



Charles Sturt
University

NSW Vocational Education and Training Review

24 November 2023

Office of the Vice-Chancellor
Charles Sturt University

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Dr Michele Bruniges AM
Chair, NSW Vocational Education and Training Review
NSW Department of Education
GPO Box 33
Sydney NSW 2001

By email: NSWVetReview@det.nsw.edu.au

Dear Dr Bruniges

NSW Vocational Education and Training Review

Charles Sturt University welcomes this opportunity to provide a submission to the review of the NSW Vocational Education and Training (VET) system.

The array of current reviews and inquiries into Australia's post-secondary education system has revealed a clear desire for and some moves toward closer integration between the different parts of the system in support of local, regional and national goals.

For regional universities and TAFEs this means opportunities for collaboration that build on a long history of successful partnerships. Regional TAFEs and regional universities like Charles Sturt serve the same communities, educate many of the same students, and work with many of the same industry and community stakeholders.

They also face many of the same challenges: building local aspiration toward higher education, operating in thin markets, managing higher costs than those affecting metropolitan providers, the need for up-to-date infrastructure and suitably qualified and experienced staff, and evolving national and regional priorities.

Charles Sturt University suggests that the best way to address these challenges is closer collaboration between regional TAFEs and universities. In this submission we outline some of the barriers to collaboration that will need to be overcome, how to do so, and some of the short, medium and long-term opportunities available.

We also propose three collaborative pilot projects that could lay the foundation for strong, long-term collaboration while addressing some immediate priorities:

- improving pathways into tertiary education and between different kinds of providers,
- boosting First Nations participation and attainment, and
- meeting the skills and workforce needs of key regional employers including in the health, education, IT and renewable energy sectors.

I would be happy to provide you with more information on any of the ideas discussed in the University's submission, and to support the ongoing work of the review.

Should the review process include any public consultations or workshops the University would be keen to work with our colleagues in regional TAFEs to help organise and host the review team and others in



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a regional centre and showcase both the excellent work already under way and the exciting prospects ahead.

Thank you again for the opportunity to contribute this conversation, and for your on-going support for regional education and communities.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Renée Leon".

Professor Renée Leon PSM
Vice-Chancellor and President



Submission to the NSW Vocational Education and Training Review

Charles Sturt University is Australia's largest regional university and one of its largest providers of online education. We have an essential role in boosting higher education participation and attainment, not just in regional NSW but across the country.

Through award-winning student retention programs, we are making sure that more students from disadvantaged backgrounds can succeed in their chosen field of study. And as a university with consistently high ratings for student satisfaction, employer satisfaction, graduate employment and graduate starting salaries, Charles Sturt has shown again and again that it can meet career aspirations and workforce needs, especially in regional areas.

Charles Sturt University's purpose and guiding principles are encapsulated in a Wiradjuri phrase, *yindyamarra winhanganha*, meaning 'the wisdom of respectfully knowing how to live well in a world worth living in'. The University seeks to fulfil this purpose through quality teaching and learning, research with societal and economic impact, a vibrant and rewarding student experience, and community engagement, social responsibility, and sustainability initiatives.

One characteristic of Charles Sturt that is a key point of distinction compared to our metropolitan counterparts is the University's strong relationship with local communities, employers, and schools. It's a relationship that extends from grants to community organisations to placements and internships with regional industry, from developing courses to meet regional needs – such as our innovative Grow Your Own and Collaborative Teacher's Aide Pathway program – to providing emergency accommodation for people affected by natural disasters. This role – as an economically, socially, and culturally important regional institution – is something we share with regional TAFEs. We serve many of the same communities and educate many of the same students. In 2023, for example, more than 27 per cent of students were admitted to Charles Sturt on the basis of previous VET and TAFE study and attainment, and in the same year at least 13 per cent of all students had some level of prior VET or TAFE attainment.

The review Terms of Reference and discussion paper cover some particular challenges for TAFE in regional areas. Many of these challenges are common to regional universities, too: maintaining provision in thin markets, the higher costs associated with operating in regional areas, high proportions of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, staff demographics, fluctuations in the demand for courses, poor connectivity (which also impacts students' digital skills), and ageing infrastructure. Regional TAFEs and universities must also manage the expectations of regional communities as to what courses (and facilities) they offer, which may be unrelated to demand or need.

