

11 April 2023

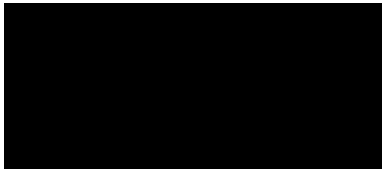
Mary O'Kane  
Chair, Australian Universities Accord  
Higher Education Division  
Australian Government Department of Education

**Re: Taree Universities Campus – A Regional University Centre response to the Australian Universities Accord Discussion Paper**

Dear Mary O'Kane and the Australian Universities Accord Panel,

Thank you for the invitation for Taree Universities Campus (TUC) to provide a written response to the discussion paper. The following presents our responses to the Discussion Paper, drawing on our experience as a Regional University Centre (RUC).

Kind regards,



Donna Ballard

Chief Executive Officer



## **Taree Universities Campus, the MidCoast NSW**

Taree Universities Campus (TUC), part of the [Regional University Centres](#) Network throughout rural, regional and remote Australia, was established in 2020 with the mission to ensure access to tertiary education is equitable for regional students living and working in the MidCoast region of NSW. TUC is a not-for-profit organisation led by a volunteer Board of respected local community and business leaders.

Set with the vision to connect residents of our regional Local Government area (LGA) to learning and opportunities, close to home, TUC reduces barriers to tertiary education including those of distance (to attend a traditional university campus away from home) and cost (negotiated through offering scholarships, cadetships and local work placements) to ensure face to face support is provided in a specifically designed campus-like space for study.

It is our firm belief that tertiary education can become a key driver for economic recovery and resilience, and for positive social and economic regeneration and development for the MidCoast NSW region, and throughout regional, rural and remote Australia.

Our response to the discussion paper is framed in three sections as follows:

- 1. Evidence based support for Regional Universities Centre (RUC) operations in regional Australia.**

**This section provides an understanding of the unique factors TUC responds to in its local context, in support of the significant contributions' RUCs can and are making to their regions and nationally.**

- 2. Quality teaching delivering quality learning that also meets regional Australia's knowledge and skill needs.**

**This section reflects on the ideal model that TUC aims to realise in its facilitation of local, place-based learning opportunities. It emphasises the tremendous potential for operational collaboration between RUCs, universities, and local partners to deliver improved higher education outcomes in response to localised skills needs.**

- 3. Improving equitable access through local inclusive community engagement and development**

**This section outlines some of the work TUC is doing towards inclusive community engagement and development in the MidCoast region. This demonstrates the potential for RUCs as mediating institutions working in collaboration with universities, governments, and local entities toward improved socio-economic outcomes for equity groups in regional areas.**

## **1. Evidence based support for Regional Universities Centre (RUC) operations in regional Australia**

In 2021 the estimated population of the entire MidCoast LGA was 96,425, over a land area of 10,060 km<sup>2</sup>. More so, approximately 40% of that population (37,816) lives solely in the Taree-Forster-Tuncurry area. The balance of the population lives in a large number of small towns (about 30%) and rural localities (around 25% of residents) that are closely associated with these major centres. The more populous of these small towns include Gloucester, Wingham, Old Bar, Hallidays Point, Harrington, Bulahdelah and Nahiabac, which truly reflects a “hub and spoke” demographic and the merge of the three councils in 2016 (Gloucester, Great Lakes and City of Greater Taree councils).

The campus in Taree is situated within an “Inner Regional” (Code: 2 or RA2) zone. It is proposed that over time, additional nodes may be located in Forster-Tuncurry and the more remote areas in MidCoast council buildings (such as Gloucester at 89 King Street that is situated in “Outer Regional” – code:3 or RA3). Therefore, the campus and nodes will be able to reach a large proportion of the MidCoast LGA population.

