

Response to the Universities Accord Interim Report

University Colleges Australia
1 September 2023

University Colleges Australia ('UCA') thanks the Minister for Education for the opportunity to respond to the Australian Universities Accord Interim Report ('Interim Report'). We strongly **support the ongoing review process** and are pleased that the strength of Australia's higher education sector is a priority of the federal and state governments.

We wish to use this opportunity to provide an overview of UCA's role in the tertiary sector, comment on the Priority Actions discussed in the Interim Report and convey our preparedness to assist with the implementation of plans that emerge from the Accord.

About UCA

UCA is the **peak body for university colleges, halls, and other collegiate residences** (hereafter, 'colleges') in Australia. It is presently led by Lisa Sutherland, the Master of Wesley College within the University of Sydney, and represents the senior leaders of more than 50 organisations that provide integrated accommodation and educational offerings to students. Though these organisations are diverse, they are typically characterised by:

1. Not-for-profit governance models (most colleges are independent statutory corporations, companies limited by guarantee, or divisions within not-for-profit universities).
2. Investment of a significant proportion of operating revenue in student programs and experiences, including:
 - a. academic programs, which may include academic mentoring, weekly subject tutorials, and courses;
 - b. student leadership opportunities;
 - c. pastoral care programs; and
 - d. extra-curricular programs, including music, sport, visual art, and drama.
3. The provision of scholarships awarded on the basis of financial need.
4. A strong emphasis on community-building.

Since 1966, UCA has been **advancing, enhancing, and promoting collegiate life and collegiate leadership** in Australia. In practice, this means:

1. Commissioning research into issues affecting tertiary students, including alcohol-related harm and sexual misconduct;
2. Convening forums and other professional development programs designed to build the leadership capabilities of our members;
3. Developing frameworks designed to address problems affecting tertiary students;
4. Advocating for collegiality, holistic learning, and inclusivity; and
5. Encouraging members to adopt best-practice policies and procedures.

Response to Priority Actions in the Interim Report

Priority Action 1 – Regional University Centres

In accordance with our core values, which include equity and access to education, we strongly **support building better learning infrastructure in areas that are not proximate to university campuses**, whether in regional Australia or in suburban areas. We stress the importance of ensuring that these Centres are **collegial**: they must facilitate connections between students, not merely connections to the internet. Our members have significant experience in building communities in different contexts and would gladly engage in the ongoing refinement of the blueprints for these Centres and the student programs they offer.

Priority Action 2 – Removing the 50% Pass Rule

We have found that many students whom governments should be trying to *include* in higher education – particularly low socioeconomic status students – have been disproportionately affected by the ‘50% Pass Rule’ introduced as part of the Job-Ready Graduates Package. Colleges across Australia increased academic support resourcing in response to the Rule – many offered private tutorials to struggling students at risk of failing subjects during their first year of tertiary education – but its discriminatory effects were nonetheless felt. We **endorse the move to abandon the Rule**.

Priority Action 3 – Funded places for First Nations students

We also **welcome the move to ensure that all First Nations students are eligible for a funded place at an Australian university**. We emphasise, however, that funded places should form part of a multi-layered approach to promoting the rights of First Nations students to a high-quality tertiary education. Colleges and places of residence have a significant role to play in providing a holistic support framework that will ensure that *enrolment* translates into *degree completion*. Our hope is that scholarships offered by colleges to First Nations students – as well as the growing support programs led by First Nations officers working and residing within colleges – will support Priority Action 3.

Priority Action 4 – Recommendation that universities and other providers direct more funding to equity outcomes

We respond to Priority Action 4 in light of the government’s aspiration to increase the number of students with a university degree. Any expansion of the number of students must, in our view, be met by a commensurate expansion of supports, including those identified in the Interim Report: ‘improved academic advice and learning support, wraparound support and services (such as mental health services), scholarships and other equity-related services’. However, we would like to see **more onerous conditions attached to university funding packages**. We consider it essential that students are not only provided with high-quality lectures and tutorials, but the full suite of offerings that make completion of a degree a realistic possibility for all.

Priority Action 5 – Improving university governance

We strongly support the notion that Australian tertiary institutions – including colleges – must do more to improve student and staff wellbeing, and are particularly focused on efforts to promote student safety. We **hope to be part of the ongoing conversation about standards and compliance**. We are also eager to impress upon the government the importance of nuanced policy responses that engage with the diversity of accommodation providers in Australia (discussed below).

A call for sensitivity to the distinctions between accommodation-providing institutions

While the differences between colleges and commercial accommodation providers are obvious to staff and students who live or work in colleges, they are not always apparent to other stakeholders. For example, government officers are often surprised to learn that accommodation is only a small part of what colleges offer.

Our focus is on academic, pastoral, and extra-curricular programs – as well as building enduring communities – not just accommodation. This is evidenced by the growth of non-residential college membership around Australia. It is thus inappropriate to treat colleges and commercial accommodation providers as being synonymous when pursuing regulatory initiatives.

The distinction between colleges and commercial accommodation providers is not the only one worth drawing. Even within UCA, diversity is significant. Our members belong to:

- independent institutions with annual revenue of up to \$55m;
- small institutions that provide a home to fewer than 60 students; and
- institutions that deliver a collegiate experience but are owned and operated by universities.

Complicating matters further, these institutions are often described using different language, including ‘college’ (eg, St John’s College), ‘halls’ (eg, Toad Hall), and ‘houses’ (eg, University House).

Our view is that **effective policy hinges on an appreciation of this diversity**. For example, we respectfully challenge recent calls – particularly at the Australian Financial Review Summit – for uniform policies on sexual misconduct. While UCA unequivocally supports minimum standards and robust governance frameworks, we are concerned that a uniform policy designed for all ‘providers of student accommodation’ could overlook details that must be considered to achieve *optimal* – not merely *adequate* – student outcomes. These details include the size of organisations, how they are governed, the number of staff they have, and their student gender composition.

To ensure that this nuance can be understood, UCA has committed to running a national census of its growing member base. We are seeking consent from our members to publicise data on matters such as the student training programs in place in different colleges and approaches taken to handling reports of sexual misconduct.

We are eager to engage with the federal and state governments throughout this exciting period of change. We believe it is crucial that policy changes to emerge from the Accord – particularly concerning student safety in residential settings – take account of the perspectives and knowledge of educators who are intimately familiar with colleges.

Contact

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