

Professor Mary O’Kane AC
Chair, Australian Universities Accord Panel

Dear Professor O’Kane and colleagues

Thank you for your recent letter and for the opportunity to share our priorities for the Review of Australia’s higher education system.

As the sole University based in Tasmania, we are responsible for educating much of the future workforce that Tasmanians will rely upon during their lifetimes, including teachers, farmers, lawyers, nurses, doctors and social workers, just to name a few. It is therefore imperative that the higher education system in which we operate can meet the needs of our community, industry and whole island.

Despite the attractions of living in Tasmania and population growth in recent years, we face serious and pressing challenges in increasing employment and participation both now and indeed as we look ahead to the future. Tasmania has a disproportionately high number of people facing disadvantage in all its forms, including chronic health challenges, disability, and the lowest digital literacy in Australia. Tasmania has the highest proportion of people living in the most disadvantaged areas (37%)¹. We have the highest rate of disability (26.8% compared with 17.7% nationally)², and we have some of the poorest health outcomes in the country. Tasmania also has the lowest proportion of people with a university degree at 16.2%, compared with 22% nationally³, and 48% of adults are functionally illiterate⁴.

Central to what makes these challenges hard to address are low levels of educational attainment in Tasmania. Currently, Tasmania has the highest proportion of adults with only year 11 education outcomes or below in the country. This poor educational attainment magnifies our economic challenges, with unemployment in Tasmania consistently higher than nationally at 3.7%, compared to the 3.4% nationally for July 2022, and we have the lowest level of workforce participation at 60.6% compared with the national average of 66.4%. Our geographic remoteness adds further complexity, with Tasmania being the least digitally inclusive state, recording an average score of 66 compared to the national average of 71.1.⁵ Delivering our mission to address these challenges has seen us a university very much focused on developing expert teaching and support practices for regional,

¹ ABS 2016 Census, Index of Relative Socio-Economic Disadvantage

² [Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers 2018](#)

³ <https://www.abs.gov.au/census/find-census-data/quickstats/2021/6>

⁴ ABS (2018), 2016 Census QuickStats

⁵ <https://www.digitalinclusionindex.org.au/dashboard/National.aspx>

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remote and low SES cohorts, attracting more of these students than the average university, with higher numbers of:

- regional and remote domestic students (61% vs national average of 24%),
- low SES students (27% vs national average of 18%), and
- mature age students (~80% of our total student cohort), compared to 60% for other universities.

We have also tailored our offerings to meet the areas of high need in Tasmania, such as key occupations with skills shortages, and this is delivering strong and much-needed employment outcomes. For example, our Graduate Outcome Survey results from 2017-2021 show:

- 100% employment outcomes for UTAS graduates in Rehabilitation Studies,
- Over 96% employment outcomes for UTAS Pharmacy, Agriculture and Medical graduates, and
- Over 90% employment for teachers, process and resource engineers, nursing and allied health, behavioral science and architecture graduates.

These outcomes are compared to the national undergraduate bachelor domestic employment rate of 87.9% (2017-2021).

We seek to do much more of this because too many barriers to higher education remain. We know that in just Tasmania alone there are over 1000 students whom we make offers to every year, who are not able to study because of affordability issues. Many come from communities where education would be transformative not just for them as individuals but indeed for their families also and the communities they are a part of. The need is great and we must do more.

In addition, the University of Tasmania has the privilege and responsibility of meeting the research needs across all regions of Tasmania, and we are deeply committed to this as part of our mission. At the same time, we provide unique, distinctive and hard to replicate capability that contributes to meeting the needs of Australia and the world. One example, includes our work with partners such as the Australian Antarctic Division, CSIRO, Bureau of Meteorology, Geoscience Australia and Integrated Marine Observing System in contributing to excellent and impactful Antarctic and Southern Ocean research, which is improving our understanding of the global climate system and also evidences our diplomatic credentials on a global stage. Long-term, bold objectives such as these require decadal level planning and a commensurate research funding system to sustain a more programmatic approach.

