

16 December 2022

Prof Mary O’Kane

Chair

Australian Universities Accord

Via: Department of Education Website

Dear Professor O’Kane

RE: Australian Universities Accord – Public Consultation

I write to provide input into the consultation round for the Australian Universities Accord with specific comment on the following Terms of Reference items:

2. Access and opportunity

7. Delivering new knowledge, innovation and capability

Regional Development Australia Tropical North (RDATN) is an independent organisation, governed by a voluntary Board, with a charter to facilitate economic development solutions for our region which create jobs, and increase trade, investment and local procurement. The tropical north Queensland region comprises 16 percent of Queensland’s land mass with a population of nearly 300,000 people which is expected to grow to over 389,000 by 2041. Our region has substantial links with Papua New Guinea (indeed our closest capital city is not Brisbane, but Port Moresby) and the Indo-Pacific region.

The region has excellent research universities in Central Queensland University (CQU) and James Cook University (JCU) with strong connections between the universities, vocational training institutions and industry. Tropical expertise is one of our regional competitive advantages.

The need for continued and expanded higher education in our region is crucial – we know that students who study at regional universities, are more likely to stay in regional Australia and this is important to ensure the workforce to grow our liveability and prosperity.



Access and Opportunity

To improve access to higher education, across teaching, learning and research, particularly for First Nations people and regional and remote Australia, financial commitment to regional universities is important. Regional universities have a social charter to operate in thin markets, but this means the business model is vastly different to that of metropolitan universities. CQU and JCU service a remarkably different cohort, which often involves higher costs in challenging locations.

There is disparity in university funding models in capital cities versus regional areas. Students are drawn from regional areas to cities due to the availability of higher education spaces. The cap for metropolitan universities is higher (given the population size), whereas regional centres, the caps are lower. Indeed, often there are simply no spaces left in regional universities due to local demand – students need to leave the regions and travel to cities to study. Once this occurs, it is challenging to entice students back to the regions. **Consideration needs to be given to increase the higher education caps in regions and reduce the caps in metro centres.**

By increasing spaces in regional universities, it will enable local industries to find the workforce to drive economic growth and increase access to Indigenous peoples. CQU and JCU welcome students from across regional, rural and remote areas and enrol a significantly higher proportion of students from low socioeconomic or disadvantaged backgrounds. The institutions also have a high proportion of part time students. Any reduction in funding levels and/or support for regional universities would reduce our institutions' capacity to provide the additional support that many of our local students need.

In addition, we feel there is a need for **regional universities to provide a comprehensive range of course offerings**, both at regional campuses and through online delivery (supported by local campuses), to assist with the development of a sustainable workforce pipeline now and into the future. Cairns, like other regions in Australia, is in the grip of massive professional skills shortages from Engineers and Architects to health professionals and accountants. Cairns is also on the cusp massive expansion in the maritime industry, with a pipeline of technical and professional skill requirements that cannot be met without an increase in local university graduates.

Finally, regional universities are unable to simply drop courses that are financially unsustainable. Cessation of courses in regional Australia has huge impacts on our professional services industries (eg. Accountants, lawyers, engineers) with businesses needing to limit their client intake or shut down due to staff shortages.

It is essential that the government prioritise a sustainable and equitable funding model for higher education that supports access and attainment in regional Australia.

Delivering new knowledge, innovation and capability

Research informs teaching – local experience with CQU and JCU shows us that local research done in collaboration with local industry yields results. Research cannot be deemed the remit of metropolitan universities only. If research is limited to metro centres, regional universities will have no research staff to supervise students, again adding to the 'student drain' away from regional Australia. It would make little sense that regional universities become teaching only institutions.



Research is also important for the development and sustenance of our regional communities/environments. Our universities are deeply engaged with local industry and community and therefore understand the current and emerging challenges and opportunities within our region. It is therefore **imperative that regional universities retain their capacity to undertake research that is focused on local challenges and the needs of regional Australia**. Our local institutions must be able to drive improvements in quality across the curriculum through research-informed teaching. Regional universities must continue to be 'comprehensive' rather than 'specialist'.

Thank you for considering our submission.

Kind regards



Sonja Johnson
Chief Executive Officer