Charles Sturt University has covered each of these issues in our submissions to the Australian Universities Accord. We have argued for:

- new funding arrangements that reflect the actual cost of provision, supplemented by a loading for regional campuses,
- additional funding to support students from defined equity cohorts, with recognition of the compounding effect of differing kinds of disadvantage,
- critically, on this point, providing some student support funding on the basis of headcount rather than load, as part-time students can require as much assistance as full-time students (our analysis indicates that this is a problem of particular relevance to regional higher education providers),
- predictable funding arrangements to enable long-term planning,
- implementation of the revised AQF, and

- targeted investment in regional education infrastructure (physical and digital).

In addition, we have also called for:

- an increase in the number of Commonwealth Supported Places, phased in over time, to support the Government's participation and equity targets,
- concomitant growth in funding for student support services – essential for wider participation,
- equity targets for each higher education provider,
- arrangements for public funding that take into account universities' abilities to attract income from other sources,
- a roadmap to grow investment in research to at least 3 per cent of GDP, and
- on-going oversight of the implementation of the Accord including monitoring of targets, perhaps as part of the remit of a new Tertiary Education Commission.

Finally, we recognise there are some merits in the idea of a new National Regional University, including ensuring more sustainable provision of tertiary education in regional areas through, for example, shared delivering of enabling programs and student support services. It is not yet clear, though, that the creation of a new tertiary education institution would be a better way to achieve the desired outcomes than providing an equivalent level of resourcing to support regional education delivery. One alternative is to invest in programs to incentivise collaboration between existing regional providers. With so much in common and in an environment of thin markets and constrained resources, it is increasingly clear that closer collaboration between regional TAFEs and regional universities like Charles Sturt is in the best interests of both.

The VET review discussion paper recognises that there are benefits to collaboration in improving pathways to completion and employment, improving student support services, increasing participation in tertiary education by previously underrepresented cohorts of students (the main goal of the Australian Universities Accord), and – an issue of particular interest to Charles Sturt University – meeting skills needs in rural, regional, and remote areas.

Regional universities and regional TAFES bring recognised strengths to potential collaborations. Charles Sturt offers:

- well-established capabilities in work-integrated learning that result in the University having the higher education sector's best post-graduation employment and starting salaries (according to the Graduate Outcomes Surveys),
- extensive experience in digital and flexible delivery that complements our substantial regional campuses presence,
- a forward strategy focused on further innovation in learning experiences,
- a track record of developing quality education programs aligned to current and emerging skills priorities and workforce needs,
- a range of pathways, programs, and related activities, such as schools outreach, that build aspiration, equity and diversity, and
- a sustained commitment to supporting vibrant regional communities and their economic and social development.

TAFENSW offers complementary capabilities, including:

- the nation's best VET Graduates' satisfaction ratings, as measured by the NCVET Student Outcomes Survey,
- a long history of flexible and work-based learning that is growing in scale through the TAFE Digital arm
- a range of a comprehensive, equity-focused, industry current programs with an emphasis on skills needs,



- a suite of specialist student support services,
- a 2025 strategy focused on accelerating skills in priority areas, delivering exceptional learner experiences and higher quality, and partnering to drive agile, innovative solutions, and
- an established regional presence, with scale and reach across the state.

Most notably, TAFE NSW offers skills-based programs at AQF 4-6 that align strongly with CSU's AQF 6 and 7 courses, particularly in the priority areas of Health, Education, Human Services, IT and Renewables.

Opportunities for collaboration

Charles Sturt University is pleased to see that the Accord process has inspired conversations about new kinds of higher education provider and given new energy to long-running discussions on how to achieve a more unified tertiary education system. A key argument in many of the University's submissions to the state and federal governments in the past few years is that there is more than can be achieved through closer collaboration between higher education providers than by forcing them to compete for resources and students. This principle applies as much to collaborations between universities, TAFE and other VET providers as it does to collaboration between universities.

Indeed, many of the challenges noted above can be met, in part or fully, through collaboration between regional TAFEs and regional universities. This could extend to shared facilities, courses, staff, and even administrative services, especially in smaller towns.

