16 December 2022

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

Re: Submission to the Universities Accord – Terms of Reference

Dear Mary and the Australian Universities Accord Panel,

Thank you for the invitation to provide feedback on the priority issues outlined in the Terms of Reference for the Review.

The Society for the Provision of Education in Rural Australia (SPERA) has members from across regional, rural, and remote communities across Australia. We represent universities, community organisations, schools, academic researchers, and community champions who are deeply experienced and passionate about regional education.

We want to provide feedback on three of the Terms of Reference with the lens of regional, rural, and remote higher education. While the suggestions made below speak generally to the Terms of Reference, the three focus areas SPERA would like to comment on are:

1. Access and opportunity.

2. The connection between the vocational education and training, and higher education systems.

3. Meeting Australia's knowledge and skills needs, now and in the future

Each of the points below provide brief context and a recommendation from SPERA for the Panel to consider.

Reinstate Demand Driven Funding (DDF) for equity students

The current CSP capped funding environment and JRG policy settings inhibit the ability to widen access and opportunities for marginalised people within regional Australia. During its implementation from 2012 to 2017, Demand Driven Funding (DDF) made significant increases in the participation of students from equity groups (Indigenous undergraduate student enrolments had more than doubled (105 per cent); enrolments of undergraduate students with a disability had increased by 123 per cent; enrolments of students from regional and remote areas had increased by 50 per cent; and enrolments from students from low socio-economic status backgrounds (LSES) rose 66%).

One of the weaknesses of the DDF (2012 to 2017) was the high attrition rates that public universities experienced in 'opening up higher education' (Norton, 2020). In addition to reinstating DDF, SPERA strongly advocates for a concurrent review of HEPPP/IRLSAF funding and incentivising universities with equity student retention targets to ensure greater support for the completion of regional students.

Recommendation: Reintroduce Demand Driven Funding for targeted equity groups alongside a review of retention targets for universities.

Redesign Widening Participation to be more equitable for regional Australia.

Many regional, rural, and remote Australian communities have only received limited or no access to Widening Participation activities, while schools in metropolitan areas being over-serviced by universities. The Regional Partnerships Project Pool Program (RPPPP) has allowed local communities to lead their own outreach programs in partnership with universities. This provides cost effective and locally relevant outreach and widening participation programs and an opportunity to develop regionally focused partnerships that enable every student to access both Widening Participation activities and effective and tailored career advice. Regional University Centres (RUCs) are already facilitating these activities and are well positioned to continue acting as the lynchpin between communities and universities.

Recommendations:

- *Expand the Regional Partnerships Project Pool Program (RPPPP)*
- *Review the 'Partnerships' component of HEPPP to explore how community-based organisations can be better included.*
- *Include Regional University Centres as eligible for HEPPP/IRLSAF funding.*

Incentivising universities to continue developing online learning

Covid created an imperative for universities to shift to online and blended models of learning. The increase in flexibility and quality of online education has benefitted regional, rural, and remote Australians providing access to expanded courses and learning opportunities. Coupled with a reinstatement of DDF and Widening participation activities, further normalising online learning will significantly increase access to higher education for regional people.

Recommendation: Incentivise universities to continue with online and blended models of learning to maintain and expand access to higher education for people in regional, rural, and remote Australia.

On Country student support for First Nations students

Equity support programs like the Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme (ITAS) funding could be reconsidered and expanded so they can be accessed directly by community organisations that are best placed to deliver the services on Country for regional First Nations students who are studying online or remotely. This has occurred on a small scale in regional NSW and some selected locations but has potential to be embedded in First Nations student support practice within higher education.

Recommendation: Alter the Indigenous Tutorial Assistance Scheme (ITAS) to allow community organisations to access funding to support first nations students on Country.

Regional Student Placements

In regional Australia, student placements are a significant barrier to completion of higher education. Students studying through small regional campuses or online face challenging university requirements to complete their degree. For students in outback locations, this may mean travelling days to a metropolitan placement. Often these students have the ability to meet their placement requirements in the local community; however, most universities do not allow this to occur. An understanding of the context that regional, rural, and remote students face in meeting student placement

requirements is needed and utilisation of local connections can ensure student retention, success, and ultimately employment in the local workforce.

Recommendation: Create requirements that ensure universities must allow regional students to complete their placements in their local community if they choose.

Standardise Enabling Programs and Alternative Pathways.

