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**Tuesday, 11 April 2023**

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

### **Australian Universities Accord Panel Discussion Paper**

Dear Professor O'Kane

I am writing to you on behalf of Southern Cross University in relation to the Australian Universities Accord Panel Discussion paper.

I do this conscious of the weight of material you are likely to receive in response. Consequently, rather than producing a standalone response that would largely replicate the content of two substantial documents that I have collaborated in the production of, one from the NSW Vice-Chancellor's Committee and one from the Regional Universities Network, I write to endorse the contents of both of those submissions and to provide some additional reflections on elements of these that may be regarded as capturing some nuances and highlighting some areas that from the point of view of Southern Cross University are regarded as of particular significance.

The Accord process represents a profound opportunity to create a vision of and pathway towards a future Australian University sector, to the benefit of the nation as a whole. This is particularly so for Australia's regionally based Universities, which have the capacity to do enormously greater good under improved policy settings with respect to region building, extending the opportunity and benefit of higher education to those with least privileged access to it and to enhancing the resilience, attractiveness and contribution of Australia's regions to national outcomes and wellbeing.

As you read the submission from the Regional Universities Network, I hope that you and panel members are struck by the poignancy of the paradox that is woven through it. On the one hand, as the submission makes clear, the benefits of providing high quality university education in regional Australia are profound and wide-ranging. It is in the regions that chronic workforce shortages in key professions and industries continue to manifest to adverse effect, yet it is regionally trained people who are likely to remain in and thus contribute to regional Australia. By contrast, it is people in regional Australia who have the lowest levels of University attainment by a very measurable margin, and these people most likely under present policy settings to not find access to a University place given the impact of funding caps and the mismatch between any growth envelopes presently available and the underlying demography of our regions.

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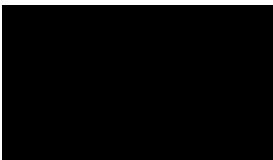
The material within the RUN submission that deals with the impacts and implications of scale are critical, and I hope that these will be given very careful consideration. Simply put, Universities are very high fixed cost institutions and these fixed costs relative to available resourcing envelopes are often substantially more challenging to cover in the context of multiple campus operations spread across vast distances, a social need for a comprehensive offer even where this entails enrolment numbers that are thin and the need to support cohorts with more complex needs and life circumstances. The consequences of this are clear on any review of the long run operating margins of Australian Universities, which are clearly positively associated with scale. For many institutions in Australia's regions, simply producing ongoing surpluses adequate to maintain legacy capital stock, to say nothing of investing in enhanced quality, is a challenging, tenuous proposition.

The warning that present policy settings and funding arrangements may have the practical effect of pushing Australia towards a two (or possibly three) tiered higher education sector if not changed is a vital one that I hope the panel will very deeply consider, particularly in light of the access and participation gaps adverted to above, and the key role of Australia's regional universities as anchors within their communities and as reserves of capacity and capability in times of emergency and disaster.

Ultimately, one of the distinguishing features of Australia's regional Universities is their focus on building world class platforms of capability whose dominant gaze is the opportunities and problems we find at home in Australia and in particular in our regions. This is to the greater good but over the medium to long run, can only be done by institutions with robust and sustainable underpinnings.

Both of the detailed submission papers to which I have referred include a rich vein of thinking in relation to an array of measures, some within direct and easy grasp, others requiring considerable will and investment over many years, which can take Australia's University sector forward in the national interest. I commend them both to you and the panel, and look forward to the opportunity to speak further with you about the ideas contained therein as the consultation process you are leading continues.

Sincerely



**Professor Tyrone Carlin**  
Vice Chancellor & President