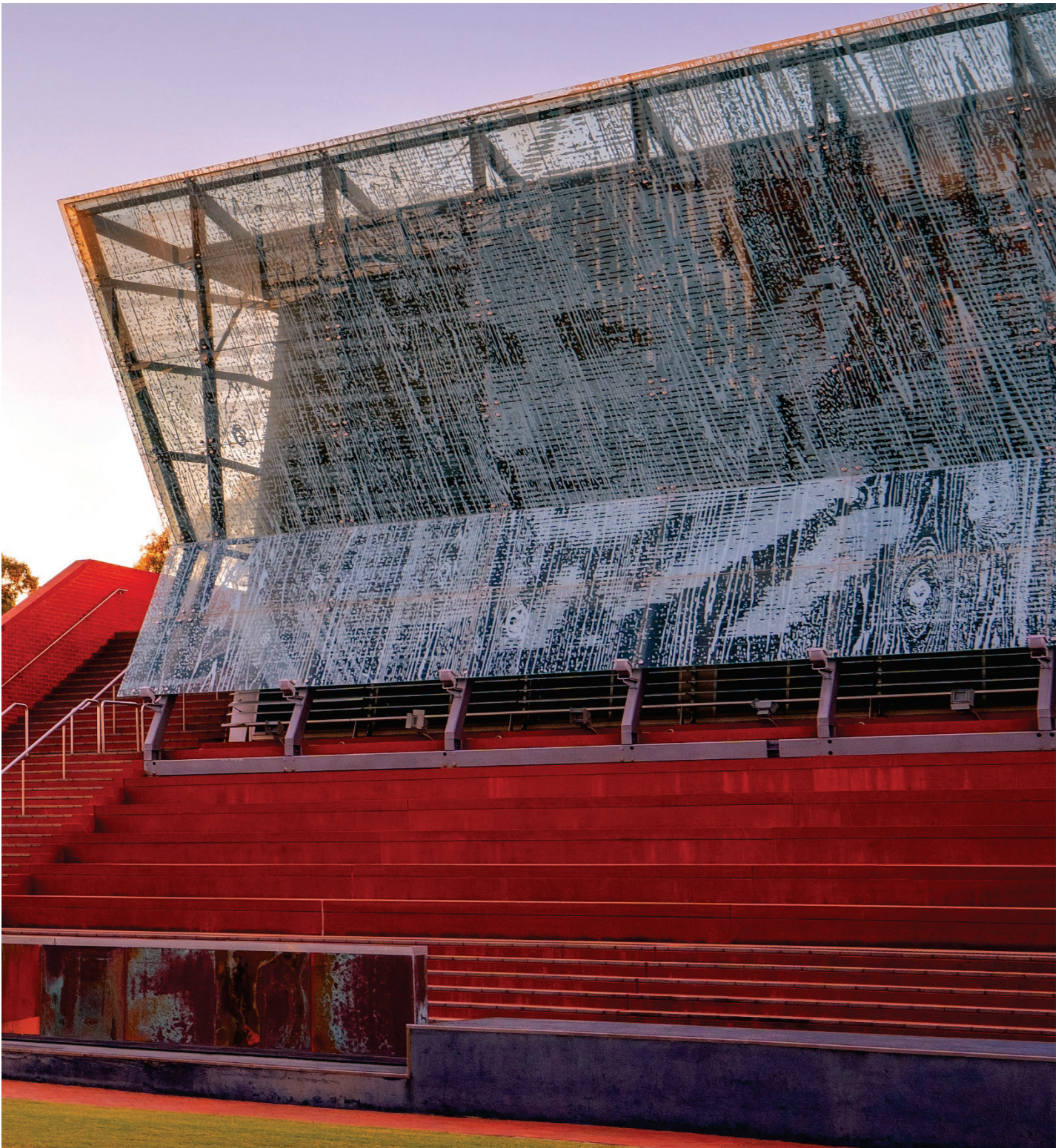


University Sector Review: Western Australian Universities Discussion Paper

Submission from Edith Cowan University, May 2023



Kellie

Kellie had not completed Year 10 and had never taken an exam until she started university, when the youngest of her four children was just turning one.

A proud Dieri, Arabana and Kokatha woman from a remote outback town in South Australia, Kellie found her way into university via ECU's university preparation pathway, *UniPrep*.

Kellie was the first in her family to graduate from university and is now excited to give back to the community as a registered nurse at Royal Perth Hospital.



Ryan

Ryan was born with a genetically inherited eye disease and is legally blind.

A lack of support during high school discouraged Ryan from furthering his education. However, with adaptive technology and the support of ECU, Ryan persevered to graduate with a Bachelor of Psychology, Criminology and Justice in 2022.

During his studies, Ryan was involved in the award-winning Enhancing Digital Accessibility Project and sat on a panel for the International Day of Persons with Disabilities.

Ryan is currently working towards a career as a psychologist and brings his lived experience to create accessibility for others in his role as a Digital Accessibility Analyst.



Lorna

Lorna was a mother of a toddler, pregnant with her second child, and working night duty as a clinical nurse when she enrolled in a Bachelor of Health Science at ECU.

After completing her bachelor degree, she returned to study for her Master of Nursing and, later, a Master of Business Administration. By then, Lorna was a single mum of three and found ECU gave her the flexibility she needed to juggle work, study and parenthood.

Lorna co-founded chemo@home, a game-changing service allowing cancer patients to have chemotherapy and other medical infusions in their own homes.



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A. Summary

Western Australia's universities are more than the sum of global rankings, research outputs and league tables. At their best, our universities realise human potential.

They equip students with the skills to shape a career and open the door to opportunities around the world. They undertake research that helps shape a better future. They are inclusive and accessible. They change lives.

To succeed, our universities must reflect the diverse nature of the student populations and the communities they serve. They must strike the right balance between achieving teaching and research excellence, driving innovation and economic prosperity, and delivering an exceptional learning experience which values creativity and provides students with practical workplace experiences.

For the past three decades, Edith Cowan University has forged such a path. We have set the national benchmark for teaching excellence and the student experience. Our clear focus on accessibility ensures Western Australians from non-traditional backgrounds, including first-in-family and mature-age learners, enjoy a high-quality education in an inclusive and supportive environment.

Despite our relative youth as an institution, our teaching and research expertise is globally recognised and growing, evidenced by our ranking in the top 100 in the *Times Higher Education* Young University Rankings for universities under 50 years of age. Our creative faculties are also world class. The Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts is internationally renowned, and our alumni are global ambassadors for Western Australia.

ECU's new City Campus, being built with the financial support of the State and Commonwealth governments, will see ECU students revitalise the heart of Perth while enjoying access to unique workplace opportunities in a wide range of professions. Equipping our graduates with the skills they need to navigate a rapidly diversifying economy remains a key focus.

ECU shares the State Government's ambition to ensure that our universities are well placed to meet the current and future needs of the State. We seek to contribute to the work of the Review Panel in a constructive manner and our submission offers a number of recommendations for consideration.

We do not, however, support any structural change that would directly involve ECU in a merger.

Our purpose is clear and distinctive. We are inclusive, diverse and accessible, offering high quality learning experiences and undertaking impactful world-class research.

ECU believes that any structural change resulting in fewer universities would mean less choice and more restricted access to higher education for Western Australians.

Differentiated WA universities provides better student choice, and opportunities for higher education participation that would otherwise be absent. Without these opportunities, the higher education participation rate in WA – already poor in comparison to other states – will fall further.

Successful universities have a positive impact on the communities they were established to serve. We seek to continue to get the balance right and deliver outstanding education and research outcomes.

B. Measuring performance

1. Accurate and relevant metrics

The data considered in the Discussion Paper are constrained to a narrow set of metrics that do not accurately reflect the current overall performance of the Western Australian public universities, or consider the key influences on that performance.

The perceived areas for improvement are also described in aggregate terms, but clearly the performance issues identified do not apply to *all* universities *equally*. For example, the Discussion Paper cites financial performance, but does not acknowledge that ECU has delivered operating surpluses of \$20 million or more in each of the past eight years.

Comparing performance of WA universities in combination, against the averages of universities in other states, also fails to recognise the diversity in WA and those other states. Benchmarks on performance would be better considered relative to similar sized universities with similar missions interstate.

Using 2021 as a reference year is also problematic, given the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on university operations, student demand and income. Our data for 2022 and 2023 shows significant recovery post-pandemic, particularly in international student demand. In order to provide a more accurate framework for analysis, where available, this response provides current data, including performance in 2022 and 2023.

2. State comparisons and external factors

It is important to consider the external factors that may have impacted on the performance of the universities in recent years and to identify *differences* in these factors, by state, to contextualise the performance of the WA universities compared to their interstate equivalents.

These external factors include:

- the relative strength of the WA economy and labour market demand that has suppressed domestic demand for higher education to a greater extent in WA than elsewhere.
- the state/territory variations in population demographics, including numbers and changes in school-leavers, workforce participants and equity groups (including people from regional and remote areas, those from low SES backgrounds, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people).
- the low ATAR participation rates in WA relative to most other states, which negatively impacts the rates of transition to higher education in WA, despite the best efforts of ECU and other universities in the State.
- the Year 12 half-cohort of 2015, which modelling suggests had a pipeline negative growth impact on domestic higher education student numbers of 5%.
- the diversion of school-leavers and other learners to free and discounted TAFE courses in WA.
- differences in state responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, including the timings of border closures and re-openings.