There is a recognised serious gap in access and support for current and potential university students in the MidCoast. The available data indicate that the MidCoast community is missing out when it comes to access to higher education. For example:

- Only about 12% of the population aged 15 years and over in the MidCoast Council area (2021 Census) has a Bachelor or higher degree - compared with the average of 26.3% for Australia;
- Only 1.3% of the population in the MidCoast council area are attending university, compared to 4.7% for Australia (2021 Census);
- Of the total students enrolling in university from the MidCoast, less than 20% actually complete their study: In fact, Completion rates are decreasing and there is an increasing dropout rate.

The MidCoast community needs TUC to help reverse these worrying trends and meet community skills demand by providing the infrastructure to support people with the opportunity to receive a university education. Overall, the demographic profile of the MidCoast is characterised as low socio-economic, with an index of relative socio disadvantage (SEIFA) in the 889-950 band - the second lowest category. At the 2021 Census, 34.7% of MidCoast Council households had an income of less than \$800 per week (low household income) compared to 21.0% across NSW. The unemployment rate was at 6.1% compared to 4.9% across NSW. The community has repeatedly raised concerns about the lack of opportunities for school leavers in the region. Many school leavers take low value jobs, become unemployed, or leave the area. In addition, surprisingly, there are very few apprenticeship opportunities. Therefore, TUC motivates young people to stay and achieve a qualification that matches the skills/profile in demand for the region.

The MidCoast LGA has a high Indigenous population making up 6.7% of the total population - compared to 3.2% across NSW (2021 Census). Only 1.3% of Indigenous people are attending university compared with 2.7% across NSW and only 5.5% of Indigenous people in MidCoast have a Bachelor or higher degree compared with 8.3% across NSW (2021 Census). The proportion of Indigenous people in the MidCoast LGA who are unemployed is 13.0%, compared to 9.8% in NSW (2021 Census).

The 2021 Census reports that only 33.4% of people over the age of 15 have achieved a level of schooling to year 12 or equivalent, compared to 56.9% for Australia. The low level of education achievement is

due to a range of issues such as deficit imaginaries, changing industries, socioeconomic disadvantage, and in current circumstances natural hardships such as the prolonged drought, recent floods and changes in the environment from Covid impacts.

Internet connections are poor as soon as you are outside a town, and this is often coupled with low uptake of technology. For example, the MidCoast LGA has one of the lowest Australian Digital Inclusion Index (ADII) nationally, with a score of 61, compared to a regional average of 67.4 and State/National average of approximately 71.

As a Regional University Centre, TUC is best placed to support and inspire students in our regional MidCoast LGA who are undertaking their tertiary education online or who may not otherwise believe university study is within their reach or capability. Essentially, TUC acts as a service provider for universities in the regional areas, and day-to-day support for universities. By engaging with the community and providing pathways to study options, the education level and qualifications of MidCoast residents can develop and grow. For example, 43% of registered students with TUC state they are 'first in family' undertaking tertiary education. Such growth nurtures digital literacy, improves the liveability of the MidCoast LGA, progresses business sustainability for local employers through assisting in meeting local skills gaps, and contributes importantly to regional socio-economic development. By supporting local tertiary students studying online to complete their studies we improve the tertiary completion rates in our region. The outcome is we assist in filling local skills gaps for regional employers.

Employers in our regional towns of the MidCoast are seeking skilled workers particularly in the areas of Health, Allied Health, Education, Business, Accounting, Construction, and Engineering. TUC currently 'partners' with selected universities to target these identified areas through online learning. In just two years of operations, from January 2021 to January 2023, TUC now has had over 300 students registered for study support and campus access (from a base of nil), supported over 30 students to graduate, and provided access to 6 financial scholarships - but of course there is much more to do.

