

Response to the Australian Universities Accord Interim Report

A single national regional university

Executive summary

The Accord Interim Report proposes (3.1.1.6) consideration of the concept of a single national regional university. The report suggests that, following the Bradley Review, no study was conducted to assess the appropriateness of the concept. This is not quite correct. PhillipsKPA was commissioned by the Government to conduct such a study: **“A new national university in regional Australia: Feasibility Study” (July 2009)**

This submission provides a summary of some key findings of the PhillipsKPA report that may assist the Accord Panel in its deliberations. Overall, the report concludes that with substantial new funding a new national regional university could operate at a higher level of scale, efficiency and impact. However, if it is to make a significant difference to the opportunities and experiences of regional students and their communities, the new university will need to do what the current providers cannot do: offer a comprehensive range of highly regarded courses across all major fields of study.

To achieve this, clarity of mission and strategy is essential. The single regional university concept is an opportunity to use higher education policy as a much more active agent for regional development in Australia. This would require a change in the orientation of national policy makers, and possibly greater collaboration between the portfolios responsible for regional development and education, and between the Commonwealth and the States and Territories. At the least, it would require an acknowledgement that investment in higher education in regional areas can serve a dual public policy objective and that investment decisions can and should legitimately reflect this dual purpose.

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A new national university in regional Australia

The Australian Universities Accord Interim Report proposes (3.1.1.6) consideration of the concept of a single national regional university noting that:

The concept of a single national regional university was explored in the Bradley Review, including recommendations for Government to undertake a feasibility study to assess the merits of such an institution.

And further that:

To date, no study has been conducted to investigate the appropriateness of a single university model for regional areas.

This is not quite correct.

On 10 March 2009, the Deputy Prime Minister, The Honourable Julia Gillard, MP, announced that the Government would grant \$2 million to Charles Sturt University and Southern Cross University to undertake such a feasibility study.

PhillipsKPA, a higher education consultancy firm, was commissioned to conduct the first part of the feasibility study, the Needs Analysis. The final report “**A new national university in regional Australia: Feasibility Study**” (July 2009) was intended to inform judgements about the case for a new approach to higher education in regional Australia. Some initial work was also undertaken to identify possible new models, including models for a new **National University in Regional Australia (NURA)**, that could merit more detailed examination.

The 191-page PhillipsKPA report provides detailed analysis from an extensive range of data sources and consultations focused on:

- The role and impact of higher education and universities in regional areas
- Patterns of provision of higher education in and for regional Australia
- Needs for higher education in regional Australia
- Needs for higher education in Australia’s region of the world
- Research and knowledge transfer
- The sustainability of current approaches to higher education provision in regional Australia
- Impact of new developments in course design and delivery
- Overview of needs, opportunities, obstacles and constraints.

Observations and findings from the 2009 Needs Analysis that may be of particular relevance in the current context of the Accord Panel’s deliberations include:

- Identifying the factors that directly link sustainable higher education provision to national social and economic prosperity is relatively straightforward although not entirely quantifiable. The argument then needs to go to another level to consider those aspects that could be strengthened significantly by a university with a national mission and profile, the form it should take, and the critical mass and reach required to advance and sustain regional development.