- the notion that Australia is a single, homogenous market. The term “market share” is used in reference to domestic student load (p.16) and international student load (p.14), with no recognition of the variations in demand and supply in different jurisdictions.

These factors are addressed in more detail in response to the Terms of Reference.



C. Imperatives for change

1. Introduction

The Discussion Paper proposes the need for structural change for WA's universities.

ECU's position is that the need for such change has not yet been identified, nor what, if any, benefits would be achieved.

If the objective of structural reform is to increase research capacity and international research rankings, or to win more research grants, ECU's view is that the focus should be on improving the individual performance of those universities with a primary focus on research.

To do otherwise would be to fundamentally misunderstand the purpose of universities and the need for diversity, choice and access to higher education, all of which frame the Commonwealth Government's strategy and direction for Australian higher education.

We contend that there is no research benefit to merging research-focused universities with those more focused on teaching excellence and accessibility. Even the merger of two research-intensive universities runs the risk of reducing the breadth of research, through the alignment of the differing research priorities of those institutions.

If the objective is to attract more international students, or to improve the financial sustainability of WA's universities, ECU respectfully suggests more accurate and relevant metrics be used to assess performance. We believe there are significant differences between WA's universities, and ECU in particular, is performing strongly in those areas key to our strategic focus and the Commonwealth's goals for Australian higher education.

That is not to say there are not issues to be addressed and that the performance of WA universities could not be improved. However, ECU believes restructuring, and in particular, merging universities, is not a valid solution. In fact, ECU believes it will cause significant and long-lasting damage to the performance of the universities.

2. Big does not mean better

The Discussion Paper includes a fundamental proposition that improved performance can be achieved only through upscaling:

Australia's higher education funding system incentivises universities to operate at large scale ... They must search for efficiencies through economies of scale in their administration and operations. (p.9)

The Discussion Paper cites Professor Glyn Davis in support of this argument. However, the same author, in an article for the Australian Financial Review¹, says:

Size imposes complexity, making Australian universities more alike as they become larger.

The Discussion Paper outlines the performance of WA's universities in international rankings. However, big does not mean better in terms of global rankings. The highest ranked universities globally are not the biggest: in fact, six universities ranked in the top 10 across the three major ranking programs, have an average student load *lower* than any of the four WA public universities.

Their key advantages are their endowments and their longevity, with an average age of 425 years, compared to an average age of 58 years for WA’s four public universities.

International rankings are a relevant proxy for research capacity and quality, given that ranking scores largely rely on research metrics, but do not reflect teaching quality. Importantly, they are of limited relevance as a consideration for international students.

In a recent QS survey of international students² only 25% of respondents nominated rankings as one of their top five decision factors when choosing where to study, while the 2021 International Student Barometer³ identified that league tables or rankings do not have a key role in choice for international students, placing this equal 7th in the list of decision factors for onshore students to Australia.

International rankings are highly unlikely to be a significant factor for domestic prospective students when choosing where to study.

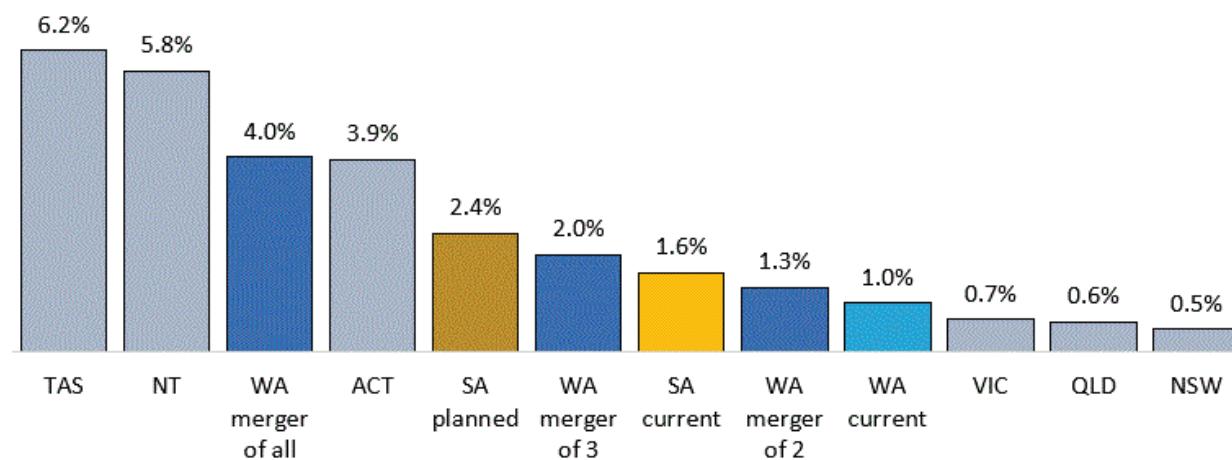
3. Is structural change the best and only solution?

ECU challenges the presumption that structural change is required to improve the performance outcomes of Western Australia’s universities.

We note the lack of modelling to demonstrate the improved performance and financial sustainability of the universities associated with the various change options. The inclusion of options such as no change, cooperation and consortia, give encouragement that less radical and less disruptive change may be considered, although it is difficult to see how a tertiary sector merger option (i.e. merging a TAFE with a university) would deliver improved outcomes in research income, international rankings, or international student market share.

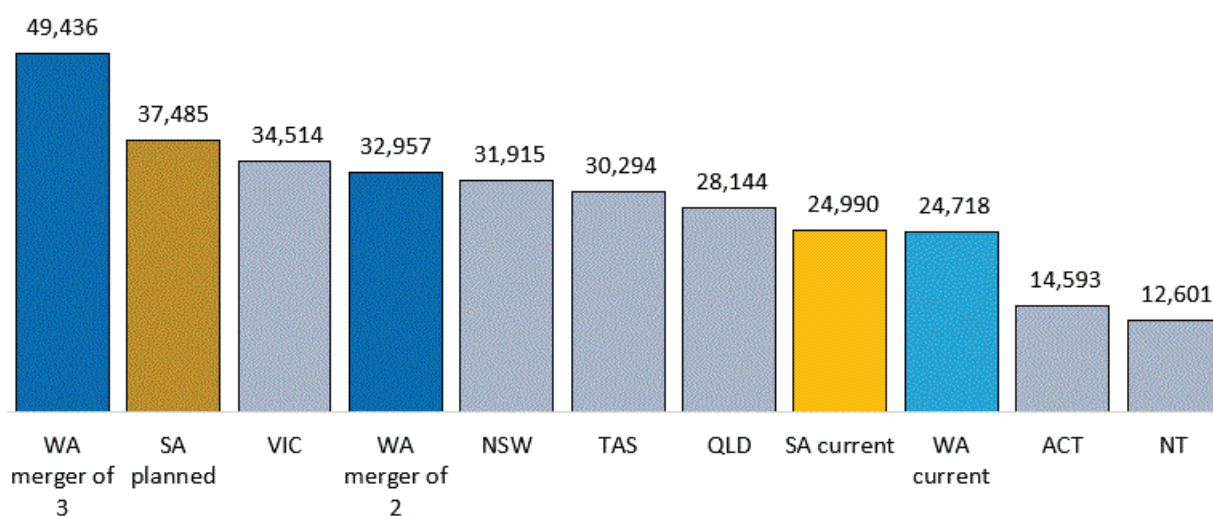
Western Australia, with a population of 2.8 million people, is currently served by four public universities. The share of the state/territory population served by each public university, along with the merger scenarios for WA and SA is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Share of population served per public university



The domestic student cohort sizes for each state’s public universities, along with merger scenarios for WA and SA is shown below.

Figure 2: Domestic students per public university



What this basic modelling demonstrates is that merger options for Western Australia (and South Australia) would result in universities that look “out of scale” compared with those in the larger states of New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland.

4. What we risk through mergers

ECU contends that structural change involving amalgamation would be costly, destabilising and a significant impediment to growth and productivity in the short- and medium-term.

Disruption to programs that are addressing current State and national skill shortages would be most unwelcome.

ECU’s teaching programs contribute significantly to WA’s knowledge and skills needs – ECU graduated 705 new teachers in 2021, the fourth-largest cohort in Australia. ECU also produces more nursing and midwifery graduates than any other WA university. In 2021, there were 956 completions for initial registration as nurses – the third highest of all Australian universities.

Beyond the short- and medium-term recalibration of the WA universities following mergers, there is a real risk of a permanent contraction and loss of recognition and reputation. In highly competitive Australian and international settings, this would disadvantage for WA universities long-term, leading to:

- a decline in international ranking positions in the QS and THE ranking programs
- declining student demand
- attrition and inability to attract high-calibre academic staff, and
- reduced industry funding for research, as industry partners look to more well-established universities for collaboration opportunities.

Incompatible institutional cultures and lack of synergies between organisations are recognised as two of the principal causes of failure in mergers and acquisitions⁴. The World Bank Report: The Challenges of Establishing World-Class Universities (2009)⁵ makes similar points in relation to

universities, and highlights that for merged universities, there may be difficulties in creating a new identity out of distinct institutional cultures. The report's conclusion includes:

- Focusing efforts on the local community and economy ... could lead to more effective and sustainable development than broader world-class aspirations.

