

# **Australian Catholic University**

**Submission to the Legislative Assembly  
Economic and Infrastructure Committee  
inquiry into Victorian universities'  
investment in skills**

**May 2022**

# **ACU submission to the Legislative Assembly Economic and Infrastructure Committee inquiry into Victorian universities' investment in skills**

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## 1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Australian Catholic University (ACU) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the inquiry of the Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee into Victorian universities' investment in skills (the Inquiry).

In view of ACU's demonstrated strengths and expertise, this submission focuses primarily on the following elements of the terms of reference:

- i) future skills
- iii) regional skills in health

A major pinch point in securing the necessary pipeline of skilled workers to support Victoria's growing economy – particularly teachers and health professionals – is a shortage of professional placements. These real-world supervised workplace placements enable students to refine their skills and, ultimately, help to grow a profession's workforce.

Students often view placements as the most valuable part of their university course and the location of these placements is important to their future career choices. Evidence shows that a positive regional placement or experience can motivate a graduating student to begin and maintain a career in the bush.<sup>1</sup>

ACU stands ready to expand the pipeline of skilled professionals in health and education, the university's longstanding core areas of strength and areas of growing worker shortage.

However, the university – and the sector more generally – is constrained by two key factors:

- a cap on Commonwealth Supported Places (CSPs); and
- the limited available of professional placements.

To enable universities to increase the supply of skilled workers in areas of significant and growing workforce demand, ACU makes the following recommendations:

- 1) That the Victorian Government support a campaign to promote clinical placements in regional areas to health sciences students – particularly in the fields of nursing, physiotherapy and allied health.**
- 2) As part of that campaign, that the Victorian Government establish a small fund to provide modest financial incentives to students on regional placements.**
- 3) That the Victorian Institute of Teaching count time spent by qualified teachers supervising student practicum towards teachers' professional development accreditation hours, particularly where reflection, research and scrutiny of supervision occurs as part of a postgraduate degree.**
- 4) That the Victorian Government petition the Commonwealth to allocate more CSPs to Table A universities to support an increase in postgraduate qualifications in areas of acute and specialised workforce need.**

Victoria's future skilled workforce could also be bolstered by increasing student retention rates and reducing attrition. While there are many reasons students elect not to complete their university studies, based on its detailed research, ACU's Institute for Learning Sciences and Teacher Education (ILSTE) finds all Victorian Education faculties could usefully adopt a more evidence-based, research-informed approach to retention and student success, an important finding rather than a formal recommendation to the Victorian government.

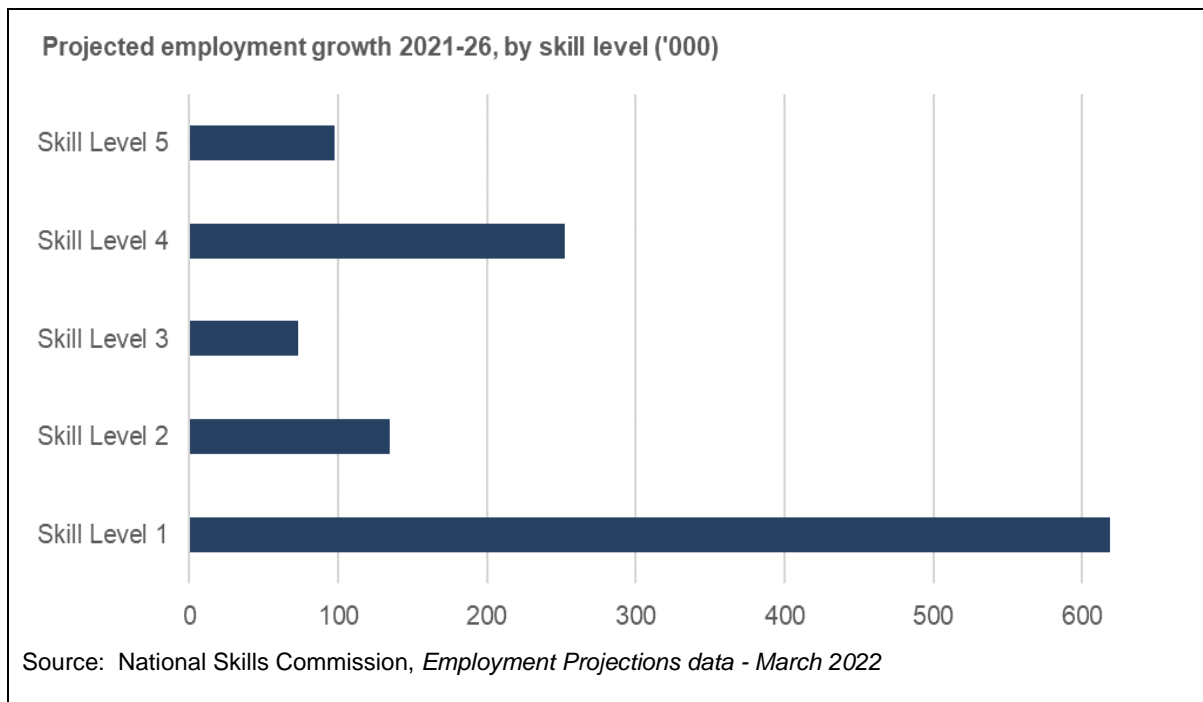
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<sup>1</sup> John Halsey, *Independent Review into Regional Rural and Remote Education—Final Report*, 2018.

