

Submission to the Australian Universities Accord Interim Report

Charles Darwin University's (CDU's) April 2023 submission to the Australian Universities Accord consultation process contributed three big ideas, that reflect our continuing priorities for the Panel and then the Government in 2024:¹

1. to genuinely engage with First Nations knowledges – in research and curricula, and in creating a culturally safe environment for First Nation students in training, education and research;
2. to address the funding flaws of the universities model and to properly recognise CDU's contribution to the NT and its people; and
3. to seek a 'one tertiary' system.

Grouped under the Vision and these three big ideas, the following 'new recommendations' focus on how the Accord can enable CDU to deliver on its vision to be Australia's most connected university. Our success is pivotal to delivering for Northern Australia's security and future prosperity, especially for the Northern Territory (NT) and its people. CDU serves a highly dispersed population comprising 32 per cent First Nations people.

Vision

The Panel's vision has the potential to establish a shared aspiration for Australia's tertiary education system. The vision should also include that students entering tertiary education have access to excellent school-based education, which is fundamental, but only receives a cursory mention in the Report. In short, the most important lever to support students at university from equity cohorts is addressing the education gap (of essential knowledge and capabilities) that exists first in schooling. CDU addressed this in our first submission (p10) because it is a persistent concern in the NT where school students have on average the lowest levels of literacy and numeracy in the nation. Disadvantage is compounded by remoteness and experienced by First Nations students especially.

Entrenched barriers to educational success will remain until long-term school reform can be realised. Lifting school achievement would improve the prospects of tertiary success for all students, especially those from equity cohorts.

The vision already acknowledges higher education's role as being, 'vital to the nation's social fabric, particularly in the regions'. CDU argues this should include a stronger guarantee of access to 'most-local' institutions for regional and remote students. The incorporation of this within the vision may take the form of the Regional Universities' Network concept of a 'Universal Higher Education Access Commitment'.

First Nations

CDU strongly agrees with putting First Nations at the heart of higher education as one of the possible 'system shifts' (p20); better recognising and incorporating First Nations knowledges in research (p94); and the idea of a First Nations Higher Education Council to collaborate at a sector-level on excellence (p112). CDU made a number of recommendations for how outcomes for First Nations students could be improved (see especially p10-13 of CDU's first submission) and these remain our priority.

The importance of driving better education and training outcomes in the NT, especially remote NT cannot be understated and deliver long-term dividends. CDU has seen this first-hand, for example, through the impact of graduating just one First Nations school teacher in a community. The tertiary system must recognise the knowledge and skills of First Nations peoples, as this has great potential to innovate tertiary courses across the country. Significantly, it will shape and nurture institutions as more welcoming and culturally safe for First Nations peoples, and allow institutions like CDU to make a significant contribution to meeting workforce needs. When the unemployment disparity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples are closed, it allows for a range of other benefits to be realised including in health and social outcomes.

¹ Submission can be access at: <https://www.cdu.edu.au/government-engagement>

Addressing flaws of the universities funding model

Strengths of place-based regional universities

The Interim Report describes many of the strengths of regional universities including in the vision: 'Australia's regional universities are important participants in the national research effort, and regional communities benefit from the local, applied research with real impact.' CDU's first submission addresses how CDU delivers sustainable and impactful research of importance to the NT, including the embedding of First Nations knowledges (see p19-21).

Smaller, place-based institutions already draw on expertise of local human capital that fulfill some of the aspirations for future higher education workforces outlined in the Interim Report. Often out of necessity – CDU is more likely to have academics that are both excellent teachers and cutting edge researchers, or active clinical practitioners (p77). In addition, alumni are connected and facilitate CDU activities, as envisaged by the Interim Report (p90).

Funding models

The highly dispersed population of the NT adds challenge and reward, but is clearly unparalleled by any other institution in Australia. CDU argued that a new National Grant should be made available that properly recognises CDU's contribution to the NT and its people. Activity-based funding or the one-size existing funding model do not account for the challenges of operating in regional Australia, let alone remote. Neither does the current funding model provide reward for the impact of place-based institutions.

For example, in 2022 CDU successfully deployed National Priorities and Industry Linkage Fund funding to support the development of courses in Podiatry and Audiology. These courses respond to complex health needs in the NT and with maturity, will provide a pipeline of locally trained allied health professionals with specialised training for the NT. These courses under the current funding model are not viable to establish, and yet deliver real benefit.

