Submission on terms of reference for Review of Australia's Higher Education System

This submission is made collectively from representatives of Regional Universities Centres (RUCs) that have been coined as "campus model" RUC's. These Centre provide not only the study hub facilities and general supports of smaller RUCs, but also academically supported courses through their Centres. Fee-sharing partnerships with universities to support local delivery of qualifications is key to this model. With a strong emphasis on tertiary pathways and meeting industry need, our centre's maintain an underlying focus on regional development and therefore make this submission on the terms of reference for the University's Accord within that context.

1. **Meeting Australia's knowledge and skills needs, now and in the future**
- Recognise that rural and regional areas are vital for Australia's critical food and resources as well as emerging industries such as renewable energy and it is therefore key to retain, education and train talent in these areas to meet workforce demand into the future.
- Educating regional people within their regions is also vital to meet the service workforce needs (health, caring, mental wellbeing and education) of regional areas with people who ultimately will stay and work in the places they have chosen to live.
- Given regional students are the most likely to stay in or relocate to other regional areas, improving access and incentives for these students to complete university study (especially in these times of tight labour markets) be able do so should be a major focus of the Accord. The Regional University Centre program is an excellent example of this focus and requires ongoing funding. RUCs are local and operate within trusted and familiar community networks, placing them in a strong position to work strategically to develop regional businesses and industry.
- Encouraging universities to actively promote and connect their regional 'online' students to a local RUC (where available) would further enhance success for these students and therefore completion to take up regional employment.

2. **Access and opportunity**
- Supporting greater access and participation for students from underrepresented backgrounds in regional areas requires community, industry and education cooperation. Regional University Centres have these links and provide an opportunity for better program delivery on the ground and on country if supported to do so.
- Parametres/eligibility for equity support programs like the Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme funding could be reconsidered and expanded so that they can be accessed directly by RUCs that are best placed to deliver the services on country. Expanding access to HEPPP funding through the Regional Partnerships Project Pool Program has already shown the benefit of widening the net in the outreach space.
- Prioritise access and funding for RUCs to supported bridging programs as a critical first step for many regional students to access university education as Year 12 attainment is lower in regions.
- Support different modes of learning in regions (and assess their effectiveness) such as more online courses in study areas identified as a priority for meeting regional skills demands

and/or support for face-to-face lectures/tutorials in RUC's to provide greater support and variation to online learning. Clarification within TEQSA rules may support this innovation.

- Consider the costs (and means of support) for unpaid work placements which are untenable for many regional and equity students. Consideration for paid placements in key industries, child care support and priority for more placement opportunities sourced and supervised in local government areas.

3. **Investment and affordability**

- Embedding the RUC program and ongoing funding for Centres. Providing guaranteed suitable ongoing funding for core operation of regional study centres is fundamental.
- Sustainable and equitable funding models for universities need to acknowledge that educating/training students in regions is more expensive and therefore ongoing higher level funding is required.
- Consideration also needs to be given to embedding flexibility to respond to particular geographical or demographic challenges and provide support for different operating models and more nuanced or place-based initiatives – especially as the RUC program develops. This 'placed-based' approach recognises that 'one size fits all', 'short-term', 'top-down' or institution led approaches are often inappropriate and local communities are themselves central to developing solutions that very often leverage additional resources, generate efficiencies, and develop collaborations that would otherwise not occur.
- Consideration should be given to guaranteeing Commonwealth Supported Places for all equity students regardless of a university's caps. This would ensure growth models for all universities are centred on recruitment, retention and completion of equity students. This also ensures that innovative third party support arrangements (eg with regional university centres) do not face unnecessary financial barriers.
- At the very least, providing a guaranteed Commonwealth Supported Place for RUC supported students enrolled in a qualification through a formal university fee-sharing partnership.
- Changes to university funding overall should consider any inadvertent effects on third party support and regional partnerships.

4. **Governance, accountability and community**

- Consider the power imbalances between universities, RUCs and communities and ensure policy settings and funding with a regional focus deliver direct benefits to the regions. The more that funding can be directed to the regions themselves, the more likely that there will be direct accountability for the spend and desired outcomes achieved.
- Ensure in the equity space (especially in regions) that the focus is on higher education outcomes not just recruitment.

5. **The connection between the vocational education and training and higher education systems**

- Pathways to and between tertiary education are not well understood and too inconsistently applied between TAFE's and universities. Many regional areas have limited visibility to the various pathways into tertiary and vocational education.

- Developing standards for articulation arrangements from VET Diploma qualifications into Bachelor degrees would simplify the system along with common descriptors for these educational pathways.
- Priority could be placed on vocational and training programs that are specifically focused on assisting people who may not have experienced higher education before or have been away from education for an extended period of time
- In regions, RUCs can play a greater role as career advisors adjacent to the school system to help students to navigate these pathways. Policies to encourage all universities to financially contribute to such regional outreach would strengthen availability of targeted delivery in region.

6. **Quality and sustainability**

- Short term project funding in equity spaces have limited worth. A focus on how long term sustainable funding can be provided is required in this space.
- Providing additional CSPs into the system at this time when unemployment rates are low and there are workforce shortages are not required.
- Rather the system operates best when demand driven places are available.

7. **Delivering new knowledge, innovation and capability**

- Encourage and increase direct streams of partnership funding and research pools like the Regional Partnerships Project Pool Program which allows genuine collaboration to meet regional outcomes.
- Increase programs that foster aspiration building. Exposing secondary students to broader workforce choices can increase and sustain workforces regionally as students cannot be what they cannot see.

Regional Universities Centres contributing to this submission:

- Geraldton Universities Centre
- Unihub Spencer Gulf
- Taree Universities Centre
- Pilbara Universities Centre

All RUCs above would welcome the opportunity for direct consultation within the ACCORD process.