Dear Prof. Mary O’Kane,

The Australasian College of Paramedicine (the College) is the peak professional body for paramedics in Australasia. The College provides a respected voice in determining how changes in health service provision, legislation and clinical practice are shaped and implemented to enhance the quality of patient care. With its reach across jurisdictions, practice contexts and employment relationships, the College is uniquely and ideally situated to lead and advocate for the role the higher education sector will play in supporting paramedics to realise their potential, work to their full scope of practice through quality clinical education and consistently high clinical standards across the paramedic profession that supports best patient care. The College is future-focused and committed to enhancing patient-centred care through sustainable, evidence-based approaches and holistic workforce initiatives that see paramedics valued and utilised across the healthcare system for their unique skillset. As the peak professional body representing and supporting paramedics and student paramedics across Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand since 1973, the College champions the role of paramedics in emergency, urgent and primary care, driving a connected, multidisciplinary approach to high-quality healthcare in all communities.   The College welcomes the Government’s work towards establishing an Australian Universities Accord to drive alignment between healthcare needs of the community and Australia’s higher education system. The College has read the ‘Review Terms of Reference’ and the ‘Australian Universities Accord Discussion Paper: February 2023’ and would like the panel to consider the following responses from the College to those questions which most resonate.

Q1 How should an Accord be structured and focused to meet the challenges facing Australia’s higher education system? What is needed to overcome limitations in the current approach to Australian higher education? Collaboration, inclusion and listening should be the cornerstones of any overarching agreement across the higher education sector. There’s no ‘one body of knowledge’ or ‘single person’ that has all the answers, nor are the healthcare needs of any one group of consumers the same. The key to contemporary, industry relevant education and skills programs are dynamic partnerships and collaboration across government, higher education, industry, professional bodies and communities. The challenge for the Government and industry is to align the future vision of higher education, to deliver intellectual, economic and social development through the lens of profit-orientated businesses (universities). This is not to undermine the deep roots in their communities or their commitment to serving the changing needs of the communities, but there is a fundamental question of who’s going to pay – this cannot be born solely by the participants (students) and further consideration needs to be given to jointly funded ventures, scholarships, sponsorship and collaboration with Government and industry to support the volume of education required to deliver the higher education trained workforce of the future.

Q2 How can the diverse missions of Australian higher education providers be supported, taking into account their different operating contexts and communities they serve (for example regional universities)? The College acknowledges that higher education is essential in paramedicine and more broadly accords the health sector, to not just provide undergraduate education to become a registered healthcare professional, but to support the research and development of cutting-edge technology that will deliver the healthcare solutions of the future. Paramedics are a unique health workforce who work and reside across Australia, from the busiest capital cities to the most remote of communities. The College supports a sustainable, agile and contemporary approach in educating and training people in rural and remote communities.

Q4 Looking from now to 2030 and 2040, what major national challenges and opportunities should Australian higher education be focused on meeting? As a young (newly), registered health profession (Ahpra 2018) the College advocates for the higher education sector to play a collaborative role in developing and building the educational framework and programs to support the broader (future) scope of capabilities and capabilities required across our industry to deliver innovative multidisciplinary models of care to Australian communities. Australians are living longer, moving out of large metropolitan locations and have the same expectations of access to healthcare. Australia prides itself on access to high-quality healthcare, yet current figures as shown in the 2021 Mirror Mirror Report highlight the deterioration in access to healthcare across the country. We have already seen significant change across communities in the way healthcare was provided during COVID-19. Part of being future-ready is planning and educating, and the higher education sector could also be focused on the micro-credentialling and capacity building in existing workforces to utilise them to their fullest scope of practice, which supports multidisciplinary, innovative models of healthcare, not siloed to a specific discipline or traditional roles within emergency care.

Q5 How do the current structures of institutions, regulation and funding in higher education help or hinder Australia’s ability to meet these challenges? What needs to change? With the current workforce shortages and paramedics pivotal to the healthcare solutions of the future, the College advocates for undergraduate paramedic degrees to attract the same funding incentives as nursing and medicine, especially for those students who have committed to returning to communities in rural or regional areas where there are existing workforce shortages. Q6 What are the best ways to achieve and sustain future growth in Australian higher education, given the changing needs of the population and the current pressures on public funding? Create clear career pathways that allow for entry at a variety of levels and higher education study as part of the journey, not necessarily the only entry point. The College urges greater collaboration with the VET sector and the support for people studying across both systems to have clearer pathways and broader recognition of industry experience or VET level qualifications when transitioning to higher education (AQF 7 or above).

