

SUBMISSION TO AUSTRALIA'S PROGRESS AGAINST SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOAL 4 | TRANSFORMING EDUCATION SUMMIT

5 August 2022

Universities Australia welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Department of Education's consultation on the proposed Draft National Statement Commitment for the Transforming Education Summit.

UA is the peak body for Australia's 39 comprehensive universities. Our member universities are spread across Australia in both regional and metropolitan areas. They educate more than a million students each year, undertake all of the university research in Australia and engage globally to add to the country's stock of knowledge, as well as Australia's economic and social wellbeing.

UA supports the 2030 agenda for Sustainable Development, particularly recognising the importance of working with and across governments, industries and communities to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all. Universities support this endeavour by being embedded within their communities through initiatives that encourage partnership with community organisations that particularly support greater access to university for Indigenous students, while also focussing on research that delivers positive outcomes for the local, national and international community.

UA supports the Department of Education's Draft National Statement of Commitment in principle. UA is committed to working with governments, industries and communities to deliver world-class education, while providing access to all people, regardless of their background, to receive education that prepares them for various careers, gain new perspectives, and develop lifelong skills, expertise, networks and critical thinking. All of these characteristics are necessary for responding to economic, environmental, social and technological challenges affecting Australia's, and indeed the global community's, future. As identified in the draft statement, while the transformation of teaching and learning across all levels of education has been innovative and enabled participation from a diverse range of groups, the changes have highlighted other inequities in education, particularly the digital divide between metropolitan and regional populations. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has also highlighted inequities and shortages within Australia's teaching workforce that will continue to have significant repercussions on the country's future if not carefully addressed through close consultation of teacher experiences, and identification and action on cultural impediments to teaching.

Harnessing the resilience and resourcefulness education providers have demonstrated throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly universities' contribution to research and providing innovative ways of teaching and learning, while actively supporting them, will ensure Australia continues to deliver on the UN's Sustainable Development Goals.

DRAFT NATIONAL STATEMENT OF COMMITMENT QUESTIONS

ENSURING FULL RECOVERY FROM COVID-19 EDUCATIONAL DISRUPTION

What has been the impact of COVID-19-related disruptions to education delivery in Australia on learning loss, student disengagement and dropout?

As with all sectors of the economy, the COVID-19 pandemic has posed significant challenges to the Australian university sector. Despite these challenges, the sector has continued to provide a high-quality learning experience, meeting the needs of students across every discipline including health and teaching degrees. Indeed, domestic student enrolments remained strong in 2020, with 1,057,777 students studying at Australian universities – an increase of 4 per cent from 2019.

However, some areas of university study were hit harder than others, particularly in health disciplines. For example, the compulsory requirement for practical experience/service placements within certain courses, including teaching and health, made it impossible to move them to entirely online formats. During the pandemic, health professions education was particularly challenged due to its clinical education requirements, although a variety of tele-supervision and virtual/simulation approaches were implemented where possible. Despite these provisions, lack of placement capacity (already an issue pre-COVID-19), inconsistent health service directions about student placements impacted teaching quality and student and staff wellbeing.

The impacts of COVID-19 on Australia's health workforce, practitioners and trainees will be ongoing. Ensuring funding for training health professionals, together with sufficient clinical placements (including flexibility for placements and greater incentives for regional and rural training programs) and promotion of international health graduate's ready participation into the workforce in the short term will provide support to current and future health practitioners. In the medium term, policy support for partnership approaches between health/care services and universities to expand clinical placement capacity aligned with workforce needs will be important. At the same time, supporting universities in a multi-stakeholder health and education forum to determine and implement a sustainable clinical education and workforce plan will be a necessary discussion.

Throughout the pandemic, Australian universities, researchers and academics played an integral role in the country's management of, and response to, COVID-19. As Australia recovers from the social and economic impacts of COVID-19, Australian universities will continue to work with the Government to provide the support and productivity growth that will allow the country to build back stronger.

While the overall university experience was impacted by the pandemic, students' satisfaction with teaching remained high during lockdowns. The 2020 Student Experience Survey reported a reduction in student ratings of their overall educational experience in 2020. Student ratings of the quality of their entire educational experience among undergraduates fell from 78 per cent in 2019 to 69 per cent in 2020.

Despite the fall in overall educational experience, students' ratings for skills development and teaching quality declined just three per cent between 2019 and 2020, from 81 per cent to 78 per cent for both indicators. Students' ratings for student support were unchanged at 74 per cent in 2020.

Notwithstanding the impacts of COVID-19 on staff and students, universities responded with innovation and supportive measures, providing increased digital delivery of university courses and units, development of new technologies to facilitate learning, while enhancing student wellbeing initiatives that target student life stages.

