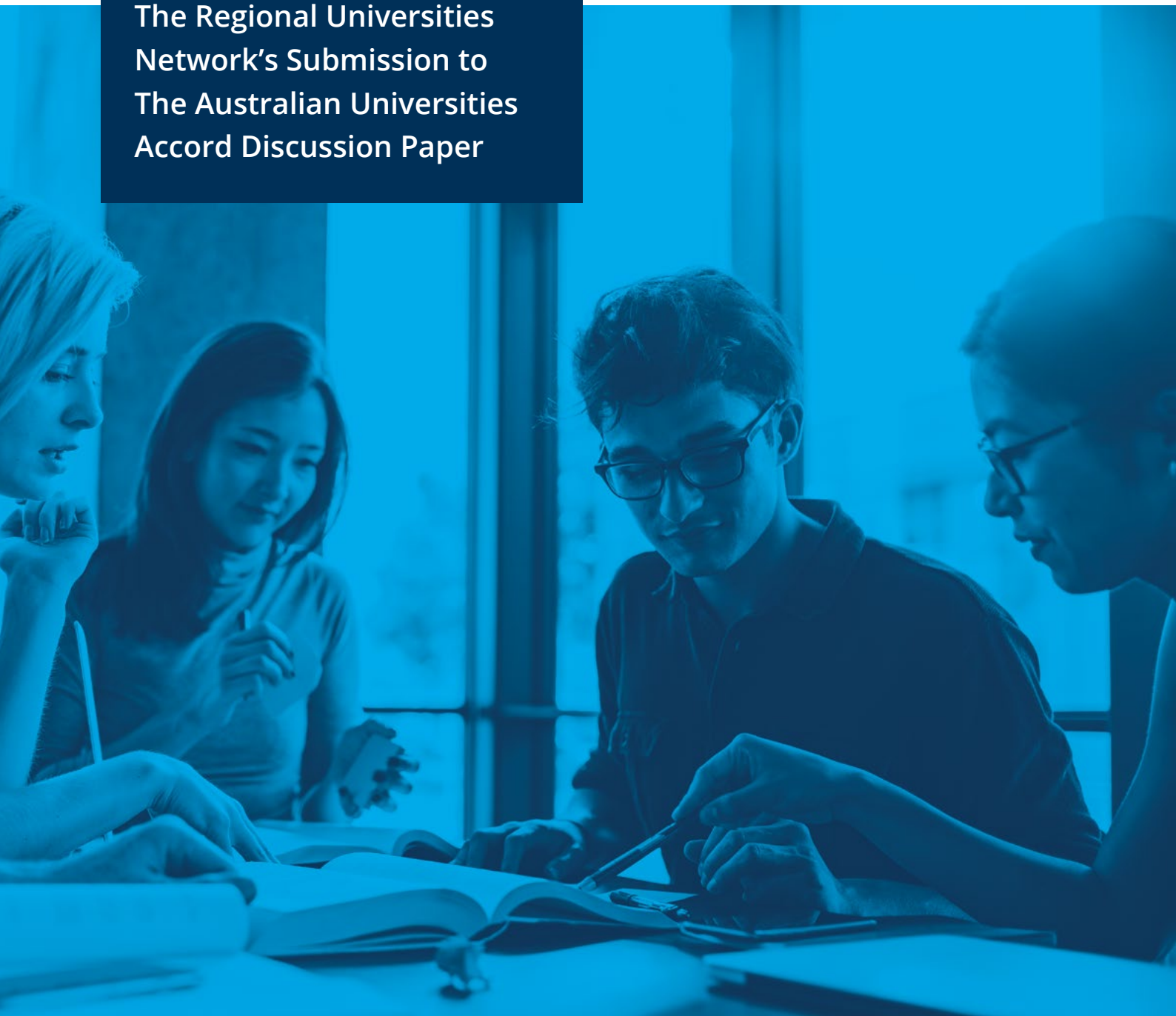


11 APRIL 2023



REGIONAL STRENGTH. NATIONAL SUCCESS.

The Regional Universities
Network's Submission to
The Australian Universities
Accord Discussion Paper



CHARLES STURT UNIVERSITY | CQUNIVERSITY AUSTRALIA | FEDERATION UNIVERSITY AUSTRALIA | SOUTHERN CROSS UNIVERSITY
UNIVERSITY OF NEW ENGLAND | UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN QUEENSLAND | UNIVERSITY OF THE SUNSHINE COAST



ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

The members of the Regional University Network acknowledge the diversity of Traditional Custodians of the lands upon which we live and work. We pay our respects to the Elders past, present and emerging, for they hold the memories, the traditions, the culture and hopes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples across Australia. A better understanding and respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and knowledges develops an enriched appreciation of Australia's heritage and can lead to reconciliation. This is essential to the maturity of Australia as a nation and fundamental to the development of an Australian identity.

CHAIR'S FOREWORD

On behalf of the seven member institutions of the Regional University Network (RUN) – including the students and communities that we seek to serve – I welcome the opportunity to shape the future of Australia's higher education sector through this Australian Universities Accord process. RUN represents the majority of Australia's regional universities, a collaboration that includes those institutions whose social licence demands primary service obligations to regional and/or other communities characterised predominantly by underrepresented student cohorts.

When envisaging what Australia's higher education landscape should look like in 10, 20 or even 30 years from now, it would be unimaginable to contemplate a system that had been designed to direct the tremendous benefits of research and tertiary education disproportionately towards the communities of metropolitan Australia, while leaving regional Australian communities to languish well behind. Yet this is precisely the legacy that our current higher education system has left regional Australia today, despite the regions playing host to stores of unmet potential, a wealth of student talent, and many world-class universities. It is an uncomfortable reality that the one third of Australians living outside our major capital cities occupy a lower tier of educational opportunity and attainment, and have fewer opportunities to access research and innovation.