Q9 How should Australia ensure enough students are studying courses that align with the changing needs of the economy and society? There is significant workforce change across jurisdictional ambulance services with paramedics no longer wanting to just work full-time in an operational role. Frontline workforce is almost 50% women, with increasing requirements for flexibility and part-time hours, along with opportunities for secondments into other areas, such as health and the higher education sector. The Government needs to play a key role in supporting the funded places of paramedics in jurisdictional ambulance services to support flexibility and work-life balance, including those wanting reduced hours, those transitioning to retirement and opportunities to work across academia, health and/or government departments. Greater collaboration with large employers and the Government to plan for the changing workforce is critical and this would encourage students to study courses that align with the needs of the health sector. The College advocates for undergraduate paramedic degrees to attract the same funding incentives as nursing and medicine, especially for those students who have committed to returning to communities in rural or regional areas where there are existing workforce shortages. Healthcare workers are critical to the survival and wellbeing of communities, these should be prioritised where there is a need.

Q10 What role should higher education play in helping to develop high quality general learning capabilities across all age groups and industries? The College advocates for educational content that is contemporary, meets the skill requirement of the individual and the industry, and is flexible, so that bespoke courses can build and contribute towards post-graduate qualifications. This will be critical in the changing landscape of primary healthcare and the implementation of innovative models of care led by multidisciplinary teams. Paramedics will be looking for post-graduate short courses that meet a skills gap or a unique clinical pathway that can meet their industry needs at the time and can build towards a higher education qualification over time. The College is a strong advocate of multidisciplinary models of care with existing health professionals working to their full scope of practice. This will require micro-credentialing and ongoing education to support nuanced changes to existing practice to meet the health care needs of communities. In partnership with the Australian Government and the College, we strongly feel that universities could play a pivotal role in designing and delivering the necessary skills and capabilities for evidence-based multidisciplinary models.

Q13 How could an Accord support cooperation between providers, accreditation bodies, government and industry to ensure graduates have relevant skills for the workforce? The College agrees with the statement that ‘by international standards, the current link between higher education and industry in learning and teaching are underdeveloped’. There is enormous opportunity for an Accord to enhance engagement with industry, to improve the quality of the curriculum, enhance student experiences, increase opportunities for varied work placements and improve employment outcomes. The College is aware that guarantee work placements for each student enrolled is a limiting factor in expanding enrolments when there are rigid requirements for accreditation. The College would support an Accord agenda to bring together accreditation bodies, the Australian Government and industry to work together on this.

Q14 How should placement arrangements and work-integrated learning in higher education change in the decades ahead? The College strongly advocates for the inclusion of non-jurisdictional ambulance service placements and sees great opportunity in expanding placement arrangements across broader health services.

Q15 What changes are needed to grow a culture of lifelong learning in Australia? As detailed in question 4, there is significant change in the health sector workforce. To support this change and the recognition of health professionals working to full scope of practice, the higher education sector could also be focused on the micro-credentialling and capacity building in existing workforces to utilise them to their fullest scope of practice, which supports multidisciplinary, innovative models of healthcare, not siloed to a specific discipline or traditional role.

Q16 What practical barriers are inhibiting lifelong learning, and how can they be fixed? The College understands from its members that there is a rigidity and hierarchical culture that is reinforced across VET and higher education institutions of non-recognition of prior learning or qualifications. For example, a large pool of school leavers complete a VET program in Ambulance Transport Attendant or Patient Transport Officer and commence work in the Non-Emergency Patient Transport industry with the hopes of transitioning onto university education and professional registration. The College welcomes a better connection for the future paramedicine workforce that recognises industry experience and vocational training towards units of study in the undergraduate degree. The College supports the development of a non-hierarchical and flexibly applied qualifications framework that encourages recognition of prior learning (as identified by the Review of the Australian Qualifications Framework).

Q18 What role should reform of the AQF play in creating this alignment? The College advocates for any reform to put the needs of the students and Australia’s future learners at its centre. Any alignment should recognise the different approaches of individuals to learning and ensure that there are clear pathways that support the learning outcomes of everyone, that they are connected, industry recognised and can be built upon at any level so that learning is lifelong. The College is well positioned to play a key role in further stakeholder engagement and would welcome an opportunity to work closely with the Australian Government on delivering the Accord in recognition of the critical role higher education plays in the future of Australia. Work is currently underway by the College in other states and federally on the future scope and future roles in paramedicine; hosting forums and nurturing relationships with government, peak organisations, key stakeholders, and practicing paramedics. The College is committed to the training and development of paramedics; collaborating and learning from other medical colleges and international paramedicine models; as well, we are engaged federally to develop a framework for credentialing and scoping across the profession.    We look forward to an opportunity to expand upon this submission and discuss further.