

# Response to the Interim Report of the Australian Universities Accord Review Panel

I would like to congratulate the Review panel on producing a wide-ranging and stimulating interim report. As the report authors note, it is full of “spiky” ideas, some of which have been canvassed before in the sector but many of which are new and innovative. I

In general, I agree with thrust of the report which is to advocate for a major expansion of the HE system to meet the skills needs of the nation in the coming decades. The target of 55 per cent of 25-34 year age group holding an HE qualification by 2050 is laudable but will, as the report notes, require a major national effort to encourage students from groups traditionally poorly represented in Universities to attend in greater numbers.

However, there are a number of key concepts and ideas in the report which I think require further thought and analysis before they find their way in the Review panels’ final report. I wish to highlight three of these.

First, the proposed establishment to a **Tertiary Education Commission**. On reading the case for such a body in Chapter 3, I do not find that a convincing argument has been adduced by the Panel for such a radical change to the regulatory environment for HE. The report draws parallels with the former CTEC in the 1970s. However the environment for HE and VET in the 1970s was very different than that of 2023. CTEC oversaw a system that comprised a small number of Universities and a relatively large number of Polytechnic-style Colleges of Advanced Education. In its functioning it was principally concerned with the governance of CAEs whose curricula and qualification had to be approved by the body. The report states on P111 that CTEC also controlled funding for TAFE and schools. This is an exaggeration – Schools and TAFE funding are and always have been the province of State Governments. Only a very small proportion of funding for the VET system is handled by the Commonwealth. It is, perhaps, worth noting that the document which is referenced in the footnotes on p 111 supporting the Panel’s analysis also states that:

*“the Australian system of tertiary education administration and co-ordination has been described as the most complex in the world (as Professor David Caro has pointed out ‘...there is no other country ... which has invented such an involved co-ordinating and advisory apparatus ...’).*

Whilst most developed countries support quite complex tertiary education governance regimes, I am not sure that the members of the panel would wish to return to the complexity of tertiary administration that Hugh Hudson identified so readily in 1985.

Currently the 42 Universities in Australia enjoy a direct relationship with the Federal Minister and Government and this allows for a great deal of flexibility in the HE system. Universities Australia is an effective voice for the sector to Government. A new TEC would only bureaucratise and slow down decision making in the HE system and stifle innovation. In an innovative environment, decentralisation will always work better than centralisation.

To say that in time the TEC would also direct TAFE systems seems somewhat naïve, given the role of the States in governing VET provision in their jurisdictions. The possibility of federal control of VET has often been raised in the past, but since the demise of ANTA in 2004, has been fiercely resisted. Why would the States give over co-ordination of their TAFE systems to a federal body established within the HE system?

**Recommendation.** That the panel re-think the need for a Tertiary Education Commission and analyse instead the possibilities for national co-ordination through existing bodies such as the National Cabinet processes.

Secondly, the report advocates **the integration of VET and HE** over time. I fully agree with this sentiment. I note that the Minister in setting the terms of reference for the panel, made exploration of the “possible opportunities for greater engagement and alignment between VET and HE...” an explicit focus of the review panel’s work. Throughout the document the desirability for greater connections and alignment between the two education sectors is advocated in broad terms but is generally given scant treatment under section 3.1.2; a total of 1.5 pages in a 150 page report. This is a missed opportunity to re-think the relationships between VET and HE. As a former [REDACTED] in a dual-sector University, I know from first hand experience that there are major opportunities for TAFE and Universities to work together collaboratively to produce hybrid qualifications and learning experiences that would help reach the review panel’s targets for HE achievement by 2050. The existence and experience of Australia’s six dual-sector Universities is hardly alluded to in the report and yet provides a fascinating case study in the potential and pitfalls involved in close collaboration of TAFE and Universities in microcosm.

**Recommendation.** This is a key area for the panel to consider and I would hope that the final report provides much deeper analysis and a more sophisticated treatment of VET and HE interconnections and the mechanisms that could be deployed to enhance this. The panel might wish to look at the experience of many UK Universities in the early 2000s which, under the reforms of the Blair administration, struck long-lasting partnerships with groups of local FE Colleges to improve pathways and participation from VET to HE and HE to VET.

Finally, the report’s consideration of the need for a **National Regional University** is poorly argued. It is not clear from the short treatment of the concept under section 3.1.1.6 exactly what problem the new NRU would address. As the panel no doubt is aware, there are seven Universities in the Regional Universities Network and a number of other Universities with what could be defined as a regional mission such as JCU. In terms of the aspiration for greater participation of low SES and regional students, these existing regional Universities are already showing the way. In general amongst RUN member Universities, around 70 per cent of students are from the regions and about 25 per cent are from low SES backgrounds – compared to 15 per cent nationally. These Universities are usually multi-campus, covering

large areas of the States in which they operate and sometimes beyond. It is difficult to see how the addition of a national University would improve the coverage and performance of the current regional Universities.

**Recommendation.** The panel produce a more detailed analysis of the need for a new National Regional University. This analysis should include a clear statement of the problem which such a University would remedy. The panel should consider alternatives that might help the existing regional Universities to fulfill their mandate more effectively such as increased funding to cover the expenses of providing HE over large regional areas and to remote communities. Building on the strengths of an existing network would be far more effective in increasing regional and low SES student participation than establishing a new University with a very unclear raison d'être.

Thank you for considering my views which are provided in a purely personal capacity.