**Overall, this section responds to numerous questions in the discussion paper such as Question 8, Question 9, Question 16, Question 23, Question 28, and Question 32.**

## **2. Quality teaching delivering quality learning that also meets regional Australia's knowledge and skill needs: The Ideal Model in the MidCoast LGA**

Our MidCoast LGA cohort of older residents (40% above the age of 60 years) is considerably greater than the NSW average (23.5%) and National average (23%), a pattern seen across much of regional Australia. The region is currently facing a supply of labour shortage to meet demand in Health and aged care, which will continue to grow. For example, the Federal Government has noted the need for 8,000 Registered Nurses for nursing homes by July 2023. Therefore, it is crucial to grow our community with both short- (1-4 year) and long-term (20-30 year) plans which can be met with a large supply of human capital in the regional area/s (Figure 1). That is, regions must “grow their own” – based on local knowledge - for local skills, with a long-term goal and importance of early intervention and access to specialists to plant that seed. Yet, it is equally important that regional people are given access to tertiary education with barriers of cost and distance that exist with needing to relocate for that education removed. A skilled local population can address skill shortages in regional areas, and people educated while living in regional areas are more likely to stay and work regionally. In regional communities with tight knowledge of employers/industry, RUCs such as TUC are primely positioned to facilitate placements plentiful and sought after by employers for universities. Short-term plans may even involve ‘Earn and Learn’ programs, with part time work and study leading to a full-time job on completion. Subsequently, this keeps skilled workers in our communities, while contributing to economic development and social capital.

Universities must be incentivised to continue developing online learning. Covid forced most universities to shift to online and blended models of teaching and learning. A positive outcome is increased flexibility and quality of online education, benefitting not only international students, but our regional, rural, and remote Australians. With increased access to expanded courses and learning opportunities in the MidCoast LGA, TUC has seen a local need, responding accordingly, with adequate programs to address support of an increased number of tertiary students, whether online, on-campus, or blended models (Figure 1). This support forms a significant plan for the regional community to push the normalising of online education, significantly increasing access to higher education for regional people. For example, access to regional facilities and career-specific student learning support, whether it be “debrief” sessions after work placement for Nursing students, or cohort building (i.e., communities of practice) to alleviate the sense of isolation, are key to higher retention and success rates in the completion of higher education (Figure 1).

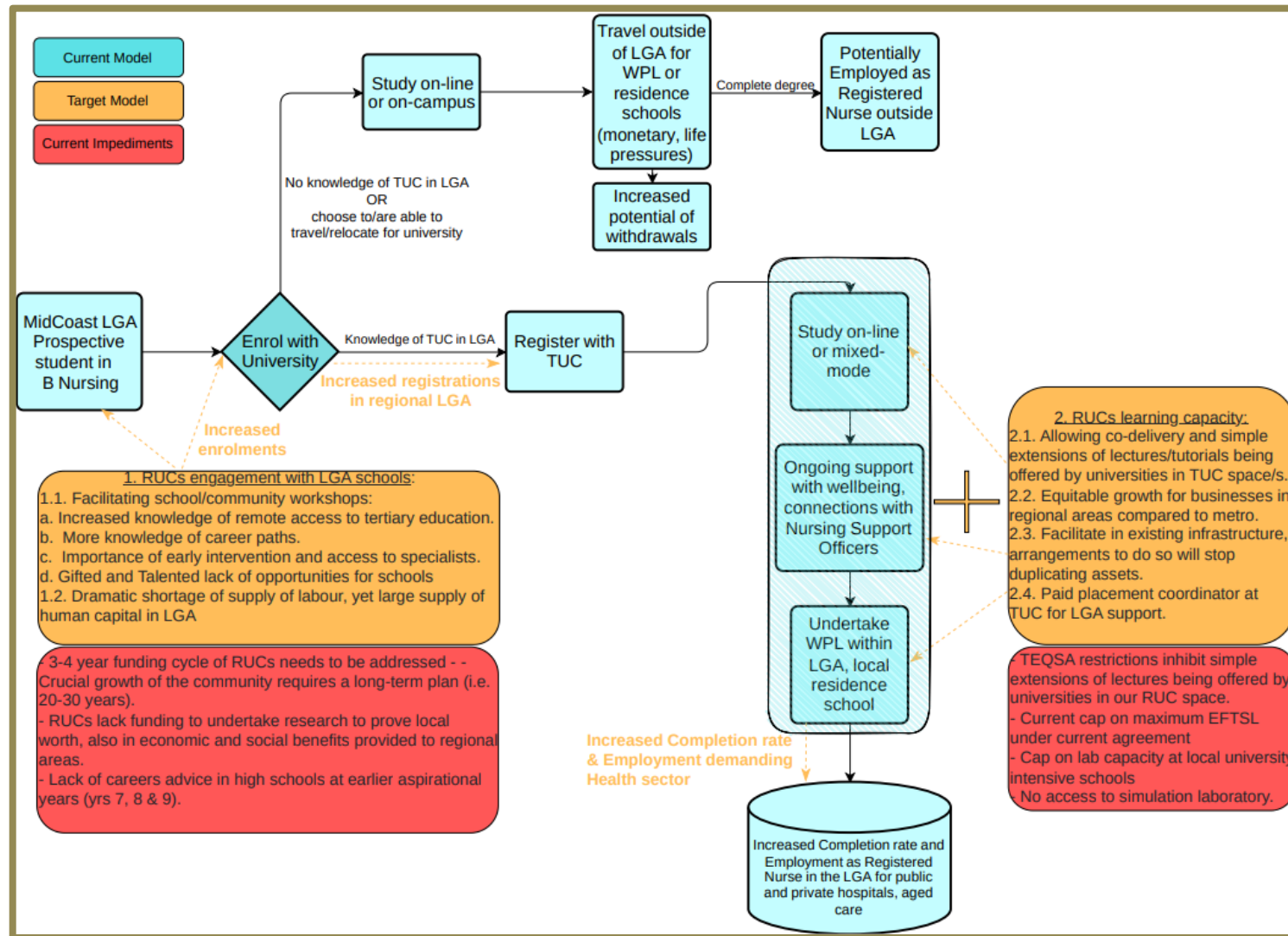
The partnership between TUC and Charles Sturt University (CSU) for their Bachelor of Nursing students demonstrates a successful locally supported tertiary education model that can be applied to other identified industries with high demand for skilled labour, yet currently have short supply of a skilled workforce. Also in the Health industry, if access to Allied Health courses online were available and other impediments eliminated, the ideal model (Figure 1) could be similarly applied.