Therefore, we very much welcome the opportunity to contribute to the University Accord process, and see the following priorities emerging against the terms of

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reference:

Meeting Australia's knowledge and skills needs, now and in the future

- We suggest considering how we can enhance funding flexibility to enable further differential pricing and remove financial barriers to increase the numbers of those from disadvantaged cohorts who can access higher education, and
- Identify measures to make it more affordable for students to study in areas where there are critical skill shortages, especially those re-skilling or up-skilling who are mid-career or those returning to work after a period out of the workforce undertaking caring responsibilities. We suggest exploring ways to encourage paid internship programs and incentivise students to undertake studies in particular skill areas, for example through tax relief.

Access and opportunity

- Conduct a comprehensive review of how Youth Allowance and other aspects of the income support system can better support access to education and potentially be complemented by expanded financial support for disadvantaged students, including scholarships that cover the rising costs of living,
- Investigate how better differentiated funding can be provided to support the significantly higher costs involved with overcoming the barriers to education and completion for students with physical and mental disabilities or mental health challenges,
- Consider whether a targeted NRAS type scheme could assist universities to create more affordable student accommodation to address the significant barrier that housing unaffordability creates for students who need to travel away from home for their education. This would also reduce the upward pressure on rental markets, especially in regional communities where housing construction responds inadequately or very slowly to increased demand, and
- Consider how our University's experience in successfully delivering micro-credentials and short-term learning as building blocks to higher education for disadvantaged cohorts, especially those in rural and remote communities, can be leveraged to deliver greater accessibility across Australia.

Investment and affordability

- In reviewing the CGS/HECS funding split established through the Job Ready Graduates package, consider that these funding arrangements do not align with the public/private benefit split that arises from higher education and how instead, incentives to direct students to areas where their skills are required

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would maximise the social and economic benefit from the Australian Government's investment in higher education, and

- Maintain the elements of the Job Ready Graduates package that support regional access to higher education and consider how greater flexibility can be achieved within the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF), that would enable higher education institutions greater agility in delivering the skills, education and training in areas of high skills need.

Governance, accountability and community

- Provide a framework and proposed KPIs to set expectations for all universities in how they can and should be meeting local, regional and national priorities including skills needs, enhancing sovereign capability and national security.

The connection between the vocational education and training and higher education systems

- Consider how State and Federal governments can work together to create collective plans that serve regional areas from year 11 onwards including whether we could:
 - standardise acknowledgement of prior learning and credit points - to make the transition between education providers more seamless for students,
 - create a standardised micro-credential framework - that encourages short-form learning and stackable degrees tailored to industry needs, and
 - build a model that enables TAFE and higher education offerings to complement each other so students can access what they need to develop the required skills.

Quality and sustainability

- Work in partnership with the ['Migration System for Australia's Future'](#) review to ensure that the migration system complements the education and training systems to deliver the skills and workforce required both now and into the future.

Delivering new knowledge, innovation and capability

- Recognise that Australia needs to be a knowledge-generating nation with a co-ordinated research ecosystem that ensures research talent is developed and retained, and is connected to appropriate infrastructure for longer periods

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of time to maximise the possibility of translating excellent research into impact to ensure all regions of Australia are prosperous, equitable and sustainable across all measures,

- Review not only the funding provided by national research funding agencies but how this is coordinated and interacts with other sources of research funding, including the role played by CSIRO and other agencies, the block funding model and how the CGS/HECS funding interacts with the 40/40/20 balanced academic model,
- Consider how a model that funds the full costs of research can be developed to address the ever increasing burden of the indirect costs (overheads) of research,
- Strengthen incentives for industry-based research that delivers outcomes in areas of high skill demand, innovation and enterprise creation, and
- Explore the development of innovative schemes such as a version of social bonds to fund university, industry and government applied research partnerships that deliver significantly improved and valuable health, education, employment and other social and environmental outcomes.

I look forward to continuing to engage with the Accord Panel in 2023 to provide further detail on how the University of Tasmania is delivering a mission and impact-based agenda to meet the needs of our communities and the island that we share.

Until then, my best wishes to you and your fellow panel members for a restorative festive season ahead of a busy and productive 2023.

Yours sincerely



Professor Rufus Black
Vice-Chancellor

19 December 2022

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