

Prof. Mary O’Kane
Chair, Australian Universities Accord
Higher Education Division
Australian Government Department of Education

19 December 2022

Dear Prof. O’Kane,

Re: Review of Australia’s Higher Education System

Thank you for the invitation to provide feedback on the priority issues within key areas outlined in the Terms of Reference for the Review of Australia’s Higher Education System.

Engagement Australia champions the unique role universities have within society to address contemporary global challenges and trends through teaching, learning, research and most importantly partnerships with community, industry and government. Engagement Australia is the peak body for engaged universities in Australia, with 20 member universities spanning all states and affiliations. Engagement Australia, through its delivery of the *Carnegie Community Engagement Classification* in Australia, offers the sector the mechanism through which engaged contribution to public good can be evidenced and institutional accountability can be achieved. Through the Carnegie Network, Engagement Australia provides university members with capability building resources and opportunities to improve their institution’s engaged research and teaching and practice. We present opportunities to celebrate excellence through the annual Engagement Australia Awards; and offer thought leadership around the role of universities as public purpose institutions through the publication of *Transform: The Journal of Engaged Scholarship*.

Engagement Australia is focusing our feedback on the following priorities:

1. Meeting Australia’s knowledge and skills needs, now and in the future
2. Investment and affordability
3. Governance, accountability and community
4. Quality and Sustainability
5. Delivering new knowledge, innovation and capability

1. Meeting Australia’s knowledge and skills needs, now and in the future

Enhance the delivery of quality education that meets the needs of students across all stages of lifelong learning and develops the skills needed now, and in the future. This will include recommendations for new targets and reforms recognising that more than nine in ten new jobs will require post-school qualifications, and fifty per cent of new jobs are expected to require a bachelor’s degree or higher.

Engagement Australia prioritises the use of engaged scholarship as the mechanism by which the higher education sector can meet Australia’s knowledge and skills needs, now and in the future.

Universities working with their communities to address contemporary global challenges locally through teaching, learning, research and partnerships.

Our emphasis on this priority area is informed by several factors:

- University engagement with industry and community means that teaching, learning and research outcomes continually consider stakeholder views in real time, allowing universities to be responsive and predictive of skills needs before a crisis point is reached.
- Engaged teaching and co-created curricula are robust mechanisms by which universities can respond to current skills gaps, as they simultaneously build the workforce of the future. The co-creation of curricula better advances the impact of work-integrated learning which has long been cited as beneficial for students, universities and their industry, business and community partners. Reciprocal relationships with the community sector have seen many examples of students delivering outcomes for communities as part of the curriculum offering, resulting in the strengthening of social and educational outcomes.
- The third sector is an important aspect of the Australian economy, employing 11% of jobs in Australia and contributing of AUD\$129 billion to the economy. The collective reliance on the not-for-profit sector has been highlighted by recent crisis events. There is a need to include consideration of the future sector-skills needed to ensure the longevity of this sector (McKinsey & Company 2021).
- The skills needed by our students not only include applied job skills, but skills that can help address the social and environmental challenges of the 21st century. An engaged teaching and learning experience for students ensures that they understand their social and civic responsibilities as an important element of their career development, and will result in a meaningful university experience.

Engagement Australia recommends:

- **Consideration of the role of engaged scholarship in meeting skills needs now, and in the future, and related infrastructure and resourcing needs, including**
 - **the institutional systems and processes needed to implement engaged scholarship;**
 - **mechanisms for demonstrating impact and supporting continuous investment;**
 - **capacity building of the sector to ensure effective implementation.**

2. Investment and affordability

Explore funding and contribution arrangements that deliver equity, access, quality and longer-term investments to meet priorities in teaching, research, workforce and infrastructure. This will include a review of the Job-ready Graduates Package

The National Priorities and Industry Linkage Fund (NPILF), offered as part of the Job-ready Graduates package of higher education reforms, resourced connections with Industry. As part of the consultation process that resulted in the final framing of the NPILF fund, Engagement Australia worked in partnership with others across the sector to argue for an expansion of the definition of 'Industry'. These efforts were successful in so far as the definition of Industry was changed to include Government and Community.