## 2. ACU’S ROLE IN SUPPORTING A PIPELINE OF SKILLED WORKERS IN VICTORIA

Universities play a crucial role in educating the professionals to meet the growing demand for a highly skilled workforce.

According to the National Skills Commission, Skill Level 1 occupations – those usually requiring a Bachelor degree or above – are expected to account for over half of the projected total employment growth in Australia to 2026.



Over the past 20 years, workforce growth has been especially strong in two key areas of State Government responsibility: health and education.

In the two decades to 2020, Health Care and Social Assistance was the industry category with the greatest employment growth (120 per cent). Education and Training (82 per cent) was the third fastest growing sector.

Demand for skilled workers in both these areas is expected to continue to grow strongly, with aged/disabled carers and registered nurses, in particular, projected to be the fastest growing occupations to 2026.<sup>2</sup>

ACU contributes significantly to meeting this workforce demand, educating the largest number of nursing and teaching students in Australia.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, according to the most recently available data, ACU single-handedly educates nearly 50 per cent more nursing students (7,509) than all of the Group of Eight universities combined (5,015).<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> National Skills Commission, *State of Australia’s Skills 2021: now and into the future*, 6 Dec 2021

<sup>3</sup> Department of Education and Training, *2020 Higher Education Data Collection – Students, Special Courses*. Section 8, table 8.3

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, table 8.3. Group of Eight universities are: University of New South Wales, The University of Sydney, The University of Melbourne, Monash University, The Australian National University, The University of Adelaide, The University of Queensland and The University of Western Australia.

While allied health data are less straightforward, it is also likely that ACU educates the largest number of physiotherapists, occupational therapists, and speech therapists in Australia.

Educating the future health and teaching professionals is core business for ACU dating back to the university's forerunner religious orders, which prepared teachers and nurses to work in Catholic schools and hospitals. Today ACU is a public university open to students of all faiths and its graduates go on to work in government, private and Catholic settings.

ACU is renowned for delivering in-demand skills that employers rate highly. ACU is the top-rated university in Australia for graduate employment outcomes three years after graduation<sup>5</sup> and its graduates have the second-highest employer satisfaction rating in the country.<sup>6</sup>

In the current financial year, the Victorian Government's Higher Education State Investment Fund provided assistance to ACU to continue to educate well-regarded, skilled and ethical workers.

The one-off capital allocation of \$8.7 million has supported the development of infrastructure at ACU's Victorian campuses, including a new state-of-the-art nursing simulation lab at ACU's Ballarat campus. This training ward will double ACU's capacity for pre-clinical training of nurses in Ballarat, assisting the university to meet the growing demand for nurses and other healthcare workers in regional Victoria.

While Victorian Government assistance has been helpful and the market for ACU's graduates is growing, challenges remain to maintain and strengthen the pipeline of skilled workers.

