

19 December 2022

Australian Universities Accord Panel
Department of Education
GPO Box 9880
Canberra ACT 2601

Dear Professor O’Kane and the Australian Universities Accord Panel,

Federation University Australia (Federation University) welcomes this opportunity to comment on the Terms of Reference for the Universities Accord process being undertaken by the Panel. We are broadly comfortable with the Terms of Reference and associate ourselves with the Regional Universities Network (RUN) submission which is focused on the role of regionally-based universities in providing education and training opportunities to traditionally more disadvantaged cohorts of Australians.

Noting there will be opportunities to engage in the process more fully once a discussion paper is disseminated next year, we will restrict our comments to some high-level points against each of the Terms of Reference priorities.

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

The concurrent processes of the Employment White Paper, Universities Accord and the establishment of Jobs and Skills Australia provides a good opportunity to align policy settings for skills across portfolios and different tiers of government. A more coordinated inter-jurisdictional approach to the identification of emerging skills needs will assist longer term planning and help to align post-study work rights opportunities with migration settings.

Closer coordination and alignment between portfolios on migration matters may help to avoid sudden spikes in visa rejection rates that can have longer term implications in key source markets. International students provide an important cultural connection but are also an economic boon to regional economies.

I was pleased to participate in the Jobs and Skills Summit in Canberra earlier this year. Addressing skills challenges must be a collective commitment by education providers, business, government and unions. Part of that is focusing on comparative strengths so we are not all trying to be all things to all people which is not sustainable, or desirable. Federation University is rolling out an Australia-first co-operative learning model that will see all our programs being co-designed, co-developed and co-delivered in partnership with regional employers from 2025. This is part of our strategic vision to pursue a distinctive mission that moves away from the relatively homogenous comprehensive university model. For example, the [Bachelor of Information Technology \(Professional Practice\)](#) offers an ‘earn as you learn’ internship with IBM, where students are embedded in real projects with real teams, learning the critical soft skills of client interface and securing meaningful experience. This innovative degree is now one of the most prestigious IT degrees in Australia and is recognised as national best practice by the Australian Computer Society.

Access and opportunity

Federation University is the number one ranked university in Australia for First Generation Student Enrolments (Good Universities Guide 2022). It also has top rankings in Victoria around student support, social equity, skills and employment. This includes:

- Number one in Victoria for Social Equity
- Number one in Victoria for Skills Development (undergraduate)
- Number one in Victoria for Student Support (undergraduate)
- Number one in Victoria for Skills Development (postgraduate)
- Number one in Victoria for Full Time Employment (undergraduate)

With higher rates of unemployment in regional Australia it is important we retain students in the regions for the longer term benefit of those communities. Around 70 per cent of students who undertake higher education in the regions, go on to live and work in the regions. As the RUN submission notes, regional universities educate a higher proportion of students from disadvantaged groups who have not traditionally accessed higher education.

Students from disadvantaged backgrounds do need greater support and through industry and other philanthropic support we provide scholarships to students in need. There are often complex issues associated with our students, including those from refugee backgrounds, who require greater levels of preparation and support through their studies. Regional students are also likely to have poorer school outcomes that add to these challenges.

Recognising these challenges for retention and completion, a continuing differential loading for these students is important to recognise the disparity in their preparedness for higher education.

Investment and affordability

While the income-contingent loan scheme defers student tuition costs and removes the upfront barrier to study, there are still significant costs students face including with course materials, and travel and housing for placements and the like.

Onerous funding arrangements and lack of availability of placements for courses like teaching and nursing can work against addressing urgent skills gaps. This is an area where governments could work together more closely to support students and institutions.

Infrastructure is an area that could also benefit from greater coordination across Government. There are no designated higher education infrastructure funding sources and there are significant legacy buildings that require maintenance or rationalisation. Also, the interaction between State and Federal Governments when prosecuting strategic education initiatives in relation to University property and infrastructure should be looked at. The University and the Federal Government may agree on an outcome, and it may gain support from State Government but the machinery of State Government is such that disposal, realignment or acquisition of property and infrastructure can make such initiatives fail. There needs to be some instrument to join up these processes.

Governance, accountability and community

Autonomy comes with accountability to the taxpayers and students who sustain the sector. Our social licence is driven by our communities, our alumni, industry partners and local employers. An assessment of red tape and duplicative processes between Federal and State Governments would help to ensure administrative burden, particularly when enacting new legislation or policy instruments, is kept to a minimum.