Current impediments limiting quality teaching include: TEQSA restrictions that inhibit simple extensions in our campus-like space at TUC of lectures offered by universities; current caps on maximum EFTSL's; and current caps on laboratory capacities at local university intensive schools (Figure 1). Access to labs for practical components is a key barrier with universities in our region (i.e., CSU in Port Macquarie for Nursing students) already hitting capacity. This demonstrates real need for local facilities, improving equitable access for regional students. State Government benefits from many

students in our region being health and education, yet there is limited funnelling of funds to TAFE or hospitals with the capacity for such infrastructure. This should be prioritised as essential, and would mean, rather than many students travelling away, that only lecturer and lab technician would travel to the region for lab sessions (Figure 1). Using some open-mindedness to access existing infrastructure (e.g., CSU academics/students accessing TAFE or other universities labs), TUC could facilitate arrangements that will consequently stop duplication of assets, resulting in improved equitable access for regional students in our area. A sense of choosing to collaborate rather than duplicate is very strong in regional areas and TAFE and universities need to have incentives to collaborate (potentially through RUCs). This matches short-term plans and urgent need to increase the skilled workforce of these industries.

In setting long-term sustainable plans for regional Australia, investment in early knowledge of career pathways, and in demand skills, needs to be at the forefront of school students, careers advisors, and parents' minds (Figure 1). Building knowledge of careers feeds into the theme and importance of "you can't be what you can't see". In the MidCoast LGA, TUC and other not-for-profit community organisations (i.e., First Steps Count, The Smith Family) see this local need and have responded accordingly with programs. Unlike universities, often operating a normal business model, TUC (and the other organisations) always choose to collaborate rather than duplicate and built reputations within the MidCoast LGA of being real facilitators for equitable access to education at all different levels. For example, facilitating community workshops for those under 20 years so they recognise the campus-like space at TUC as somewhere they can belong has provided high school students, believing university is not for them, confidence to pursue tertiary education. Including parents and Careers advisor is also essential and addressed in other community workshops that TUC facilitate (i.e., RIEP workshops, CareerQuip). Priority areas that have been recognised locally include: schools and Careers advisors often only focus on Year 10-12 students nearing completion, and not the aspirational years of 7-9, for careers advice and inspiration; [Gifted and Talented](#) lack of opportunities for primary/high schools in regional areas, where those students need to study together to not feel isolated, but can only currently access it online; and current 3-4 year funding cycles of RUCs need to be addressed in order to put in place long-term plans the regional communities.