5. Nurturing a WA knowledge economy

ECU is of the view that a reduced number of universities in Western Australia would disadvantage the local community and that the extreme option of a single university would be highly undesirable.

Fewer universities and the resulting homogeneity of the WA university sector would mean less student choice and less opportunity to access higher education for Western Australians. This in turn will restrict the development of the State's workforce capability.

This reduced choice and reduced access would not only impact high school leavers seeking undergraduate study, but also a significant number of mature-age learners, entering higher education for the first time, or returning to study at postgraduate level for career change and career progression. In 2021 some 50,000 mature-age students studied at WA's public universities, 66% of the total student cohort. At ECU, we supported almost 14,000 mature-age learners in 2021.

Student choice must be protected if opportunities for those in our community from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds are to grow. A merger of universities may result in our State's low higher education participation rates falling even further.

It is imperative for the future success of the State that we meet the expectations of our community for high quality educational experiences that equip Western Australians with the skills and knowledge needed to contribute to their own success and that of the State.



As intimated in the Discussion Paper (p.9), for the universities themselves, mergers would be expected to result in efficiencies through economies of scale, meaning job losses in back-office operations and administration. In 2021, almost 6,000 staff⁶, or 5,300 full-time equivalents⁷, worked in non-academic ('professional services') roles at the four WA public universities. Even a modest 5% efficiency gain could result in the loss of 300 staff and a reduction in the State's payroll tax revenues of more than \$2 million per annum annually.

The cost of these job losses to individuals, families, communities, and the WA economy would be coupled with reduced job opportunities for those aspiring to work in the sector.

Professional services staff are often highly qualified people with transferrable skills in high demand, and many would be lost to the State in favour of opportunities at interstate universities.

Rationalisation and efficiency savings are notoriously difficult to realise and merged universities would not want to repeat the experiences of the WA public sector's expensive and ineffective Office of Shared Services restructure, initiated in 2001 and abandoned in 2012⁸.

6. The role of the Commonwealth Government

The significant role of the Commonwealth Government, not just in funding universities, but in setting the legislative and regulatory frameworks and overall strategy and direction of Australian higher education, is not recognised by the Discussion Paper.

While Australia's 37 public universities are established under state legislation, their operations are determined by Commonwealth legislation including the *Higher Education Support Act 2003*, and overseen by the Commonwealth's Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency. Put simply, WA's universities exist as part of a national sector.

The Australian higher education sector is diverse. Universities operate with considerable autonomy and work hard to serve their various and distinct stakeholders. For many years the WA universities have pursued very distinct missions and strategic foci.

Diversity for WA universities means having some focused on research intensity, and others focused on teaching excellence and equitable access.

In fact, the Commonwealth Government *requires* Australian universities to commit to this differentiated approach, formalised through Mission-based Compacts that were introduced in 2011. The Australian Department of Education website states:

Compacts recognise each higher education provider as an autonomous institution with a distinctive mission, operating within a state or territory, national and international higher education environment.

ECU believes mergers with the narrow objective to simply increase research capacity and international rankings will threaten this diversity, reduce both student choice and access for the WA community, and would run contrary to the expectations of the Commonwealth Government.

7. The role of the State Government

The State Government's concern about WA universities' competitiveness is largely misplaced. Each Western Australian university strives to outperform its benchmark group – those with similar missions, size etc. – in Australia, and globally. As noted previously, the WA universities are very different, and hence benchmark their performance against those in other states as well as locally.

Although Australian public universities receive the majority of their funding from the Commonwealth, state governments have an important role in supporting the universities in their jurisdictions, to assist them to achieve a competitive advantage that will benefit the universities and the community, industry and the local economy in which they operate.

With this in mind, the State Government's desire to support higher education may benefit from a benchmarking exercise to investigate whether there are examples of government interventions in other states that could inform initiatives to help WA universities achieve this competitive advantage.

For example, to address the State's below-average rates of higher education participation, possible WA State Government initiatives might include:

- supporting increased ATAR participation in high schools
- providing additional funding for improved regional participation
- providing further funding support for international education
- funding work placements in public schools and hospitals, and
- seeking ways to improve the complementarity between universities and TAFE.

These ideas are explored in more detail below and form the basis for a series of recommendations included in this submission, including examples of initiatives in Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland.

8. Conclusion

On the most current and relevant data, ECU and other WA universities are performing well and are showing positive growth trajectories in the re-bounce from the COVID-19 pandemic. Where there are opportunities to leverage benefits from partnership or joint activity, for example through joint research projects, WA universities are already doing so. We collaborate extensively.

Mergers would be a step too far, delivering little additional gain.

Given the uncertainty of any beneficial outcomes from mergers and the substantial cost and disruption – as well as the potential for economic and reputational damage – ECU contends there is no convincing case for structural change for WA's universities.

However, there may be opportunity to grow and improve the universities' competitiveness with strategic and targeted State Government support.

ECU has sought to provide constructive recommendations for action in the following response to the Terms of Reference.

D. Addressing the terms of reference

1. Meeting current and future knowledge and skills needs, increasing enrolments, providing equitable access, and enhancing the student experience

1.1 Introduction

The Discussion Paper (p.7) points to WA having the smallest percentage increase in domestic higher education enrolments of any state from 2011 to 2021. Analysis by ECU, based on *unique* enrolments in a year (i.e. no double-counting of students in two courses), indicates that WA saw a 23% increase in domestic enrolments, compared to a national average 28%, and with better growth than New South Wales (18%). Nonetheless, WA domestic enrolment growth was well below Victoria and Queensland, and we agree the low uptake of higher education opportunities by Western Australians is a matter of significant concern.

ECU undertakes significant engagement and outreach activities with high schools and local communities to raise aspirations for university and to provide the support and assistance individuals need to realise their ambitions for higher education study and qualifications.

These activities include training and support programs for high school career and guidance counsellors and engagement programs to give high school students a taste of higher education across various disciplines.

For example, ECU's School of Engineering developed a STEM program called "CREATE – *Creating Real Engineering and Technology Experiences*". Through CREATE workshops, students in Years 9 to 12 with an interest in science, technology, engineering and mathematics are challenged in an interactive and engaging environment.

ECU's *UniPrep Schools* program, offered in high schools across Western Australia to Year 11 and 12 students, is committed to addressing inequities by primarily focusing on schools in low socio-economic areas and in regional and remote WA, where often no, or few, ATAR subjects are available to study. This year, ECU helped 450 students from 30 participating schools. This is clear evidence that enabling pathways can, and do, support ATAR participation: they are not competing forces in our educational landscape, they are complementary and mutually supporting.

Other WA universities are also delivering engagement programs, in a substantial collective effort to raise aspirations for higher education among the State's high school students. These activities are often supported by Commonwealth Government funding.

However, despite the significant efforts of ECU and other universities, more action is needed at the high school level to encourage greater participation in ATAR and beyond – to provide the 'push' to the universities' 'pull' needed to bring WA in line with other states and territories.

1.2 Falling ATAR participation rates

It has long been recognised that falling ATAR participation rates and the challenges of providing access to students across WA’s extensive regional areas are contributing factors to the State’s comparatively low levels of university participation.

Universities are part of an education continuum. Shortfalls in the secondary school system have an impact on the tertiary sector and in particular the ability of universities to lift domestic higher education participation. The perception that it is solely the actions of universities that is disincentivising ATAR participation fails to address the upper primary and secondary school role in guiding and preparing students.

This, in turn, limits WA’s ability to grow a workforce with the knowledge and skills to remain competitive in a national and global economy with rapidly changing needs and priorities.

The longstanding issue of low and declining ATAR participation in WA is illustrated in Figure 3. Comparative ATAR participation rates for the latest year of analysed data are shown in Figure 4.

Figure 3: WA ATAR-eligible participation rates (%), 2010-2020

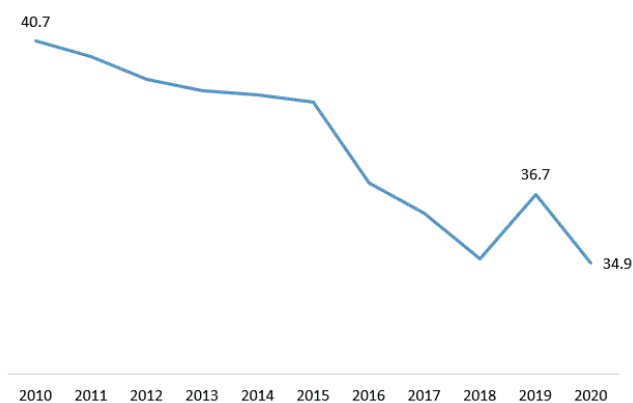
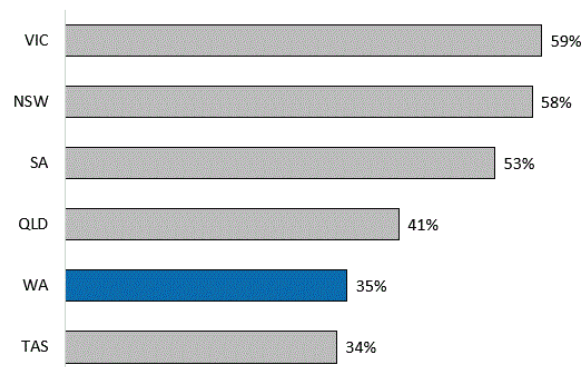


Figure 4: Estimated ATAR participation (%) by state, 2020



RECOMMENDATION 1

That the State Government establishes a review of WA’s public high school system to identify ways to increase opportunities for secondary school students to study in an ATAR pathway, particularly those subjects aligned with their university course preferences, and provides incentives for secondary schools to offer and promote ATAR subjects.

