

# SUBMISSION Response to the Interim Report of the Australian Universities Accord



September 2023

The University of Newcastle welcomes the opportunity to further contribute to the Australian Universities Accord. The University provides this submission in addition to the Australian Technology Network submission.

The University supports the foundational premise that widening participation is required to meet skills needs—*growth for skills through greater equity*. This must build on good equity practices based on proven track records of delivering outcomes. Enabling programs are a successful initiative that has effectively bridged the gap for disadvantaged students to university study, and should help forge the way ahead.

This submission focuses on the highest priority areas for the University and the people and regions we support:

1. Systemic equity funding that is needs-based and driven by positive outcomes for students.
2. Legislation for sustainably resourced enabling programs that are free of fees.
3. Community-led approaches to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Governance working in partnership with individual institutions.
4. A roadmap to a unified tertiary education system, beginning with Cooperative Skills Centres, and increased Commonwealth-state engagement, including data sharing and improved funding arrangements.
5. A research system that supports impactful, engaged research, including in regional settings.
6. Addressing the divide between additional system resources and where these resources are needed to widen participation, including consideration of a levy applied to university revenue.

## **Systemic equity funding that is needs based and, driven by positive outcomes for students**

The University supports the call for widened participation, that is focussed on quality, student support, systemic change, and is driven by better outcomes for students.

Any system designed to increase participation must recognise that competition for students who have experienced disadvantage does not widen participation, nor does it produce better equity outcomes. Any approaches to reaching equity targets must not lead to the potentially destructive outcome of universities competing to enrol students from underrepresented backgrounds. Student enrolments must be paired with long-term commitments to community engagement and notions of success that are developed from the perspective of the student being enrolled (see [Rubin, Burke, Bennett et al, 2022](#)). Rather, the genuine transformation of universities to deliver high quality educational opportunity must be whole-of-institution and systemic across the sector.

The University supports the ATN's call for a mix of block and formula driven funding. Institutions with the highest numbers of student from disadvantaged backgrounds in general have greater administrative education overheads. In establishing an appropriately funded system, we urge the Government to consider the overall administrative load on both the public service and on the individual institutions.

A needs-based funding model should include increased and sustained public funding for dedicated equity expertise, and also for general staffing to address the trend of increasing student/staff ratios.

The University welcomes recognition that students who have experienced disadvantage significantly enrich our higher education system, the workforce and Australian society. 'Deficit models' that presume these individuals lack potential, aspiration, confidence, capability or resilience, are outdated and inaccurate.

## **Legislate for sustainably resourced enabling programs that are free**

The University advocates for the recognition of the structural role of free enabling programs in widening participation in our higher education. These pathways must be recognised in the Australian education landscape by enshrining them in legislation (removed by JRG legislation), and providing an enabling loading to adequate to support systemic practice in institutions. Given major disruption to schooling through the pandemic, and teacher supply and retention issues, enabling programs can now play a larger role in bridging the gap to higher education.

We strongly agree with increased support for free enabling programs, recognising these through the credential framework, and scaffolding enabling teaching methods and support into coursework to increase success for students who have experienced disadvantage.

### **A sector wide, community-led approach to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Governance**

The University supports the call to place Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing and being at the heart of the higher education system. However, for this approach to be successful, it must be led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and supported by structures within universities.

We support the establishment of a Commission; however, we propose that its governance be centred around community, with clear goals around nationally consistent processes to embed community into decision-making at universities. Without this, there is a significant risk that universities could diverge from community in decision making, lose support from community, and deter potential students.

Sector level governance must also be underpinned by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural governance at a local University level. We are proud of the Board of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education and Research and the Nguraki Elders Committee that have guided our university for over 10 years. The University strongly advocates for clear communication between the Commission and local cultural governance structures, ensuring local matters influence the national agenda.

### **An aligned tertiary education system, beginning with Cooperative Skills Centres**

The University strongly supports the recommendation to move towards an aligned tertiary education system, which is essential to developing new, engaging modes of education.

Parity of esteem is important; this will progress when students can experience and value both modes of delivery. In our University's experience, resourcing and regulatory barriers are the biggest impost to working more closely with TAFE, and to developing course models where students seamlessly experience both systems.

The Cooperative Skills Centre (CSC) concept was developed through experiencing the rewards (and significant challenges) of jointly developing and delivering courses with TAFE in areas of skills shortages (defence aerospace, construction and nursing). The CSC would kickstart hybrid approaches to TAFE and university training for students, together with industry. It would also remove barriers for students, nurture a parity of esteem, provide TAFE the resources it needs and enable an agile focus on industry-driven disciplines. It would also provide a mechanism to reallocate funding as training becomes self-sustaining, or skills needs change.

