



Professor Mary O'Kane
Chair, Australian Universities Accord
Australian Government Department of Education

Friday 1 September 2023

Dear Professor Mary O'Kane and the Australian Universities Accord Panel,

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the University Accord's Interim Report.

We express our gratitude to the panel for championing the innovative 'spiky' ideas and for your dedication to strengthening an inclusive higher education (HE) system, ensuring that every student across Australia benefits and thrives in a profoundly equitable educational landscape. The Australian Pasifika Educators Network (APEN) firmly supports the swift implementation of the five priority areas and offers additional insights for the Accord Panel's consideration.

This APEN submission, shaped through consultation, is a collective voice representing Pasifika teachers, school executives, university staff, community educators, and advocates. Together, our goal is to enhance the educational future for Pasifika learners and communities across Australia. It is essential to note that APEN recently published the [Pasifika Communities in Australia: 2021 Census report](#). This report offers a comprehensive analysis of Pasifika communities in Australia, drawing from the 2021 Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) census. The report highlights that Pasifika communities' population in Australia has consistently grown since the 2011 census from 165,000 to 415,033 in 2021.¹ This growth represents a significant increase from 0.6% to 1.6% of the total Australian population.² In light of this demographic insight and to ensure an inclusive and representative HE system, we believe it is critical to recognise and address the needs, challenges and contributions of this growing population. This understanding can inform equity policies and initiatives to promote HE opportunities and improve socio-economic outcomes for Pasifika communities.

APEN submits four key ideas for consideration by the Accord panel to inform the final report:

1. Expand equity group definitions to include Pasifika and optimise data collection.
2. Ensure place-based community hubs are culturally responsive and relevant.
3. Embed Pacific Indigenous methodologies and competencies in research and engagement with Pacific/Pasifika³ people and communities.
4. Establish a coherent national tertiary system through a Tertiary Education Commission.

1. Expand equity group definitions to include Pasifika and optimise data collection.

Accord Interim Report Recommendation: *“specific higher education participation targets for students from underrepresented backgrounds and equity groups to achieve parity by 2035. These groups will include students from low socio-economic, regional, rural and remote backgrounds and students with disability”* (page 43).

While APEN supports the Accord Panel's recommendation to focus on four equity groups, we believe that Pasifika learners' intricate and complex challenges also require specific HE participation targets. Our findings reveal that in 2011, 38.4% of Australia's general population and 33.3% of Pasifika individuals aged 18 and above completed Year 12 or equivalent. By 2021, these numbers surged to 59.1% and 63.2% respectively, placing Pasifika completion rates above the national average.⁴ However, despite this progress, university participation among Pasifika remains strikingly low at 23.5% compared to 41.6% for the general Australian population pursuing bachelor's degree or higher.⁵ This significant disparity highlights the challenges facing Pasifika communities in accessing and participating in HE.

APEN strongly recommends expanding the scope of equity groups to include Pasifika as a designated target group, which has the potential to address the cumulative challenges Pasifika communities encounter in HE access and participation. The Pasifika Communities in Australia: Census 2023 report strengthens our call to HE providers through the Accord process to urgently address the barriers impeding Pasifika learners from accessing and participating in HE. Additionally, the accurate collection of equity group data underscores the importance of gathering relevant information, including socio-demographic characteristics. A holistic approach enables a deeper understanding of equity in HE, facilitating the development of targeted support frameworks and programs for marginalised communities such as Pasifika. Effective data collection aids in identifying obstacles, enhancing the

¹ Gerace, G., Itaoui, R., Moors-Mailiei, A., Williams, B., Patu, P., & Ponton, V. (2023). Pasifika communities in Australia: 2021 Census. Centre for Western Sydney. <https://doi.org/10.26183/9qbb-cy24> pg. 11.

² *ibid.* pg. 11

³ Pasifika - peoples and communities who are genealogically, spiritually and culturally connected to the lands, the skies and the seas of the Pacific region (including Aotearoa New Zealand), and who have chosen to settle in and call Australia home. (APEN, 2023) Pacific - reference to people and communities in Pacific Island countries.