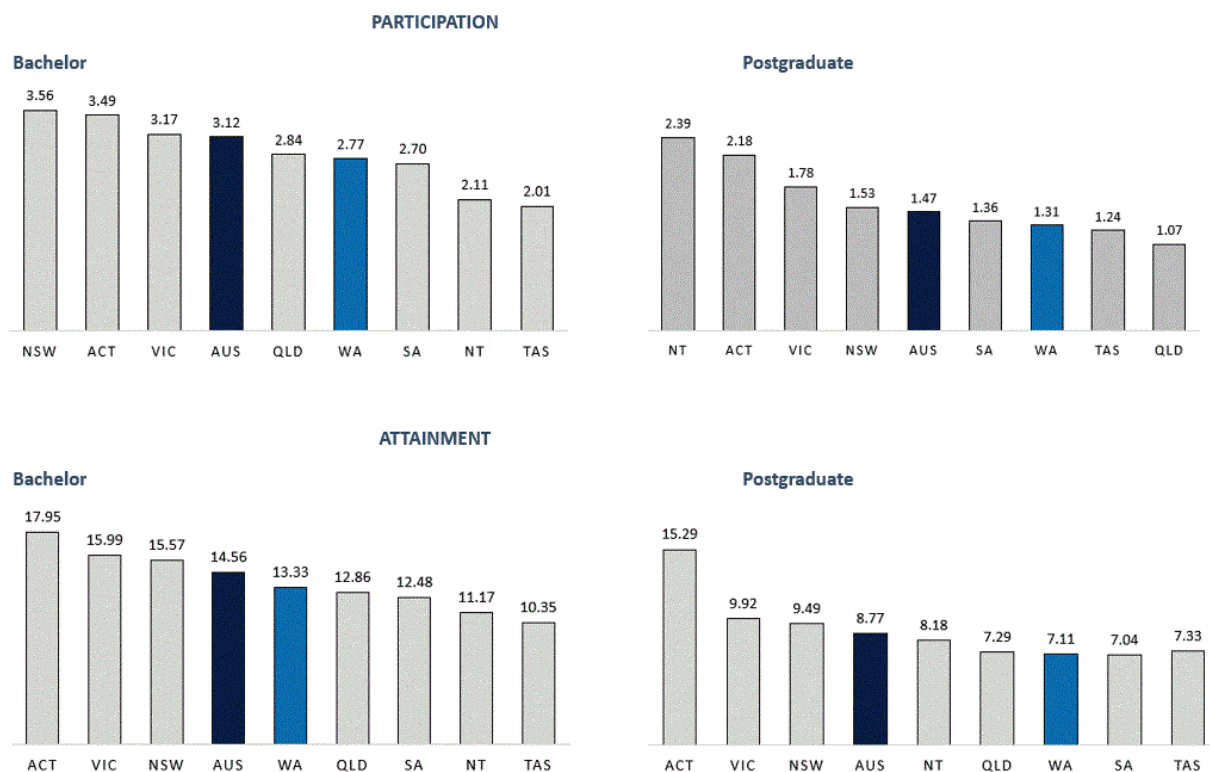
This will help address WA’s low ATAR participation rate and promote an increase in application numbers to university courses.

1.3 Meeting the current and future skills needs of the State

Low ATAR participation is a key factor in limiting university study and underpins the below national average performance of Western Australia on measures of participation in higher education.

Figure 5 shows WA's lower than national average rates of participation in bachelor and postgraduate studies and lower than national average rates of attainment of bachelor and postgraduate qualifications in the general population.

Figure 5: Participation and attainment rates (%) bachelor and postgraduate studies, 2022



A co-ordinated approach to meeting the current and future skills needs of the State is required. This would involve Government agencies and businesses working with schools, vocational education and training providers and universities to develop and deploy education and training programs to address the State's skills needs.

RECOMMENDATION 2

That the State Government establishes a 'Tertiary Education for WA Taskforce' to bring together higher education providers, vocational education and training providers, businesses, and Government agencies, for a more co-ordinated approach to addressing the State's skills needs.

The Taskforce would recommend ways in which information on current and emerging skills needs in WA can be collected and used to inform new curricula and training package offerings, and how to use *Jobs and Skills Australia's* national frameworks for codified skills needs and course competencies in future.

1.4 Regional higher education participation

ECU has provided comprehensive higher education opportunities to Western Australia's regional communities for 30 years and, in particular, has a long-standing presence in the South West Region.

The ECU South West Campus at Bunbury is the largest regional campus in WA. Through the campus and also by supporting distance and online learning, ECU has helped almost 5000 South West Region residents gain higher education qualifications.

Our regional higher education delivery is supported by local regional learning hubs at Collie, Mandurah, Bunbury, and Busselton for both online and on-campus students.

ECU's study hubs are award winning; receiving national recognition in the 2020 Australian Awards for University Teaching, with an Award for Programs that Enhance Learning.⁹

ECU's regional learning hubs have been recognised for partnering with regional innovation centres to increase participation amongst regional students and for supporting online learning by building social and academic relationships.



Image courtesy of Alana Blowfield Photography.

ECU welcomes the Discussion Paper's acknowledgement that WA's geographical and regional context presents challenges for access to, and delivery of, tertiary education and that WA universities are currently addressing these challenges by operating regional campuses.

At the State level, previous governments have commissioned a number of reviews of regional higher education in WA, but tangible support remains limited.

We agree there are further opportunities for universities to support regional students through the Regional Universities Centres (RUCs). However, this will require both growth and certainty of government funding to support the additional cost of operating in regional and remote parts of WA.

The future of the federally-funded RUCs is currently uncertain, given the Commonwealth's consideration of regional higher education strategies as part of the Australian Universities Accord Review.

State Government assistance is needed to incentivise WA universities to provide learning opportunities to regional communities that, in the past, have been taken up by interstate providers, only for these providers to later withdraw from WA.

The ECU Study Hub network is a good model for regional-based study support. These Study Hubs act as satellite study centres, attached to a larger regional campus (ECU South West). They provide ECU's on-campus and online learners throughout the South West Region with study spaces and meeting points for interaction with academic advisors and other students. An extended network of 'State Study Hubs', potentially utilising the facilities of TAFE colleges in regional WA, might provide a starting point for a State Government strategy for regional higher education delivery.

RECOMMENDATION 3

That the State Government devises and funds a *State Study Hub* program complementary to the RUCs, to raise aspirations for higher education in regional areas.

Other State Government assistance to support higher education in regional communities, as part of a co-ordinated strategy for regional higher education delivery, could include:

- improving the quality and availability of career information and advice with locally informed and locally led initiatives that provide a better match to local employment options and educational pathways;
- increasing contributions to regional infrastructure and regional innovation projects. It is recognised¹⁷ nationally that regional higher education providers need greater access to support for infrastructure projects; and
- funding and seeking public-private partnerships to increase regional housing and land supply for student accommodation.

1.5 Student load

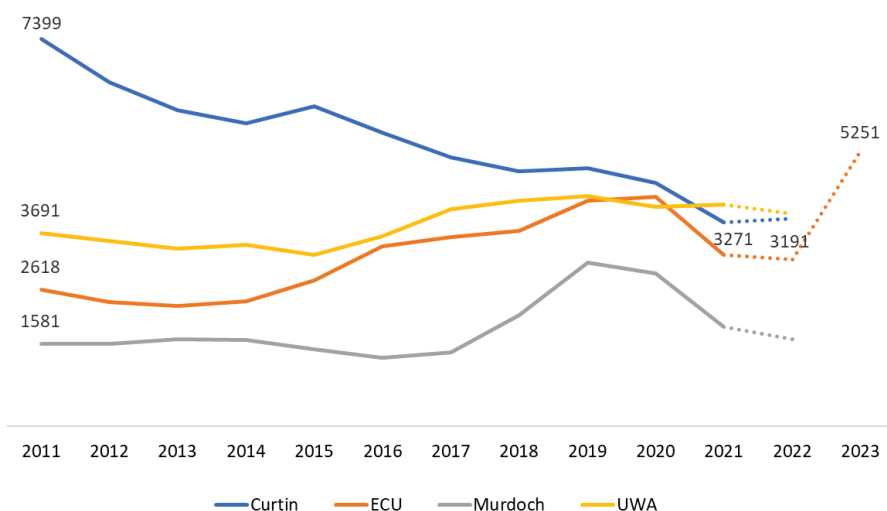
The Discussion Paper (Figure 6, p.16) shows domestic student load for the WA universities over the timeseries 2011-2021. For 2022 and the current year, the continuing impact of the strong labour market on suppression of demand for higher education is evident.

As noted earlier in this response, the Discussion Paper (Figure 3, p.14) uses 2021 data as the end point for its timeseries for overseas student load. Extending that timeseries to 2022 (and 2023 for ECU full year estimates) is useful in providing a more contemporary view.

It should be noted that the Discussion Paper’s commentary on overseas student load includes offshore as well as onshore students, which distorts the timeseries decline.