What has been the impact of the COVID-19 educational disruption on the wellbeing of both learners and teachers, including Australia's vulnerable and disadvantaged populations?

The COVID-19 pandemic brought severe disruption to social and economic norms as national governments sought to contain and suppress the spread of the disease within their own countries. Across the world, government responses to COVID-19 included:

- closing international borders and restricting domestic travel;
- restricting or closing business and education activities;
- imposing physical distancing requirements between people;
- limiting movement of people through curfews, lockdowns and travel bans, and
- implementing other measures to protect and expand health systems to prepare for a severe and sudden influx of COVID-19 cases.

While Australia is currently in a 'living with COVID' stage, universities have been and continue to be impacted by the measures outlined above. In particular, the closure of international borders and limited supports for universities, university staff and domestic and international students continues to be felt. However, universities have continued to respond strongly despite these challenges, providing increased flexibility for students and staff through the delivery of new models of education, undertaking significant research.

It is estimated that 17,000 staff were lost from universities in 2020. Indigenous staff declined by 55 positions between 2020 and 2021. To prevent further losses, many universities halted infrastructure projects, made difficult decisions about courses, made savings where possible and sold assets to prevent further losses.

Supporting universities attract more staff will be essential in responding to the skills needs of the future, particularly in ensuring high-quality student outcomes and attracting world-class academics and professional staff.

What progress has been made to date to recover pandemic-related losses?

Australian universities welcome the re-opening of Australia's international borders in December 2021. This announcement allowed international students to return to study on campus in Australian universities. International students make a contribution, both to the student experience and the wider Australian community.

Universities have worked hard to limit job losses by halting infrastructure projects, making tough decisions about courses and making savings wherever they could. Investment in university teaching and learning will help mitigate some of the impacts of COVID-19 and enable universities to continue investing in Australia's future education and skills needs.

Do you propose additional measures to support further recovery in the short- or medium-term?

Universities and Government can work together to ensure that all Australians have a genuine opportunity to choose a university education.

Enabling all Australians to receive quality and world-class education is a fundamental priority to ensuring Australia's future needs are met, whilst enabling people a quality life. Providing further Commonwealth Support Places to all Australians will support this priority.

Regulation should support our universities to build Australia's productivity through innovation and safeguard our global reputation for high-quality education and research. Together, universities and Government can strike a balance of regulation that will re-energise Australia's productivity. In

particular, the expansion of the number of Commonwealth Supported Places and clinical placements will be essential to meeting the domestic and labour market workforce needs of the future.

To broaden access to quality education, whilst supporting student wellbeing, uncapping the number of places for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, not just for those from regional areas, as well as providing sufficient and supported clinical places for health practitioner trainees is essential for addressing quality education. As part of the Government's equity agenda, the development of the Indigenous, Regional and Low SES Attainment Fund (IRLSAF) should be undertaken in close consultation with sector stakeholders. This process will ensure clarity in programs that fall under IRLSAF as well as the equitable and considered distribution of funds to support students.

STRATEGIC TRANSFORMATIONS AND LEVERS FOR REIMAGINING EDUCATION FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

What aspects of education in Australia are most important to continue, strengthen and/or safeguard?

Education is a fundamental human right. Everyone, regardless of their background or social status, should have access to high quality education that sets them up for success into the future. Universities are one aspect of Australia's education system; however, they provide the skills and competencies needed by all aspects of Australian society and that of the world. Furthermore, universities are at the heart of fundamental research, which is necessary in creating and building innovative ideas that respond to current and future social, technological and environmental challenges. Ensuring universities continue to provide this service, while ensuring access to universities is equitable, is essential to the future of Australia's workforce needs.

Working together, universities, governments and industry groups need to leverage their inextricably important relationship to respond to Australia's future needs. To support this relationship, greater incentivisation for university-industry collaboration in research and teaching and learning will be paramount to developing stronger relations but also maximising the opportunities for students and researchers to be prepared for and deliver on outstanding research and skills development. To this end, Government policy and funding settings should support universities to prepare the next generation of Australians to meet the future workforce needs of the nation. With the projected growth in population, we have a pipeline of people coming and high for skills. We have an opportunity right now to gear up and get enough places funded to solve the skills problem.

In addition, ensuring equitable allocation of funding to support access and inclusivity for university education will continue to be a priority into the future, particularly as access to education becomes impacted by the cost-of-living situation in Australia (in the short term) and the need for workers to change careers and/or reskill (in the short-to-medium term).

Can you identify any new possibilities or directions for education that have only recently become apparent?

Education at university level is not just about a graduate's first job – it is instead a foundation on which a graduate can continue to develop as a learner for the remainder of their working life. Hence, universities equip graduates with fundamental skills and knowledge that set them up to succeed in an ever-changing and globalised workplace. Graduate employment outcomes and surveys of employers show that university degrees do prepare graduates well for the first jobs of their careers, but also for the range of jobs they will have throughout their career.