Despite the definitional change, the use of the term 'industry' as the umbrella limits interpretations.

Universities working with their communities to address contemporary global challenges locally through teaching, learning, research and partnerships.

The Government's decision to review the Job-Ready Graduates package, offers an opportunity to authentically consider engagement for the purpose of supporting future ready graduates.

Engagement Australia recommends:

- ***the consideration of Community, the third sector and Government as significant players in this space;***
- ***investment in community-engaged learning and teaching as a specific category of Work-Integrated-Learning, which offers an evidenced approach to skills building and improved public benefit.***

3. Governance, accountability and community

The placement of 'community' alongside governance and accountability carries inherent risks. As demonstrated throughout this submission, 'community' offers a rich array of contributions to higher education outcomes. When placed alongside governance and accountability, the framing creates limitations and potential unintended consequences.

Engagement Australia recommends the consideration of 'community' as a separate section within this focus area, enabling full engagement with what community can offer.

Enhance regulatory and workplace relations settings to support universities to meet their obligations to both staff and students

University engagement with industry and community is critical to ensuring that research is impactful, relevant and translatable; and that our graduates leave our institutions with the capabilities, skills and experience needed to succeed in the workforce. Australian regulatory frameworks, such as the Higher Education Standards Framework 2021 (HESF), are silent in relation to community engaged scholarship and practice. A valuable opportunity to support community engagement as the third pillar of the function of a university (along with research and education) is therefore lost.

Engagement Australia has partnered with the US Carnegie Foundation for Teaching and Learning to create an Australian Carnegie Community Engagement Classification. The Carnegie Community Engagement Classification offers a national, evidence-driven overview of the public benefit of the higher education sector in relation to community engagement. Performance and reporting frameworks, such as the Carnegie Classification, incentivise public benefit and engaged teaching, learning and research, and should be considered as part of a future approach and a driver for behaviour change.

Explore the contribution that higher education makes to the Australian community, national security and sovereign capability

In a global environment of increasingly wicked problems, universities have an important role to play as creators and disseminators of new knowledge, and as anchor institutions that support communities in transition. Universities in Australia are foundational to local and regional economies; investing and directly

Universities working with their communities to address contemporary global challenges locally through teaching, learning, research and partnerships.

supporting a zone of the economy focussed on productive enterprises and social capital. The economic and social benefit of a university is further amplified through the practice of community engaged teaching, learning and research. Providing students and researchers with the opportunity to apply their knowledge and skills to areas of public purpose is not only associated with increased student retention, but has been shown to strengthen civic and democratic engagement. This may also lead to students choosing careers which support sovereign capability over those in the private sector.

Community engaged research has been shown to bridge the gap between research and practice through the equitable engagement of community members. It enables transformational change by ensuring that agenda setting, programme design and delivery are co-created. It also aligns with government priorities, including Indigenous Engagement, cultural competence, language and literacy. The alignment with cultural frameworks improves the social inclusion of marginalised people, giving a voice to the voiceless, which in turn improves research quality and impact. This form of democratisation of research better harnesses community potential by building social capital and community capacity building while building trust between universities and communities.

Community engaged scholarship requires expertise. Australian universities need to build the capacity of their academic and professional staff to undertake community engaged research and teaching, both locally and internationally. The Carnegie accreditation process allows participating universities to examine their own institutional commitment to community engaged research, teaching and learning, and pinpoint where they need to improve. Engagement Australia then provides capacity building resources, workshops and events for university staff and community partners to improve their engaged research and teaching practice.

In the UK, ‘third stream’ funding has supported programs that reward institutions that successfully disseminate the results of their research and scholarship in partnership with communities. Government and university funding has allowed for the establishment of the National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement ([NCCPE \(publicengagement.ac.uk\)](http://publicengagement.ac.uk)), an organisation designed to drive public engagement between universities and communities– recognising that a system wide commitment to “wider social benefit, to dialogue and to mutuality – are ones that help re-balance the modern university and reconnect it to its roots.”