In regional Australia, students are increasingly accessing alternative entry pathways and enabling programs to transition to higher education. These are essential to providing access to higher education for people who may not have completed school, or who are mature-aged students. School leavers are increasingly utilising alternate entry pathways with just 26% of Australian students enter an undergraduate degree based on their ATAR in 2020 (Mitchell Institute). While universities have enabling programs, access to these in regional Australia is limited and universities often use these as recruitment tools for their specific institution. There is an absence of state-based or national alternative pathway and assessment measures – often resulting in students having to navigate diverse university-driven alternative entry programs or being funnelled into a specific institution. This disadvantages students who do not have any family experience with navigating higher education.

Recommendation: Development of national standards on enabling programs to ensure institutional transferability and/or a national or state-based alternative assessment framework and university entry program.

Incentivise higher education providers to collaborate with schools, VET, and local community organisations.

Creative collaboration is essential in small regional communities. There are opportunities for higher education providers to collaborate with schools, VET and other community groups who are already working together to ensure seamless educational outcomes and lifelong learning in rural Australia. One example is in Country Education Partnership (CEP) in Victoria, which works with clusters of small rural schools across the state. These existing community-led school collaborations are successful and can be better utilised by universities and VET providers to develop broader collaboration extending the educational opportunities locally beyond school. However, universities do not have a financial interest in collaborating on such a small scale.

Pathways to and between post-secondary schooling are largely invisible to the average Australian not familiar with the sectors. Development of common descriptors, education pathways and career maps included in career planners for school students would be a valuable investment. More career advisors in and out of the school system via a national framework would also help students to navigate these pathways.

Recommendations:

- *Incentivise partnerships between universities, schools, VET, and community groups to ensure rural communities have seamless access to lifelong learning.*
- *Develop a national approach to pathways education between school and post-secondary providers*

Regional University Centres

Regional University Centres have been demonstrated to improve access, participation, and success for regional people in addition to training locals for the jobs and skills required in their communities (Urbis, 2021; DESE, 2021).

However, only select regional communities have an RUC and in smaller communities an RUC is not a viable option in its current form. SPERA has worked with the RAPAD region of councils in South-Western Queensland to develop a pilot low-population RUC model that works as a cluster across multiple towns and incorporates TAFE/VET. This community-led model can be further developed and expanded in rural and remote locations that do not have large populations or current access to VET. RUCs can play a pivotal role in supporting both university and VET students in small communities and facilitate seamless transition across both study pathways for local students, often utilising existing infrastructure. Creating more RUCs in their current form and well as a low-population model incorporating VET across Australia will have a demonstrable impact on access, retention, and workforce development in rural communities.

Recommendation: Expansion of the Regional University Centre program its current form, and exploration of low-population models that incorporate vocational training within smaller RUCs.

Developing communities of practice for online students

Online students face isolation as a major barrier to their retention and success in higher education (Crawford, 2020). Developing communities of practice for students studying online from any university through existing infrastructure will be beneficial to student support and retention – especially in smaller remote communities.

Recommendation: Incentivise libraries, regional university campuses and vocational education providers to provide study support and communities of practice for online students in their own communities, regardless of their home institution (in communities where there is not access to an RUC).

Visas and Workforce Shortages

Narrow conditions on student and temporary work visas in Australia plus exorbitant cost of key courses for international students are dissuading international students to embed themselves in regional communities and meet Australian key workforce needs.

For example, Assistants in Nursing on 482 visas in regional areas are still expected to pay $90,000 for a Nursing degree, despite the lack of registered nurses being a dire workforce need in their own local communities.

Employability incentives for graduates to work in regional communities could be explored and embedded into WIL and the final years of study to encourage graduates to move to regional communities and fill workforce gaps.

Recommendations:

- *Explore incentives for international students who are currently living and working in regional Australia on visas to upskill through higher education in a more equitable manor and that is reflective of local needs.*
- *Explore incentives that are embedded into university courses to encourage graduates to work in regional communities post-university.*

Simplify scholarship and incentive schemes

The current support initiatives for regional students are complex and cumbersome to navigate. These include the Tertiary Access Payment Scheme where universities have approached SPERA for advice on how best to support students to obtain the payment. This complexity creates inefficiencies and barriers for students to access the support they require to succeed in higher education. A review of the financial scholarship support mechanisms and the barriers to students applying is required at a national level.

Recommendation: Review financial support and incentive schemes for regional students to simplify the application process

SPERA is deeply connected throughout regional, rural, and remote Australia and is eager to see a reimagined higher education system that is more equitable for all Australians – no matter where they live. Thank you for your time and the review, if you have any questions regarding the SPERA submission I would be very happy to discuss these with you.

Kind Regards,

Chris Ronan

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Chris Ronan
SPERA President