**Dear Professor Mary O’Kane,**

I, Dr Paul Harpur, write on behalf of Universities Enable and thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on the Review of Australia’s Higher Education System Terms of Reference.

# Universities Enable

Universities Enable is a disability steering group which will support universities to develop and realize disability action plans, embed a culture of inclusion, and support the development of sector-wide efforts to champion ability equality.

We believe that ability equality can be achieved, and that universities are the machines which can educate the leaders of tomorrow, employ the leaders of today, and create research and innovation which can lead to a more inclusive tomorrow.

We believe that inclusive universities are safe universities. Making our university environments safer and more secure for staff and students with disabilities is a priority. This involves identifying and targeting barriers to ability equality that are imposed upon the sector by outside influences, as well as identifying and targeting the challenges which universities can address. This includes identifying targeting disabling barriers that universities can address individually, as well as identify the challenges that are common across the sector, where universities can work collaboratively to efficiently champion ability equality responses.

We believe that society and our universities are the richer for the diversity we bring.

We champion the belief that persons with disabilities belong and can succeed at all levels.

We believe that universities are the key to realizing ability equality in society.

# Achieving the Purpose of the Review

Australia has always been diverse but has an unfortunate history of excluding those who are different. The university sector now has more students and staff with disabilities included in its institutions than ever before. More inclusive universities have over 10% of the student cohort reporting having a disability, and some universities having similar representation of the staff population, it is more timely than ever to consider disability inclusion in higher education.

We believe the Purpose of the Review can only be achieved if those who continue to be excluded have a direct voice in the Review process now and into the future.

# Key Area 2: Access and Opportunity

Rather than speaking of access and inclusion, we believe that the focus should be broader and focus instead on creating and realizing the belief that staff and students with a disability belong in higher education.

Key Area 2 needs to be strengthened to ensure students are included and supported throughout their entire student experience and not just on the point of entry.

The ToR should seek to identify clear targets for the access and inclusion of under-represented groups. These targets will further enable universities to embed concrete goals into their strategic objectives around inclusion and provide a minimum standard that all universities should be working towards. Illustratively, if universities can achieve a certain percentage of the total entry level population, then this proportion of total population should be reflected across all student activities, including employment as research assistants, and in graduation statistics and then into the employment of professional and academic staff with a disability.

Students with disabilities often have intersecting attributes. illustratively, there is a strong connection between LGBTQIA+ and disability communities. However, we note that LGBTQIA+ students should be specifically mentioned in this section, particularly given the context that LGBTQIA+ youth are at higher risk of experiencing homelessness and encounter significant and specific barriers within the education system alongside the other identities named.

# Key Area 4: Governance, accountability, and community

The first point within this area, which talks about regulatory and workplace relations obligations, should include an expectation that universities, which operate for the public good, will do much more than mere regulatory compliance.

Action Plans have been used to advance the participation and success of many excluded groups. Persons with disabilities are no different. The Review should create an expectation that universities will have Disability Action Plans that are created and monitored by persons with disabilities, where those persons are provided support and resourcing from their respective universities.

# Key Area 6. Quality and Sustainability

The current articulation of this area implies that the international students are primarily responsible for the sustainability of the sector. This only commodifies the valuable contribution that international education makes to research and innovation which is social as well as commercial. It also undervalues the positive impact that broader diversity and inclusion makes on the sustainability of an institution (i.e., 4 times less likely to leave their job in the next 12 months).

Short-term funding cycles and research programs provide specific barriers to inclusion for Early Career Researchers and International staff. The ToR should include specific wording around ensuring universities are equipped to provide solutions to these barriers by enabling timeframes that are conducive to long-term commitment to the University.

# Key Area 7. Delivering new knowledge, innovation, and capability

The current wording on the first point under Key Area 7 lends significant weight to the translation of research to commercialisation, without placing value on the non-financial benefits to research associated with research such as pure basic, strategic basic and applied research.

Furthermore, focusing on profit could create barriers for those that are already experiencing obstacles to participation. Research which supports Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, people with disabilities or women to recognise and overcome historic oppression is valuable in its own right and should not be judged on whether or not such research is profitable.

**Yours faithfully,**

**Dr Paul Harpur**

**Chair of Universities Enable**