Most importantly, closer collaboration between Charles Sturt University and regional TAFEs could help ensure the sustainability of courses critical to local communities and employers, especially where numbers of students may be sub-viable, or where demand is greater than can be met by either organisation. Working separately, regional universities and TAFEs have limited ability to meet demand in courses like electronics, medical technicians, and some nursing programs. Both are constrained by the availability of suitably trained and qualified staff and, in 'hands-on' courses, the capacity of physical teaching spaces. Collaboration between regional TAFEs and universities is a good way to solve both problems. Rather than competing for the same staff they could, for example, identify and help train potential instructors in their extended industry and community networks, while shared use of teaching spaces would increase capacity. Collaboration could extend to coordination of work placements, pedagogical and technical training for staff, and the co-development of foundation programs, articulation pathways, and jointly-badged qualifications.

Similar ideas were canvassed in the 2008 'Review of Higher Education' (the Bradley review), the 2017 'Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education' (the Halsey review), the 2019 'National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy' (the Napthine review), and more recently in submissions to the Accord from TAFE Directors Australia (TDA) and others.

Discussions among Charles Sturt staff in the development of this submission also resulted in suggestions such as:

- combining some university and TAFE funding streams (the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program, TAFE Community Service Obligation, and some Indigenous funding) to build scale in support for equity students, and to provide a more unified tertiary education framework for communities, schools, employers, and individuals,
- collaboration in schools engagement and careers advice, including to build education aspirations in regional communities,
- combining to provide education opportunities and pathways across the whole of the AQF,
- partnering in the establishment of a regional education and training Centre of Excellence,
- innovative models of working with employers, and
- the development of innovative teaching models that work for both organisations.

Achieving better collaboration

As noted above, the idea of closer collaboration between TAFEs and universities, especially in regional areas, is not new. Progress in pursuing these ideas has, however, been hampered by various barriers including, particularly, the different regulatory and funding arrangements for TAFEs and universities. For example, the Gonski-Shergold review noted that the availability of income-contingent loans for university courses has tended to steer students in that direction, since there was limited provision of such loans for VET courses. They suggested that making income-contingent loans available for Certificate III and IV qualifications was an essential requirement for the greater collaboration underpinning Institutes of Advanced Technology. One way of achieving this outcome is discussed below. As to the other barriers, Australia's recent experience with COVID-19 has shown what is possible – especially across jurisdictional boundaries – when there is sufficient political will.

In a submission in response to the Accord interim report TDA identified several other barriers to collaboration including an over-reliance on public funding that inhibits innovative approaches to delivery, differing approaches to the design and assessment of courses, and the perennial challenge of recognition of prior learning.

Fortunately, TDA and others have put forward some suggestions for how to reduce these barriers, including greater autonomy for TAFEs, diversification of funding, and harmonisation of regulatory arrangements for tertiary education. Greater autonomy for at least some TAFEs, as suggested by TDA, would mean they could partner as equals with regional universities and industries, with the potential to develop some truly innovative local solutions to local needs. The proposed TAFE Centres of Excellence provide an opportunity for new approaches to TAFE governance. At a smaller scale, one option would be to ensure that regional TAFEs, universities, and other partners have access to local TAFE decision makers, as this would enable them to respond quickly to opportunities for place-based programs and innovations.

The Accord, the new National Skills Agreement, the creation of Jobs and Skills Australia and the associated industry councils, and the implementation of a new AQF mean that TAFEs, universities and governments have their best opportunity in more than a decade to achieve these goals and establish a more integrated post-secondary education system.

The Australian Universities Accord presages expanded opportunities for universities that are prepared to be more equitable, innovative, student-centred, and focused on skilling for the nation's socio-economic priorities. The Accord interim report suggests these goals could be achieved in part through the introduction of a student-centred needs-based funding model. If such a model was extended to all tertiary education, or even just to all post-secondary pathways programs, this could help eliminate one of the major barriers to collaboration by providing appropriate levels of funding regardless of where a student chooses to study.

The National Skills Agreement is intended to drive greater collaboration at the state and territory level under a new system stewardship model. Jobs and Skills Australia will provide TAFEs, universities and employers with a common source of data to help identify future needs and emerging opportunities.

For regional tertiary education providers the establishment of the regional Education Commissioner – a recommendation of the Napthine Review – means providers have a high-level advocate to government, and in the Accord process. The Commissioner, the Hon Fiona Nash, has been tasked with, among other goals, removing barriers to regional students participating in all levels of education, and with a good evidence base and good examples her role could extend to helping to promote greater collaboration between different kinds of regional education organisations.

