



PREMIER OF TASMANIA

21 September 2023

Professor Mary O'Kane AC
Chair
Australian Universities Accord Panel
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Dear Professor O'Kane

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the Interim Report released by the Australian Universities Accord Panel. I apologise for the delay in responding.

The Tasmanian Government supports the Australian Government's efforts to ensure that Australia's higher education system meets the current and future needs of the nation and targets to achieve this.

The Interim Report's core themes are critical to inform a vision for the future of Australia's higher education sectors in responding to projected and anticipated challenges and opportunities.

Broadly, we support a shared, long-term plan with the Commonwealth Government for policy, governance, funding and regulatory reform of the Australian higher education system which reflects the following Tasmanian Government priorities in the Accord:

Better alignment with state priorities: maintaining flexibility that allows and encourages universities to work more closely with the state and local governments and stakeholders to support regional development, job creation, and innovation in priority areas and to strengthen joint planning to help ensure that Australia is training (and planning for the training of) the right workforce to meet current and future priority workforce needs. The importance of joint planning to building a strong and sustainable health workforce is a key example.

Improved student outcomes: focussing on improving the quality of education and student outcomes by increasing student support, ensuring graduate job readiness and providing a safe and inclusive learning environment.

A focus on regional and remote areas: prioritising improving access to higher education in regional and remote areas, including expanding regional campuses and online learning options. These facilities are to be appropriately supported and funded.

Collaboration with industry and VET: better alignment with the objectives for National Skills Reform and recognise that pathways between VET and Higher Education are increasingly operating in both directions. Our VET providers need to be on a more competitive footing if partnership arrangements with Higher Education are to be mutually beneficial. This requires improvements to the accreditation pathways for VET in addition to Higher Education. encouraging universities to collaborate with industry partners and other partners in the education system to promote innovation and meet local needs. Likewise, the proposed Tertiary Education Commission (TEC) needs to be designed with regard to the objectives of National Skills Reform and also have regard to existing governance arrangements in the VET system including the recently established Jobs and Skills Australia.

Increased investment in research: support increased investment in place-based research to support innovation and development in key sectors such as health, energy, and technology.

Promotion of diversity and inclusion: encouraging universities to promote diversity and inclusion across all aspects of university life, including through policies and initiatives that support socio-economic and gender equity, cultural diversity and disability inclusion.

Increased accountability and transparency. All Australians want to see universities demonstrating greater accountability and transparency in their operations including alignment with the needs of local economies and use of government funding. The accountability being imposed on States and Territories through the National Skills Agreement far stands to outweigh proposed arrangements for the Higher Education sector.

Tasmania supports, in principle, the five Priority Actions in the Interim Report. On Actions 2, 3 and 4, we wholly support the Australian Government taking immediate action. In particular, Action 4, to grant the immediate extension of the Higher Education Continuity Guarantee for a further two years to provide funding certainty to universities as the Accord process rolls out will be of critical value to Tasmania.

Tasmania notes that – given that the Final Report will propose new funding arrangements for consideration – extending the guarantee into 2024 will avoid unnecessary disruption to staff, students and the sector. While the Panel recommends that universities and providers should be expected to direct any funding resulting from this guarantee to support greater equity outcomes, it will be critical that the Australian Government work to ensure that this is the case.

The Tasmanian Government supports Action 2, to abolish the 50 per cent pass rule, introduced as part of the Job-ready Graduates Scheme, which will remove a policy that had a disproportionately negative impact on learners from an equity background; and Action 3, to extend demand driven funding to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners who are eligible for courses they apply for.

However, I am advised that both actions are likely to stimulate greater demand for support services without the required concomitant funding. Given our demographic profile, this will present both opportunities and challenges for Tasmania. Likewise, extending guaranteed university places for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders may lead to a transfer of First Nations students from the vocational education and training (VET) sector to universities and may make it more difficult for the Tasmanian VET sector to meet its Closing the Gap targets and realise positive and sustainable outcomes for learners. As such, consideration should be given to amending that metric to a tertiary goal rather than a separate goal for each sector.

As the Interim Report notes, further consultation and work must be done to determine the exact mechanisms and funding required to achieve the aspirations expressed in the Report. For example, in relation to Priority 1, Tasmania sees the potential for great value to be added by establishing an additional 20 Regional University Study Hubs and 14 Suburban University Study Hubs. Further detail is required to fully assess their potential impact. In particular, Tasmania will be looking to ensure that these hubs are well integrated with our highly successful Jobs Hubs and the existing virtual learning centres run by TasTAFE and support our strategic regional partnership model. .

Similarly, while Tasmania has committed to engagement through the Cross-jurisdictional Working Group on Strengthening University Governance concerning Action 5, we note that resolutions to outstanding concerns around campus culture, safety and industrial issues will be necessarily complex and not within the remit of a single jurisdiction's power. Moreover, it remains important to note that Australia's universities are independent and autonomous institutions, so intervention must balance this autonomy with community expectations of governance at public institutions.

The Tasmanian Government welcomes further opportunities to work at an interjurisdictional level to progress actions arising from the Panel's Final Report. However, it is crucial to recognise the intricate landscape of concurrent reform processes that are currently unfolding. These reforms span various sectors and fields, intersecting with the overarching goal of establishing the Accord.

A comprehensive and coordinated approach is critical to guarantee the success of each reform and prevent any inadvertent conflicts or misalignment. Perhaps the clearest example relates to aspirations on the role and direction of the tertiary education sector in Australia. In this, it extends far beyond the direct remit of the higher education sector into the entire tertiary sector.

Tasmania notes that the Interim Report only touches lightly on international education and migration, identifying a range of persistent concepts and issues but offering limited suggestions as to the role of the Accord in addressing them. While the reform directions have the potential to improve international student access to relevant, high quality training, better harness the skills of international student graduates and improve VET outcomes, to realise this potential it will be critical to ensure new initiatives in the Accord are consistent with reforms stemming from the Migration Review and Strategy.

It is also important that the Review considers broader reform work on workforce training, attraction and recruitment (in both negotiation and implementation), to make sure that the Final Recommendations of the Review support, or at least do not have unintended consequences for this work. Some examples of related broader reform work include the National Teacher Workforce Action Plan; the National Schools Reform Agreement; the NDIS Review; the Review of the *Australian Research Council Act 2001*; and the broad range of health workforce reform initiatives underway at the national level.

Given this, the Review's Final Report will need to reflect further consultations, submissions, research and testing to provide concrete actions and benchmark measures that complement and build upon current work.

Thank you again for providing an opportunity for the Tasmanian Government to have input into the Interim Report, and I welcome further engagement on these important issues.

Yours sincerely



Jeremy Rockliff MP
Premier