### **3. BARRIERS TO PRODUCING A PIPELINE OF SKILLED WORKERS IN VICTORIA**

A major barrier to producing sufficient numbers of teachers and health professionals for Victoria's future workforce requirements is the availability of professional placements, known as the "practicum" in education and "clinical placements" in health.

Other barriers exist to retrain the existing education and health workforce in areas of acute need, and in student retention, where better use of data can help prevent student failure at university.

#### Health

As Australia's only truly national university, ACU is in the unique position of having had experience interacting with health providers and regulatory regimes in multiple states and territories.

ACU has become increasingly concerned about the growing shortage and rising cost of clinical placements for nursing and allied health students, but notes with approval Victoria has led the nation in capping costs for placements.

Victoria's "Standardised Schedule of Fees for Clinical Placement of Students in Victorian Public Health Services" establishes maximum chargeable fees for supervision of students in public facilities. This promotes transparency and allows universities some certainty to budget for what is becoming a significant and increasing expense for Health Faculties.

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<sup>5</sup> QILT (September 2021), *2021 Graduate Outcomes Survey – Longitudinal (GOS-L)* (94.2 per cent employment rate).

<sup>6</sup> QILT (February 2022), *2021 Employer Satisfaction Survey* (employer satisfaction rate of nearly 90 per cent).

However, Victoria, like all jurisdictions, requires more placements for more health students, particularly in regional areas.

ACU spends over \$1.3 million a year simply on securing and coordinating placements for its health sciences students. The university also incurs additional costs to administer these placements.

ACU-funded Clinical Coordinators visit facilities across regional Victoria, including in:

- Gippsland (eg. Traralgon, Sale and Bairnsdale)
- The Mallee (eg. Mildura)
- The Goulburn Valley (eg. Shepparton)
- North East Victoria (eg. Wangaratta and Wodonga)
- The South West Coast (eg. Warrnambool)
- The Western District (eg. Colac)

The purpose of these visits is to scope the capacity of facilities to partner with ACU to supervise our health students.

ACU has found that, while health supervisors in regional areas have the competence to supervise students on placement, they often lack the capacity to do so.

The university has also funded specific initiatives to access additional placements, particularly in Ballarat.

A good relationship with a university may make a provider more willing to supervise students but capacity remains an issue, with fewer student placements and, ultimately, fewer health professionals working in regional areas.

Universities Australia (UA) recently asked the Commonwealth for a time-limited health service placement adjustment package to help build placement capacity.<sup>7</sup> However, aside from a small number of additional placements in aged care and for medical students in regional areas, this issue has not been holistically addressed.

### Education

A recent analysis by the Victorian Government estimates that in the short to medium term – to 2024-26 – there will be enough teachers to meet Victoria’s school and early childhood centre demands.<sup>8</sup>

The government’s analysis defines the available “supply” of teachers as qualified individuals who are not teaching. This includes principals and those who are not currently employed in the teaching profession but who still hold current registration with the Victorian Institute of Teachers.

Despite this wide definition of supply, the analysis predicts Victorian government schools will, despite an overall adequate supply, continue to experience recruitment challenges for

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<sup>7</sup> UA, *2022–23 Pre-Budget Submission*, January 2022.

<sup>8</sup> Victorian Department of Education and Training, *Victorian Teacher Supply and Demand Report 2020*, November 2021.

some teaching roles, exacerbated by location and subject area, particularly STEM and special education.

Ensuring adequate future teacher supply relies on the availability of teaching practicums, yet many schools and teachers are reluctant to host pre-service teachers.

For example, in 2021, of the 233 Victorian government schools that indicated a willingness to host ACU students in a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between ACU and the Victorian Government, only 11 per cent ultimately did so.

ACU's experience is that, despite the willingness of government schools to host students, many teachers appear to consider supervising practicum an unrewarding chore.

This problem is not specific to ACU. A national study for the Commonwealth Government conducted by the Australian Council of Deans of Education (ACDE) found that teachers are typically required to self-nominate to undertake supervisor roles and there is little professional recognition for their work.<sup>9</sup> ACU has found that it is often the same schools, and the same teachers within those schools, who routinely host student practicums.