Charles Sturt University would like to propose three specific projects that encompass many of the opportunities discussed above and could serve as a proof-of-concept for new models of collaboration across

sectors. Some are achievable in the short term and need not wait on the implementation of the Accord or a new AQF.

1. A joint foundations and pathways program

A pilot formal collaboration at a local level would help boost students' aspirations, participation and attainment in both TAFE and university studies while helping to identify new models for course development, delivery, and assessment, and for working with industry. This might include joint administration and delivery of some student support services. A pilot would also help identify practical obstacles to collaboration, trial potential responses, and provide a seamless transition into either TAFE or higher education for the students involved – and between TAFE and university as they progress through their education and careers.

2. Boosting First Nations careers

There is also scope for regional TAFEs and universities to combine their efforts in improving tertiary education aspiration, participation, and attainment among First Nations peoples, as well as promoting higher employment and business creation. The meeting of the Skills and Workforce Ministerial Council on 17 November identified 'First Nations Engagement and Partnership' as a national priority for 2024, with an emphasis on listening to and being guided by First Nations peoples on any action. Charles Sturt University has an extensive network of First Nations staff, students, and advisors, and strong links with regional First Nations groups. The University and regional TAFEs could work with this network on the joint development, delivery, assessment, and administration of courses and support services for First Nations students to increase their participation and attainment in tertiary education, and their subsequent employment.

A pathways pilot or a First Nations targeted initiative need not require additional funding but rather more effective use of existing resources, though both would be predicated on many of the funding and regulatory barriers to collaboration being reduced over time.

3. Industry specific collaborations

Regional NSW is subject to chronic workforce shortages in health, allied health, and education including childcare. In addition to impacting regional communities these shortages also affect regional employers' ability to attract people to the area, which exacerbates the wider workforce challenges. A larger-scale collaboration focused on a particular industry sector could develop a suite of short and long-term solutions to boost that industry's workforce. This might include entry-level qualifications, pathways to upgrade qualifications, and microcredentials to support the acquisition of specialised knowledge and skills. An industry-specific collaboration of this kind would be similar to but perhaps not of the scale of a Centre of Excellence, although a regional Centre of Excellence in, for example, health and allied health would be a strong signal of governments' commitment to deal with workforce shortages.

Charles Sturt University's Grow Your Own (GYO) and Collaborative Teacher's Aide Pathway (CTAP) programs, mentioned above, are an example of how the University has been able to rapidly develop and implement a new initiative in response to regional employers' needs, in partnership with those employers, and in an industry in need of more qualified and experienced workers. Both provide a vehicle for people already employed in the education sector to earn or upgrade a qualification (many of the participants have Certificate III or IV qualifications) while continuing to work (and therefore not worsening the sector's shortages). The programs allow existing teacher's aides to qualify as teachers in as little as two years. Their appointment to teaching positions creates employment opportunities for new teacher's aides, and the flexibility of the program means we can create a steady pipeline of new teachers for regional schools.

While this kind of initiative would require dedicated funding, it would be committed to ensuring optimum outcomes. Both GYO and CTAP make effective use of existing resources and operate with a very lean administrative structure. The bulk of the NSW Government funding for both programs is used to provide



academic support for the students involved and direct financial support during extended placements. The University's experience with a range of professional programs and the feedback from those involved in CTAP and GYO confirm that this kind of direct financial support is critical: for many, it is the one element that ensures they can complete the course and go on to a new career.

This kind of collaboration could involve:

1. Selecting a target region for the pilot. Core requirements would be a regional university campus and one or more TAFE campuses, with some courses in common.
2. Identifying one or two industry sectors subject to chronic workforce shortages or high levels of unmet demand. Based on our discussions with regional communities and employers, childcare, health and allied health are a very high priority.
3. Establishing a joint university-TAFE-industry working group (with some community and school representation). The working group could begin mapping specific skills needs, identify current university and TAFE course offerings aligned to those needs (or any gaps).
4. Designing short- and medium-term measures to help fill workforce and skills gaps. This could involve a combination of microcredentials, short courses, AQF qualifications and new offerings such as degree apprenticeships.
5. Developing a business and implementation plan for consideration by government and other funders.

As the emphasis would be on meeting regional needs as quickly as possible, Charles Sturt University suggests that the joint working group should be expected to deliver a plan within a few months, for implementation in the second half of 2024. The pilot itself would run for no more than two years to allow for quick evaluation, adaptation, and translation to other regions and industry sectors.