The National Priority Industry Linkages Fund whilst being a fund designed to encourage engaged research and teaching, has a narrow focus on industry partnership, and does not support skills or capacity building within the sector. In Australia, unlike the UK, there is currently no source of funding for the critical, and time consuming, relationship building that enables co-design of engaged research, or the translation and dissemination work essential to research impact.

Engagement Australia recommends:

- ***the consideration of ‘community’ as a separate section within this focus area, enabling full engagement with what community can offer;***
- ***evidencing the role that universities play in the most critical issue of our time: social and economic equity;***

Universities working with their communities to address contemporary global challenges locally through teaching, learning, research and partnerships.

- *an examination of ways to recognise community engagement within external regulatory frameworks such as the HESF, and/or through sector-led initiatives such as the Carnegie Community Engagement Classification;*
- *a uniquely Australian version of Third-Stream Funding to enable progress in this space.*

4. Delivering new knowledge, innovation and capability

Support a system of university research that delivers for Australia, securing the future of the Australian research pipeline, from basic and translational research to commercialisation. In doing so, the Accord will explore relevant initiatives and other opportunities and to further boost collaboration between universities and industry to drive greater commercial returns.

As outlined above, it is important that the public benefit of engaged and impactful research (and research translation) is not narrowly defined as the capacity for research to deliver commercial returns. Whilst important, quantitative measures around features of entrepreneurship or technology transfer, often miss the other valuable forms of interaction between universities and society. As described above, universities have a unique role in a world facing increasingly wicked problems. As outlined in *SDG 17 – Strengthen the means of Implementation and revitalise the global partnership for Sustainable Development*, these problems will require multi-disciplinary collaboration and cross-sector partnership in order to be successfully addressed.

Engaged research is a two-way process. It recognises that knowledge creation does not just happen within the Academy. It also arises in the context of practice. Rather than undertaking knowledge work *on behalf* of society, universities must be supported to undertake it in active collaboration with society, alongside industry, government and community partners. This offers the benefit of incorporating contextual knowledge and experience, thereby enhancing the collective outcomes resulting from such partnerships.

Engagement Australia sees the Review as an opportunity to modernise the Impact and Engagement research agenda in Australia so that it is world leading, recognising the role universities can play to address present global crises as a multi-part player in the creation of new knowledge for a social purpose.

The key will be to ensure the development of a research agenda that prioritises public benefit, engagement and impact. We see great opportunity to develop this agenda through the work of this Review, the Review of the Australian Research Council; and the ARC’s Review into ERA and EI.

5. Quality and sustainability

- Examine the challenges faced by domestic and international students and staff due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the temporary and permanent impacts on the way the higher education sector works.

There is no doubt that COVID-19 significantly impacted the sector, and that the related challenges require deep reflection and consideration by the review panel.

Universities working with their communities to address contemporary global challenges locally through teaching, learning, research and partnerships.

It should however be noted that, despite the significant toll experienced by the sector, many universities rose to the challenge and took up their role as part of society to respond to the collective crisis we all experienced. Universities redirected their infrastructure and resources to community needs, distributed food, became vaccination centres, produced COVID masks, undertook significant research in areas related to COVID and other emergencies being experienced and offered communities student resourced support – to name a few.

Engagement Australia recommends:

- ***the consideration of temporary and permanent ways in which the higher education sector contributed to resolving national and global challenges experienced in recent history – and how this can inform what we consider to be the role of higher education moving forward.***

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on the Terms of Reference for the Review of Australia's Higher Education System. This is a unique opportunity for the sector and we look forward to hearing from you in due course.

Yours sincerely,



Prof. Jim Nyland
Chair



Prof. Verity Firth
Deputy Chair

Universities working with their communities to address contemporary global challenges locally through teaching, learning, research and partnerships.