Not every teacher sees supervision as a duty they should perform or as an important way of supporting the profession to train the next generation of teachers.

As the ACDE report notes, incentivising teachers to supervise practicums by providing greater formal professional recognition would make it more rewarding to do so and, in turn, would decrease the variability in the quality of support that pre-service teachers receive during placements.<sup>10</sup>

### Postgraduate Qualifications in Health and Education

Some of the largest skill gaps in Victoria will only be filled by the existing health and education workforce retraining or “upskilling” through postgraduate education.

As discussed above, Aged and Disabled Carers is expected to be the fastest growing occupation category in Australia over the next five years.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, the Committee for Economic Development of Australia (CEDA) has predicted that Australia will need at least 17,000 more direct aged-care workers each year over the next decade just to meet basic standards of care.<sup>12</sup>

Yet aged care (like mental health, another in-demand area) is a postgraduate speciality rather than an undergraduate options in all nursing degrees. For registered nurses to transition to these in-demand sectors, they require a postgraduate qualification.

ACU's Faculty of Health Sciences offers a range of postgraduate courses in areas of need with different exit points to promote flexibility (e.g., Graduate Certificate, Graduate Diploma and Master level qualifications).

But affordability, and hence accessibility, is dependent on Commonwealth funding for student places, whether that be for a nurse retraining in aged care or mental health or a teacher learning to teach STEM or Inclusive Education.

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<sup>9</sup> ACDE, commissioned by the Federal Department of Education and Training, *Professional Experience in Initial Teacher Education: A Review of Current Practices in Australian ITE*, October 2017, revised March 2018.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> See above, note 2.

<sup>12</sup> CEDA, *Duty of care: Meeting The Aged Care Workforce Challenge*, August 2021.

While CSP funding is not a Victorian Government responsibility, the state government has a significant platform from which to petition the Commonwealth to allocate more CSPs in areas of acute and specialised workforce need.

### Retention

Another way to meet existing skill gaps in Victoria is to ensure fewer students leave university without completing the course in which they are enrolled.

ACU's ILSTE has identified several key assessment points in teacher education that, taken together, reveal which students are likely to fail and which are likely to succeed in their course.

This allows universities to intervene early to prevent at-risk students from failing.

Predictive analysis has been used by ILSTE in relation to initial teacher education (ITE), but the same approach could be applied to any student in any course at university.

ILSTE's "preventative analytics" could be deployed to increase Victoria's supply of skilled workers.

Further detail about ILSTE's research is available at [Attachment A](#).

## **4. SOLUTIONS TO PROVIDING MORE SKILLED WORKERS IN VICTORIA**

Universities are constrained in the number of students they enrol in areas of skill demand by the availability of CSPs and clinical placements. This restricts universities' capacity to meet Victoria's need for more skilled workers.

One solution is carefully crafted incentives designed to ease pressure on one of the major pinch points in the pipeline of skilled workers: namely, the availability of placements. Incentives to retrain the existing workforce, and to use data more effectively to increase the supply of student graduates, are also relevant.

### Health

The current lack of availability of clinical placements in regional areas can create a negative feedback loop.

Professor John Halsey's report into Regional, Rural and Remote (RRR) Education expressed this finding about teachers, but it applies equally to health workers:

*Submissions and numerous discussions during visiting schools and communities strongly affirmed that pre-service teacher placements in RRR locations were a very effective way of attracting teachers to RRR schools and communities.<sup>13</sup>*

Conversely, if placements do not occur in regional or remote areas, fewer professionals tend to gravitate to work in regions.

One solution is to incentivise students to conduct their placements in regional areas.

On 3 May 2022, the Victorian state budget included a new "Go Rural – Education" program pilot to facilitate pre-service teachers to undertake placements at rural and regional schools.

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<sup>13</sup> See above, note 1, p. 40.



ACU recommends a similar “Go Rural – Health” program be introduced to achieve the same purpose for health students.

ACU’s experience is that removing even part of the financial burden students face in accepting a regional placement (travel, accommodation, etc) can be enough to remove the barrier altogether.

