



YOUTH ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY DISCUSSION PAPER

1 September 2023

Submission

University of the Sunshine Coast

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1. Introduction

The University of the Sunshine Coast (UniSC) is pleased to provide a submission in response to the Australian Government consultation on the development of a youth engagement strategy.

Our submission responds to the first three of the four questions posed in the discussion paper and has been informed through consultation with UniSC students.

UniSC would welcome the opportunity to elaborate on any aspect of our submission. If this is of interest, please contact Jason Mills, Head of Government Relations, UniSC at jmills3@usc.edu.au.

About UniSC

UniSC was founded by its community in 1996 after Sunshine Coast residents campaigned for locally provided tertiary education opportunities. As the first greenfield university to open in Australia since 1975, UniSC has helped unlock the innovation, productivity and potential of its regional communities through the contributions from its 33,000 graduates and 17,500 current students studying a diverse offering of in-demand higher education programs.

Consistent with our mission to improve access to higher education in underserved locations, UniSC has strategically expanded its footprint into more regional communities, encompassing areas from Moreton Bay to the Fraser Coast. The University collaborates closely with all levels of government, regional leaders, industry, and other partners to ensure programs, research and support services align to create greater opportunities in all the areas it operates within.

On the world stage, UniSC is recognised by The Higher Education (THE) Impact Rankings as a global leader in climate action, clean water sanitation, life on land, and life below water. This ranking comes alongside the Australian Research Council's recognition of UniSC as a producer of world-class research in 26 speciality areas, including environmental science, medical and health sciences, neuroscience, technology, and psychology.

Among public universities, UniSC is number one in Queensland for overall educational experience, and the best in Australia for postgraduate skills development¹. In the Good Universities Guide 2023/24², we achieved 14 five-star ratings in key areas such as teaching quality, overall experience, learner resources, learner engagement, skills development, social equity and student support.

UniSC is committed to amplifying the students voice through our Students as Partners (SaP) program, which helps students to build networks, improve their experience and develop qualities and skills aligned with graduate attributes.

2. Response to discussion paper questions

1. What are the top issues that the Government should work with young people to address?

UniSC, in consultation with our students, identified three priority issues for the Government to consider and address.

Financial pressures

Demand for higher education by Australian students is currently being impacted by strong economic conditions and elevated cost of living pressures. As part of the Australian Government's Higher Education Review (Australian Universities Accord), UniSC has welcomed the proposal to undertake a broad review of university student income support measures, including Youth Allowance, Austudy

¹ https://www.qilt.edu.au/docs/default-source/default-document-library/2022-ses-national-report.pdf?sfvrsn=b8e30414_0?sfvrsn=d1237953_5&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=website&utm_source=sendgrid.com

² <https://www.gooduniversitiesguide.com.au/>

and ABSTUDY to ensure they are sufficient to support students, and targeted to students most in need, particularly students from more disadvantaged backgrounds.

A key consequence of insufficient student income support, particularly during periods of elevated cost of living pressures such as we are currently experiencing, is lower overall participation in post-school education and training. This is occurring at a time when Australia needs more people undertaking post-school education and training to meet forecast skill needs. Another adverse impact is some students will take on more courses than they can realistically handle in order to meet the student load requirements to retain government income support allowances. Other students may need to take on more paid work than is ideal for them to manage their academic workload and of course some may need to change from full-time to part-time study or reduce their course load, all changes which we know from experience increases the chances of students not completing their degree. All of these consequences can impact in different ways a student's ability to succeed at their studies, and consequently their progression and success.

At UniSC's regional campus locations, the lack of availability and increasing cost of suitable accommodation has become a primary inhibitor to students accepting a study offer and is also a key driver of attrition when rents become unaffordable. Consistent with UniSC's response to the Australian Universities Accord review, we encourage the Government to review student rent assistance payments and thresholds and extend the existing Tertiary Access Payment to students enrolling at regional universities.

Another significant financial barrier for university students is attending compulsory unpaid practical placements as part of their degree (for example, nurses and teachers), particular those who need to travel to and live in regional or remote locations for their placements. While the Australian Government is increasing aware of this challenge, it is yet to address it with a holistic and sustainable policy and funding response.

Students with disabilities and complex mental health conditions

At UniSC the number of undergraduate students with a reported disability increased by 157 per cent between 2017 and 2021³.

Within this growing cohort of students with a reported disability, UniSC has also seen a marked increase in those students disclosing mental health conditions (549 per cent increase from 2019 to 2022) and neurological conditions (509 per cent increase from 2019 to 2022)⁴.

Given that in 2021, 1 in 6 Australians were estimated to have a disability (1 in 4 had a mental or behavioural disorder as their main condition), an estimated 10 per cent of school students (aged 5–18) had a disability (almost 5.4 per cent with a severe or profound disability)⁵, and university students with a reported disability increased from 4.7 per cent in 2011 to 9.6 per cent in 2021⁶ we can expect to see a continuing upward trend, including those with mental health conditions.

Students reporting a disability are the fastest growing equity group in universities with 58.6 per cent growth from 2013 – 2019⁷.

Support for employability and career outcomes

UniSC provides a range of services to maximise the employability outcomes for our graduates, including career advice and support to prospective, current and past students. We take our

³ <https://www.education.gov.au/higher-education-statistics/student-data/selected-higher-education-statistics-2021-student-data>

⁴ UniSC internal data

⁵ <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/disability/people-with-disability-in-australia-2022-in-brief/report-edition>

⁶ <https://www.education.gov.au/higher-education-statistics/student-data/selected-higher-education-statistics-2021-student-data>

⁷ <https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/data/national-data/>

commitment to ensuring positive graduate outcomes seriously, and our overall graduate employment rate is higher than the national average at 89.6% (88.5% nationally)⁸.

Consistent with UniSC's response to the Australian Universities Accord review, we recommend greater Australian Government investment into existing and new career programs that support employment outcomes of graduates from equity groups, which remain below the national average. According to the 2022 Graduate Outcomes Survey, students from targeted equity groups continue to obtain employment at a lower rate than the all-student indicator. In particular, only 59 per cent of students with a disability and 53 per cent of students who speak a language other than English were working full-time within four months after graduation⁸.

2. What is the Government doing that is working well to engage young people?

UniSC commends the Australian Government's commitment to ensuring young Australians from diverse backgrounds have a say on the issues that matter to them, and on government policies and programs through the establishment of a Youth Steering Committee. We also welcome the establishment of Youth Advisory Groups focusing on climate change, First Nations youth, mental health and suicide prevention, Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM), and youth safety and support.

UniSC students who participated in a focus group on this topic also identified several areas that they considered were positive youth engagement initiatives (not all of which are Government supported), including Youth Parliament and Youth Advisory Councils, community centres such as Brisbane's Visible Ink Youth Hub⁹ and Police Citizen Youth Clubs. Students also commended the support services available for young carers and people with disabilities that provide opportunities for youth from under-represented backgrounds to have a voice on the issues that affect them.

3. What are some of the ways Government can improve how we engage with young people?

UniSC students suggested there is a need for a wider variety of communication methods for young people and improving the channels of communication to cater for varying visual and auditory communication styles to reach all groups who may not be able to engage through public consultations or in writing.

Students also suggested that there need to be more opportunities to empower youth to have an individual voice to government instead of being part of a group voice.

Students also recommended an expansion of local government Youth Advisory Councils.

⁸ [https://www.qilt.edu.au/surveys/graduate-outcomes-survey-\(gos\)#anchor-1](https://www.qilt.edu.au/surveys/graduate-outcomes-survey-(gos)#anchor-1)

⁹ <https://visibleink.org/>