The performance of the universities in international education onshore (on Australian campuses only) is more relevant to the WA economy and therefore offshore students (those studying at campuses outside Australia) are excluded below. This timeseries has been reproduced and extended to include 2022 actuals and an estimate of ECU load for 2023.

Figure 6: Onshore international student load, 2011-2021



It is clear that the decline in international student load for all WA universities corresponds to the onset of COVID-19 and associated restrictions in the State – with a corresponding fall in market share across Australia.

More recent figures for ECU show its international student load has recovered quickly, with a return to the strong upward growth trajectory that we experienced pre-pandemic. We anticipate a similar pattern for other WA universities which have taken similar steps to recover and build sustainability in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

On this basis, WA's share of the international student market should not be of concern or considered as a factor in support of university amalgamation.

However, if WA is to grow its share of the international market in Australia, further State Government assistance will be needed, to increase the promotion of Perth and the WA regions as study destinations and to develop better transport links.

State Government funding for these activities should be at levels comparable to other states.

RECOMMENDATION 4

That the State Government considers further promotion of Perth and the WA regions as study destinations, including additional funding for *StudyPerth*, and secures new direct flights with key overseas cities to increase access to Perth for international students who currently can only reach Perth via competing cities such as Singapore, Melbourne and Sydney.

1.6 Equity

ECU is one of the leading universities in Australia for access for students identified as from an equity background. ECU's enabling programs (called *UniPrep*) are some of the largest in Australia, reaching a peak of more than 3,000 enrolments in 2019, equal to 55% of our domestic student commencements into bachelor courses, and well above the State average peak of 26% in 2020.

Enabling pathways provide an opportunity for students to determine if university is right for them before taking on a HELP loan and the associated debt.

More than 70% of those completing enabling courses go on to undergraduate study at ECU, with unit pass rates similar to new students from other pathways. Many go on to excel in courses such as nursing, education, engineering, and cybersecurity.

In 2022, almost 3500 students who completed ECU enabling programs were enrolled at ECU undergraduate courses, including bachelor degrees.

Many of the 40% who do not complete the enabling courses take up higher education in later years, when better prepared, or when personal circumstances make study more feasible.

Two-thirds of ECU's enabling students are from equity backgrounds: 12% have a disability, 16% are from regional/remote areas, and more than 50% are the first in their family to study at university.

ECU's role as a significant access university, both locally and nationally, is illustrated by our First in Family student enrolments. In 2020 – the latest year for which national comparative data is available – more than 41% of ECU's domestic students were from a **first in family** background. This proportion is well above the average of 34% for WA universities (see Table 1).

Table 1: Proportion of first in family enrolments, WA universities, 2020

	First in family	All	Proportion (%)
Curtin	3,183	9,494	33.5
ECU	2,066	5,006	41.3
Murdoch	1,453	3,820	38.0
UWA	981	4,008	24.5
Total (incl. Notre Dame)	8,448	24,863	34.0

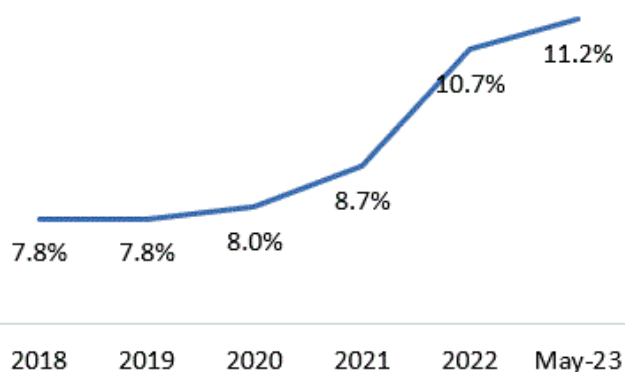
Nationally, of the metropolitan-based universities, only Victoria University, the University of South Australia, Swinburne University of Technology and Griffith University enrolled a greater proportion of first in family students.

In 2021, ECU access rates for **students from regional areas** were 19% compared to a WA public university average of 17.6%. Some 22% of ECU’s nursing students were from regional areas, compared to 18% for the other WA public universities.

ECU’s **mature-age** focus is clear. In 2022, the median age of ECU’s domestic undergraduates at commencement was 22. Only 12% were recent school leavers using ATAR as the basis for admission. Based on commencing student survey responses, almost 70% of students starting their studies at ECU are in paid employment and typically 60% are working part-time.

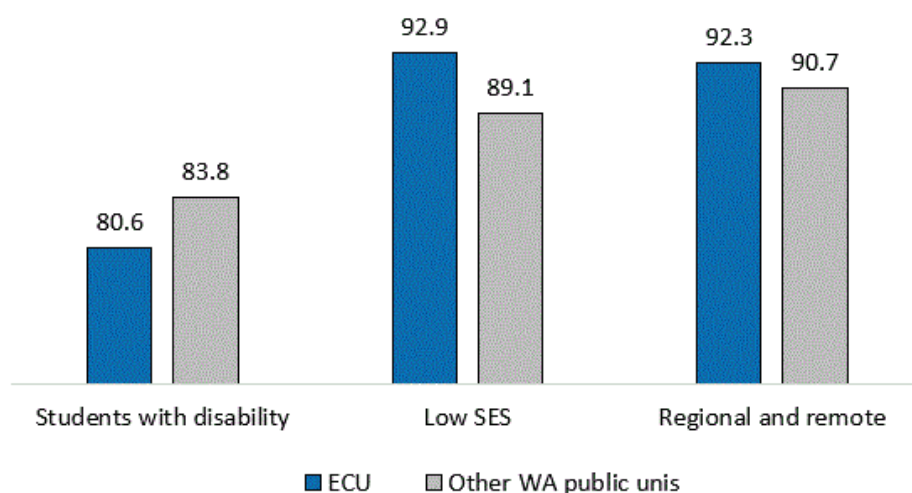
Access rates for people with disability have grown strongly at ECU in recent years and reached 11.2% for current year domestic undergraduates.

Figure 7: Commencing domestic undergraduate access rates for students with disability, 2018-2023



ECU’s dedicated approach to equity group students takes the form of tailored support at every stage of the student lifecycle, including academic progress, course completion and successful graduate outcomes. The graph below shows the relative performance of ECU graduates with disability, from a low SES background, and/or from regional and remote areas in obtaining employment, compared with the other WA public universities.

Figure 8: Overall employment rates after graduation, 2022



The Commonwealth Government provides significant funding to all Australian universities, through comprehensive equity grants programs that fund facilities and services that support educationally disadvantaged students in higher education.

Nevertheless, there remains a clear need to provide additional assistance, particularly to university students who are impacted by loss of income while completing their practicum requirements. For a significant number of these students, this loss of income, and the additional costs associated with undertaking placements (e.g., childcare costs and travel costs) can affect their ability to complete their practicums and, consequently, their courses.

This is a significant barrier to meeting Western Australia's skills needs.

RECOMMENDATION 5

That the State Government creates a financial assistance program providing means-tested grants to WA university students to help them complete their practicum requirements.



1.7 Enhancing the student experience

The Discussion Paper provides a snapshot of the latest QILT survey results from the [ComparEd](#) website, but with no view of performance over time. Additionally, these are two-year aggregate results which tend to “smooth” changes over a timeseries.

It should also be noted the Discussion Paper presents results for domestic and international students combined and the national average results include non-university higher education providers.

ECU prides itself on delivering an outstanding student experience. It has been Australia’s top public university for undergraduate teaching quality for seven consecutive years, and highest or second highest university for “Overall Satisfaction” nationally over the same timeseries. ECU has received a five-star rating for teaching quality for 16 consecutive years from the *Good Universities Guide*.

Figure 9: Undergraduate student satisfaction with overall educational experience, 2017-2021

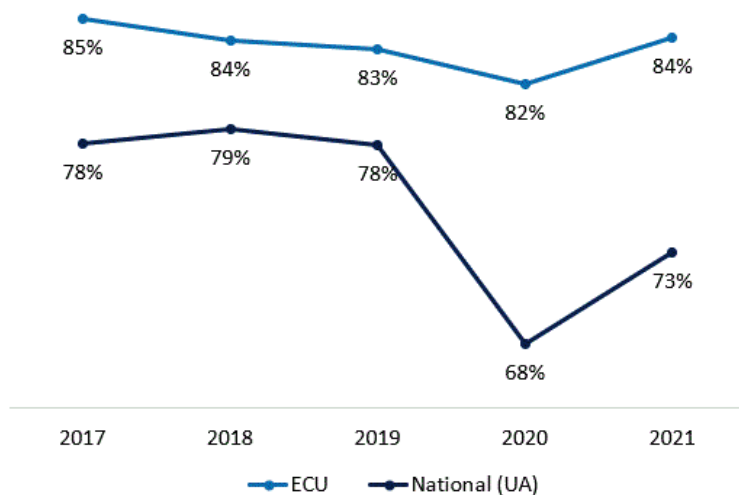
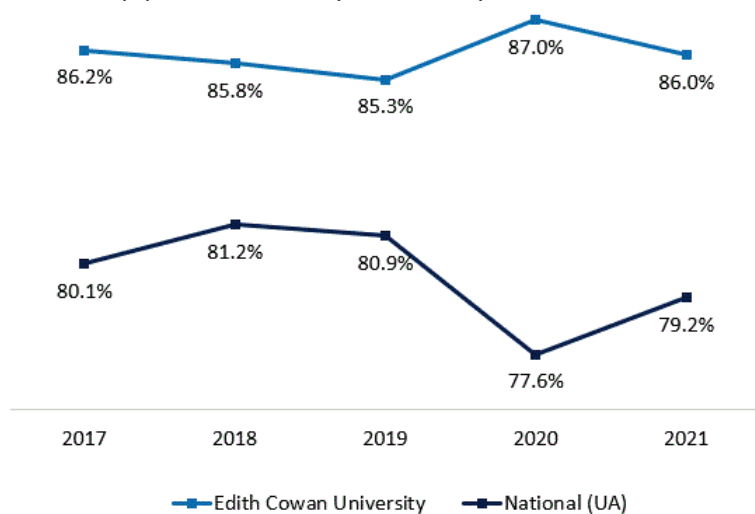


Figure 10: Undergraduate student satisfaction with teaching quality, 2017-2021

ECU – top public university across all years



1.8 Graduate outcomes

As with the undergraduate student experience figures presented in the Discussion Paper, the graduate outcomes measures shown in the Discussion Paper are aggregated (this time over three years) and the national average results include non-university higher education providers.