The regional disadvantage built into the higher education policy landscape of decades past does not reflect the actual aspirations, capabilities and potential of our regions. Our communities are calling out for skilled graduates who are prepared to live and work in the regions. Our industries are calling out for local innovators and research partners who understand their needs. And our students are calling out for the tertiary experiences and opportunities that many metropolitan students take for granted. Regional Australia is well-served by many quality universities that demonstrate sector best-practice on so many fronts – graduate employment, student support and student satisfaction, teaching quality

and research impact to name but a few. The missing component, then, is a higher education system that acknowledges the limitations of one-size-fits-all metropolitan-centric policy, and recognises the need for addressing entrenched sectoral inequalities through regional differentiation and policy nuance.

We should rightly celebrate the remarkable accomplishments of higher education in metropolitan Australia. But now is the time to attempt a genuine replication of these accomplishments in regional Australia. The Australian Universities Accord process is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to reimagine higher education policy so that it may finally address the myriad of social, cultural and economic inequalities that persist within regional Australia. I urge the Accord Panel to not waste this opportunity to promote bold reforms designed to unlock the enormous potential of regional Australia.

This submission reflects the positions of RUN institutions, and in doing so, also aims to represent the views of those students and communities that RUN universities serve: the one-third of Australians who live outside of metropolitan centres in regional, rural and remote locations. I commend the RUN submission to the Australian Universities Accord Panel, and I urge your favourable consideration of the recommendations contained within this document.

Professor Nick Klomp



**Chair, Regional Universities Network.
Vice-Chancellor, CQUniversity Australia**



CONTENTS

| | |
|---|-----------|
| Acknowledgement of Country | 1 |
| Chair’s Foreword | 2 |
| Contents | 3 |
| Introduction | 4 |
| Run’s Accord Recommendations | 8 |
| The Role and Value of Regional Universities | 10 |
| Principles, Goals and Recommendations | 18 |
| Goal 1: Universal Higher Education Service Obligation for all Australians | 19 |
| Goal 2: Increasing Attainment Among Underrepresented Groups | 20 |
| Goal 3: Supporting Students to Succeed | 25 |
| Goal 4: Recognising the Social Value of Regional Universities as Comprehensive Universities | 31 |
| Goal 5: Balancing Australia’s Research Capabilities | 36 |
| Goal 6: Investing in Infrastructure | 39 |
| Goal 7: An Environment for Lifelong Learning | 42 |
| Goal 8: Balancing the Benefits of International Education | 43 |
| Goal 9: A Sustainable Regulatory Framework | 45 |
| References | 46 |

INTRODUCTION

The Regional Universities Network (RUN) is a national collaborative group of seven regional Australian universities: Charles Sturt University, CQUniversity Australia, Federation University Australia, Southern Cross University, University of New England, University of Southern Queensland, and University of the Sunshine Coast.

Australia's higher education system is recognised for its accessibility, quality, and reputation, as well as its ability to generate socio-economic dividends that drive and sustain Australia's prosperity. Much of the sovereign capital that is held in Australia's skilled workforces, research and innovation capabilities, and in the soft power of cultural exports, has its roots in Australia's higher education sector.

Nationally, this sector has expanded its impact such that 44.6 per cent of Australian 25 to 34-year-olds now hold a bachelor's degree or higher¹. In 2021, Australia ranked 12th out of 38 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries for the proportion of those aged 25 to 34 holding a bachelor's degree or higher, comfortably above the OECD average².

As a nation, Australia's world class research and innovation capabilities, nurtured by universities, have grown to become invaluable multipliers of prosperity,

Australia's successes including degree attainment, global rankings, research outputs, international education or sector resilience are disproportionately the accomplishments of metropolitan Australia.

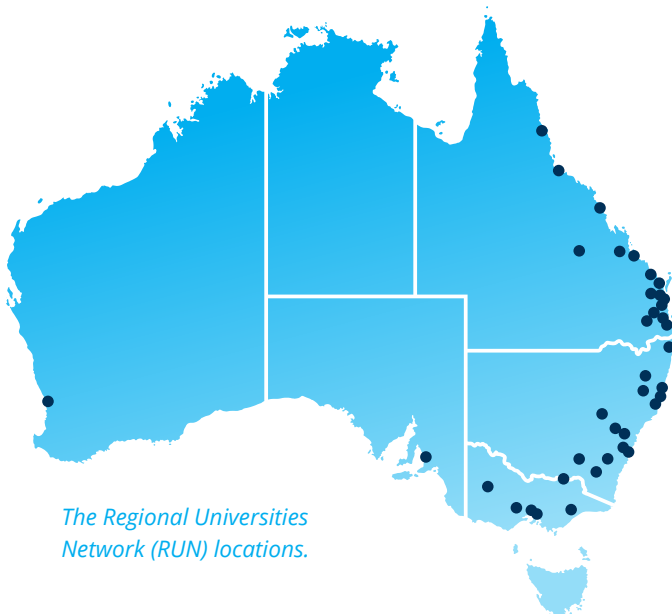
productivity, and investment. Australia produces three per cent of the world's research despite being home to only 0.3 per cent of the world's population³. Universities are also trusted partners for all levels of government, playing a vital role in achieving local, regional, state and national priorities and goals.