The University recommends further developing the CSC concept as a pilot of blended regulatory approaches, where competency-based education and knowledge-based education are jointly pursued. Importantly, a system of joint governance would see industry, university, TAFE and other partners jointly oversee the CSC. Resourcing would take the burden of navigating two systems off the students, providing resources through the CSC. Longterm funding, similar to the CRC model, would provide the time to test and modify training.

The University supports the suggestion of a student 'Passport' that covers both sectors, and views this, and other building blocks such as microcredentials, as an important step towards alignment.

### **A research system that supports impactful, engaged research, including in regional settings**

We welcome the Report placing importance on local communities, place-based strategies, and the anchor role of regional universities in both R&D and training the future workforce.

Funding for research and development in Australia needs to be more predictable and less reliant on volatile location-based sources such as international student fees. We agree that simply funding the full cost of research without other systemic changes would see fewer research areas funded, along with other distortions.

Resourcing of research should follow impact, at all locations, especially those outside major cities. To maximise societal return on investment, regional research locations should be enhanced, and high-quality research must be conducted within regional communities. This is especially important as we seek to grow advanced manufacturing and value-add in the Australian economy. To enable this, we support a more effective measure of impact.

To leverage the knowledge and connections of universities as we seek to diversify our economy, the Panel could look to integrating national workforce, economic and research strategies. For example, national research priorities should also align with priority areas for Cooperative Skills Centres. In addition, existing schemes (e.g. ITRP and CRC/CRCP) could include dedicated funding allocated to high quality bids led by regional universities.

The Report correctly identifies that PhD support and pathways must be improved to build a qualified research and industrial workforce. We recommend the Panel consider the Doctoral Training Centre model currently employed by the University. These centres currently support more than 200 PhD students working on industry identified

research problems, with joint supervision from industry and the University, implicitly aligning industry need with research and research training. This model prepares PhD students for immediate and concurrent employment in industry, and creates pathways for research trained people to move between industry and university.

### **Addressing the divide between additional resources and need, including consideration of a levy on revenue**

We welcome the Report's discussion of funding sustainability in the sector, particularly the observation that cross-subsidisation decreases sector transparency.

Our University's initial submission identified a clear mismatch between the geographical concentration of additional revenue in the sector from international student fees (based in capital cities) and populations who are not accessing higher education – there is almost no overlap in where revenue is available and where expanded efforts are needed to achieve equity. An open conversation within the sector and with government on revenue, and the best way to work as a whole to benefit society, is welcomed.

We observe that currently, to attract and welcome international students, many regional universities establish campuses in capital cities, including in states outside of their main campus. Rather than creating choice, diversity and a cultural experience, many of these campuses are administered by private providers, and have few or no domestic students. At a system-level, a levy on our nation's international education export, or more broadly on university revenue, is a means of removing the incentive for this kind of business model. We would support and welcome the Government examining how such a model would work for the benefit of the nation.

Other considerations missing from the report are the potential role of industry in contributing to the higher education system, as a net beneficiary of skilled graduates and research.

### **Governance and employment arrangements in universities**

We support the ATN's contention that universities are complex organisations whose governing bodies should draw broadly from across the community. This includes, but is not limited to, people with experience in the higher education sector.

Universities should be model employers. University agreements across the sector have provisions that are generous by community standards, are nation-leading (i.e. in parental leave, superannuation and redundancy provisions) and align with Government policy goals. It is a fact noted by the Parliament that Enterprise Arrangements in universities are, in general, too complex, and take considerable time to implement. Considerations around employment structures must consider the need for universities to adapt and rapidly develop into new areas, for example new coursework in renewable energy and different ways of working with TAFE and industry.

### **Sector policy formation, administration, and a Tertiary Education Commission**

Some commentary on the Interim Report has noted that taken in total, the Report recommends forming a number of new bodies, reporting structures, and roles, including brokers. We urge the Panel to consider the total effect of all new policies within the Accord on the administrative burden on both the sector and the public service, and where possible, recommend using existing structures, data and expertise.

Universities exist in a highly complex governance environment. This University recommends against creating bodies that could over time see policy expertise developed outside, or alongside, the public service, rather than within the existing Departmental structure. Sub-par investment decisions are made when governments cannot readily access a strong evidence base, to assess claims. The apolitical, independent and enduring nature of the Australian Public Service should retain the largest concentration of policy expertise on Australian universities.

### **Student-centred funding and the Universal Learning Entitlement**

While this University strongly supports a move towards aligning funding to address disadvantage, we urge careful consideration of previous policy examples when considering schemes such as a Universal Learning Entitlement. The 2016 ANAO Audit of the VET FEE HELP Scheme is instructive in considering how policies designed with similar aim – to increase access to tertiary education - have in the past led to perverse outcomes.

### **Summary**

We congratulate the Panel on the breadth of work involved in considering the higher education system. We support an Accord of universities, between universities, government and society, grounded by a commitment to put national need ahead of institutional advantage, and to create opportunity for those who seek it.