A new National Regional University

The insufficiencies of the current funding model was recognised in the Interim Report with the idea to establish a new National Regional University (p107), first canvassed in the Bradley Review. CDU has publicly expressed an openness to considering this idea, in part because it acknowledges that the present funding model is not sustainable. CDU evidenced in its first submission that other practical objectives from the Bradley Review are reflected in CDU's operating model, especially the consolidation of higher education with Vocational Education and Training (VET).

CDU would participate in any feasibility study on a National Regional University, on the premise that a federated model would champion local institutional identity and maintain a strong regional footprint. In the NT, we see the engagement of state and territory governments in any feasibility analysis as critical. CDU plays an important role in providing a pipeline of locally qualified workers, especially in health, education and care sectors; and locally initiated and achieved research. In addition, as outlined in our first submission (p8), universities provide a backbone of community infrastructure and human intellectual capital than underpin communities.

Any consideration of a National Regional University would need to contemplate implications professional workforces and their contribution to regional cities and centres, like Darwin, Alice Springs, Katherine and Nhulunbuy.

Other ways to support education in regional Australia

The net impact of implementing equity targets, along with the continued diversification of metropolitan universities into online delivery will weaken the market share available for regional universities, at least in the short and medium-term. The Interim Report's bold expected student numbers for 2050 may be rational, but are also a long-term proposition and so preserving the viability of regional institutions as these numbers build is important.

One option is to reconfigure regional loadings, in both teaching and in research grants, so that regional universities are given protection where the market otherwise fails. This is not dissimilar to models alongside activity-based funding in public policy, whereby a foundational block-grant protects service delivery in thin and difficult markets.

While CDU does not waiver from its position that student choice should ultimately be supported, we also recommended incentives for students to move to regional and remote areas, such as expanding the Tertiary Access Payment to metro students moving to regions (see CDU's first submission, p 13).

One tertiary system

An aligned tertiary system envisaged by the Interim report is strongly supported by CDU beginning with the implementation of the Noonan Review of the AQF (see CDU's first submission, p18-19). Implementation would allow the consolidation of AQF to eight levels, and address issues of reclassification, such as raising Certificate III apprenticeships and strengthening industry and professional PhDs. More professionals with PhDs teaching at universities will be required to meet the expected increased volume of university students.

The deregulation opportunities for dual sector universities are apparent (p110) and CDU is working with other institutions to progress these ideas practically. Deregulating the tertiary systems is important, especially as other aspects of the Interim Report infer further administrative burden and reporting. Tertiary alignment could be referred to National Cabinet, as with the Interim Report's Priority Action 5.

Equity cohorts

Creating better alignment between sectors ensures tertiary education can be pursued by all Australians. CDU's VET student cohort is currently 26 per cent First Nations – near parity of population. Territory-wide, 76.5 per cent of all students and 72.5 per cent of First Nations students increased their employment status from training. No other jurisdiction had a better overall employment outcome, and only the ACT and Tasmania, with much smaller proportions of First Nations people, achieved a higher outcome for First Nations students.²

Broadly, CDU supports the extensive focus on equity cohorts and notes the Final Report will also be informed by parallel work on student contributions and HELP arrangements. However, CDU argues a stronger emphasis should be included in the Final Report on supporting policy levers known to be critical to equity cohorts: addressing the burden of cost of living; income support for students studying part-time, and Work Integrated Learning support.

Setting targets may see competition for equity cohorts, over genuine whole-of-sector commitment to greater access and achievement of tertiary education. CDU emphasises that student success programs are critical and CDU's first submission outlined that student supports should be made available, as a general principle, on a per headcount, rather than per EFTSL basis (see pp 11-13).

Summary of New Recommendations

1. That the Accord Panel's vision also include:
 - a. the necessary connection to excellent school-based education; and
 - b. a guarantee of access to 'most-local' institutions for regional and remote students.
2. That any feasibility study of a new National Regional University involves states and territories.
3. That regional universities require a funding model that underpins their place-based impact both for the delivery of education to students, and for local research effort with real impact.
4. That Sector alignment be strengthened in the final report and referred to National Cabinet.
5. That the Final Report support policy levers known to be critical to equity cohorts.

² Table 5A.19 of Productivity Commission 2023 Report on Government Services, <https://www.pc.gov.au/ongoing/report-on-government-services/2023/child-care-education-and-training/vocational-education-and-training>.