



**Office of the Vice Chancellor**

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Office of the Vice Chancellor  
PO Box 157, Lismore, NSW, 2480

**Thursday, 31 August 2023**

Professor Mary O’Kane AC  
Chair, Australian Universities Accord Panel

**Australian Universities Accord Interim Report**

Dear Professor O’Kane

As invited, I am writing to you on behalf of Southern Cross University in relation to the Australian Universities Accord Interim Report.

The report presents a rich and varied tapestry of ideas and as such, it is not possible or useful to attempt to traverse each of them in this response. Moreover, I have had the benefit of reviewing the submission that has been prepared by the Regional Universities Network and I commend that document to you and fellow panel members in the strongest terms.

The RUN response does not provide feedback in relation to each individual element of the Interim Report. Nor by its nature can it reflect the varying weights that the member institutions may place on the items selected for commentary.

Nonetheless, it succinctly and on the basis of strong evidence points to a set of issues regarded in common as being of gravity and of relevance given the policy objectives that underpin the work being undertaken by the Accord Panel. In doing this, it casts helpful light on the very substantial potential of Australia’s regional universities to contribute meaningfully and effectively to the resolution of the grand challenges of access and equity that in such large part represent a core premise of the Accord process.

These challenges of access and equity, as I noted in my response to the initial Accord Discussion Paper, are at their most profound in Australia’s regions and it is also in our regions that the experience of skills gaps is most sharply experienced.

There is little coincidence in this. Good intentions to one side, the full human potential of those inhabiting vast swathes of our nation has, for want of the right policy settings and investment frameworks been trapped behind barriers that will not fade absent determined and focused action. No doubt the realisation of this has weighed heavily on the mind of each panel member.

The depth and diversity of ideas set out in the Accord Interim Report speak powerfully to a sense of ambition and to a recognition of the role that Australia’s Universities can play in driving improvements in national prosperity, influence, security and cohesion under redesigned policy settings.

As the various combinations of measures intended to better unlock this potential are weighed by the panel in coming months as the work of framing final recommendations is undertaken, it is my contention that consistent reference to three underpinning constructs may be of substantial assistance both in clarifying the hierarchy of priorities that must necessarily emerge from the work ahead and in validating their likely internal consistency and harmony.

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Arguably, a flaw in our existing overarching policy framework for Universities in Australia is that inadequate attention has been paid to these three matters. It follows that attentiveness to these and an understanding of how this may nuance key policies or decisions relating to the future of our Universities can support substantially sharpened and effective settings and outcomes.

The first of these constructs is *purpose*. Much of the anxiety that has been expressed in relation to the state of our University sector as we now find it may be related to concerns with respect to sameness or homogeneity and the perceived or actual opportunity and direct costs of this state of affairs.

An element of this anxiety likely flows from a deep sense that there exists across Australia's universities considerable variety in the elements of their instinctive or stated purpose, a state of affairs to be contrasted with the relative absence of recognition of this in myriad respects including current regulatory frameworks and funding arrangements.

If driving greater diversity in the character and focus of our Universities is indeed to be one of the ultimate products of the Accord process, a focus on and incorporation of a recognition of the differing focal points for the purpose of each University will be a powerful and helpful touchstone.

A second key construct that may usefully guide the further work of the panel is *place*. It is true that this has not been wholly overlooked by policymakers. Work conducted on the development and realisation of precincts models represents an excellent example of considerations relating to place being at the forefront of consideration.

There nonetheless exists a real opportunity to more systematically take account of the impact and implications of place in configuring the design of Australia's future University system. This is especially important for Australia's regional universities whose operating and strategic cadence is dominated by considerations of or related to the geographic domains in which they operate.

Whether in relation to the provision of an adequately broad offer outside areas of concentrated population, or the need to maintain duplicate infrastructure to reach communities, or the complexity of attracting and retaining academic and professional staff or in many other ways, place matters deeply yet is to a substantial extent overlooked in many key aspects of our current system design, especially with respect to funding.

Place can also matter in very fundamental ways that have nothing to do with the day-to-day work of universities in teaching and research. This was graphically illustrated in the case of Southern Cross University during the 2022 floods in northern NSW when the University in effect suspended its own operations at the Lismore campus in order to facilitate flood response and recovery efforts.

It remains the case to this day that on the campus, the University houses three schools that were destroyed, in addition to TAFE, a range of primary health services and an ambulance depot. In order that these organisations and their needs be accommodated, it remains the case that a substantial number of the University's staff normally based at Lismore continue to work from home. All of the work necessary to accomplish this process of support and adjustment has been supported through the diversion of internal capabilities and resources.

For our University community, there is a very deep sense of pride in the ongoing work that has been done in response to a major natural disaster event. It has served as a showcase for the enormous capabilities that Universities can bring to bear within their communities and as a case study in what it means to be an anchor

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institution in a region. At its core, however, the lesson to be derived from this is not about how a single institution in a particular region may rise to the challenge of adversity but rather the improvement that may be engendered across Australia's university system taken as a whole if future policy settings take more explicit and systematic regard to the implications and consequences of place.

The third construct that I regard as central to supporting any analysis of reformation of our university system may be labelled *proportion*. Decisions made within universities in relation to their size and shape are regarded as some of the most strategically complex faced by leadership teams and governing bodies. Yet even in the face of this complexity there lies a brutal, overwhelmingly powerful reality that in the context of the present design parameters for Australia's university system, size or scale matters more than most, perhaps even all other factors.

The quest for scale dominates many other considerations, and the rewards for its achievement are outsized, though laced with the paradox that the accomplishment of scale can beget an urgent need for the achievement of still more scale.

For reasons that have been traversed in detail elsewhere, including in submissions made to the Accord panel by the Regional Universities Network, regional universities face varying barriers to accomplishing scale and in consequence, in a relative sense and in the context of present system arrangements face an endemic, systemic and profound disadvantage relative to other institutions. This disadvantage manifests in a variety of ways, but is most powerfully evinced through the slow motion running down of the capital stock of those institutions unable to achieve a threshold level of scale that under present settings marks a dividing line between institutions configured to be self-sustaining through time and those not so.

Unaddressed, this will have profound consequences over time for the delivery of opportunity in education to some of the population cohorts least touched by the march of progress in national educational attainment over the past two decades, and will sap vitality and innovation from key regional industries through the absence of key supporting research programs and infrastructure.

A key opportunity therefore exists to explicitly and carefully address the inconsistency now embedded in our system architecture that arises from the inherent tension between the vast differences in scale observable across Australia's universities set against the relative blindness to the implications of this in key funding, regulatory and governance frameworks.

Taken together, a systematised and explicit incorporation of reference to the constructs of purpose, place and proportion in the design of policy for our sector can yield the development of a more sustainable, impactful and effective system of Australian universities and at the same time better support the enlivenment of the points of comparative distinctiveness and advantage of each node within this system. I hope that these reflections are useful and I am of course happy to further elaborate on any aspect of them should that be of assistance as the panel continues its vital work.

Sincerely



**Professor Tyrone Carlin**  
Vice Chancellor