The performance of WA universities is impacted by the prevailing labour market conditions and the WA average relative to the national average is impacted by the relative strength of the WA labour market compared with labour markets in other states.

A view of change in full-time employment results for recent domestic graduates over a five-year timeseries is provided below. The uniform up-tick in performance for all universities in 2022 is a clear illustration of the importance of external factors – principally the prevailing labour market conditions – as influences on graduate employment.

Figure 11: Full-time employment rate (%) domestic undergraduates, 2018-2022



1.9 Work placements

To further promote knowledge and skills outcomes as well as foster employment opportunities, universities currently pay fees to employers, including government hospitals and public schools, to take interns and offer placements.

These opportunities are integral to contemporary university study and are often required as part of professional accreditation of a course as a condition for graduation. Work placements have an important role in enhancing graduate employability.

However, this activity is a major cost pressure on WA universities and cost, together with availability of placements, acts to *cap* the number of enrolments universities provide in skill shortage disciplines such as nursing and teaching.

RECOMMENDATION 6

That the State Government considers meeting the costs of WA universities in providing internships and work placements for university students and considers incentives for employers, such as a contribution to costs, to accept students on work placements.

Further, increasing the number of WA Public Service and State Enterprise work-integrated learning opportunities for university students could also assist in future workforce and succession planning within State Government.



2. Improving research funding and impact

ECU's research base is appropriate given its relatively recent establishment in 1991. Research capacity takes time to build, and ECU is performing well in research for a young university. ECU's research strategy is based on a focus on impactful world-class research in distinctive areas of nationally- and internationally recognised excellence, aligned to ECU's course offerings and to the needs of industry and the community.

Research-based inquiry informs the curriculum and teaching, and the nexus between teaching and research, a requirement that sets universities apart from other higher education providers, is codified in the Australian Government's *Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2021*.

International rankings are a proxy for research capacity and quality, given their reliance on research metrics.

In the global *Times Higher Education (THE) Young University Rankings 2022* for universities under 50 years old, ECU was ranked 94. In 2022, 890 universities were considered for this category and 539 received a rank.

The improving global ranking position of ECU is shown in the timeseries for the *Times Higher Education (THE) World University Rankings* results shown in Table 2. ECU has made steady progress in the past five years and for the 2023 rankings, 2,325 universities were considered (and 1,799 received a rank).

Table 2: Times Higher Education (THE) World University Rankings, ECU results, 2019-2023

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
ECU official banding	501–600	401–500	401–500	401–500	351–400
<i>Unofficial</i> ECU-calculated	529	473	472	444	390

ShanghaiRanking's Global Ranking of Academic Subjects (*GRAS*) 2022. ECU is ranked 30 for Hospitality and Tourism Management (*GRAS*), 33 in Sports Science (*QS*), ranked top 75 for Metallurgical Engineering (*GRAS*), top 100 in Performing Arts (*QS*), top 150 in Nursing (*QS and GRAS*), top 150 for Oceanography (*GRAS*), top 175 in Engineering (*THE*), top 250 for Business and Economics (*THE*), top 300 in Social Science (*THE*) and top 300 in Education (*QS and THE*).

ECU has more than 450 academic research staff and 800 PhD and masters by research candidates, whose research addresses local, national, and international community needs, in areas such as sustainable energy, environmental science, nutrition health, exercise medicine, cybersecurity, performing arts, and Aboriginal research.

ECU's research is on a strong growth trajectory. ECU's field weighted citation impact has increased to well above the Australian average in the past five years. ECU is increasingly leveraging partnerships with governments, and industry and community organisations, to direct and grow its research and has almost doubled its Category 1 research income from 2017 to 2021. ECU's research is having [widespread impact](#), including demonstrated commercialisation success through multiple spinout companies.

This growth trajectory is unlikely to be improved through amalgamation with another WA university.

ECU anticipates that, through amalgamation, there will either be:

- the same researchers applying for the same grants to support the same research – with nil net benefit; or
- a reduction in the diversity of research as research capability is pooled in the combined university's new priority areas – with negative impact on the overall range of research conducted in WA universities and associated teaching and learning opportunities.

As there is already substantial and increasing collaboration with, and funding from, industry and private sources, there is little opportunity to achieve a substantive increase in research capability and impact – regardless of university amalgamation – without an increase in available State Government funding.

ECU estimates that, of the \$1.06 billion expended on research and development by WA universities and research centres annually, around \$40 million is received from WA State (and local) Government.

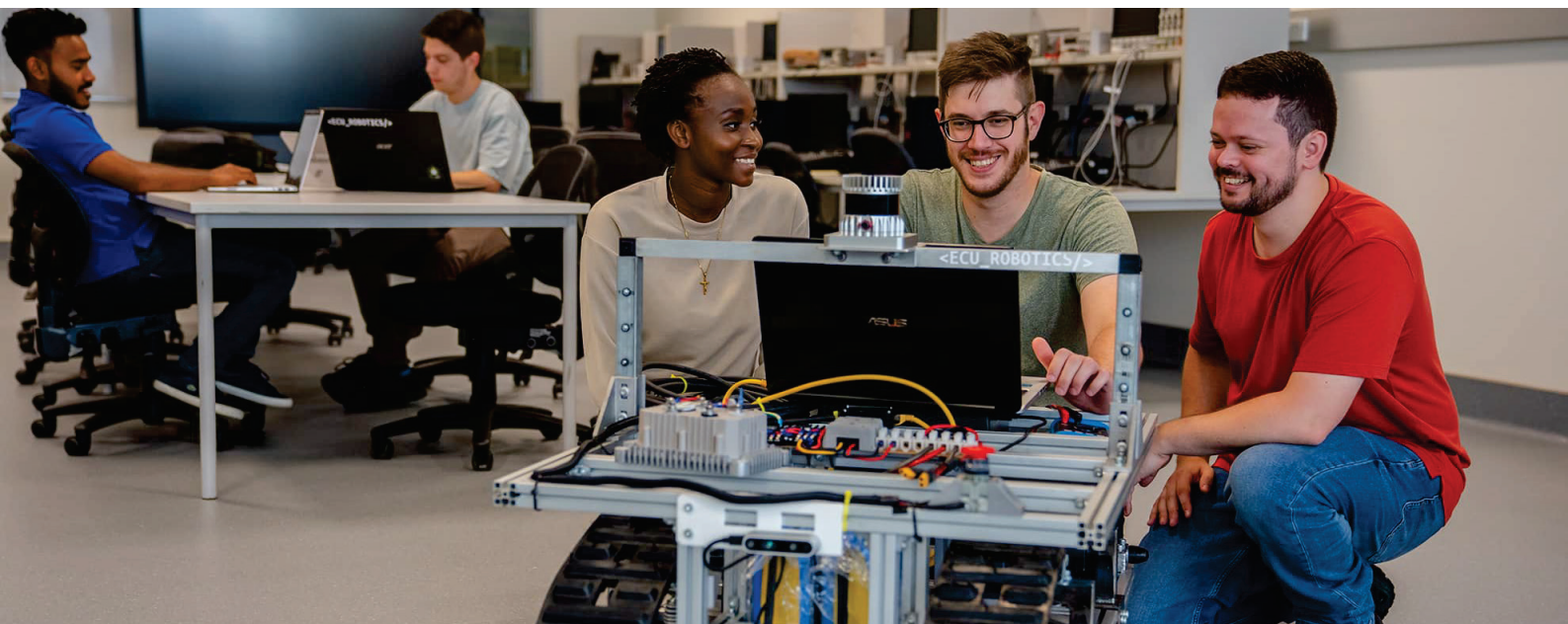
In 2020, the WA public universities received \$50 million in research income from state and local governments, including interstate governments. This represents just 12.5% of the total research income received.

There are currently 5000 doctoral students enrolled at WA universities. To attract more PhD candidates to WA, a State-funded program of PhD scholarships – as top-ups to base stipends (\$30,000) – is needed. Doubling the base stipends to attract an additional 800 PhD candidates would cost \$24 million.

RECOMMENDATION 7

That the State Government considers:

- ways to increase the quantum of State-funded research to universities,
- establishing a state investment fund, similar to that in Victoria¹², to support capital works, applied research and research infrastructure in Western Australia, and
- providing a State-funded program of PhD scholarships to attract research talent to Western Australia.