**Overall, this section responds to numerous questions in the discussion paper: Question 1, Question 2, Question 5, Question 8, Question 9, Question 32, Question 39, and Question 44.**



**Figure 1:** A depiction of prospective pathway/s for a resident in regional MidCoast NSW for a recognised labour short industry (i.e., Registered Nurse), unlocking the large supply of human capital. Shown are current operations/model, current impediments, and priority issues that hinder achieving an ideal/target model, which are discussed in Section 2.

### **3. Improving equitable access through local inclusive community engagement and development**

TUC is undertaking a range of regenerative community engagement and development initiatives that contribute to local socio-economic development and implement widening participation strategies. There is a need to reflect critically on how well current systems and funding incentivise and support a motivated commitment to collaborative, comprehensive and wholistic strategic planning and ongoing collaboration towards shared goals. Community led local initiatives like RUCs could benefit from stronger partnerships from governments at all levels, and from educational institutions. This could be better enabled with establishing shared national governance standards, benchmarks and frameworks for collaboration with RUCs that empowers and joins their responsiveness to local needs. RUCs also need to be adequately resourced and supported in respect of their internal knowledge and people resources to ensure effective inclusiveness of under-represented groups at that micro level in the communities they are working within. RUCs have promise as a neutral mediating institution working in partnership with multiple universities and facilitating collaborative engagement of a range of investors and stakeholder aspiring to shared goals. RUCs like TUC are in a position to engage in trust building in their regions and to advocate for their local communities.

There is an opportunity being realised by TUC, through its activities, to lead place based social transformation that includes empowerment of historically disenfranchised groups. TUC is currently undertaking community cultural development initiatives in its TUC Learning Community Project, aimed at unlocking potential of local community assets through processes of inclusive and strength-based community engagement and co-creation. This is made possible through a NSW State Government grant under the COVID-19 Community Connection and Wellbeing Program (CCCWP), which aims to rebuild social connection and cohesion following covid and multiple disasters in regional areas. Priority target groups under this program are groups that have been disproportionately impacted by COVID and other disasters, a good number of these groups are otherwise often recognised to be the most vulnerable groups in regional communities and beyond.

Two examples of responses to target groups under the project are provided below:

#### Initiatives for the wellbeing of young people

A range of youth development initiatives currently being undertaken by TUC, under the Learning Community project, follow consultations conducted by headspace Taree in 2022 that found young people across the LGA are feeling they are unwelcome and negatively stigmatised which impacts their wellbeing. Responding to this, in collaboration with headspace and MidCoast Council, TUC has launched a range of programs which provide opportunities for young people to have a voice and to engage in leading and co-creating local activities and events. These opportunities are designed to offer immersive wellbeing skills and capacity building for diverse groups and individuals. TUC is facilitating these as local collaborative initiatives that not only cultivate diverse local talent but also contribute influentially to shifting invisible barriers in the



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local social landscape, so that diverse young talent can thrive. TUC is invested in building up social capital through wellbeing and social impact initiatives that make the MidCoast an attractive and welcoming place for people of all ages.

