

## **Australian Universities Accord: interim report response**

The Queensland Widening Tertiary Participation Consortium is a whole-of-state initiative to increase participation of key under-represented groups in tertiary education involving Queensland's seven Table A universities, the multi-state Australian Catholic University and the Queensland Department of Education. This response represents practitioner voices from across Consortium institutions and is not necessarily the viewpoint of individual institutions.

### **Part 1 Immediate Actions**

The Consortium supports the five priority actions as important first steps. In particular it notes the value of increased provision of Tertiary Study Hubs to both regional and outer-urban locations. Consultation on the location of future hubs should include local community representatives as well as local universities and partner organizations, such as the Consortium, who have long-term partnerships across regional and outer urban areas where higher education participation is low.

### **Part 2: Areas for further consideration**

#### **A. Putting First Nations at the heart of the Australian higher education system**

The Consortium supports the primacy of First Nations knowledges, perspectives and participation in the higher education system. Actions to address this priority must be based on consultation with First Nations peoples and involve First Nations leadership in designing and implementing strategies to realise this goal.

#### **B. More students enrolled in higher education, a fair system that ensures access and attainment, and a larger system that meets national jobs and skills needs**

The Consortium supports a larger and fairer tertiary system, noting:

- The need for careful calibration of targets including consultation with the sector to ensure targets are specific, achievable and backed by data tracking measures that support genuine attainment.
- First Nations people, people from low SES backgrounds, people from regional and remote locations, and people with disability and health conditions should be defined as *priority learner groups* in the higher education system. There is well established data, research and practice to justify their inclusion as priority learners and to guide ongoing interventions and monitoring.
- As well as these priority learner groups, further consideration is required to address the impacts of cumulative factors of disadvantage and how institutions address the needs of other learner groups who have unequal higher education access or outcomes. These groups may include students from care backgrounds, students from underrepresented culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and other locally identified priority groups who require specific support at different stages of the student life-cycle. Consideration should include reference to the University of Queensland's *Review of Identified Equity Groups* (2018) and *Investigating the Effects of Cumulative Factors of Disadvantage* report (2020).

#### **C. Meeting Australia's future skills needs**

The Consortium supports measures to address skills needs, in particular:

- A more integrated tertiary system that facilitates skills development and academic preparation; caters for different learner preferences and needs; facilitates movement between sectors; and increases geographic spread of tertiary provision.
- Provision of financial support and flexibility to meet WIL requirements, noting especially the needs of those with caring and financial responsibilities.
- Ensure a national jobs broker scheme improves access to part-time work and paid internships for all student groups and includes safeguards for successful degree completion including consideration of remuneration, work hours and conditions.

#### **D. Equity in participation, access and opportunity**

The Consortium supports the universal and wholistic approach to achieving parity of access and outcomes outlined in the interim report. There is clear need for all institutions to be involved across the student life-cycle and to take a collaborative approach within and across institutions to achieve proposed parity and attainment targets. National, state and local level collaborations involving education providers and community partners will enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of initiatives, particularly at the pre-access stage.

Achieving parity of outcomes will also require national and state commitment to a coordinated approach to improving outcomes for priority learner groups across early childhood, school and tertiary education sectors. This will include increased focus on building foundational learning skills, universal provision of high quality career education, and realising the potential of all students.

##### ***a. encouraging students from underrepresented groups to aspire to higher education and fulfil their potential***

Partnership or *widening participation* work by universities with school students, communities and other partners should focus on building skills, knowledge and confidence to realise potential rather than a more limited focus on increasing aspirations for higher education.

The Consortium recommends the development of a National Widening Participation Strategy that leads national level collaboration on outreach innovation, resource development, research, monitoring and evaluation, and supports place-based collaborative delivery coordinated at a state or regional level. The Consortium's long-term state-based collaboration has proven effective in coordinating outreach delivery; supporting innovation and program improvement; and facilitating program monitoring and evaluation. Co-delivery approaches by Consortium institutions have led to improved student engagement in activities and reinforced institution-neutral messaging (see attached case studies).

Collaborative, place-based widening participation programs need to be resourced to enable:

- partnership with schools, communities, education providers and other stakeholders to tailor programs to community needs;
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership in the design and implementation of programs;
- scaffolded tertiary awareness and preparation activities that are early, ongoing and experiential;

- parity of esteem for different pathways and an institution-neutral approach to tertiary options;
- engagement with parents, carers and Elders as the single largest influencers of students' pathways and post-school decisions;
- community member and non-school leaver cohort engagement and connection to learning that suits their life-stage and circumstances;
- quality career education and advice that is tailored to life-stages and needs; and
- evaluation integrated into the design and delivery of programs at institution, state and national level.

***b. making it easier for students to enter, exit and return to higher education***

Support for greater flexibility and inter-connectivity in tertiary education to meet needs of diverse learner groups.

***c. increasing access to preparatory and enabling programs***

Support noting importance of such programs for some of our most vulnerable students. Effective mapping of state/region-based pathways and provision of personalized career advice is also required so prospective students can realise their career and study goals in the most time and cost-efficient manner based on prior experience and skills.

***d. providing scaffolded learning support.***

Ongoing support is necessary to ensure students from priority learner groups succeed in their studies and achieve parity in graduate outcomes. Institutions must take a comprehensive whole of life-cycle approach that is responsive to different learner characteristics.

***e. through a national jobs broker system help students find part-time work*** (see above)

***f. exploring the potential for a student-centred, needs-based funding model***

Support exploration of better ways to adequately fund the institutional costs involved in ensuring students from priority learner groups succeed in studies and make positive post-degree transitions. However, there is also a need for distinct multi-year partnerships-based funding for collaborative, institutional-neutral widening participation programs. Such funding needs to enable collaborative, co-design of programs and early, ongoing engagement necessary to build long-term partnerships with communities and lift outcomes across urban, regional and remote locations.

***g. reducing the cost of living barriers***

***h. revising student contribution amounts and HELP repayment arrangements***

Support the panels comprehensive review of HELP costs and cost of living support noting particular concerns for priority learner groups. The panel should take into account the higher debt aversion of low SES students and lack of savings and family resources to support full-time study.

**G. Serving our communities**

Support for engagement with communities, including education providers, industry, business, local government, Indigenous leadership and community organisations to ensure higher education is responsive to community needs and there is community collaboration on lifting tertiary education participation and success.