Internationally, the higher education sector has grown to become a beacon of global excellence and a destination-of-choice for students from around the world. International students not only make significant social and cultural contributions to Australia, but the business activity they generate sustains major investments in university research, infrastructure and teaching excellence. In 2021, Australia's higher education providers enrolled over 440,000 international students⁴. In 2022 international education was worth \$25.5 billion to the Australian economy⁵.

And as a collective, Australia's higher education sector demonstrated its resilience through the pandemic years, absorbing a complex array of disruptions to enter the current period of post-COVID recovery from a position of strength.

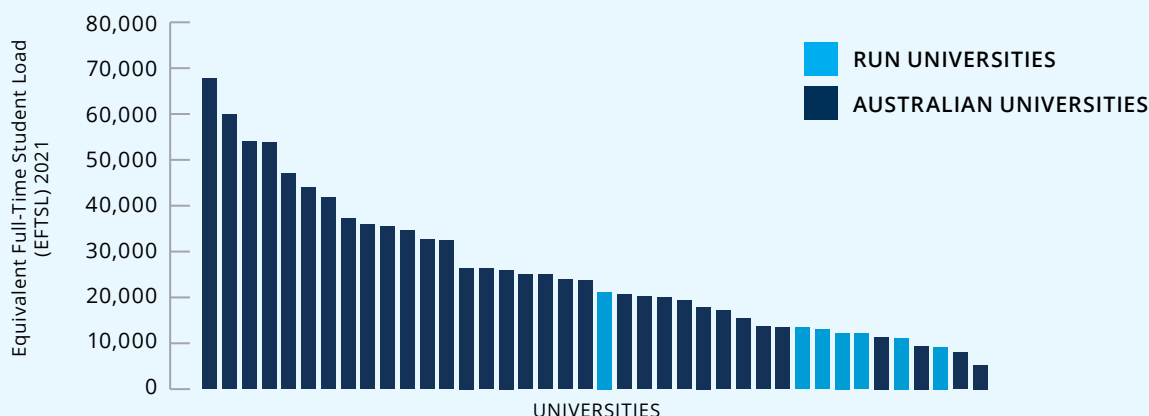
However, a national aggregate view of the apparent success and resilience of Australia's higher education system disguises the emergence of a two-tiered ecosystem. Australia's successes including degree attainment, global rankings, research outputs, international education or sector resilience are disproportionately the accomplishments of metropolitan Australia.

Australia's higher education landscape is dominated by a small handful of capital city institutions whose operations, underwritten by densely populated urban markets and legacies of considerable financial surpluses and bequests, allows them to operate at a scale that is unachievable for many other universities, particularly regional universities. The advantages afforded by highly-scaled metropolitan operations



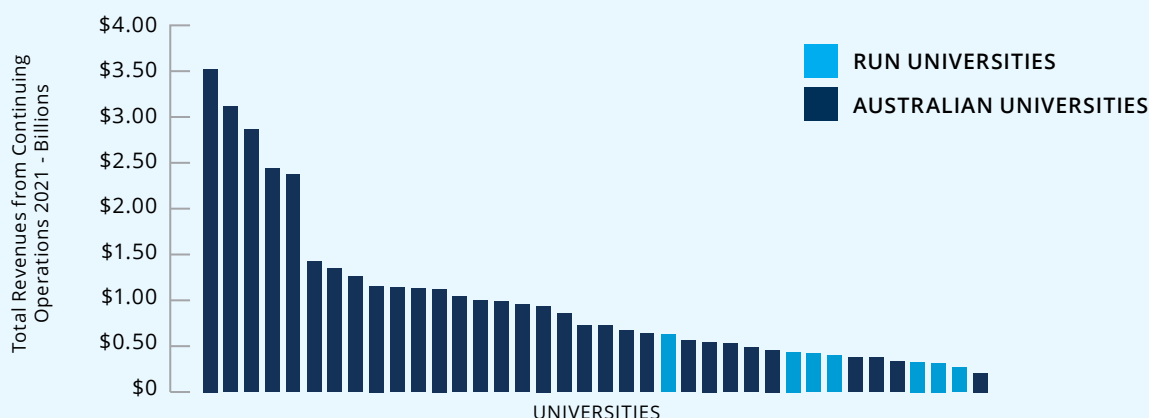
The Regional Universities Network (RUN) locations.

FIGURE 1: 2021 EQUIVALENT FULL-TIME STUDENT LOAD (EFTSL) AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITIES



Source: Department of Education, Higher Education Statistics, Student Load Pivot Table accessed at <https://www.education.gov.au/higher-education-statistics/resources/student-load-pivot-table-2021> on 11 March 2023.

FIGURE 2: 2021 TOTAL REVENUES FROM CONTINUING OPERATIONS - AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITIES



Source: Department of Education, Financial Reports of Higher Education Providers, 2021 Finance Tables accessed at <https://www.education.gov.au/higher-education-publications/finance-publication> on 11 March 2023.

are able to be extended into almost every aspect of service delivery. Furthermore, the operational dividends of many larger scale metropolitan universities are complemented by student cohorts that are more likely to come from higher socio-economic households featuring academic role models, resulting in greater rates of student retention and completion, and reduced need for student support services. When student support is required, the advantages of scale makes delivery far more cost efficient. Further compounding these advantages of operational scale and urban student demographics is a 'one-size-fits-all' national policy setting that has been disproportionately rewarding those few institutions who dominate the densely populated markets in the largest capital cities. In 2021, 11 universities held approximately 50 per cent of all student load⁶, while nine institutions accounted for over 50 per cent of all sector revenue⁷ as demonstrated by Figure 1 and 2.

