree to which the Accord promotes holistic student engagement.

2. Employability and Career Development

To effectively gauge the Accord's influence on students' employability, TUC proposes a comprehensive assessment of career outcomes. This entails tracking the percentage of graduates securing employment within six months of degree completion, differentiating between full-time, part-time, and relevant job positions. Furthermore, the alignment of graduates' roles with their field of study will indicate the degree to which the Accord facilitates practical career development. A closer examination of internship participation, post-graduation training, and involvement in industry-linked projects will offer qualitative insights into the Accord's contribution to enhanced employability.

3. Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Progress

Recognising the Accord's emphasis on diversity and equity, TUC recommends a systematic approach to measure progress. This involves consistent monitoring of demographic shifts in student enrolment and faculty representation across various dimensions such as socio-economic background, ethnicity, and gender. Concurrently, evaluating the implementation of initiatives aimed at fostering inclusivity, such as mentoring programs, diversity scholarships,

and bias-aware curricula, will provide a tangible gauge of progress. Regular climate assessments, conducted through surveys and focus groups, will offer insights into the experiences of underrepresented groups, aiding ongoing improvements and progress toward an equitable and inclusive university environment.

The Accord Panel positioned itself to recognise that RUCs (such as TUC) will be integral in the future of higher education. We agree that RUCs can perform an additional and necessary function to that offered by not only the main university campus, but also ‘satellite’ centres established by universities in locations away from main campuses. The number of institutions that students registering with the RUC can provide an indication of diversity in courses sought by regional students and subsequently add to the human, social and economic capital of regional areas. For example, TUC currently registered students attend in excess of 30 institutions for their studies, whereas the University of New England ‘satellite’ Taree centre can only be utilised by their own students.

Incorporating these measures of success would provide a comprehensive assessment of the Accord's impact on:

- student experiences, career trajectories, and the overall university climate. By analysing both quantitative data and qualitative feedback, the government and the higher education sector stakeholders can gain a deeper understanding of the transformative
- effects of the recommendations and make informed decisions for the future.
- catering to the holistic development and well-being of students, fostering their employability, and ensuring a diverse and inclusive university community.