#### **ACU recommendations**

- 1) That the Victorian Government support a campaign to promote clinical placements in regional areas to health sciences students – particularly in the fields of nursing, physiotherapy and allied health.**
- 2) As part of that campaign, that the Victorian Government establish a small fund to provide modest financial incentives to students on regional placements.**

#### Education

To encourage more schools and teachers to supervise preservice teachers, ACU proposes that the Victorian Government count this supervision towards the professional development (PD) accreditation hours required of practising teachers by the Victorian Institute of Teaching.

ACU also recommends that this be supported by incentivising teachers to update their knowledge regarding best practice supervision as part of a postgraduate degree.

#### **ACU recommendation**

- 3) That the Victorian Institute of Teaching count time spent by qualified teachers supervising student practicum towards teachers’ professional development accreditation hours, particularly where reflection, research and scrutiny of supervision occurs as part of a postgraduate degree.**

#### Postgraduate Qualifications in Health and Education

To increase the retraining of the existing health and education workforce in areas of acute workforce need, ACU recommends that the Victorian Government petition the Commonwealth for more CSPs in these areas.

#### **ACU recommendation**

- 4) That the Victorian Government petition the Commonwealth to allocate more CSPs to Table A universities to support an increase in postgraduate qualifications in areas of acute and specialised workforce need.**

## Retention

ILSTE finds significant potential in collecting, on a more regular basis, linked student performance data and analysing and using these data systematically to structure courses more thoughtfully so as to increase the chances of student success (see [Attachment A](#) for more detail).

This important finding shows the positive impact a more evidence-based, research-informed approach to retention and student success could have on Victoria's supply of skilled workers.

## Attachment A: Institute for Learning Sciences and Teacher Education

### Australian first: new knowledge about initial teacher education, retention and a call for moving from intervention to prevention

ACU's ILSTE hosts the Teacher Education Workforce Studies Research Program<sup>14</sup> to address critical issues in teacher education including ATAR, retention, targeted intervention, and more broadly, evidence of the quality of graduates entering the teacher profession. Given the historic prominence of ATARs in debate about what makes a quality teacher, the Institute developed a novel design for longitudinal investigations using linked data sets to examine the trajectories of teacher education candidates from entry to exit<sup>15</sup>.

#### **Key outcomes include:**

1. A unique, linked data corpus suited to examining ITE performance pathways. Linked elements: Literacy and Numeracy Test in Initial Teacher Education (LANTITE), Professional Experience (PEX), Graduate Teacher Performance Assessment (GTPA), Grade Point Average (GPA), and entry characteristics.
2. To improve completion: Higher Education Institutes to use linked performance data for purpose-designed scaffolding to support teacher education candidates at identified risks for progression.
3. To address retention: provide targeted, point in time interventions to optimise successful completion rates.
4. New evidence: ATAR is a single predictor for, rather than a determinant of, completion. Others include age and entry pathways. The combination of age, ATAR and entry pathways are together associated with completion.
5. The timing and grouping of key assessments are consequential for ITE outcomes. Risks of separation intensify where multiple assessments are undertaken concurrently in a single semester.
6. Failure of PEX is the main assessment barrier to program completion.
7. Currently, mandated common assessments in ITE function as discrete or separate events; failure on any one of them is consequential for progression and separation.
8. 'Ghost students' are a subgroup of special interest; they appear as enrolled but inactive. They should be targeted for interventions and be the subject of further research.
9. Incentivising groups of HEIs to work together in cross-institutional moderation-online (CIM-Online™) to demonstrate consistency in scoring is a necessary precondition for moving to a more ambitious enterprise of benchmarking teacher education nationally. Investment in digital infrastructure and quality assurance systems and processes are necessary.
10. New digital platforms including simulations of classrooms should be investigated to support PEX preparation.
11. Issues of reliability and validity remain largely unaddressed in PEX assessments. The standards and quality assurance processes used to assess performance in PEX should be investigated. Agreed judgement protocols and moderation processes should be developed.
12. Effectiveness of interventions should be the subject of research to establish their impact and effectiveness in improving retention and progression.
13. Proactive prevention: There is a long overdue need to move from intervention to prevention in teacher education and higher education more generally. This move would bring significant savings to taxpayers and students themselves undertaking higher education study.

