

Northern Australia Universities Alliance

Australian Universities Accord

Submission Response

April 2023



Introduction

The members of the Northern Australia Universities Alliance (NAUA) provide the following joint comments in relation to the current consultation process supporting the development of the Australian Universities Accord. We do this as an emerging alliance of education and research institutions that will work in collaboration with the Australian Government to deliver integrated and place-based solutions of importance for the development and prosperity of Northern Australia. We look forward to expanding on this submission through further consultation with the Accord Expert Panel.

Background

Central Queensland University (CQU), Charles Darwin University (CDU) and James Cook University (JCU) are the three Australian universities headquartered in Northern Australia. We have established the Northern Australia Universities Alliance (the Alliance or NAUA) to enable us to collectively and proactively engage with the policy making and practice that is essential for the sustainable social, environmental and economic development of Northern Australia. A more detailed overview of the objectives of the Alliance is attached to this submission.

While all three institutions are lodging individual institutional responses to the Accord discussion paper, it was important to ensure that the Australian Government is also aware of our shared willingness to work together for the future betterment of Northern Australia across key themes identified through the Accord terms of reference discussion paper. In particular these key themes include the current focus on:

- Meeting Northern Australia's knowledge and skills needs, now and in the future;
- Increasing access and opportunity for education within the north;
- Investment and affordability to ensure equity and access;
- Improved governance, accountability and community;
- Contributing to the social, cultural and economic prosperity of the north;
- Exploring the contribution that higher education in Northern Australia makes to the wider Australian community, national security, and sovereign capability;
- The connection between the vocational, training and higher education systems;
- Quality and sustainability issues; and
- Delivering new knowledge, innovation and capability.

Exploring Some Key Issues for the North

Relative to the key themes outlined above, there are some important issues that warrant early awareness in the development of the Australian Universities Accord and its implementation.

1. Place-based Approaches to Workforce Development

The Alliance is strongly of the view that governments need to work together with the university sector, VET sector, schools, industry and the community over the long term to acknowledge the significant (and often different) challenges that exist in workforce issues in regional, rural and remote (RRR) areas, including in Northern Australia. CQUniversity and Charles Darwin University are both dual sector universities, offering also vocational training to meet the needs of their regions.

Population trajectories into Northern Australia are also fundamentally different than from other areas described as 'regional'. In particular, Northern Australia did not benefit significantly from internal migration movement seen during COVID, unlike regional centres within a few hours of major metropolitan cities. This has a practical implication for how net overseas migration could be better targeted to the North.

Collectively we are committed to more place-based approaches across the north into the future. We seek to work closely with governments in recognition of the importance of collaborative partnerships between industry, unions, civil society groups and communities, including place-based workforce development. This work should focus on the pre-conditions for labour market outcomes, including educational attainment and liveability (that is, access to health, housing and social services), as well as a focus on opportunities for employment in regional areas, lifting our sovereign capability, and including Indigenous-led enterprises, the care sector, and environmental and climate change management.

Support for regional development must be place-based to be effective, particularly in the north. The links between educational attainment, economic growth, and community well-being are well established. The National Skills Commission indicates that more than nine out of every 10 jobs created in Australia over the next five years will require post-secondary education. The Productivity Commission also notes the important relationship between different Australian regions' education and skills base and their adaptive capacity, economic resilience and social development. Labour markets in regional and remote areas in the north are underwritten by universities and TAFEs. In Northern Australia, CQUniversity, CDU and JCU are critical anchor institutions, graduating students, employing staff, providing community facilities and enabling access to research and innovation services.

The Accord presents a unique opportunity to further articulate the way that Australia conceptualises place-based regional development, or *regionality*, through using it as a foundational framework to analyse the Australian labour market and to make recommendations.