Initiatives to incorporate a voice for local First Nations peoples. TUC and RUCs are in theory positioned advantageously to engage locally within their communities to bridge high priority equity gaps specific to our regions, in a way that is not possible by distance. Under its TUC Learning Community Project, TUC also aims to incorporate local Indigenous voices and support two-way learning opportunities under the guidance of a dedicated local community advisory group that includes well respected local Elders and Cultural Knowledge holders from a range of local family groups. They will advise upon initiatives including the incorporation of cultural and artistic physical placemaking elements in a new Campus design, developing local cultural knowledge resources for local education purposes, developing creative immersive learning experiences, and a narrative therapy story sharing project. Additionally, working in conjunction with the TUC Community Advisory Group and the local Aboriginal Education Consultative Group, TUC aims to develop a Reconciliation Action Plan with a goal that it should be an exemplary, locally based one, that other local organisation can model from. TUC is thus demonstrating localised benefits of a community led, higher education entity being embedded in communities.

Through locally based community engagement and development activities, TUC is recognising and seeking to empower diverse local voices in a way that removes ‘invisible from a distance barriers’ to social mobility that exist for some groups, more than for others, within regional areas. That is, unique local paradigmatic assumptions that might be assumed to be truth but may not be critically questioned such as an assumption that people are not accessing education or training due to an intrinsic lack of aspiration. Working in partnership with universities who can supply knowledge resources (such as researchers and equity practitioners), and assuming adequate financial and governance resources, local, community-based mediating organisations like TUC, if equipped with social justice literacy and expertise, can become a triple threat to the entrenched paradigmatic and prejudicial factors that hold our local talent back.

However, it is important to note that a good deal of the innovation and intention mentioned above and what is being achieved and made possible is due to fixed term funding for which success will be measured on wellbeing outcomes. RUCs are not funded in the longer term for the broadly beneficial wellbeing, social justice and social capital building initiatives such as we’re currently offering our local community. Therefore, evaluation measures applied to RUCs may not detect or recreate these kinds of broader social impacts that are keys to improving access and learning success for equity groups. And the funding is making possible the recruitment of a range of valuable professional expertise that may not otherwise be available under the RUC or CUC models because it is not considered core business. In places like ours where there has been entrenched and long-term disadvantage, universities may have a key role to play investing and developing equity knowledge and praxis, that will help communities to recover and thrive. Of course, this must recognise local people as experts in their own lives and an important role for community-based not-for-profit organisations as advocates for their communities.

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**Some key recommendations that can be made based on our experience and addressing Questions 30 and 34 directly are:**

- The provision of ongoing funding opportunities that incentivise collaborative ‘communities of learning’ strategies like TUC’s. These must promote collaboration between local community groups, organisations, RUCs and universities with wholistic wellbeing, social cohesion and connectedness being primary among the measurable outcomes.
- Effective policy and governance frameworks to recognise RUCs nationally as mediating institutions advocating for their local communities, inclusive of equity groups.

### **Closing Remarks**

Taree Universities Campus (TUC) is dedicated to ensuring access to tertiary education is equitable for regional students living and working in the MidCoast region of NSW. As part of the Regional Universities Centre (RUC) network, it is apparent that a single approach is not appropriate (one size does not fit all) across all of regional, rural and remote Australia. The grassroots connections and knowledge of our local landscape is where the difference can be made. We, like each RUC, focus priorities on the skills shortages in the LGA, for businesses to have the opportunity to grow, and that is equitable growth for businesses in regional areas compared to metro. Remote learning can be better supported with local capacity building for more higher education support workers & networks to be based in regional communities, to ensure strong in person support on the ground to supplement evolving, improving distance learning methods and technological developments. RUCs are currently providing this personalised level of local support and it could be expanded upon and or emulated or better recognised by many more universities.

TUC has consistently observed that locally based work placements and residential school placements are essential to low SES students who are upskilling while being a care giver or having limited funds and availability to travel away from home. Universities seem to struggle to meet this need and thus there is benefit from investing in more student support, community engagement and a strategic approach involving, for example, RUC staff who are based in regional locations and focused on building strong local relationships and partnerships. If not RUCs, then universities at the very least need dedicated, proactive advocates for specific regions who are employed at high levels within the institution. Locally based in person support networks are also essential, and RUCs can facilitate those where universities do not have a local Campus or have limited resources. Where RUCs are able to connect with a strong advocate from within the University it makes a huge difference to successful collaboration. TUC has observed a measurable improvement in the rate of retention for students who have benefited from our advocacy supporting their local placements. This is in contrary to locally irrelevant career advice delivered by universities or schools.

