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Northern Australia Universities Alliance

Employment White Paper

November 2022

The members of the Northern Australia Universities Alliance provide the following comments on the Employment White Paper. We look forward to further opportunities to expand on this submission through consultation with the Taskforce.

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

The Alliance is strongly of the view that the White Paper needs to acknowledge the significant (and often different) challenges that exist in workforce issues in regional, rural and remote (RRR) areas, including in Northern Australia. Stronger foundations in Indigenous led-development, education and training, workforce, health and ecologically sustainable development are all essential components of a Northern Australia development strategy. As such, significant cross-over exists between regional (and northern) development policies, and national employment policy. The “Our North, Our Future: White Paper on Developing Northern Australia”, for example, has already identified the importance of these considerations in developing national employment policy.

We endorse the six themes identified in the Terms of Reference, and note the scope covers the need to improve labour market outcomes for First Nations and Rural and Remote populations (at 5.2), and the need for education and training in transitioning sectors and regions (at 5.3). We also welcome the recognition of the importance of ‘collaborative partnerships between governments, industry, unions, civil society groups and communities, including place-based approaches’ (at 6).

However, we believe that the Terms of Reference should include a seventh theme that explicitly covers ***Regional Development*** and explores the interconnections between regional development and employment policy.

This theme should focus on 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 specific opportunities for employment in regional areas, including Indigenous-led enterprises, the care sector, and environmental and climate change management.

Regional development must be place-based in order to be effective, and employment policy must be too. The White Paper presents a unique opportunity to further articulate the way that Australia conceptualises regional development, or *regionality*, through using it as a foundational framework to analyse the Australian labour market and make recommendations. Central Queensland University and Charles Darwin University are both dual sector universities, offering also vocational training to meet the needs of their regions.

The decision to relocate to, or to stay in, regional areas is multi-faceted and reflects a wide range of factors and past attempts to populate the north from southern Australia have largely been unsuccessful. For this reason, the Alliance recommends the White Paper should also address 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 otherwise justifies.

Our universities are committed to leading the development of human capacity from deep within the Northern Australian landscape. Broader structural change relating to the care economy, climate change, digitisation and geopolitics provide unique opportunities for Northern Australia. At the same time, there are unique workforce development and retention challenges, including school-based educational outcomes that lag behind the rest of the nation, and significant liveability and cost of living pressures.

Failure to take a holistic and joined-up approach to development and employment policy leaves Northern Australia relying on a fly-in-fly-out (FIFO) model, or online/virtual-model of labour supply that does little to support the sustainable development of regional and remote communities.

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.

Given this, the Alliance supports the submission of Universities Australia that higher education be featured within the White Paper. The tendency for employment policy to focus on skills and training pathways to the exclusion of higher education is not helpful. The Government's inclusion explicitly of universities within the Jobs and Skills Australia legislation is also welcome acknowledgment of the important role of universities.

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. In addition to exploring broad issues,

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

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

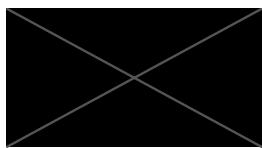
frameworks and policy approaches relevant to the labour market, it is essential that the Taskforce consider complementary issues for education providers, such as funding, especially taking account of additional costs of delivery in RRR areas and to disadvantaged student cohorts.

Labour markets in regional and remote areas are underwritten by universities and TAFE. 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.

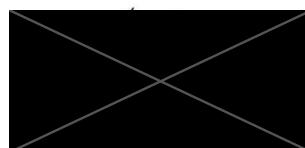
The Alliance is optimistic that the themes identified through the White Paper can complement the Universities Accord process, announced by the Minister for Education on 16 November 2022; and the negotiation of a new Skills Agreement from 2024, being led by the Minister for Skills and Training. The intersection of these public policy frameworks creates an exciting opportunity for meaningful reform.

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

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, these students first need enabling or bridging courses, prior to commencing their studies, to provide them with solid foundations for future success. The importance of adequate investment in the availability of these programs in regional and remote areas, cannot be underestimated.



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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.