Australia's regional universities, on the other hand, operate under a distinct social charter to develop highly skilled regional workforces, to deliver world-class research and innovation outcomes for regional industries, and perhaps most importantly, to lift retention and attainment rates of traditionally under-represented student cohorts. However, the diseconomies of scale inherent in the smaller, dispersed operating environments of regional universities frequently act as a handbrake to growth, investment and social impact. Hence, the gap between metropolitan and regional Australia – especially in the social benefits of educational attainment, workforce development, research impact, and investments in tertiary infrastructure – continues to widen.



The underlying business models of regional and metropolitan universities are not different; all have been moulded into a lockstep design by the same shared policy environment. RUN's **first fundamental argument** of this Accord process is that this shared policy environment is calibrated almost exclusively to the needs and characteristics of metropolitan Australia, with only limited policy differential afforded to the unique needs and challenges of the regions. Australia is witnessing the emergence of a two-tier higher education system along geographic lines due to a policy landscape that fails to adequately recognise the diversity and differences of student cohorts, community needs and operating environments that exist outside of metropolitan areas. As such, any policy change that arises from the Accord process must seek to promote more balanced and equitable outcomes from Australia's higher education system between Australia's major cities and regions, for both students and institutions.

RUN's **second fundamental argument** is that there is a tremendous quantum of stored potential that resides within Australia's regions currently suppressed by the unmet demand for tertiary attainment and regional research. Australia's regions are a powerhouse of economic activity,

accounting for 30 per cent of Australia's workforce, two-thirds of national export wealth and over one-third of total national economic output⁸. Regional Australia leads productivity (output per worker) in seven of the 19 industry categories recorded by the ABS: mining, agriculture, construction, transport, manufacturing, healthcare and social assistance, and accommodation and food services⁹. Regional Australia is a major driver to national prosperity and sits on the frontline to so much of Australia's future opportunities and challenges. The regions also play host to world class universities that have been geared towards sustaining and multiplying the success of their regions. This submission seeks to quantify the national potential that can be unlocked via equitable advances in tertiary attainment and research impact within regional Australia.

"Regional Australia is in the box seat to lead the industries of the future: decarbonised economy, agriculture and food production, resources, renewable and low carbon technology, defence and advanced manufacturing."

*Jennifer Westacott AO, CEO,
Business Council of Australia¹⁰.*

RUN's **third fundamental argument** of this Accord process is embedding a Universal Higher Education Service Obligation that extends to all Australians, regardless of postcodes or background. Modern Australia, including its regions, has now reached a threshold of prosperity and technological capability where it is far more viable for the access and opportunities of university studies to be equitably distributed to all citizens, not just those living within reach of major capital cities. As a highly advanced economy, Australia can and must ensure its regions have comparable access to higher education opportunities, attainment, infrastructure, research, globalised classrooms and social impact as that enjoyed by metropolitan Australia. It unconscionable for regional Australia to enter the second quarter of this century with tertiary attainment rates lagging so far behind the OECD average (as per Figure 3). Undoubtedly there are significant barriers, costs and challenges involved in the pursuit of Universal Higher Education Service Obligations for all Australians. Nonetheless, modern Australia has the means and ability to unlock the stored potential of regional Australia through equitable higher education provision and research activity.

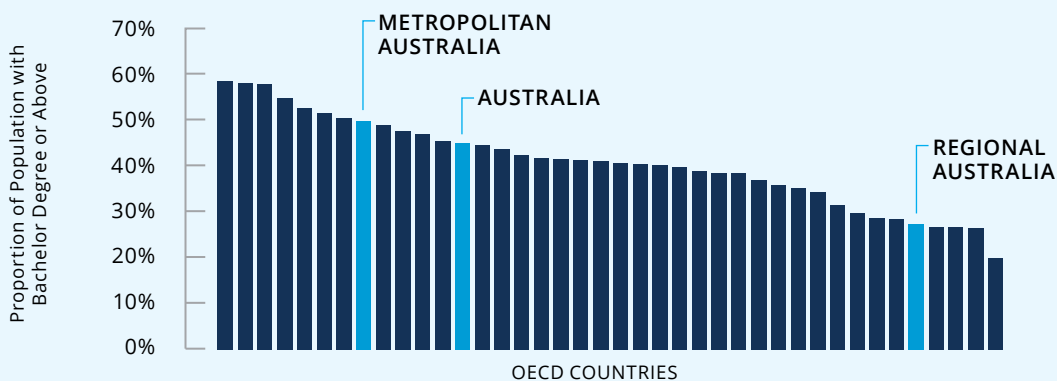


It unconscionable for regional Australia to enter the second quarter of this century with tertiary attainment rates lagging so far behind the OECD average.

RUN's **fourth fundamental argument** of the Accord is to ensure a whole-of-Government approach to funding Australia's higher education sector. The sovereign benefits provided from Australia's universities are multi-faceted and span the full spectrum of Commonwealth agencies. It is therefore logical that the resourcing of such an indispensable service involves contributions from a wider cohort of stakeholders.

This submission seeks to highlight the causes and consequences of Australia's emerging two-tier higher education system as it disproportionately affects the students, communities and economies of Australia's regions. In doing so, this submission also promotes realistic policy and funding responses that leverage the tremendous potential of the regions to address the distortions and inequities that exist within the sector.

FIGURE 3: OECD BACHELOR DEGREE OR ABOVE ATTAINMENT



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Education and Work, Table 34 Australia, May 2022, and OECD.Stat, Educational Attainment and Labour-Force Status [Data Set].