However, in some instances, **long-term targets** could be a unified and sophisticated response to skills and socio-economic priorities in a changing landscape can be utilised. For example, anticipating an increasing demand for onshore knowledge, health and digital workers nationally, and enabling local economy building for regional and remote areas. In other words, enabling local human resources supply to fortify regions with skills needs of the future. Strategic planning and evaluation should be engaged with measures to assess the changing landscape at intervals reflecting various qualifying periods for degrees. Parity in traditionally under-represented equity groups should be a minimum target with success being demonstrated by numbers of at degree attainment. In addition, clear evidence of a contribution towards positive social impact amounting to a clear trajectory that improves quality of life including the social and economic agency in low SES communities and under-represented groups. To be measure qualitatively and quantitatively with reference to substantial community engagement enabling an effective voice in processes for these groups.

In terms of **funding and regulatory settings**, incentivising commitment to comprehensive and wholistic strategic planning and ongoing collaboration towards shared goals. Sophisticated and sensitive qualitative evaluation. Ensure inclusion of the equity groups and relevant communities in question in the processes for identifying opportunities. Community led local initiatives like RUCs could benefit from stronger partnerships from governments at all levels, and from educational institutions. Together there is work to be done towards establishing shared national governance standards, benchmarks and frameworks for collaboration with RUCs that empowers their responsiveness to local needs; and, RUCs also need to be adequately resourced and supported in respect of their internal governance and evaluation to ensure effective inclusiveness of under-represented groups at that micro level in the communities they are working within. This can mean at times there is extra work needed towards overcoming the cultural barriers, prejudice and power dynamics that are entrenched in the paradigmatic assumptions of local communities and holding certain groups back. Disadvantaged communities need a whole of system social justice and advocacy treatment that will require significant knowledge resources to be activated. RUC's have promise as a neutral mediating institution working in partnership with multiple universities and facilitating collaborative engagement of a range of investors and stakeholder aspiring to shared goals.

Additionally, demand driven commonwealth support for students from all under-represented groups would be beneficial. Geographical allocations of funding for additional supports that recognise areas of need in response to data. Additional commonwealth scholarship funds that support under-represented groups to access professional development in areas of skills gaps for the future, with reference to the specific gaps in their geographical locations of origin as well as nationally.

Overall, **looking from now to 2030 and 2040, major national challenges and opportunities Australian higher education should be focused on meeting** include:

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- Quickly changing skills priorities – in regional areas there is an opportunity for universities working with RUCs to undertake research and co-creative engagement processes that empower local people in processes of socio-economic, cultural and community planning and development.
  - Universities as outsider influencers collaborating with RUCs could assist local communities to forecast and plan for changes that will overcome entrenched power inequities embedded in the social structures of regional areas that act as an invisible barrier for under-represented groups whether they stay local or move away.
  - Obstacles to social mobility and overcoming negative stereotyping appears to be a significant factor affecting the choices of young people in our region, extensive consultation with youth has revealed they feel unwelcome and lack access to safe spaces. If left unchecked this will continue to drive away our young talent. There is an opportunity to initiate significant positive social change, including among local employers' organisations that would improve the attractiveness of our region to young talent.
  - Climate change and potentially continued extreme weather events during this timeframe will require a global, national and local level approaches presenting opportunities for greater collaboration and connection across all three.
  - Changes in local and global socio-political environment combined with multiple crises have caused a recognition of local community connection and wellbeing being important. Regions are fertile with opportunities for research into a dramatically changing psychosocial environment and how that impacts on cultural awareness and inclusion.
  - People now have changed expectations about the nature of work and are seeking a balance between life and work. There is an opportunity for revitalisation of regional centres with remote work having been normalised and a migration out of city centres having taken place.