Government can ensure that there are enough university places to meet increasing student demand as a result of population growth, especially in workforce growth areas such as health and teaching.

This is particularly pertinent as highlighted by the National Skills Commission predication that by 2024-25, more than 600,000 new jobs will be created that will require a bachelor degree or higher.

If there is a shortage of places, the economy will lack the graduate skills it needs. Young Australians will miss out on the opportunities a university education brings, and not enough older Australians will have the chance to retrain for jobs in demand. When demand for university places significantly exceeds supply, it is students from non-traditional backgrounds that are most likely to miss out. We therefore urge Government to ensure adequate supply of places over the rest of the decade, as demand increases due to demographic growth and continuously evolving labour market demand.

Demographic growth in the youth population and changes in skills in demand means that many more people – both school leavers and others – will want to study in coming years. According to the ABS population projections, there will be 55,000 more 18-year-olds by 2030, compared to 2021. By 2030, the 18-year-old population is projected to increase by 17 per cent. Further, there will be a huge jump in 18-year-olds in 2024 and 2025 (the so-called ‘Costello babies’), with annual growth in the number of 18-year-olds increasing from around 5,000 to 6,000 to more than 12,000 each year in 2024 and 2025.

To equip Australians with the skills needed to drive recovery and to thrive in the economy of the future, the supply of university places must keep pace with the increasing student demand, especially in the next two to three years as the effects of Costello’s ‘baby boom’ begin to be felt across the economy.

Government and universities need to prepare for this increase in demand now, to ensure that these young Australians have the same opportunities to go to university as recent youth cohorts – and that they will be ready to meet the nation’s skills needs.

What are some innovative transformations for education that Australia should embrace?

Australia’s universities are trusted partners in this future. Universities are part of Australia’s national fabric and have national and international impact. To ensure Australia’s workforce needs are met, while providing flexibility in the delivery of programs, including through microcredentials and short courses, support through financial incentivisation and co-design of programs with governments and industries will be important as Australia’s skills needs shift. Delivering these programs alongside the trusted programs offered by universities, surety of Australia’s future needs will be well-established, as well as students’ preparedness when entering the workforce.

Aside from innovative ways of program design and flexible learning, modes of delivery have shifted in response to not only the COVID-19 pandemic but also changing ways of learning, workstyles and life commitments. Universities provide significant work into technological innovation to support student learning. This innovation includes hybrid delivery of programs course and unit content, which not only accommodated for the students locked down due to the pandemic or international students who could not enter Australia, but also to students from regional Australia who may not have had access to tertiary education.

This innovation-driven form of education continues to evolve, particularly in facilitating greater access to tertiary education, whilst being flexible to the needs of students, whether they learn in-person, online or a combination of the two. This hybridity provides significant opportunities to deliver quality education to a wider range of people – opening up opportunities for more people during and post university.

Can you identify any groups, bodies or forums that can be leveraged or can lead on education transformations in Australia?

Universities Australia looks forward to continuing to work closely with Australian governments and other peak bodies to lead on and inform education transformations in Australia and globally. UA is the peak body representing Australia's universities. Its primary activities include policy advocacy and awareness-raising on higher education and research. We pursue policy that supports our university system to position Australia for long-term economic and social success. This work is informed by Australia's world-class universities researchers and staff.

University researchers carry this purpose forward in their life's work. They make new discoveries, uncover new ideas, collaborate with experts and expand the body of knowledge that benefits the country – and all of humanity. As a result, communities, industries and community leaders look to universities as a trusted, sound source of expertise, innovation and knowledge.

Within universities, Deputy Vice-Chancellors (DVC) carry responsibility for a wide range of issues pertinent to not only tertiary education but also pre- and post-university life and further education. Working closely with these senior educators provides significant insights into the breadth of education a person experiences throughout their life. At UA, DVCs, and in particular DVCs Academic, provide essential insights into many significant areas of education, including equity and quality education, which have and continue to have significant benefits for the sector. For example, through consultation with a range of stakeholders, including the DVCs, the Indigenous Strategy 2022-25 was adopted by the sector, which now provides guidance and benchmarks for supporting Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander students at university.

What are your thoughts on Australia's progress in meeting the SDG 4 targets?

Australian universities are committed to providing equal access for all Australians to receive quality tertiary education. Responding to SDG 4, universities have many platforms and programs in place to support both men and women, Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander peoples, people from regional, rural and remote Australia, people from Low SES backgrounds and people with disability have access to tertiary education. These programs include pre-commencement scholarships, pathways programs and accessibility supports as well as supports programs for students while they are studying. These platforms and programs have seen a significant increase in all equity group participation in Australian universities since 2008. This is a great achievement. However, building upon the successes of previous years will be important as the workforce and education landscapes shift, and responding to these will require ongoing innovation and support from governments, industries and communities.

