



Australian Universities Accord- Interim Report Submission

Key points

The Northern Australia Universities Alliance (NAUA) is developing place-based solutions for the development and prosperity of Northern Australia. NAUA welcomes the Universities Accord proposals as a pathway to realise the opportunity presented by the demographic profile of Northern Australia.

Complementing individual submissions from our members, NAUA suggests that the final Accord Panel recommendations could be enhanced by noting:

1. The opportunity for mission-based compacts to lift educational attainment in Northern Australia and that the NAUA provides capacity to support this agenda. (Serving Our Communities, Collaborative Delivery Arrangements)
2. First Nations participation needs to be place-based, rather than one-size-fits-all, to ensure there is no unintended outcomes across the diverse communities in the North. (Equity in participation, access, and opportunity)
3. The Panel needs to prioritise a future funding approach that effectively resolves the fundamental viability challenges for all regional universities (and particularly those in the North) to avoid terminal decline in this part of the sector (Sustainable Funding and Financing)

NAUA seeks to be an active partner in delivering the intended success of the Accord, providing a practical collaborative model for enhancing the impact and sustainability of the sector, and a mechanism for partnering with the Australian Government to achieve a wide range of public policy goals in Northern Australia.

About the NAUA

The Northern Australia Universities Alliance brings three universities together to support the sustainable development of Northern Australia. Universities headquartered in Northern Australia are pivotal in fostering the capabilities of our communities and ensuring locally driven research and ideas shape our future.

The Alliance strives to:

- develop and retain crucial skills and education for the people of Northern Australia;
- build strategic research capabilities that support progress for Northern Australia's industries and communities; and
- shape future policy and investment for Northern Australia by Commonwealth, State and Territory governments.

Our work will inform government decision making on issues for Northern Australia and develop new collaborative research and education initiatives for our region.



1. Place-based, mission-based compacts can lift educational attainment in the Northern Australia

We welcome the recognition of the civic engagement role in universities in the Interim Report and recommend the development of mission-based compacts for educational attainment in Northern Australia.

The NAUA has been specifically formed by member universities as a ‘collaborative delivery arrangement’ to support, develop and implement place-based (mission-based) approaches to educational attainment in Northern communities. The North is both an emerging and transitioning economy, and more needs to be done to effectively develop the foundations for future achievement in our communities. We need to build a better, fit for purpose education system for our region. This means that as well as providing better integration between VET and university education, school outcomes and the increasing role of communities and industry in driving change needs to be integrated into future approaches.

NAUA members see an opportunity to work collaboratively at scale across Northern Australia on these fundamental attainment issues. Through stronger place-based agreement making and partnerships with schools, TAFE/VET providers, First Nations, and industry, we can improve educational outcomes. This is essential to secure the unique skills required for local workforce and the northern economy going forward.

This long term and collaborative work must draw on our university capacities in research *and* education but go further in leveraging our deep community and industry links and relationships with other institutions in the North that come from being based in the North. NAUA welcomes the opportunity for our Vice Chancellors to discuss in greater detail how mission-based compacts might be formed as part of further consideration of this policy approach.

2. Proposed national targets for First Nations participation in university should be considered carefully.

The NAUA strongly support the Accord Panel’s report focus and recommendations in relation to equity and the goal of increasing First Nations participation in university. However, any one-size-fits-all target for First Nations participation needs to be reconsidered.

Reflecting the communities we serve, NAUA members are the top three Australian universities for the proportion of indigenous students. In 2021, 5.9% of NAUA students (2,773 of the 46,778 NAUA university students) identified themselves as First Nations¹. For vocational education students, CDU’s cohort had a 26.4 per cent First Nations presence and CQU had 9.7% First Nations students in 2021. In addition, our First Nations student cohorts are more likely to be from remote and very remote areas.

¹ Australian Government Department of Education data.



Within a framework of self-determination for First Nations communities², targeted effort to increase engagement and attainment of students in schools and in earlier life stages is the key priority for success in Northern Australia, building on the successful pathways already created by NAUA members and the practical knowledge of our teams and local allies.

We see further opportunities to build the scale and success of our First Nations student cohort, and this is a core priority for NAUA members.

However, we do not see the implementation of one-size-fits-all national targets for the sector as an effective policy and are concerned about the potential unintended consequences of a minimum target approach. Theoretically, the shifting of First Nations students from a strongly performing local university to an underperforming institution elsewhere could be considered success within this policy goal. This outcome would not serve the interests of individual students or the communities they come from.

Prioritising the readiness of First Nations school students to participate in post-school study and improving pathways for students of all ages to study at university is the key to progress and any policy approach should target this outcome. Many of our current First Nations students are older, balancing university education with career and family obligations. Key factors to support First Nations pathways are to consider the cost of living pressures, including overcoming the additional financial strains of participating in work integrated learning, and student support structures while learning.

3. Sustainable funding and enhancing education opportunity in place.

The NAUA strongly supports the consideration of future funding which helps achieve attainment and equity targets and resolves the fundamental viability issues facing regional Universities under current funding arrangements.

NAUA universities provide local access to VET and higher education in areas of Australia which are distant from major cities and other universities. The Interim Report rightly identifies the challenging operating environment for regional universities. Relevant examples of funding deficiencies across the Report include delivering comprehensive teaching and learning in regional areas, in research funding, and in built infrastructure. Much of the built infrastructure for NAUA partners, which is critically important for place-based universities, is approaching end-of-life.

NAUA is committed to safeguarding the interests of the regional areas we serve, however current funding arrangements do not provide a sustainable foundation for the current operations of NAUA members, let alone the capacity to expand or innovate to better meet the needs of our underserved and disadvantaged communities.

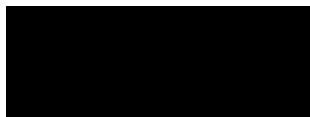
² See the Northern Australia Indigenous Development Accord - <https://www.niaa.gov.au/resource-centre/indigenous-affairs/northern-australia-indigenous-development-accord>.



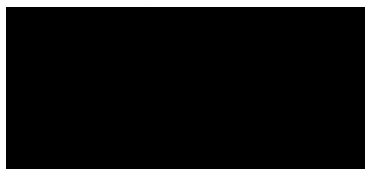
Funding certainty for the future of our institutions is crucial to any reform pathway. For example, regional loading and mission-based loading could be used to recognise the additional costs for regional universities and could be implemented as a core component of future funding arrangements. Loadings calculated based on a transparent and predictable criterion, supported by clear policy outcomes and clear review and indexation arrangements would enhance the system and provide clarity for both government and the sector on future funding.

An on-going resolution is crucial to success. Whilst one-off mission-based funding strategies, periodic infrastructure investments and other initiatives have been valuable to regional universities, these investments do not on their own address deep seated viability issues and provide certainty for the sector in the North.

We look forward to engaging with the Panel and the government in a more detailed consideration of a sustainable funding framework for the sector as part of the next stage of the Accord reforms.



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