⁴ *ibid.* pg. 27

⁵ *ibid.* pg. 29



accuracy of predicting university enrolment, and empowering institutions to work towards mitigation.⁶ Furthermore, conducting comprehensive research and analysis on equity groups can provide a more profound understanding of prevailing trends, challenges, and opportunities within the HE sector. There is a pressing need for culturally responsive and community-based strategies aimed at enhancing access, participation, and retention in HE. Simultaneously, the collection of accurate data on enrolment, graduation rates, employment outcomes, and other pertinent indicators is urgently required to inform decision-making and establish benchmarks. These benchmarks, alongside performance indicators, will be instrumental in evaluating the effectiveness of tertiary support mechanisms for Pasifika learners.

APEN proposes the integration of a standardised Pasifika identifier on enrolment forms across educational institutions. Currently, the inclusion of such an identifier across the education sector remains inconsistent. Advocating for the incorporation of a Pasifika identifier, akin to practises modelled at institutions like Western Sydney University, can promote uniformity, ensure accurate data collection, increase the visibility of Pasifika learners, and facilitate the tailoring of educational strategies to their unique needs and experiences.

2. Ensure place-based community hubs are culturally responsive and relevant.

Accord Interim Report Recommendation: *“believes similar place-based and community-led solutions – New Tertiary Study Hubs – could improve participation, retention and completion for students in outer metropolitan and peri-urban areas, especially those from low SES backgrounds. These Hubs should be based on the specific needs of each local community and have tailored wraparound support to help students succeed.”* (Page 11)

APEN commends the Panel's recommendation for implementing place-based and community-led solutions modelled after the successful Regional University Centres (RUCs). While we endorse the establishment of New Tertiary Study Hubs, we strongly advocate for culturally responsive, relevant, and inclusive co-design, delivery, and facilitation of these hubs. Moreover, we emphasise the need for a genuine commitment to extensive community consultation, placing community-led solutions at the forefront.

This is particularly pertinent considering our report findings, which indicate that Pasifika communities in Australia are concentrated within specific geographic clusters, residing in identified disadvantaged socio-economic areas. Queensland has a Pasifika population of 102,320 individuals, while New South Wales has 92,028 Pasifika residents.⁷ By strategically aligning government efforts with these demographic realities, Tertiary Study Hubs hold the potential to create a supportive and enriching educational environment tailored to the unique needs of Pasifika communities. However, this potential can only be realised through intentional design, cultural relevance, and responsiveness to community challenges and needs.

The New Tertiary Study Hubs can offer tailored learning environments that focus on the entire learner journey, from transition and onboarding through academic support to the development of graduate attributes and employability, all while ensuring that learners' lived experiences are acknowledged and celebrated. Central to this approach is the provision of culturally responsive wrap-around support and services addressing broader life obstacles. This includes prioritising social and emotional well-being, financial literacy and security, and ensuring access to technology resources that guarantee an equitable and effective educational experience.

Strengthening culturally responsive community support systems and forging partnerships with local industries and businesses can further enhance the effectiveness of this initiative and better meet the needs of Pasifika learners. Targeted opportunities, such as internships, work experience, mentoring, coaching, and collaboration with local businesses, community leaders, and industry partners, would serve to boost learners' sense of belonging, confidence, and motivation to succeed.

Finally, the flexibility of schedules is of paramount importance. Understanding that many learners from low SES backgrounds often grapple with work or family commitments, New Tertiary Study Hubs must offer flexible schedules, weekend classes, or online options tailored to the community's specific needs. By providing this flexibility, we reduce the likelihood of learners having to choose between work, family, and education, thereby enhancing retention rates.

APEN strongly recommends planning, consultation, and delivery of New Tertiary Study Hubs involving established, recognised, and trusted community organisations throughout all design and development phases.