Similarly, supporting education for women has continued to improve significantly, with more women receiving university degrees than ever before. However, more work needs to be done to ensure women are better represented in academic and professional staff capacities and in particular at senior staffing levels within universities. Ensuring better representation of females within university governance and leadership is essential in breaking down barriers to educational engagement.

Australian universities have responded strongly to SDG 4 and the SDGs more broadly, with several universities being ranked by THE Impact Rankings 2022 within the top 200 universities for quality education, while 17 ranked within the top 100 for overall ranking from over 1400 universities worldwide.

In particular, the creation and adoption of the UA Indigenous Strategy 2022-25 provides a holistic approach to Indigenous advancement including increasing understanding of Indigenous histories and lived experience and calling out racism in all its forms to help ensure cultural safety for Indigenous staff and students. As a whole-of-sector endorsed document, the strategy affirms Australian universities' commitment to equitable and quality education based upon mutual understanding and relationship building.

Can you identify ways of accelerating progress towards meeting the targets?

To support the lifelong learning of all Australians, it is necessary to respond to the changing landscape of education delivery and skills needs. Accordingly, providing flexible access for learners to access higher education as they need it, when they need it will be essential. Expanding FEE-HELP to microcredentials and shorter courses will help to ensure that Australians can up-skill and re-skill as they need to. This should be in addition to increasing the number of Commonwealth Supported Places available at universities in order to ensure young people have access to quality education that strongly sets them up for their careers and lifelong learning. By extension, ensuring adequate supply of clinical placements for health practitioner trainees and university places for Australia's growing school-leaver population will be essential for addressing Australia's current and future health needs.

In addition to providing support to enable universities to respond to changing skills needs and demands, enabling community engagement and partnerships within and beyond Australia will be important in addressing Australia's workforce needs. Furthermore, these partnerships will support innovation in education and education policy, which will have an ongoing positive effect on students and communities, particularly through lifelong learning opportunities.

A key feature of ensuring accessible and quality education is through sustained funding arrangements and providing enough places to support Australia's emerging youth workforce and skills needs. With the implementation of the JRG, total base funding per place – i.e. CGS and student contributions – is expected to decline by 5.8 per cent, assuming universities maintain their 2018 discipline mix. This funding context for teaching and learning imparts disruptions on students and universities and may be seen to prevent access for some groups of people. Providing sustainable funding will be essential to achieving the aspirations and targets of the SDGs.

Each of these measures will support the education and workforce needs of Australia into the future.

Are there any opportunities to review, define or evaluate targets and benchmarks?

UA supports the aspirations of the Sustainable Development Goal 4 and the SDGs more broadly.

ENSURING STRENGTHENED AND SUSTAINABLE PUBLIC FINANCING OF EDUCATION

Can you identify any innovative models or mechanisms for financing education?

If there is a shortage of places, the economy will lack the graduate skills it needs. Young Australians will miss out on the opportunities a university education brings, and not enough older Australians will have the chance to retrain for jobs in demand. When demand for university places significantly exceeds supply, it is students from non-traditional backgrounds that are most likely to miss out. We therefore seek an adequate supply of places over the rest of the decade, as demand increases due to demographic growth and continuously evolving labour market demand.

Australia needs a balanced system of funding for research, teaching and learning, that supports all of the different types of research, teaching and learning programs that benefit the nation. Government has a particular role in providing long-term support for university research, teaching and learning that builds a pipeline of innovative ideas and support for career-ready graduates.

How effectively does Australia's domestic education funding address equity issues?

While Australia has a range of funding arrangements in place to address equity issues in higher education, the impact of these funds has varied over time.

In addition to the Commonwealth Grants Scheme funding that subsidises tuition costs for Commonwealth Supported students, the Australian Government also provides funding to promote equity in the provision of higher education through a range of initiatives including the IRLSAF, the Higher Education Participation and Partnership Program (HEPPP), National Priorities Pool, Regional and Enabling Loadings and relevant elements of the National Institutes Grant. Presently, the IRLSAF has not been set-up. As part of the Government's equity policy and focus, working together with universities and relevant stakeholders will be essential for the clarifying the scope of IRLSAF and ensuring it fulfills its purpose in supporting universities and students. While these programs have changed over time, growth in equity group participation has improved.

Continued investment in supporting equity group participation in higher education will be essential as Australia's skills needs shift and the delivery of education and skilling initiatives respond to global challenges of access and skills needs. By extension, ensuring all Australians have access to quality education will be essential in meeting the needs of Australia's skills and workforce needs.