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ATT: Prof. Mary O’Kane AC, Chair Australian Universities Accord Panel

Submission to Australian Universities Accord Panel

Executive Summary

The Tasmanian University Student Association (TUSA) acknowledges the priorities highlighted in the Universities Accords Interim Report and its potential impact on students within our region. TUSA's central mission is to represent the students of the University of Tasmania and to ensure that our students receive comprehensive support, enabling them to excel in their studies regardless of their background. We commend the inclusion of student welfare concerns, student representation, and institutional accountability in the interim report, but emphasize the necessity of concrete commitments in the final report to establish a safe, nurturing, and equitable academic environment for all students.

The TUSA would like to provide input into two areas identified by the Universities Accords Interim Report as they related to Tasmanian students and the University of Tasmania, regarding:

1. Affordability and Overcoming Financial Barriers
2. Student Representation and Institutional Responsibility

Key Areas of Focus

Affordability and Overcoming Financial Barriers

The primary hurdle facing Tasmanian students’ centres on the high cost of living associated with higher education. Notably, as of 2021, Tasmania's rate of bachelor’s degree or higher level of educational attainment for those over 15 years of age sat at only 21.6%, in comparison to the national average of 26.3%. These challenges are further underscored by statistics showing that students at the University of Tasmania, on average, devote 26.4 hours per week to part-time employment in order to cover living expenses while completing their studies. It is concerning that almost 50% of Tasmania's population faces functional illiteracy, emphasising the need for enhanced educational support. Additionally, personal incomes in the region are 26% lower than the national average. These factors combined contribute to the financial obstacles encountered by students, further emphasising the already existing nation-wide inadequacies in support systems and welfare measures for students.

Inadequate welfare provisions place substantial burdens on low-socioeconomic students and those transitioning from regional areas, recognising that as the entire of Tasmania is considered regional to remote, the majority of our students come from regional backgrounds. Students often balance attending classes and working extensive hours to meet financial obligations, leading to compromised academic outcomes. We recommend extending Centrelink access to students aged 18 and above without restriction and elevating all payment rates above the poverty threshold. Additionally, policies should be

tailored to ensure that students are not compelled to work more than 24 hours a week, granting them ample time for education.

Furthermore, unpaid placements present a predicament for students pursuing various degrees in Tasmania. These placements necessitate students to forgo paid employment while dedicating substantial hours to unpaid work. In collaboration with state governments and employers, we urge the expansion of paid placement opportunities. For instances where this may not be feasible, we advocate for the federal government to introduce stipends outside existing welfare structures to support these students.

Interim Report Considerations Supported by TUSA:

1. Changing income support payment arrangements, including eligibility tests around independence, part-time study and unpaid work placements (Page 75, paragraph a)
2. Reducing the cost-of-living barriers to higher education through improved income support measures and more opportunities for part-time study (Page 74, paragraph g)
3. Providing appropriate financial support to students on compulsory placements, particularly to address urgent skills shortages (Page 63, paragraph b)
4. Improving Work Integrated Learning (WIL) and placements by providing participating students with better incentives and financial support (Page 63, paragraph k)

Student Representation and Institutional Responsibility

TUSA is steadfast in its recognition of students as integral stakeholders within the higher education sphere. Their voices are not only vital but essential in shaping a productive and equitable academic system. However, the current educational landscape often falls short in adequately addressing student concerns, and universities can appear as seemingly unaccountable institutions. It is in this context that the importance of stable and secure funding for student associations, unions, and guilds, such as TUSA, is paramount.

Over the years, student-led peak representative bodies have played a pivotal role in advocating for students' interests and needs. They have served as the foremost conduits for voicing the concerns of the student body and have been instrumental in providing essential support services on campuses. Despite these invaluable contributions, these organisations have grappled with fluctuant and uncertain funding levels, which have had a detrimental impact on their ability to represent students effectively.

For instance, at the University of Tasmania, TUSA, formerly known as the Tasmania University Union, has witnessed a marked decline in its percentage of Student Services and Amenities Fees (SSAF) funding over the years. In 2012, TUSA received 43% of SSAF funding, a figure that has dwindled to a mere 8% in 2020, further stabilizing at 19% for the 2023 academic year. This sharp decline underscores the inherent insecurity in the funding structure for student associations, unions, and guilds.

This lack of funding security severely hampers the ability of these crucial organisations to effectively represent students. It places them in a precarious position, where they must continually negotiate for funding, diverting precious time and resources away from their core mission—advocating for students. The consequences of this funding instability ripple across the student body, impacting the quality and scope of services these organizations can provide.

To rectify this situation and ensure that student associations can fully and effectively represent the interests and needs of the student body, it is imperative to modify federal Student Services and Amenities Fees legislation. TUSA, along with many other student-led organizations, advocates for the legislation to mandate that a minimum of 50% of SSF be allocated to these peak representative bodies. This step would provide the much-needed stability in funding, enabling student associations, unions, and guilds to focus on their core mission—representing and supporting students.

Furthermore, integrating these student organizations into the fabric of universities through inclusion in University Councils and Academic Boards would strengthen their position and ensure that student voices are not only heard but also have a direct impact on institutional decision-making processes. It is through these measures that the educational system can be transformed into one that truly prioritizes and serves the interests of students, fostering a more inclusive and equitable environment for higher education in Tasmania and beyond.

On the topic of student safety, the 2022 the National Student Safety Survey (NSSS) release displayed minimal progress on issues of sexual assault prevalence within universities, even following five years of student-led advocacy. To bridge this gap, a well-resourced body with a streamlined process for addressing student complaints and sanctioning universities for negligence is essential. Whether through the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) or an alternative Commission, this body should ensure students' voices are amplified and their concerns are addressed effectively.

Establishing a national student charter becomes imperative to safeguard students' rights pertaining to education, safety, and well-being on campus. Prioritizing student safety and instituting mechanisms to hold universities accountable is of paramount significance. We advocate for a national student charter that enforces accountability through regulatory actions by entities like TEQSA or the Student Ombudsman.

Interim Report Considerations Supported by TUSA:

1. Creating new structures and empower existing ones for students to advocate for their interests in institutional and national-level decision making (Page 129, paragraph b)
2. Providing a greater percentage of the Student Services and Amenities Fee to student unions to ensure the support and representation of students. (Page 129, paragraph e)
3. Developing a national student charter, in collaboration with domestic and international students, ensuring a national commitment and consistent approach to the welfare, safety and wellbeing of all students (Page 129, paragraph a)

4. A Tertiary Education Commission which could protect and promote student voices, in light of the new, student-focussed vision for the sector, including the role for a new Equity Commissioner (Page 120, paragraph d)
5. Strengthening the role for the Commonwealth Ombudsman in student complaints, for both international and domestic students (Page 129, paragraph d)
6. Reviewing the TEQSA Act to ensure the agency is fit for purpose in light of other changes in this Review (Page 120, paragraph a)

Thank you for your time and consideration of the issues we have raised in this submission, we are very appreciative of the opportunity. We look forward to seeing the outcomes of this process. Please do not hesitate to contact us for further information.

Kind regards,



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