



Northern Australia Universities Alliance

Workforce Development in Northern Australia

Joint Select Committee Response

December 2022

The members of the Northern Australia Universities Alliance provide the following submission to the Joint Select Committee on Northern Australia to assist with their inquiry into workforce development in Northern Australia. We look forward to further opportunities to expand on this submission through direct consultation with the Committee.

Background

Central Queensland University, Charles Darwin University and James Cook University are the three Australian universities headquartered in Northern Australia. We have established the Northern Australia Universities Alliance (the Alliance) to enable us to collectively engage with the policy making and practice that is essential for the sustainable social, environmental and economic development of Northern Australia.

Regional development and labour markets

In considering the opportunities for northern development and the enablers to sustainable economic growth, we believe it is important to acknowledge the interconnections between (and interconnectedness of) regional development policy and employment policy.

It is particularly important to consider the pre-conditions for positive labour market outcomes, including educational attainment within the north and growing our region's liveability (including access to integrated health, housing and social services). It is also important to consider specific opportunities for employment in regional areas, including Indigenous-led enterprises, growing the innovation ecosystems, strengthening the care sector, and catering for major economic transitions within the region, inclusive of environmental and climate change management.

Regional development must be both sector and place-based in order to be effective, and it is the same for employment policy. The policy reviews that are currently underway (including

the Employment White Paper and the Universities Accord) present a unique opportunity to further articulate the way that Australia conceptualises regional development, or *regionality*, through using it as a foundational framework to analyse development policy and the labour market.

Education as a foundation for development

The links between educational attainment levels, economic growth and community wellbeing are well established. The National Skills Commission¹ 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 Commission² also notes the important relationship between the education and skills base of different Australian regions and their adaptive capacity, economic resilience and social development.

Australia-wide, universities and public training providers (TAFEs) are critical to the creation of human capital and skills, as well as new knowledge and innovation. Labour markets in regional and remote areas are underwritten by the local universities and TAFE. In Northern Australia, CQU, CDU and JCU are critical anchor institutions, graduating students, employing staff, providing community facilities, and enabling access to research and innovation services. CQU and CDU are both dual sector universities, offering also vocational training to meet the needs of their regions.

The Alliance recommends that education is considered a foundational feature of any policy response to the workforce development needs of the North. The Government's explicit inclusion of universities within the Jobs and Skills Australia legislation is a welcome acknowledgment of the important role of universities.

Increasing School Attainment and Local Education Pathways

Attainment levels from school systems in Northern Australia lag behind Australian averages, limiting the progress of people into vocational and higher education pathways *within* the north. Effective strategies to lift school attainment within the north, and the development of stronger pathways into post-secondary education are essential.

As also expressed by the Cooperative Research Centre for Developing Northern Australia (CRCNA), training and education for the current and future needs of the north's workforce must be done in the north, for the north. It needs to be fit-for-purpose, culturally appropriate and cognisant of climatic conditions affecting work in the North.

Funding for public education providers (universities and TAFE) should reflect the costs of delivery in the North to achieve the same standards of amenity, education and vocational training available to southern students.

¹ www.nationalskillscommission.gov.au/insights/projecting-employment-2026

² www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/transitioning-regions#report

It is also important that government programs designed to increase the participation of regional, rural and remote (RRR) students do not have the unintended consequence of draining students from the regions to study at metro universities in the south. For example, the Federal government is very concerned with improving access and participation rates for RRR students, and has announced 20,000 new places that are targeted towards addressing equity concerns. However, providing places for these students incentivises metro universities to recruit students from within Northern Australia. It is more than just accepted wisdom that students who study in the north, stay in the north and hence the focus must be on enabling northern people to access and succeed at the universities who are headquartered in the North, if we are to retain our talented students in the North.

The Universities Accord process provides an opportunity for a systemic reset of the tertiary education system in order that opportunities to access a high-quality education and skills (and the employment that follows) are expanded for the people in Northern Australia.

Sector and place-based workforce development strategies – Partnerships & Alignment

Recent work from both the CRCNA and Regional Economies Centre of Excellence (RECoE) has demonstrated the potential of northern Australian industries. We need more cohesive and long term partnerships among key players, including industries, governments, schools, universities and vocational facilities) to deliver strategic workforce development. A lack of strong effort alignment and integration at both the sectoral, regional and community levels leaves our industries and communities poorly positioned to address current skills gaps, and well as to prepare for future workforce needs.

Attracting and retaining a skilled workforce across Northern Australia

The decision to relocate to, or to stay in, regional areas is multi-faceted and reflects a wide range of factors. Past attempts to populate the north from southern Australia have largely been unsuccessful. For this reason, the Alliance recommends the Government consider skilled migration as an important ongoing pathway for growing Northern Australia. In particular, consideration should be given to policy settings which allow higher levels of international migration than Northern Australia's population base might otherwise justify.

Empowering and upskilling the local Indigenous population

In all of the issues raised above, the focus on supporting education and training for First Nations communities is essential. Compared with universities Australia-wide, Alliance members educate a higher proportion of First Nations students, remote and very remote students, and/or students who are mature aged, first-in-family, second-chance, or come from low socioeconomic or disadvantaged backgrounds.

In many cases, to improve long-term employment outcomes, our students first need enabling or bridging courses, prior to commencing their studies, to provide solid foundations for future success. The importance of the availability of these programs in regional and remote areas, cannot be underestimated.

Conclusion

The Alliance is optimistic that the Employment White Paper, the new Skills Agreement being led by the Minister for Skills and Training, and the Universities Accord process, together create an exciting opportunity for meaningful reforms, to increase opportunities in access and attainment of education which is necessary to underwrite a skilled workforce in Northern Australia.

Professor Nick Klomp
Vice Chancellor and President
Central Queensland University

Professor Scott Bowman AO
Vice Chancellor and President
Charles Darwin University

Professor Simon Biggs
Vice Chancellor and President
James Cook University

Please direct all enquiries in relation to this submission to:

Professor Allan Dale
Professor of Tropical Regional Development
James Cook University November 2022

About the Alliance Members

CQUniversity

CQUniversity, originally founded in 1967, is one of the largest universities based in regional Australia and the only dual-sector university in Queensland. It has a vision to be Australia's most accessible, supportive and engaged university, recognised globally for innovative teaching and research excellence.

Charles Darwin University

CDU is founded on 50 years of delivering high quality multi-sector education in the Northern Territory. Its vision is to be Australia's most connected University by being courageous and making a difference in the Northern Territory, Australia and beyond. CDU is the largest tertiary institution in the Northern Territory with campuses in Darwin and regionally throughout the Northern Territory.

James Cook University

JCU is a research-intensive university defined by the Tropics, being uniquely woven into the intellectual, economic and social fabric of its tropical location and set amid irreplaceable ecosystems and cultures. Its strategic intent is to create a brighter future for life in the tropics world-wide through graduates and discoveries that make a difference. JCU is the only Queensland university to receive a 5 star rating for undergraduate employment for the past 12 years in the Good Universities Guide.