



Prof. Mary O’Kane  
Chair, Australian Universities Accord  
Higher Education Division  
Australian Government Department of Education

1 September 2023

Dear Prof. O’Kane,

**Re: Response to Universities Accord Interim Report**

Engagement Australia welcomes the opportunity to make this final submission on the considerations for change outlined in the *Australian Universities Accord Interim Report* (the Interim Report). This is Engagement Australia’s third and final submission as part of the Accord process and focuses primarily on the findings of the Panel outlined in *2.6 Serving Our Communities*.

Engagement Australia is the peak body of engaged universities, counting over half of Australia’s universities as members.<sup>1</sup> Engagement Australia supports engaged research and teaching across all partner types - industry, government, community and the not-for-profit sector.

Engagement Australia was formed in 2003 with a vision to cultivate understanding and awareness of university engagement as a strategic methodology for individual and institutional achievement in unison with societal improvement and impact. It focuses on supporting professional learning and peer exchange, providing avenues for publication and collaboration, demonstrating and benchmarking university engagement, and showcasing best practice.

In 2019 the Business Higher Education Roundtable (“BHERT”) ceased its operations and passed its advocacy role – and its long-running Awards mechanism – into the hands of Engagement Australia (many BHERT University Members were also Members of Engagement Australia). In 2021 Engagement Australia launched the Australian Carnegie Community Engagement Classification to support the development of best practice community engagement in Australian universities, through a benchmarkable classification process and capacity building support.

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<sup>1</sup> Engagement Australia / Carnegie Community Engagement Network members: Academy of Information Technology; Australian Catholic University; Australian National University; Bond University; Charles Darwin University; Charles Sturt University; Excelsia College; Griffith University; La Trobe University; Monash University; Southern Cross University; University of Canberra; University of Canterbury; University of Melbourne; University of Queensland; University of Southern Queensland; University of Sydney; University of Tasmania; University of Technology Sydney; University of the Sunshine Coast; UNSW; Victoria University; Western Sydney University.

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Considerations for Change outlined in Interim Report in 2.6 Serving our Communities:

- a. *Recognising and formalising the crucial role institutions play in their communities through the Accord process and mission-based compacts.*

In the 2023 Federal Budget, the Treasurer announced new funding (\$198m) for place-based initiatives – a model that focuses on deep partnerships between communities, government agencies, not for profits and in many cases, universities. This commitment to partnership with community for the purpose of public benefit is echoed in the Australian Public Service’s new Charter of Partnerships and Engagement, introduced in 2022.

In relation to the budget announcement the government’s intention is clear – it seeks to break the cycles of disadvantage by partnering with philanthropy to enhance place-based, community driven approaches, supported through cross sector partnerships. The Treasurer has previously cited [‘Logan Together’](#) as a stellar example of the type of initiative he is seeking to replicate. A big part of Logan Together’s success was the role Griffith University played as anchor institution.

At a time when the central agencies are investing in partnership incentives and frameworks, it is timely that the Universities Accord is also asking the question about how government can best encourage and promote university-community collaboration and engagement. We must ensure these strategic processes are working in tandem with each other, and that incentives for partnership and collaboration are being applied to all actors.

Engagement Australia supports the recognition and formalisation of the crucial role institutions play in communities. We support the creation of mission-based or place-based compacts between the universities and the communities they serve.

Whilst many of these compacts will be focused on the university’s relationship with its local community, compacts can also speak to non-geographically proximate communities served by the university. A good example is research and teaching relationships that exist between urban universities and remote Indigenous communities, these existing partnerships can also be part of a mission or place-based compact.

These compacts would be diverse in nature, speaking directly to the particular needs and opportunities of the communities that each university serves. The compacts would also create a mechanism for universities to evidence their ‘strong civic leadership, engagement with...local and regional communities, and a commitment to social responsibility’ in accordance with the federal Higher Education Standards Framework (HESF.)

Whilst TEQSA assure against all standards embodied in the framework, there is no clarity or discussion about how this is done when it comes to community engagement. Universities should be required to demonstrate that they are meeting these statutory requirements. This can be achieved through the creation of place and mission-based compacts alongside the sector wide roll out of the Australian Carnegie Community Engagement Classification.