The review should cover regulation and its economic impact. ASQA and TEQSA separation has a deleterious effect on the provision of timely and appropriate skills across the AQF. Training Packages are no longer fit for purpose either in themselves as they focus on competency, or as a pathway into non-competency based higher education provision. At a time when flexible pathways, micro-credentials for upskilling and hybrid learning is of growing importance, current regulatory arrangements can and do act as an impediment.

It will be helpful to clarify whether the Jobs Bill that recently passed the Parliament is expected in the longer term to apply to the university sector and what this might mean for current and future enterprise bargaining agreements. The University has endeavoured to minimise job losses but also needs to ensure we are sustainable into the future by aligning with industry and student demand. Arrangements that we might need to put in place may be very different from a metropolitan-based institution and in keeping with the move away from a one-size-fits-all, we would also not want this imposed on us in the area of workplace relations.

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

Federation University works closely with partner TAFEs to provide two-way pathways for students skilling and upskilling or changing careers in areas like Berwick and Gippsland where we do not have our own TAFE presence. Although the States are primarily responsible for public provision of vocational skills the settings between public TAFEs and dual-sector institutions are treated differently. The former has any losses underwritten by the State Government, unlike we who must cross-subsidise.

There is an opportunity to assess funding arrangements more broadly as they apply to post-secondary education. Alignment of policies such as Free TAFE between the Commonwealth and State Government is helpful but more consideration of funding arrangements in growing areas such as short courses and micro-credentials would be useful.

Funding and regulatory arrangements are different yet increasingly students will be choosing to take a vocational qualification to change careers having already attained a higher education qualification. Others will transition from or between the other as their life circumstances change.

Making it clear that no one option is better than another is key to getting better connections between the systems, which really should be one post-secondary system. Both provide opportunities to be self-employed, to employ others or work across the country or overseas.

Quality and sustainability

Ensuring universities can play to their strengths and be supported by local communities and government in moving away from areas of diminishing industry and student demand will be important to ensure constrained funding is used most effectively and not diluted.

Failure to ensure regional sustainability has resulted in and compounds the hollowing out of regions. It is a challenge to support replacement industries in dispersed regional towns with the appropriate skills and qualifications. 18-29 year olds either do not want to travel to cities or do and do not return. This is the case nationally and Australia is the most urbanised OECD jurisdiction. The regions are, with limited exceptions, dying and outer regions beyond the commuter belt are dying more quickly as small towns die and send populations to the nearest bigger town, eg Horsham. Then those towns slowly die. Most employment ends up being Government supporting inter-generational dependency. Regional, targeted skills and transition plans could go some way to addressing this.

Delivering new knowledge, innovation and capability

With the support of the Victorian Government and funding from industry, Federation has constructed Australia's first wind turbine training tower in Ballarat - the Asia Pacific Renewable Energy Training Centre (APRETC), where Australia will be able to train workers from around the country and across the region in a growing renewable energy industry. With the opening of the wind turbine training tower, Federation TAFE is on track to start delivering Global Wind Organisation (GWO) Standard Basic Safety Training and Basic Refresher Training and the globally recognised post-trade turbine technician training course.

Launched in 2021, our new Future Regions Research Centre is focusing on workforce transitions and new industries. The Centre brings together expert research and local knowledge to tackle challenges ranging from the transition from coal-fired power generation in the Latrobe Valley and mine rehabilitation to helping regional communities recover from bushfire and drought.

Our Centre for New Energy Transition Research funded by the Australian Government is focusing on advancing enabling technologies for the Net Zero Goal. The Centre will focus on hydrogen, electric vehicle applications and utilization of renewable energy and battery storage systems including micro grid and community power hubs. We are partnering with C4NET, AusNet, EQUIS, Gekko, Swinburne University, and OTI Technologies (USA) in this project.

Our research on machine learning and optimisation is providing the local water industry with cheaper water and saving energy and helping to alleviate peak electricity demand.

Federation is seeking to build up our research expertise in areas that are world-class. By researching and teaching locally we can work with industry to identify local solutions that work.

There will be arguments to concentrate research funding where the impact can be greatest for finite dollars. If the objective is to create greater opportunities, to provide a system for the best ideas to flourish no matter where that pocket of excellence is, then creating an elite system that is only available in the major capital cities will not meet that objective. There should be stronger collaboration and a number of the Government's funding programs encourage this. The status quo should always be questioned and a careful assessment made of the impact of taxpayer funding. The opportunity cost though of any changes should also be carefully considered.

If you wish to discuss further, please do not hesitate to contact me at vc@federation.edu.au. I look forward to engaging with the Panel during the Accord process.

Yours sincerely



Professor Duncan Bentley

Vice-Chancellor and President