RUN'S ACCORD RECOMMENDATIONS

RUN provides the following recommendations to the Australian Universities Accord Panel. These recommendations re-appear throughout this document as they relate to distinct topics and are accompanied with detailed justifications. RUN recommends that the Commonwealth;

- Establish a Universal Higher Education Service Obligation policy framework to enable greater provision of educational services to Australians living in less-serviced communities and/or thin markets.
- Expand specific programs, scholarships and campaigns that lift the aspirations of students to attend universities, including expansion of initiatives consistent with proven HEPPP activities.
- Uncap student places at regional universities.
- Establish a dedicated national centre that drives improvement across learning and teaching in higher education.
- Develop a series of appropriate targets to ensure equity participation and attainment are being measured and met across the sector, including considering metrics relating to student outcomes and student satisfaction.
- Adopt contextualised attrition thresholds for underrepresented cohorts.
- Uncap funded enabling places for equity group cohorts.
- Change the allocation of subsidised support provisions away from an Equivalent Full-Time Study Load (EFTSL) basis, to a head-count basis.
- Adopt a needs-based approach to the provision of subsidised student support provisions, making it available when it is needed, wherever it is needed.
- Provide a dedicated infrastructure fund designed explicitly to supporting the access and experiences of students living with disability within their campus and online study environments.
- Explore a more effective and nuanced system for student income support that accounts for the study costs faced by regional Australians to ensure they have the time and resources to devote to the completion of their studies.
- Establish a student support mechanism that provides financial assistances to students undertaking mandatory placements.
- Ensure regional universities are retained as comprehensive research active universities.
- Establish a dedicated funding pool and distributive funding model to support the social charter of universities through a whole-of-Government approach.
- Establish a dedicated regional research and workforce transition fund that seeks to build regional Australia's understanding of, and ability to respond to, the opportunities and challenges of the net zero energy transition. This fund would not only drive capacity for regional innovation and resilience, but also inform the teaching and training of transitioning regional workforces.
- Provide support to universities to assist with the recruitment of staff to areas where housing and services are not readily available.
- Shift the funding of Australia's higher education from a limited number of agencies and Departments to a whole-of-Government approach.
- Set attainment targets and provide adequate funding for increasing the numbers of research higher degree graduates in regional Australia.
- Increase the distribution of Australian Research Council National Competitive Grant Program, via targeted rounds, to ensure greater opportunities across Australia, including incentives for grant recipients to partner with regional universities.

- Increase funding and infrastructure that grows the research capacity, infrastructure and workforces of regional Australia and their universities.
- Maintain the existing Excellence in Research Australia (ERA) ranking model that assigns institutional scores of between one-to-five for different research categories.
- Re-establish a dedicated, significant education infrastructure fund. This must be designed either explicitly for smaller institutions or include dedicated rounds exclusively for those institutions. The infrastructure fund must carry scope to accommodate digital infrastructure (including cyber security), and the maintenance needs of institutions.
- Incentivise the uptake of lifelong learning via the further extension of income-contingent loans to cover short courses and micro-credentials while broadening the tax deductibility of their fees from those relating to a person’s current job to those that may relate to a person’s alternative/ aspirational career in recognised skills shortage fields. This includes specific incentives targeting underrepresented/equity student cohorts.
- Develop a Recognition of Prior Learning framework that enables the recognition of qualifications and learning across all elements of the post-secondary learning environment.
- Provide Commonwealth support in: promoting the unique socio-cultural benefits of studying in regional Australia to international markets; providing positive regional differentiation in visa policy settings; providing onshore international students with clear, assured pathways from study-to-skilled migration; and, as migration policy evolves, grandfathering these assurances as to not disadvantage international students who have already commenced affected study-to-migration pathways.



- Create a simplified and dedicated pathway to residency for students who study in, and then subsequently work in regional Australia, such as ensuring international students receive additional points towards skilled visa applications if they have studied in regional Australia, with extra points for applicants who remain in regional Australia.
- Conduct a comprehensive multi-jurisdictional review of the sector’s regulatory environment that has scope to reduce the duplication of reporting and data collection and to ease the regulatory burden upon universities via a more streamlined “report once” model.

THE ROLE AND VALUE OF REGIONAL UNIVERSITIES

“Regional universities and campuses are important service providers for their regions providing significant financial and social institutions in the areas in which they operate, offering their communities educational, research, economic, cultural and social opportunities which otherwise may not be available within close proximity” (Australian Council of Learned Academics, 2019¹¹).

MEETING THE NEEDS OF AUSTRALIA’S REGIONAL COMMUNITIES

Aside from the indispensable research and workforce development functions of regional universities, there are deeper social, cultural and economic dividends of regional Australia’s hosting of comprehensive tertiary institutions. Often, regional universities provide the foundation for the intellectual and cultural infrastructure of many regional communities.

Regional universities often host some of the few – and in some instances the only – vital community facilities upon which regional communities rely. Such infrastructure includes sporting fields and gymnasiums, business parks and start-up hubs, health clinics and community COVID testing facilities, childcare/kindergarten facilities, and emergency evacuation centres during times of natural disaster.

Regional universities routinely open their facilities to schools and community groups to support important events such as professional conferences, arts and multicultural festivals, Indigenous outreach programs, school aspiration and immersion events, charity fundraisers, sporting carnivals, theatre productions, local business and economic development forums, and even the hosting of military personnel during training exercises.



One of the most profound social roles that regional universities play is in raising the aspirations, participation, and educational attainment of underrepresented student cohorts living and working in regional Australia. These underrepresented cohorts include students from low socio-economic, first-in-family, Indigenous, regional/remote, and/or with disability backgrounds. The lifting of qualification attainment within these underrepresented cohorts has an intergenerational impact that can help remove the barriers to social mobility, widen life and career opportunities, challenge stigmas and prejudices, enable more representative workplaces, enable more representative decision-making within social institutions, and create a wider pool of academic and professional role models within regional communities.

