

Response to the Universities Accord document

Australian College of Nursing (ACN) submission:

The aims expressed by the interim report are sound and would enable better access to education, more equity for students, and a more skilled workforce in the future. ACN encourages the University Accord to consider the ways that non-universities—that is, Institutes of Higher Education and University Colleges—can support this mission. There are approximately 170 higher education providers across Australia, and these provide significant geographical and disciplinary coverage. The interim report proposes that policy, funding and regulatory settings enable institutions to “specialise in and deliver to their areas of strength and advantage” (26). Delivering in areas of specialisation and advantage, with close connection to industry, is something that independent providers do very well.

Moreover, as the interim report argues, Australia has an ageing population, and the demand for health, disability and aged care services is growing, and there is a skills shortage in nursing (31). There are a number of Institutes of Higher Education and University Colleges that provide qualifications in nursing and allied health and these will play a pivotal role in supporting skills growth in these areas. Laurent *et al* (2018) argue that the more of the nursing workforce that takes part in postgraduate education, the more pressure and workload may be alleviated from General Practitioners.

ACN agrees that expanding the higher education sector to such an extent that the majority of the community now has tertiary-level skills and qualifications will require greater access and equity for students than is currently available. This would be aided by giving students better access to a range of providers as this would open up more study places nationally. Broadening commonwealth supported places to Institutes of Higher Education and University Colleges will help support this, as currently it is more expensive for a student to study at a non-University provider, even when sometimes a course is only offered at a non-university provider.

It is important that funding enables students to study at the education provider of their choice. Rural and remote communities that are often at significant disadvantage in tertiary education trust smaller providers and prefer to study with them rather than larger universities (ITECA 2022). Indeed, according to Crawford (2021), many mature-aged students in rural and remote settings feel lost and unsupported by larger universities and over nearly 50% withdraw from studies. Additional commonwealth places could be offered to providers who are able to support regional and remote students, either through flexible and online study options or through the provision of regional centres, including smaller independent providers. This would also align to the Australia government’s “Stronger Rural Health Strategy” (2021). Bolstering opportunities for online and flexible modes of study would also significantly reduce pressure on graduate nurses, most of whom are in full-time clinical roles, and many of whom are women with additional family responsibilities (Stone, C., & O’Shea, S. 2019).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, commonwealth support places were offered for a delimited period to Institutes of Higher Education (upon successful application). ACN were offered 70 places in the first round of offers and had overwhelming interest from nurses who wanted to upskill, but had over 1500 applications. This demonstrates an enormous demand for commonwealth supported places for graduate qualifications in areas of immediate demand (nursing in a pandemic) independent higher

education providers. As ACN is not a university, students are usually not able to access commonwealth supported places. And yet some of ACN's graduate certificates are not offered anywhere else in Australia, which means that nurses who wish to specialise are not able to access funding and are compelled to pay full fees.

Reducing the burden of student debt will help students from lower economic backgrounds access higher education. One part of reducing student debt is greater accessibility to commonwealth supported places. However, it is also important that there is a review of student fees, as government contributions to student fees have reduced in recent years as part of the Jobs Ready Graduates program, and some disciplinary areas have become significantly financially less accessible. High rates of student debt will need to be addressed to ensure that higher education is widely accessible, but also to ensure that attainment rates for tertiary degrees grow at the rate required to meet future workforce and research needs.

The interim report also addresses "the vital need to centre the experience of First Nations peoples in higher education" (36). This is particularly needed in healthcare education, as one of future drivers to reduce the gap in healthcare outcomes is First Nations representation in the workforce. Ensuring funding for First Nations students and prioritising funding for rural and remote students will help support outcomes and close gaps in healthcare and education. This will not only help those underrepresented in the higher education system attain tertiary qualifications, but also ensure that there are qualified healthcare professionals in the regions where there are currently persistent shortages (54).

Australian Government Department of Health and Aged Care (2021). Stronger Rural Health Strategy. <https://www.health.gov.au/topics/rural-health-workforce/stronger-rural-health-strategy>

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Independent Tertiary Education Council Australia. (2022). Skills Training Snapshot Remote, Rural and Regional Students. <https://www.iteca.edu.au/ITECA/Content/News/2023/vet-q1/rrr.independent.students.aspx>

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