

6 April 2023

Professor Mary O’Kane  
Chair  
Australian Universities Accord Panel  
Via – online submission

Dear Professor O’Kane

**Re: Higher Education Review / Australian Universities Accord**

I write on behalf of the Regional Development Australia Moreton Bay (RDA MB) Committee in support of the submission by the University of the Sunshine Coast (UniSC) in response to the Australian Universities Accord Discussion Paper. Funded by the Australian Government, RDA MB provides independent advice to all three levels of government on critical issues affecting our region and works closely with community leaders to identify priority activities that will drive regional economic priorities.

Given the essential role regional and peri-urban universities play in furthering economic development, our organisation has worked closely with other levels of government to attract and retain investment for providing higher education in the region. In part, because of our organisation’s advocacy, our region has two university campuses catering for a population spread across three functional economic zones. Having UniSC campuses at Caboolture and at Petrie has lifted participation in tertiary education from 9.3% in 2011 to 11.4% in 2021 but, participation is still below the national (15.4%) and state average (14.2%). To address labour force shortages, raise gross regional product and combat inequities based on income, we continue to promote engagement with higher education institutions

This letter explains the unique needs of peri-urban and regional populations’ and businesses, and why we recommend the solutions proposed by UniSC. The shift of Australia towards a knowledge-based economy demands even higher levels of tertiary education. The sharing of technology and innovation to local industries, after being developed/shown by local university research is critical. At the same time Australia is experiencing a movement towards industry development in more regional and remote areas. Continued investment in peri-urban and regional universities will ensure that the populations and businesses in areas adjacent to capital cities, such as Moreton Bay are not left behind.

We take the opportunity of this review to again highlight the misuse of ABS definitions of ‘regional’ when considering our communities’ needs and regional characteristics. Our region consists of three regional centres and central business hub, with large areas of much less populated areas. Spread across over 2,000km<sup>2</sup>, our population of 500,000 has very diverse needs and complications relative to the neighbouring capital city, on top of transport, phone and internet access.

Being just north of Brisbane, with a growing population, university graduates are needed work in professional service/technology enabled industries within the region work and remotely in knowledge-based jobs in Brisbane, the Sunshine Coast or in other parts of Australia.

There is greatest demand in the Somerset employment region (which covers all of Moreton Bay), for workers with bachelor's degrees or higher. These degrees were required for 36% of online job advertisement in our region, according to Jobs and Skills Australia, Internet Vacancy Index, seasonally adjusted data, Dec 2022). By 2031, it is estimated that 5,324 students would be first in the family to go to university and would earn tertiary degrees, creating a local workforce productivity benefit of \$258.2 million.

In deciding eligibility for education, research and infrastructure funding programs i.e. eligibility based on program objectives we would encourage there to be emphasis on lifting higher education participation rates in a particular region, not the physical location of a campus. The current approach is particularly punitive for UniSC's Moreton Bay and Caboolture campuses, which are not considered 'regional' for many higher education and infrastructure funding programs, despite Moreton Bay clearly mirroring many of the challenges of more regional communities.

To provide ongoing improvement in university participation rates and particularly in 'equity' groups we join UniSC in calling for:

- The scope in funding programs to pursue innovative opportunities to increase higher education participation and completion rates amongst under-represented groups / regions
- Recognition and provision for the unique funding needs of regional universities e.g. student types / higher cost of delivery, diseconomies of scale, greater reliance on Commonwealth Supported Places revenue i.e. less revenue from international students, research, philanthropy and investments
- Review measures of success being tied to performance funding (e.g. consider teacher quality, student satisfaction, graduate outcomes, employer satisfaction) and nuance for regional universities (e.g. allow for longer study durations, allow for higher attrition rates due to student types/choices).

Noting the benefits of easing the transition between VET and higher education, we back the request by UniSC for more physical and qualifications integration to improve student choice and articulation pathways (e.g. improved recognition of higher learning arrangements).

The benefits of the specifically design and maintenance of buildings for teaching, learning and research must be maintained for ongoing operation of a full-service universities in population centres of Moreton Bay. To this end, we welcome the provision of teaching and research labs and workshops in the Petrie campus development to allow student to be trained in many fields previously unavailable in the Region.

Any funding allocation for universities should account for the business community needs and flow-on effects of the regional/peri-urban universities' buildings. Moreton Bay Region's business communities including the Moreton Bay Regional Council and our organisation frequently request the use of the UniSC buildings to hold meetings, forums and other events that support economic activity.

Equally, the applied and place-specific research that regional and peri-urban universities provide is vital for growing place-based solutions for local industry issues and opportunities. Having dedicated areas for local research, development and commercialisation is important.

Research funding should be deployed to regional universities in a way that plays to their strengths. There could be better alignment of Commonwealth and state government research funding to particular industries that are developing to meet regional populations' needs. In a region like Moreton Bay where most businesses are SMEs, there is a need to facilitate and promote industry partnerships then commercialisation with SMEs.

UniSC, like other regional universities who operate in thin markets, is often challenged to fund the necessary infrastructure needed to deliver new research opportunities. We encourage the Panel to consider how the Government can work with the regional university sector to address this issue. Re-establishing a dedicated higher education infrastructure fund with a dedicated amount for regional universities is suggested. To ensure the advances of digital technologies are available, any fund would need to fund asset investment for needs such as cyber security.

Our Committee is aware of the advantages to be gained from having international students in our region. The potential for these students to work in the region during their degree and after university through current visa arrangements is applauded. To gain the advantages of having more international students in the region, we concur with UniSC that incentives could be provided for international students that choose regional and peri-urban universities. Additional inducements could be offered to international students that stay in regions on graduating or their employers. Specifically we join UniSC in asking for:

- fast tracked visas for students attending a regional/peri-urban university easier permanent residency pathways for international students;
- employer employment incentives (wage subsidies) for employers of international students
- exploring ways to provide rental subsidies/assistance

To make an Australian, regional university more competitive value proposition in key overseas markets the Panel could consider ways to enhance the end-end international education experience too.

In summary, having UniSC delivering the comprehensive university capability across teaching and research in regional and peri-urban areas of Moreton Bay is a must. If you would like further information, please contact our CEO, Julia Callaghan.

Yours sincerely



Kelvin Patch  
Chair

cc: Professor Helen Bartlett – Vice-Chancellor and Chair, UniSC