It is important to appreciate the lost potential to regional Australia of regional students relocating to metropolitan campuses for their studies. Policy that intentionally or unintentionally incentivises and perpetuates the drain of regional academic talent to the cities will only worsen the educational disparities of regional Australia. While regional student choice

SOUTHERN CROSS UNIVERSITY FLOOD RESPONSE

CASE STUDY

When catastrophic flooding hit the Lismore region in February and March in 2022, Southern Cross University's (SCU) Lismore campus became the primary evacuation center for more than 1,000 displaced residents and their pets. The campus also became the logistical rallying point for major relief efforts and services.

The Defence Force used SCU's rugby ovals as an airfield and a personnel base, with ADF helicopters dropping off evacuees or picking up supplies, with more than 500 ADF personnel camping on the campus while they assisted with the recovery. The Lismore police – flooded from their own station – established a makeshift operations centre on the SCU campus.

At the height of the emergency, SCU - a national leader in marine science - deployed its six research vessels and many of its staff for flood rescue, assisting with the 3000+ retrievals that were undertaken during the course of the disaster by dozens of civilian and emergency service boats and helicopters. Further south, where floodwaters threatened the Mid North Coast oyster industry, the University's National Marine Science Centre housed three million oyster babies for flood affected commercial farmers in the area, ensuring their livelihood survived.

SCU converted its campus medical clinic from student-led learning to emergency medical care for flood evacuees, while the campus UniBar kitchen was utilised by Sikh Volunteers Australia to cook hundreds of meals for the mud army as the clean-up began.

More than 20 local organisations used the Lismore campus as their base in the aftermath of the floods, with a range of service providers remaining on-campus today, including:

- 30 consulting rooms for Primary Health Network mental health practitioners, general practitioners, and a pop-up pharmacy and pathology.
- Trinity Christian College and The Living School establishing their schools on campus.
- Richmond River High relocating to land on the University boundary.
- TAFE NSW delivering programs from the Lismore campus.
- Business NSW establishing the Northern Rivers Business Hub as it continues to support local enterprise.
- A suite of more than 50 pod homes constructed as emergency housing on the University's football fields.

*Southern Cross University Professor
Vice-Chancellor Tyrone Carlin at the
campus flood evacuation centre.*



must be preserved, and their successes celebrated regardless of degree location, policy settings should be such that regional students can be equally attracted to study in regional Australia. It is a net loss for regional communities to see regional Australians relocate to metropolitan Australia. Four out of every five regional students who relocate to a major city to study never return to the regions after graduation¹², and the proportion of regional students relocating to capital cities to study is rising. Fewer than a third of regional students commencing university in 2005 moved to a city, by 2010 that number had risen to half, and by 2015 it was 57 per cent¹³. Disparities in regional tertiary attainment rates can be addressed by removing policy or funding incentives to relocate to metropolitan areas, and through the provision of stronger, more attractive regional university course offerings. Often regional students relocate to major cities to pursue course options that are unavailable at their local regional universities due to

“Regional universities lead the country in terms of post-graduation employment and salary outcomes” Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching, Graduate Outcomes Survey 2022

viability limitations in thinner markets. Nonetheless, regional universities generate ‘sticky’ graduates who adhere to regional workforces. Of the students who graduate from a RUN university, 70 per cent go on to remain living and working in regional, rural and remote Australia after graduation, enriching regional communities and economies while suppressing the widening of city-country skills disparity¹⁴. Disparity in economic participation and wellbeing also reduces social and political engagement, trust in government, and social inclusion.

CHARLES STURT UNIVERSITY HOSTING ATHLETES’ VILLAGE

CASE STUDY

Seven hundred athletes from more than 60 countries made Charles Sturt University their home when the Bathurst campus was transformed into the Athletes’ Village for the World Athletics Cross Country Championships (WXC Bathurst 23) in February this year.

The University’s role in the international sporting event was essential to the economic success enjoyed by the Bathurst region from the competition, with thousands of competitors and spectators to drawn to the city.

More than 500 rooms across five residential campus areas were occupied by athletes during the WXC Bathurst 23, with the University events team preparing thousands of meals over three-and-a-half-days to ensure the success of the event.



A Memorandum of Understanding between Charles Sturt University and WXC Bathurst 23 also gave students practical work experience at the event aligning with their fields of study, including exercise and sports science, physiotherapy, podiatry, paramedicine, sports media, communications, and business (marketing).

Charles Sturt Vice-Chancellor Professor Renée Leon said Charles Sturt was proud to host the world’s best in cross-country running at the Bathurst campus. “Our regional campuses play an important role in our communities not only anchoring students to each area, but they are also an asset that can play an important role in attracting world-class events like these which bring enormous benefits to local economies,” Professor Leon said.

Charles Sturt Manager Food & Beverage Services Mr Brett Russell, Charles Sturt Vice-Chancellor Professor Renée Leon, Charles Sturt elite athlete Ms Hannah Kable.

ALLEVIATING REGIONAL SKILLS SHORTAGES

A consequence of regional Australia's educational disparity is more acute critical skills shortages across many key industries, as compared to metropolitan Australia.