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Engagement Australia's Carnegie Community Engagement Classification allows for universities to undertake a rigorous and independent warranting of their university's commitment to, and investment in, community engagement. It also allows for a system wide analysis of higher education community collaboration, and the capacity to benchmark university community engagement across the sector. The network that sits alongside the Classification builds capability for university and community partners, with workshops and communities of practice delivered through Engagement Australia. This investment unlocks social benefit through increased university capability in engaged teaching, research, and community outreach, and increased capacity in community engagement more broadly. Building the capacity and skills needed for partners to undertake these place-based partnerships will be vital to the success of the government's approach.

*b. The creation of stronger links with industry and education, particularly in regional areas and other areas with low participation and attainment rates*

Engagement Australia supports the Interim Report's Priority Action 1 to fund new Tertiary Study Hubs in regional and suburban locations. This proposal arises from the success of the Regional and Country University Centres, a mode of delivery that has been shown to boost rural and regional participation and success in higher education. Significant to the success of these centres has been their deep community connection and engagement. Close relationships with local industry allow for the development of employment pipelines and upskilling opportunities to meet the employment and skills needs of the local area. Like RUCs and CUCs, Tertiary Study Hubs will become a valuable part of the interface between tertiary education and the community, supporting universities to foster meaningful industry and community engagement, creating a more deeply engaged higher education sector.

This is already occurring in the Widening Participation space. In 2022, the federal government funded the Regional Partnerships Project Pool Program (RPPPP) which enabled Regional University Centres to develop community-led outreach activities that were codesigned with university partners. This codesign occurred through 32 workshops led by 16 Regional University Centres across 21 communities throughout Queensland, NSW and Victoria. The codesign process also engaged with 99 schools in these regions. Participants included students, parents, industry, schools, teachers, youth organisations, local government, and NFPs. The federal government has now provided over \$5 million in funding for this work for partnerships between RUCs and Universities, demonstrating the potential role they can play in creating a more engaged tertiary education sector in partnership with universities.

Engagement Australia is well positioned to capture the learnings gained from effective cases such as RUCs and CUCs, and sharing this knowledge across the growing national network forming around the Carnegie project. By doing so, we can ensure that the developing practice in this space is evidence informed.

Engagement Australia also believes that expertise in engaged practice will be vital for staff in Tertiary Study Hubs. Ongoing, mutually beneficial collaboration with local industry, community organisations, universities, vocational education and training providers and government agencies will be key to the ongoing success of these hubs and should be explicitly supported in the roll out of the program.

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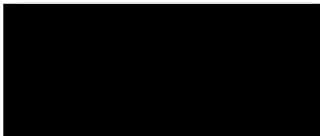
## **Recommendations**

Engagement Australia recommends:

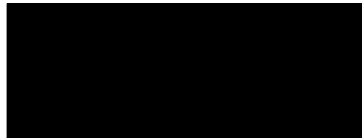
1. Government invest in Engagement Australia/Carnegie Community Engagement Network to scale the existing Classification for broader adoption, and further develop Engagement Australia as a backbone entity that cultivates and shares good engagement practice across sectors as part of a comprehensive capacity building set of offerings. This support would leverage existing investment provided by Engagement Australia and its 23 member universities and colleges.
2. Government apply the learnings gained through the Country University Centres in the development of the Tertiary Study Hubs, to create a range of hubs that similarly respond to targeted equity cohorts in relevant ways.
3. Government invest in skills building and professional development for the staff of Tertiary Study Hubs and other similar community-based hubs, particularly in the areas of community engagement, equity practice and transition pedagogy. This upskilling could be delivered through relevant organisations such as Engagement Australia's Carnegie program delivering community engagement capacity building; and equity focused organisations such as EPHEA delivering training in inclusive learning and transition support.

Thank you for the opportunity to make this final submission, and for your consideration of Engagement Australia's input. We look forward to the completion of the Australian Universities Accord Final Report.

Yours sincerely,



Prof. Jim Nyland  
Chair



Prof. Verity Firth, AM  
Deputy Chair

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