3. Attracting and retaining high-calibre academic staff

ECU's academic staff are recognised nationally for their teaching excellence, contemporary approaches in pedagogy, their collaborations with industry, inclusive practices, and innovative thinking.

In the past five years, ECU has received 21 awards and citations under the *Australian Awards for University Teaching* program, including a 2019 award for Teaching Excellence¹⁰, a 2021 award for Programs that Enhance Learning, for ECU's *Inclusion in Action*¹¹ and, in 2022, four citations for Outstanding Contributions to Student Learning.

ECU's Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts (WAAPA) is internationally renowned for producing the world's best creative artists and consistently attracts the highest calibre teachers, as well as visiting alumni, to inspire and share their experience with our students.

ECU's School of Business and Law was Australia's 'top-ranked business school for quality' in the inaugural [AFR BOSS Best Business Schools list](#).

World-class facilities such as those designed for ECU's City Campus will help ECU maintain its leading edge in teaching excellence and the student experience, one of the many contributing factors that makes ECU so attractive to high-performing academic staff.

It is no coincidence that ECU's high student satisfaction ratings are matched by sector-leading staff engagement ratings. ECU's organisational culture is reflected in staff dedicated to our students. Any merger involving ECU would risk the loss of this positive culture.

The prospect of amalgamation will act to counter these positives in the short- and medium-term, creating an impression of uncertainty and disruption for academic staff and professional staff looking for stable employment.

These conditions will cause significant attrition among current staff and significantly reduce the ability of ECU and the other WA universities to attract high calibre academic staff to the State.

RECOMMENDATION 8

That WA universities work with State Government to identify ways in which the State's resources for promoting tourism, and materials for addressing employment gaps in tourism and hospitality, could be used and adapted for academic staff recruitment to WA.



4. Supporting the financial sustainability of the sector

The financial sustainability data cited in the Discussion Paper does not provide an accurate reflection of the status of the financial health of WA universities.

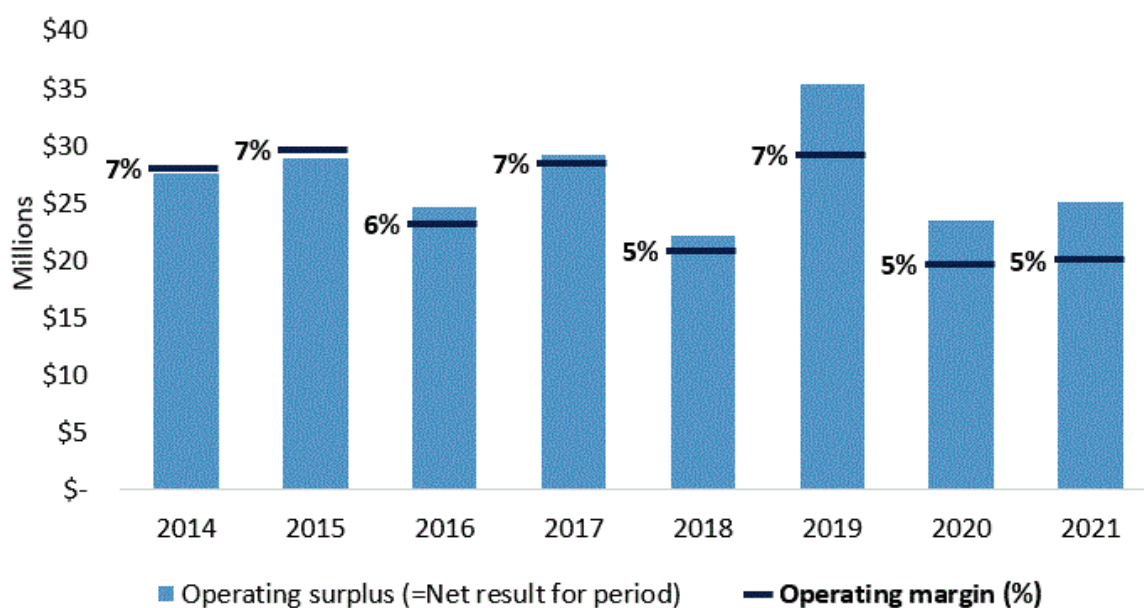
The two-year comparison (2022 versus 2021) for operating margins does not consider the continuing impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic into 2022, or the recovery indicated in data for 2023.

Further, the Discussion Paper does not consider how the results for universities in different states have been differentially impacted by external factors such as the local economy, the labour market, state demographics, government support and government responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. A further level of complexity not addressed by the Discussion Paper, relates to the contribution of different revenue streams (e.g. investment income, commercial revenue, government grants) to the overall results of each university.

In any case, it is important to recognise that perceived issues of financial sustainability do not apply *equally* to *all* the WA public universities.

ECU has delivered operating surpluses of \$20 million or more in each of the past eight financial years. The Commonwealth Government sets an operating margin benchmark minimum of 4% for universities, which ECU has exceeded in every year since 2007.

Figure 12: ECU operating results, 2014-2022



ECU’s financial viability is externally recognised, through Moody’s rating of Aa2, as “investment grade” – a grade shared with large universities such as Macquarie University and Western Sydney University.

ECU makes a significant contribution to the success of international education in WA, including in its post-pandemic recovery. In 2022, almost 25% of WA’s onshore international higher education students studied at ECU. Revenue from international onshore student fees in 2022 was \$98 million compared to \$92 million in 2021.

Commonwealth funding for higher education has been severely constrained for many years and WA has a longstanding lack of success in competitive funding applications. This may reflect a number of

factors, including a lack of experience in making grant applications, lack of proximity to decision-makers in Canberra, or lack of support/ advocacy from the State Government, compared to universities and government agencies in other jurisdictions. The Perth City Deal is a notable recent exception, where ECU's unique value-proposition was recognised by the Commonwealth Government and resulted in significant funding (\$245 million) for the ECU City Campus.

Whatever the reasons for the State's comparatively weak performance in attracting an appropriate share of national grant funding, advocacy from the State Government would be beneficial.

More fundamentally, the WA State Government's own Innovation Strategy should give specific consideration to investments in higher education directly. Examples of state government investment in higher education strategy and policy includes:

- the Victorian Government's co-ordinating role in developing higher education policy, and its \$350 million Victorian Higher Education State Investment Fund to support capital works, applied research and research infrastructure.¹²
- the New South Wales Government's approach to the integration of higher education and vocational education and training, driven by its NSW Higher Education Strategy 2021-2025.¹³ The Collaboration and Innovation Fund which allocated \$15.7 million in 2022 alone.¹⁴
- the Queensland State Government's Homework Centres¹⁵ to provide additional out of hours facilities for school students, and the Link and Launch program¹⁶ to better support the transition of Year 12 students to higher education, training, or employment.

RECOMMENDATION 9

That the State Government commissions a review to assess the varied approaches of other state governments to supporting, engaging, and working with their public universities.

Consideration should be given to establishing a *WA Higher Education Investment Fund*.



5. Strengthening relationships with business, industry, and the VET and school sector

WA universities already collaborate extensively with business, industry, other education providers, and State and Commonwealth government agencies. ECU is particularly committed to a collaborative approach. We have established – and continue to pursue – strong relationships with other bodies across various disciplines. Two notable examples are:

Cybersecurity – ECU is recognised as a national leader in cybersecurity and is the key research partner in the Cyber Security Cooperative Research Centre. ECU’s [Security Research Institute](#) takes a cross-disciplinary approach and engages with the WA community, such as the WA Police, to protect against cyber threats. ECU’s cybersecurity research led to the development of the spinout company Sapien Cyber Ltd, which brings together academic and industry practitioners to develop unique cybersecurity solutions for operational technology environments.

Medical research – ECU’s [Exercise Medicine Research Institute](#) (EMRI) is a pioneer in prescribing exercise to manage chronic disease. EMRI’s research has improved clinical management of patients with cancer and neurological disorders, providing WA patients with access to first-in-Australia technology and clinical exercise programs at the Institute’s Vario Health Clinic. Rob Newton, Deputy Director of EMRI, was jointly named WA Premier’s Scientist of the Year in 2018.

Further financial support and incentives for industry to engage with universities would be most welcome.

5.1 *Creating a TAFE sector that works in harmony with WA universities*

To meet the current and future skills needs of the State, Western Australia needs a TAFE sector that complements, rather than competes, with the higher education sector.

The State Government’s offer of free and discounted TAFE courses in WA in skill shortage disciplines has negatively impacted on higher education demand in the same disciplines, such as nursing, by diverting school-leavers and other learners away from university study.

According to the National Centre for Vocational Educational Research, there was a 16% increase in school-leavers opting for Nationally Registered Training Package diplomas and advanced diplomas in 2021 compared to the previous year, and a 43% increase in school-leaver enrolments over the 2018-2021 timeseries (see Table 3).

Table 3: WA students enrolled in government funded VET diplomas and advanced diplomas

Previous highest qualification	2018	2019	2020	2021	% Change
Bachelor degree / Higher degree	1300	825	770	1075	-17.3
Advanced diploma / Associate degree	220	140	120	155	-29.6
Diploma	950	690	795	830	-12.6
Certificate IV	1380	940	905	1075	-22.1
Certificate III	2215	1525	1400	1610	-27.3
Year 12	2525	2770	3115	3605	+42.8

RECOMMENDATION 10

That the State Government through a '*Tertiary Education for WA Taskforce*' works to improve articulation and pathways for education and training.