Recent National Skills Commission data reveal job advertisements in regional areas have grown by 95.8 per cent from pre-COVID levels, compared to a growth of just 60.6 per cent in capital cities¹⁵. In its policy paper *Overcoming Australia's Labour and Skills Shortages*, the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry recognises that one-third of the national workforce is employed outside capital cities, but employers in the regions continue to report difficulty recruiting with regional employers filling a lower proportion of their vacancies and attracting a smaller number of applicants¹⁶. In December 2021, there were over 70,000 job vacancies across regional Australia, an increase of 36 per cent since December 2020¹⁷. There are poor prospects that the regional phenomenon of lower education attainment alongside higher skills shortages will improve under a 'business as usual' approach to regional workforce development. The National Skills Commission anticipates that nine out of every 10 Australian jobs created over the next five years will require post-secondary education¹⁸. Increasing regional tertiary attainment must be prioritised or regional Australia will be left behind in the next phase of Australia's national economic story.

EDUCATING UNDERREPRESENTED STUDENT COHORTS

Regional universities do the sector's heavy lifting in terms of attracting, supporting, and graduating underrepresented student cohorts.

As a percentage of Australian domestic students, RUN enrolls the nation's highest rates of Indigenous students, students from low socio-economic backgrounds, and students from regional, rural and remote communities. As shown in Figure 4, RUN universities host 12 per cent of Australia's total domestic enrolments, while enrolling 23 per cent of the nation's total Indigenous enrolments, 20 per

FIGURE 4: STUDENT COHORTS 2021

| | % | NUMBER |
|----------------------------|--------|---------|
| Domestic Students | 12.10% | 139,794 |
| Indigenous Enrolments | 23.30% | 5,588 |
| Low SES Enrolments | 20.00% | 38,768 |
| Regional/Remote Enrolments | 28.10% | 31,936 |
| Disability | 13.50% | 14,632 |

Source: Department of Education, Higher Education Statistics, Section 11 – Equity Groups, accessed from <https://www.education.gov.au/higher-education-statistics/student-data/selected-higher-education-statistics-2021-student-data> on 21 March 2023.

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN QUEENSLAND'S MEDICINE PATHWAY CASE STUDY

A partnership between the University of Southern Queensland, University of Queensland's Rural Clinical School in Toowoomba and the Darling Downs Health and South West Hospital and Health Service is offering a Bachelor of Biomedical Sciences (Medicine Pathway) to improve the regional medical workforce.

This is a new evidence-based workforce strategy designed to improve health outcomes in regional, rural and remote Queensland by increasing capacity in

Australia's rural medical workforce as well as provide opportunities for students to study medicine in regional Australia. The pathway program enables university students to complete all their undergraduate and postgraduate studies and clinical training in the regions

The inaugural cohort of 22 students commenced in 2023 with one student remarking "I was really excited to be able to stay in Toowoomba with my family but also know I was on a path to contribute to rural health in my future.

cent of all low SES enrolments, and 28 per cent of all regional/remote enrolments; representing the largest proportions of enrolments among these equity groups of any university sector network¹⁹. RUN universities also enrol over 14,500 students who are living with a disability, the fast growing of all equity cohorts²⁰. The student cohorts at RUN universities are more comprised of equity student groups than any other university network²¹.

FIRST NATIONS STUDENT COHORTS

Regional universities play a pivotal role in raising the aspirations and tertiary attainments of Australia's First Nations People, and in promoting Indigenous Australian knowledge, values and leadership within university curriculums, staff cohorts and communities.

Approximately one in every four Indigenous undergraduate students in Australia today is studying at a RUN university²². However, there is still work to be done by institutions and the community to achieve Indigenous Australian parity with non-Indigenous rates of education participation, retention and attainment. RUN welcomes the proposal by Universities Australia to extend uncapped bachelor's degree places to Indigenous Australians nationwide as an important and necessary step in meeting the objectives of the Closing the Gap report. RUN also acknowledges the progress required for Indigenous Australian staffing levels within university workforces to reflect population parity. Nonetheless, RUN celebrates the progress being made by regional universities and regional communities and, most importantly,

THE CQUNIVERSITY JARWUN RESEARCH CENTRE

The CQUniversity Jawun Research Centre is a flagship for Indigenous health equity research in Northern Australia. Jawun Research Centre conducts high impact applied research to ensure that Indigenous nations gain full and equal access to opportunities that enable them to lead healthy lives.

Directed by Professor Adrian Miller, Jawun Research Centre has a national focus and extended international networks with research groups, communities, services, government and industry to collaboratively meet the priority health needs and aspirations of local and international Indigenous communities. Professor Miller is of the Jirrbal people of North Queensland and is the CQUniversity Deputy Vice President Indigenous Engagement and BHP Chair in Indigenous Engagement at CQUniversity.

Jawun Research Centre sets a pioneering agenda for change in health by nurturing research that is meaningful and directly relevant to the lives of Indigenous people. Social justice principles of Indigenous sovereignty, engagement, leadership, priority setting and nation building underpin Jawun Research Centre's management.

The Jawun Research Centre capabilities are in system sciences, public health equity research, impact assessment and evaluation, health economics, evidence reviews and translation/advocacy. Jawun Research Centre offers opportunities in research capacity strengthening and education to build the next generation of researchers.

CASE STUDY



*Professor Adrian Miller,
Jawun Research Centre*

Indigenous Australians themselves in the pursuit of equity, reconciliation, social justice and in meeting the objectives of the Closing the Gap report. Regional universities are proud to have played such a key role in Indigenous student enrolments more than doubling from 2010 to 2021²³, and in Indigenous students demonstrating better full-time employment rates and higher median salaries than their non-Indigenous counterparts²⁴. Regional universities have a deep and longstanding commitment to these important matters of Indigenous reconciliation and social justice and are experienced in providing the support and cultural safety necessary to Indigenous student success.