- Clarity of mission and strategy is essential. The new university should aim to be a leading provider of higher education teaching and research with national and international reach and impact, and a special mission to contribute to the social and economic development of Australia's regional areas.
- A key question concerns the extent to which there is a need for a national university with a specific mission and appropriate profile to advance and sustain the contribution of the regions to Australia's social and economic prosperity. What could it do better than is currently done by the existing providers?
- A NURA with a research-based approach to the development of culturally aligned pedagogies supported by appropriate and sustainable technologies and linked to an international business development capability could be well placed to become an international leader in remote education research, policy and program development and program delivery. This is not a short-term strategy.
- The disparity between Australia's major cities and regional Australia in access to locally based university research capacity is not unexpected. Arguably it would be nonsensical to imagine that all people in Australia should have equal geographic proximity to university research. All over the world, metropolitan centres tend to host more universities, bigger universities and universities with more substantial research investment than is true in non-metropolitan areas.
- If a national regional university is to make a significant difference to the opportunities and experiences of regional students and their communities, it will also need to do what the current providers cannot do: offer a comprehensive range of highly regarded courses across all major fields of study.
- The analysis (particularly with respect to research) concludes that there would be strong benefits from creating a National University in Regional Australia, but that realising these benefits would require substantial investment.
- Australian universities have always enjoyed higher levels of institutional autonomy and independence than those in many other countries where, for example, State agencies determine which institutions may offer certain levels of qualifications and in which fields, make detailed planning decisions on the distribution and use of capital funding between universities, and even determine staff numbers and salary levels. This level of central planning and coordination has not been a feature of the Australian higher education system.
- This independent identity is enshrined in the charters of a number of universities that give them a particular educational or geographic mission. It is reflected in the strong identification of a number of regional universities with their regional communities and the corresponding sense of 'ownership' of those universities by their communities.
- These characteristics mean that universities will collaborate in ways that are perceived to be in their mutual interests, but will resist very strongly any measures, particularly externally imposed, which diminish their independence, compromise their 'brand' or limit their freedom of operation.
- The NURA concept is an opportunity to use higher education policy as a much more active agent for regional development in Australia. This would require a change in the orientation of national policy makers, and possibly greater collaboration between the portfolios responsible for regional development and education, and between the Commonwealth and the States and Territories. At the least, it would require an acknowledgement that investment in higher education in regional areas can serve a dual public policy objective and that investment decisions can and should legitimately reflect this dual purpose.
- In the absence of such an acknowledgement, any particular funding arrangements for a targeted set of regional universities will be criticised as special treatment that should not be supported in an open and competitive system. This type of criticism will be especially

strident in relation to any 'special' funding for research or research infrastructure, where the Australian system of public funding for research is now operated effectively on a fully competitive basis.

- The full NURA vision is for a national university formed through the integration of a number of universities in different States under Commonwealth law. The implementation of this would not be straightforward given that constitutional authority for higher education does not rest with the Commonwealth and that the States currently own (in various ways) many of the assets of the universities that might be involved. The full legal and political implications of such a concept may need to be tested further in later stages of the Feasibility Study. It is worth flagging at this point that, while these matters may be of second order importance, they have the potential to be a deal breaker if the parties are intransigent.

The report concluded:

In summary, we think the needs for a new approach to regional higher education in Australia are strong, and the opportunities are substantial for some form of collaboration or integration of regional universities. If, and only if, substantial new funding was to be available, we believe that there is also an opportunity to go further and create a new national regional university in some form that could operate at a higher level of scale, efficiency and impact. It must be recognised with clarity however, that there are major obstacles to change and significant constraints on the extent to which the opportunities can be realised.

The outcome of this report was that no further action should be taken since the Government's view was that a third university in another jurisdiction was needed if the proposed NURA was to be viable. The universities involved did not wish to proceed.

Good practice in regional higher education provision

It may also be useful for the Accord Panel to know that, in 2010, following the Needs Analysis report, the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations commissioned PhillipsKPA to provide a report on "**Good practice in regional higher education provision**".

The Good Practice study includes an analysis of policies and practice across eight comparable countries with a particular focus on federated and network university models. Many of these issues covered by the report have since been widely canvassed, but again, the conclusions remain relevant:

In posing some possibilities to improve regional provision of higher education it is critical to acknowledge that, despite a wide range of policy and program initiatives over many years, the relatively low participation rates of people in rural and remote settings persist. Many of the current initiatives of governments and institutions are essentially variations on previous strategies.

While these intervention programs have undoubtedly made a difference to the lives and aspirations of many individuals, they have had only a limited impact on the overall prospects of the bulk of students in regional and remote areas. It is unlikely that government and HE providers can achieve more than this in the current context unless they work together in a significantly different policy framework from that of the past.