

31 October 2023

Professor Mary O'Kane AC
Chair, Australian Universities Accord Panel
Via email: australianuniversitiesaccord@education.gov.au
CC: fiona.nash@dese.gov.au

Dear Professor Mary O'Kane,

Re: The Australian Universities Accord Final Report

The National Alliance for Regionalisation (the Alliance), a group of 34 leading peak bodies and for-purpose organisations, was formed in March 2023 to drive forward priorities of the Regionalisation Ambition 2032 and embed regional opportunity in the national agenda. The Regionalisation Ambition 2032 is a 10-year plan to “Rebalance the Nation”, co-created by the Regional Australia Institute, its members, and over 2000 regional voices across the country. By setting 20 targets across five key areas, the Ambition aims to see regional Australia achieve greater outcomes, and greater equity.

In progressing the Ambition, the Alliance has identified five key priorities of commonality that further the targets set out, one of which includes boosting skilled workers and access to regional education. The Alliance has been actively reflecting upon and discussing the findings emerging from the Universities Accord process, and particularly the Interim Report delivered during the year.

The Alliance welcomed the Interim Report’s acknowledgement of greater equity being key to national growth and aspirations, particularly the importance of regional, rural and remote access and student support in not only university education, but tertiary education as a whole.

The Regionalisation Ambition places emphasis on the importance of tertiary education in regional Australia, setting a target to boost post-school qualification completion in regional Australia to 65% or above by 2032. This year’s Progress Report highlights that while this has increased slightly from 57.5% in 2021 to 58.4% in 2022, the gap between regions and major cities is persisting (with major cities at 64.9%).¹ This is why access to training and post-school qualifications in regions is a core priority of the Alliance.

At a recent meeting of the Alliance Working Group, we heard from the Regional Education Commissioner and member of the Accord Panel, the Hon. Fiona Nash, I, and were encouraged to hear of the amplified recognition of the importance of regional education – across the entire ecosystem.

Ahead of the release of the Universities Accord Final Report, the Alliance seeks to reiterate three key considerations corresponding to the priorities raised by the Commissioner during this discussion.

1. The role of Regional Study Hubs in enabling local career pathways across skill levels.

The Alliance commends the immediate action the Australian Government has taken in response to the Interim Report findings, particularly the commitment of a further \$66.9 million for 20 additional Regional University Study Hubs in the next two years. Local access to tertiary education is critical for regional labour markets and sustainable development. Research has shown that graduates, particularly health workers, are more likely to practice within the regions if they are familiar with or

¹ Regional Australia Institute. (2023) Regionalisation Ambition 2032: 2023 Progress Report. Regional Australia Institute: Canberra

from a rural community and complete their training regionally during their undergraduate and postgraduate education.²

Demand for labour, across varied skill levels, in regional Australia has continued at record highs in 2023, with more than 90,000 vacancies on average advertised each month in regional Australia this year. Unsurprisingly, recruitment difficulty, a critical target of the Ambition, remains higher in regional Australia this year than that experienced in capitals.³ These Regional University Study Hubs are an important enabler in connecting both young, and established, workers to train, upskill, and expand their qualifications, and facilitate local career pathways and opportunities.

However, the Alliance feels it is important to encourage these Hubs as a pathway to any local career opportunity, a place for all tertiary education options. Simply calling this Program 'Regional University Study Hubs' immediately implies they are not for vocational study, and contributes to the cultural perceptions around vocational education.

The Alliance suggests a simple adjustment to improve perceptions of tertiary education pathways in regional areas would be to rename the Program to 'Regional Study Hubs', so as to clearly emphasise the Government's support of all tertiary study pathways.

2. Creating a connected tertiary education system that supports all career aspirations and lifelong learning

The Alliance is also encouraged by the Interim Report's acknowledgement of the need to increase university-industry collaboration and university-VET collaboration. Part of the challenge in establishing this collaboration is encouraging pathways for entry and lifelong learning through both vocational and university learning opportunities.

The Commissioner discussed the Panel's strong focus on the challenge of building 'parity of esteem' between the two pathways. The Alliance understand this challenge is an entrenched cultural aspect of the nation's education system, emerging from differing values, messaging, and perceptions of vocational and university pathways. Differences such as cost, entry requirements, and access have amplified these perceptions over time, and reversing these will require considerable cooperation across the education system – from early childhood and schooling, through to tertiary education and the modern workplace.

The Alliance encourages the shaping of a more integrated tertiary education system, with simpler, integrated learning between vocational and university education.

Further to this, considerable investment in communications, education and career guidance around vocational study is needed to begin to reverse the negative perceptions and cultural value of vocational education in particular. Much of this could be centred on our nation's energy transition and the creation of new industry, particularly in regional Australia. The RAI and Alliance would like to support this process with a strong advocacy and education platform.

3. Most importantly, investigating and actioning reform at a systems-wide level

The visionary system-shifts identified in the Interim Report are encouraging outcomes for a reform program to aspire to, particularly:

² Ogden J, Preston S, Partanen RL, Ostini R, Coxeter P. Recruiting and retaining general practitioners in rural practice: systematic review and meta-analysis of rural pipeline effects. *Med J Aust.* 2020 Sep;213(5):228-236

³ Regional Australia Institute. (2023) Regionalisation Ambition 2032: 2023 Progress Report. Regional Australia Institute: Canberra

7. Higher education and vocational education will be connected through pathways, partnership and an up to date qualifications framework.

8. Re-skilling and lifelong learning will be provided through more modular, stackable qualifications, including micro-credentials, with full scaffolding and pathways.

The Regionalisation Ambition sets 20 targets, at equal priority, around a Framework of five pillars in recognition that it will take holistic, long-term planning across the entire ecosystem to shift the dial and build a stronger, more prosperous nation. This Accord process is an opportunity to begin with impactful, systems-change in the education sector, particularly with many other reviews underway across the sector, from early childhood and schools to tertiary education.

The Alliance encourages stepping beyond the comfort of siloed responses, to a holistic sector response to improving how we ignite in our young people a love for learning, and foster their skills, career aspirations and learning development throughout their lifetime, while investing in a workforce that is fit for the future.

We thank you for your dedication and consideration in leading the Accord process as the Panel, and look forward to building a stronger education system that delivers greater equity and opportunity.

Direct links to submissions from Alliance members who responded to the Accord process are provided in Attachment A, for reference. Please don't hesitate to contact the Alliance [Secretariat](#) should you have any questions or wish to discuss further the considerations raised.

Kind regards,

Liz Ritchie,

CEO Regional Australia Institute

On behalf of the National Alliance for Regionalisation membership:



Attachment A

Responses to the Accord consultations:

- 1. Australian Industry Group:**
 - [Response to the Interim Report](#)
 - [Attachment](#)
 - [Response to the Accord Discussion Paper](#)
- 2. Business Council of Australia:**
 - [Response to the Interim Report](#)
 - [Response to the Accord Discussion Paper](#)
- 3. Engineers Australia:**
 - [Response to the Interim Report](#)
 - [Attachment](#)
 - [Response to the Accord Discussion Paper](#)
- 4. Independent Tertiary Council of Australia:**
 - [Response to the Interim Report](#)
 - [Response to the Accord Discussion Paper](#)
- 5. Regional Universities Network:**
 - [Response to the Interim Report](#)
 - [Response to the Accord Discussion Paper](#)
- 6. Minerals Council of Australia**
 - [Response to the Accord Discussion Paper](#)