2. Cross Institutional Research Alliances for Development

Stronger evidence-based research foundations in the north need to explore Indigenous led-development, the north's role in the Indo-Pacific and more decarbonised and ecologically sustainable development. These are particularly essential components of a revamped Northern Australia development strategy and major economic transition. In our case, a significant cross-over exists between regional (and northern) development policies, national employment policies and the Accord's intent. The new Northern Australia Ministerial Forum has provided an exciting context for this work, identifying at its first meeting its priorities in human capital, enabling infrastructure and economic development and diversification. Our universities are well positioned to respond to these priorities by supporting governments in developing evidence-based national policy.

Our Universities are embedded in our regional communities and are ideally positioned to lead quality and partnership-based research on the big challenges facing the wider north. This includes research and development effort to build resilient communities, strengthen First Nations institutions, support defence initiatives, develop sustainable agriculture, and build affordable and secure energy (hydrogen, gas and renewable) and housing solutions

The focus of research and development also needs to ensure pan-northern water security will be of particular importance over the next decade, so consequently we have already formed a significant research alliance with CRCNA on this issue. Many of our remote, rural and regional communities face basic water supply and quality problems. Further, the water that is potentially available for development in the north will be critical to achieving Australia's Ag2030 targets. Finally, the expansion of agriculture in the north must be sustainable and have no adverse impact on the environment, while delivering social and economic benefit to rural and Indigenous communities. There must be no net increases, and even declines, in nutrient, sediment, pesticide and carbon emissions. This is a grand challenge that requires embedded and long-term research, and our three universities are building a strong capacity to deliver solutions which address these challenges.

The Alliance is of the firm view that strategic, major and adequately resourced research and development partnerships between the Commonwealth, the jurisdictions and the NAUA Universities will be key in the coming decade to achieve other challenges facing the north.

3. A Role in Supporting Indigenous Self-Determination

Northern Australia is an Indigenous domain, with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people incorporating a very significant proportion of the north's total population. There are Indigenous rights in some 78% of the north's lands, and Indigenous interests across 100% of the wider land and sea estate. Strong Traditional Owner institutions are emerging across the region, and these will drive much of the north's economic and social development in the future. Indigenous community and local governments lead the planning and future decision-making of many rural and remote townships, and new governance innovations are being explored. Many significant Closing the Gap challenges remain, and the NAUA Universities have a key role in enabling Indigenous education (across people's entire lifetime), as well as

supporting Indigenous knowledge and future-oriented research partnerships. Special attention and support is needed in fostering the role of our Universities in this space.

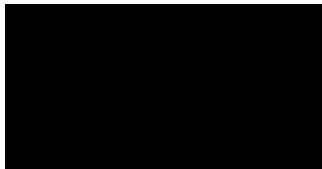
4. The Geostrategic Importance of Northern Australia

Finally, Northern Australia is also that part of the nation most directly engaged with the Indo-Pacific region; a place of increasing geostrategic importance to the nation as a whole. Our Universities are ideally positioned to contribute (in collaboration with the Australian Government) to Australia's soft diplomacy and relationship building across Indonesia, East Timor, Papua New Guinea and the wider Pacific. We are also at the forefront of the north's critical role in national and regional defence. Our emerging and deep research capacities and relationships are essential in building cross-regional security ties to address emerging challenges.

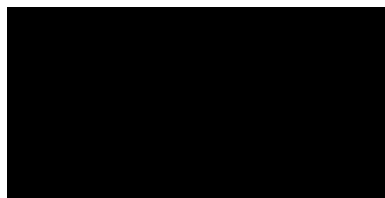
Conclusion

The Alliance is optimistic that collectively, the emerging Employment White Paper, the new Northern Australian Ministerial Forum and the development of the Universities Accord, can work synergistically with NAUA to create better outcomes for the north. Together, these processes can create an exciting new opportunity for meaningful reforms that deliver lasting change, and that increase opportunities in access and attainment of education and research which is necessary to underwrite the Government's agenda with respect to the development of Northern Australia.

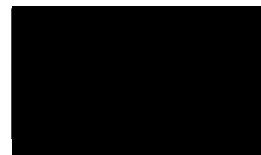
We look forward to collectively discussing these northern-centric issues further as the process of the Accord continues.



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