New university-training provider collaborations would be a key consideration for the Taskforce, based on current successful collaborations.

Further State Government funding may be required through programs that provide financial support for industry-university collaborations and incentivise industry to engage with universities.



E. Conclusion

The best interests of the Western Australian community would not be served by a merger of universities involving Edith Cowan University at this time.

The WA community deserves a university sector that retains a level of differentiation and student choice, through the distinctive missions of the individual universities, so that people from all sections of society can benefit from the opportunities that come from higher education.

The individual, societal and economic impacts of improved higher education participation, must be properly considered. ECU's distinctive role, providing high-quality educational experiences and significant opportunities for people from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds to benefit from higher education, should be respected.

A homogenous State university system that values research capacity and international rankings above all else, will deny many in the Western Australian community the education and career opportunities that Edith Cowan University currently so successfully provides.

There is no evidence that mergers between any of the WA universities will deliver improved performance, and it is likely that any new entity will experience a loss of recognition that will negatively impact on reputation and performance in the short- and medium-term. The competitiveness of WA universities, and their ability to respond to State and national skills needs may also stall for some time.

In considering how to develop a competitive advantage for WA's universities, it is recognised that the State Government has an important role to play in supporting the WA universities, particularly to undertake impactful research through industry collaboration, in providing a high school system that enables students to transition to higher education, and in operating a complementary, rather than competing TAFE sector.

ECU acknowledges the State Government's ambition to ensure our universities are high performing, and that practical solutions – alternatives to structural change – should be considered. This submission makes a series of recommendations in this regard.

We believe the University Sector Review would be well served by a comprehensive assessment of the approaches of other state governments to supporting, engaging, and working with their public universities, with a view to strengthening its own support for WA's universities.



Appendix 1: List of recommendations

Recommendation 1:

That the State Government establishes a review of WA's public high school system to identify ways to increase opportunities for secondary school students to study in an ATAR pathway, particularly those subjects aligned with their university course preferences, and provides incentives for secondary schools to offer and promote ATAR subjects.

This will help address WA's low ATAR participation rate and promote an increase in application numbers to university courses.

Recommendation 2:

That the State Government establishes a '*Tertiary Education for WA Taskforce*' to bring together higher education providers, vocational education and training providers, businesses, and Government agencies, for a more co-ordinated approach to addressing the State's skills needs.

The Taskforce would recommend ways in which information on current and emerging skills needs in WA can be collected and used to inform new curricula and training package offerings, and how to use *Jobs and Skills Australia's* national frameworks for codified skills needs and course competencies in future.

Recommendation 3:

That the State Government devises and funds a *State Study Hub* program complementary to the RUCs, to raise aspirations for higher education in regional areas.

Other State Government assistance to support higher education in regional communities, as part of a co-ordinated strategy for regional higher education delivery, could include:

- improving the quality and availability of career information and advice with locally informed and locally led initiatives that provide a better match to local employment options and educational pathways;
- increasing contributions to regional infrastructure and regional innovation projects. It is recognised¹⁷ nationally that regional higher education providers need greater access to support for infrastructure projects; and
- funding and seeking public-private partnerships to increase regional housing and land supply for student accommodation.

Recommendation 4:

That the State Government considers further promotion of Perth and the WA regions as study destinations, including additional funding for StudyPerth, and secures new direct flights with key overseas cities to increase access to Perth for international students who currently can only reach Perth via competing cities such as Singapore, Melbourne and Sydney.

Recommendation 5:

That the State Government creates a financial assistance program providing means-tested grants to WA university students to help them complete their practicum requirements.

Recommendation 6:

That the State Government considers meeting the costs of WA universities in providing internships and work placements for university students and considers incentives for employers, such as a contribution to costs, to accept students on work placements.

Further, increasing the number of WA Public Service and State Enterprise work-integrated learning opportunities for university students could also assist in future workforce and succession planning within State Government.

Recommendation 7:

That the State Government considers:

- ways to increase the quantum of State-funded research to universities,
- establishing a state investment fund, similar to that in Victoria¹², to support capital works, applied research and research infrastructure in Western Australia, and
- providing a State-funded program of PhD scholarships to attract research talent to Western Australia.

Recommendation 8:

That WA universities work with State Government to identify ways in which the State's resources for promoting tourism, and materials for addressing employment gaps in tourism and hospitality, could be used and adapted for academic staff recruitment to WA.

Recommendation 9:

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Consideration should be given to establishing a *WA Higher Education Investment Fund*.

Recommendation 10:

That the State Government through a '*Tertiary Education for WA Taskforce*' works to improve articulation and pathways for education and training.

New university-training provider collaborations would be a key consideration for the Taskforce, based on current successful collaborations.

Further State Government funding may be required through programs that provide financial support for industry-university collaborations and incentivise industry to engage with universities.

Appendix 2: Notes about the data

Figures and tables

Figure 1

Domestic and onshore international student enrolments, divided by the number of public universities, expressed as a percentage of the state/territory resident population.

Note: Excludes Batchelor Institute, private universities, NUHEPS and Australian Catholic University (regarded as a multi-state university).

Source: Australian Government Department of Education, Higher Education Statistics, 2021, All students, Table 2.6. Australian Government Department of Education, Higher Education Statistics, 2021, Overseas students, Table 7.5. Australian Bureau of Statistics, National, state and territory Resident Population September 2022.

Figure 2

Domestic student enrolments, divided by the number of public universities.

Note: Excludes Batchelor Institute, private universities, NUHEPS and Australian Catholic University (regarded as a multi-state university).

Source: Australian Government Department of Education, Higher Education Statistics, 2021, All students, Table 2.6. Australian Government Department of Education, Higher Education Statistics, 2021, Overseas students, Table 7.5. Australian Bureau of Statistics, National, state and territory Resident Population September 2022.

Figure 3

Estimated Western Australian ATAR participation rates, calculated based on eligible school-leaver age population of each State (originally sourced from Australian Bureau of Statistics).

Source: WA TISC, 2021

Figure 4

As Fig. 3.

Figure 5

Participation based on level of education of current study. Attainment based on level of highest educational attainment, as a proportion of the state/territory population.

Source: Estimated based on data from Australian Bureau of Statistics Survey of Education and Work May 2022 and Australian Bureau of Statistics Residential Population September 2022.

Figure 6

Correction issued 31 May 2023 to label to reflect ECU 2022 student load.

International onshore students defined based on citizenship and campus to attempt to reduce impact of COVID-19 border closures on WA onshore enrolments.

Source: Data 2011 - 2021 has been sourced from TCSI data reported by each of the universities to the Australian Government Department of Education. 2022 data for Curtin, Murdoch, UWA sourced from university annual reports with adjustments made, to align with previous years' data inclusions and to distribute overall 2022 student load to student types and levels of study. 2022 ECU data based on that reported via TCSI. 2023 ECU data based on internal estimates.

Figure 7

Source: ECU internal data, students who reported having a disability, of all commencing domestic undergraduate students.

Figure 8

Source: QILT Graduate Outcomes Survey, 2022. Data for domestic undergraduate students only. Average for other WA public universities does not include the University of Notre Dame Australia.

Figure 9

Source: QILT Student Experience Survey, 2021. Data for undergraduate students only. Excludes international offshore students. National average excludes Avondale University, Torrens University and University of Divinity.

Figure 10

As Fig. 9.

Figure 11

Source: QILT Graduate Outcomes Survey, 2018-22. Data for domestic undergraduate students only. National average excludes Avondale University, Torrens University and University of Divinity.

Figure 12

Source: ECU audited Financial Statements.

Table 1

Source: Australian Government Department of Education.

Table 2

Source: *Times Higher Education* World University Rankings.

Table 3

Source: National Centre for Vocational Education Research, DataBuilder 2022. Government-funded students and courses 2021: total students by state/territory of data submitter.

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Vanessa

Profoundly deaf and having limited vision, Vanessa is a passionate advocate for changing perceptions of people with disability. She advises students with disabilities to do their research and choose a university with a strong reputation for accessibility support.

Awarded WA Young Person of the Year in 2016, Vanessa completed her Bachelor of Media and Communication at ECU in 2019, went on to do a Masters in writing, editing and publishing in Queensland, and completed an internship at the Australian Embassy in Jakarta. Vanessa is a member of the Executive Committee of the Youth Disability Advocacy Network.



Mike

Born into a low socio-economic community in Northern England, Mike emigrated to Australia when he was 19.

Eight years later, Mike was married, with two young children, when he was inspired to study nursing on a tour of ECU's South West Campus.

It was financially difficult but, with the help of a nursing scholarship and the campus just minutes from his office, he was able to complete his nursing degree around his family commitments and work as a building estimator.

With the encouragement of ECU staff, Mike applied for and has just been accepted to study postgraduate medicine and looks forward to bringing his skills to Bunbury as a regional doctor.



Tanika

Tanika always saw herself going to university to pursue her passion for science. But after a year spent at another WA university and still feeling she didn't fit in, she found herself doubting whether university was really for her.

Day one at ECU, Tanika attended class in the new PC2 Super-Lab, getting hands-on and completing practical tasks under the guidance of supportive academic staff. Within her first six months at ECU she participated in a crime scene simulation.

Now a student ambassador for ECU, Tanika has gained real-world skills and competencies which she looks forward to applying as a graduate.