3. Embed Pacific Indigenous methodologies and competencies in research and engagement with Pacific/Pasifika people and communities.

Accord Interim Report Recommendation: *Fostering international engagement “Australia’s international collaboration as a core element of higher education’s teaching and research mission. It explores options to balance an expansion of our international student market with the upkeep of world-leading student experience*

⁶ Tomaszewski, W., Kubler, M., Perales, F., Western, M., Rampino, T., & Xiang, N. (2018). Review of identified equity groups. Queensland, Australia: University of Queensland, pg. 120

⁷ Gerace et al. 2023, pg 19



and the importance of staying on the forefront of innovation while helping our neighbours through research partnerships and offshore teaching models, especially contributing to our neighbours' efforts to grow their own education offerings." (page 91)

APEN welcomes the review of 'Fostering international engagement' and 'Research, innovation and research training'. While the current government's commitment of \$1.4 billion to strengthen relations with countries in the Pacific region over four years in support of the 'Pacific family first' approach⁸ is a welcomed one - a rise in geo-political funding and collaborations often leads to an increased role for universities in research and evaluation. APEN strongly supports an Australian HE commitment beyond 'extractive practices' but promotes strengthening relationships with Pacific neighbours through genuine opportunities to enhance partnerships, knowledge sharing and addressing urgent challenges.

For engagement and research involving Pacific people *for the benefit* of Pacific/Pasifika communities, the need for Pacific cultural competency and Pacific Indigenous methodologies to be adopted and adapted is of utmost importance. When contemplating research of a Pacific nature, it is imperative that researchers consult and are guided by Pacific Indigenous research methodologies, practices, or Pacific Cultural Competency/Humility experts or consultants.

Pacific peoples, whether in their native lands or diaspora, possess intricate socio-cultural nuances. Neglecting or misunderstanding these nuances can lead to misrepresentations, potentially perpetuating misconceptions or overlooking critical insights. Moreover, culturally competent engagement and research paves the way for meaningful collaborations and trust-building with Pacific communities, ensuring their voices and expertise is centred. This shift enhances understanding and communication with Pacific people and issues and confirms the appropriateness of Pacific Indigenous methodologies to enhance research more broadly. APEN firmly upholds the imperative of preserving the agency and integrity of Pacific people to maximise the impact of research within Pasifika communities, recognising cultural competence as not only beneficial but absolutely indispensable.

APEN recommends that HE institutions engage recognised and trusted Pasifika organisations to consult and advise on Pacific Cultural Competency frameworks. These frameworks can inform the development of a national, holistic policy for research training.

4. Establish a coherent national tertiary system through a Tertiary Education Commission.

APEN welcomes the re-establishment of a Tertiary Education Commission, which includes the appointment of a new Equity Commissioner (EC). We recognise numerous advantages in this development, notably creating a centralised and coordinated authority that oversees HE in Australia. Such a commission can potentially streamline policy development and implementation, particularly in favour of equity groups like Pasifika learners. This could lead to more effective decision-making, improved resource allocation, and a closer alignment with national education objectives. Including an EC within this commission is paramount. A dedicated role such as this will significantly enhance the commission's effectiveness in addressing equity issues. The EC would be critical in ensuring that the needs and challenges of underrepresented and marginalised groups, including Pasifika learners, are at the forefront of policy development and implementation.

Additionally, the commission could enhance collaboration among institutions, ensuring a cohesive approach to issues like curriculum development, quality assurance, and research that would benefit equity groups in Australia. It might also enhance accountability by monitoring institutional performance and outcomes. Such a commission could facilitate innovation, promote equitable access, and respond more adeptly to the evolving needs of both learners and the workforce, ultimately enhancing the overall quality and competitiveness of Australia's tertiary education sector.

Thank you for taking the time to consider APEN's response to the Accord Interim Report. If you have any questions or require further information, please contact the Co-Chairs on the details below.

Kind regards

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⁸ <https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/penny-wong/media-release/delivering-peaceful-prosperous-and-resilient-pacific>