<sup>14</sup> The Workforce Studies Research Program is led by Professor Claire Wyatt-Smith and involves a team of multidisciplinary researchers, including Associate Professor Lenore Adie, Professor Michele Haynes, Dr Chantelle Day, Dr Melanie Spallek, Dr Andrew Smith and Mr Alex Chen, with higher education providers and other industry partners at national and state levels.

<sup>15</sup> Wyatt-Smith, C., Haynes, M., Day, C., Spallek, M., & Smith, A. (2021). *Quality of initial teacher education through longitudinal analysis of linked datasets. Study 1: Examining performance trajectories from admission to graduation: Executive Summary*. Brisbane, Australia: Institute for Learning Sciences and Teacher Education, Australian Catholic University. ISBN: 978-1-922097-99-6. <https://www.dese.gov.au/teaching-and-school-leadership/resources/quality-initial-teacher-education>

## Attachment B: Australian Catholic University Profile

Australian Catholic University (ACU) is a publicly funded Catholic university, open to people of all faiths and of none and with teaching, learning and research inspired by 2,000 years of Catholic intellectual tradition.

ACU operates as a multi-jurisdictional university with seven campuses across three states and one territory. Campuses are located in North Sydney, Strathfield, Blacktown, Canberra, Melbourne, Ballarat, and Brisbane. ACU also has a campus in Rome, Italy.

ACU is the largest Catholic university in the English-speaking world. In 2020, ACU had over 33,000 students and 2,300 staff, with nearly 12,000 students and 857 staff at its two Victorian campuses in Melbourne and Ballarat.<sup>16</sup>

ACU graduates demonstrate high standards of professional excellence and are also socially responsible, highly employable and committed to active and responsive learning. ACU is the number one university in the country, public or private, when it comes to graduate employment outcomes three years after graduation, with a 94.2 per cent employment rate.<sup>17</sup> ACU is the second highest university in the country when it comes to employer satisfaction of its graduates, with an employer satisfaction rate of nearly 90 per cent.<sup>18</sup>

ACU has built its reputation in the areas of Health and Education, educating the largest number of nursing and teaching students in Australia<sup>19</sup> and serving a significant workforce need in these areas. Under the demand driven system, ACU sought to focus and build on these strengths through four faculties: Health Services; Education and Arts; Law and Business; and Theology and Philosophy.

As part of its commitment to educational excellence, ACU is committed to targeted and quality research. ACU's strategic plan focuses on research areas that align with ACU's mission and reflect most of its learning and teaching: Education; Health and Wellbeing; Theology and Philosophy; and Social Justice and the Common Good. To underpin its plan for research intensification, ACU has appointed high profile leaders to assume the directorships, and work with high calibre members, in six research institutes.<sup>20</sup>

In recent years, the public standing of ACU's research has improved dramatically. The 2021 Shanghai world rankings in subject areas, based primarily on scores for research citations and international research collaboration, had ACU ranked:

- 18<sup>th</sup> in the world for nursing, and 7<sup>th</sup> in Australia
- 22<sup>nd</sup> in the world for sport science, and 4<sup>th</sup> in Australia
- top 50 universities worldwide for education, and 3<sup>rd</sup> in Australia
- top 150 universities in the world for psychology
- top 200 universities in the world for law

The Times Higher Education (THE) ranks ACU in the global top 300 universities overall and in the top 250 for arts and humanities. The most recent THE ranking was the Young University ranking in which ACU is now placed in the top 40 overall. ACU's rapidly growing reputation in research is in line with its steady expansion.

<sup>16</sup> ACU Annual Report 2020 and ACU Pocket Statistics 2022

<sup>17</sup> QILT (September 2021), *2021 Graduate Outcomes Survey – Longitudinal (GOS-L)*

<sup>18</sup> QILT (February 2022), *2021 Employer Satisfaction Survey*

<sup>19</sup> Department of Education and Training, *2020 Higher Education Data Collection – Students, Special Courses*. Section 8, table 8.3

<sup>20</sup> Australian Catholic University, *ACU Research*, [acu.edu.au/research](http://acu.edu.au/research)