REGIONAL/REMOTE STUDENT COHORTS

Students from regional and remote Australia are underrepresented within Australia's degree and research-degree qualified workforces.

While accounting for one-third of Australia's total population, regional Australians are around 40 per cent less likely to gain a higher-level tertiary education qualification and less than half as likely to gain a bachelor's degree or higher qualification by the time they are 35 years old, compared to individuals from metropolitan areas²⁵. Students from regional and remote backgrounds had the lowest rates of growth in domestic undergraduate enrolments amongst every equity group during the demand-driven funding period of 2013-2019²⁶. Regional and remote students make up over 45 per cent of RUN university enrolments²⁷. This submission proposes increasing the support towards and attainment among this cohort, alongside commentary on the distinct needs and challenges involved in achieving this.

LOW SES COHORTS

One in every five Australian undergraduate students who come from a low socio-economic background is studying at a RUN university today.

Indeed, three of the top four universities with the highest rates of low SES student enrolments are RUN universities²⁸. Almost 28 per cent of all students studying at a RUN university are from a

low SES background²⁹. Raising the aspirations of this cohort, alongside efforts to lift their participation and success, remains an ongoing task for RUN universities, governments, and industry.

STUDENTS LIVING WITH A DISABILITY

Students living with a disability are the fastest growing of all equity cohort categorisations, with enrolments amongst this group more than doubling between 2013 and 2021³⁰.

Almost 14 per cent of students with a disability in Australia study at a RUN university representing almost 11 per cent of RUN universities' student cohorts. It is not uncommon for students living with a disability to also represent other categories of disadvantage, such as (for instance) low socio-economic and/or regional/remote as shown in Figure 5. The growing numbers of this equity cohort correspond to the growing need for specialised support services.

FIGURE 5: DISABILITY

| | % | NUMBER |
|---|--------|--------|
| Students from a Non English speaking background | 1.29% | 1,089 |
| Indigenous | 3.40% | 2,863 |
| First Address Low SES by SA1 | 17.22% | 14,484 |
| First Address Regional and Remote | 21.11% | 17,754 |
| Disability | 100% | 84,104 |

Source: Department of Education, Higher Education Statistics, Section 11 – Equity Groups, accessed from <https://www.education.gov.au/higher-education-statistics/student-data/selected-higher-education-statistics-2021-student-data> on 21 March 2023.

Note: Students may belong to more than one equity group. Figures should not be summed. These are two dimensional relationship only, students may belong to more than two equity groups.

ECONOMIC IMPACT OF REGIONAL UNIVERSITIES

Regional universities are economic multipliers within their communities. An economic assessment of RUN institutions found that they contributed \$2.4 billion to their local economies in 2018, which was a 41 per cent increase from just three years prior³¹.

RUN universities act as anchor institutions, drawing 63,000 students from other locations to their regional campus areas annually³². Seven out of every ten RUN graduates remain living and working in Australia's regions following graduation, while attending a RUN university increases undergraduates' earnings by \$235,000 over their lifetime³³. RUN universities in 2021 collectively graduated over 34,000 students across a comprehensive range of disciplines aligned to the needs of regional communities and industries, fuelling regional workforces, and alleviating regional skills shortages³⁴. Additionally, regional university research makes a significant economic contribution. The excellence and impact of research conducted by RUN universities has grown rapidly since 2012 with a four-fold increase in research rated as 'above world-class' by the Australian Research Council's ERA rankings through to 2018³⁵. This generates a significant impact on the industries and economies that align with RUN research. RUN university campuses are often one of the largest – if not the largest – employers in their communities. RUN universities employ approximately 10,000 staff directly³⁶ and increase real wages by 1.3 per cent in their regional campus areas³⁷.

The disparities in educational participation and qualification attainment between regional and metropolitan Australia, and the stronger demands for skilled workers in regional, rural, and remote locations, illustrate that Australia's regional communities contain the greatest concentrations of untapped economic potential at a national level. RUN believes that tapping into this potential via dedicated efforts to boost regional training, skilling and research will deliver benefits to all Australians. In its 2020 report, *The importance of universities to Australia's prosperity*, Deloitte Access Economics concluded that in present value terms, the average

bachelor's level graduate accrues an additional \$142,000 in post-tax earnings over their lifetime³⁸. Relative to the average person with no post-school qualification, this represents a discounted earnings premium of 31 per cent³⁹. When translating the value of higher education to a regional context, the Regional Australia Institute estimates that if people in the regions had the same share of bachelor's level qualifications as in metropolitan areas, there would be more than 461,000 additional graduates living and working in regional Australia, collectively earning about \$26 billion each year, based on the average salary for a graduate⁴⁰. Deloitte Access Economics modelling indicates that each percentage point increase in higher education attainment – equivalent to around 50,000 more higher education qualified workers – is associated with a 0.09 per cent increase in GDP per annum, representing \$1.8 billion in additional economic activity annually⁴¹. If regional Australia achieved bachelor's-level educational attainment parity with metropolitan Australia, the 461,000 additional regional graduates could generate an annual boost in GDP worth an additional \$16.5 billion.

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THE MIGRATION DRIVERS OF REGIONAL UNIVERSITIES

Contemporary Australia is a nation built largely by the contributions of migrants. Waves of migration in various forms have shaped Australia's values, culture, and prosperity. This has been a vital feature of Australia's past, and it will continue to play an important role in shaping Australia's future.

The benefits from Australia's skilled migration intake, however, is maldistributed between metropolitan and regional Australia. Of Australia's total (pre-pandemic) overseas arrivals, less than 20 per cent settle in regional Australia annually⁴², despite Australia's regions hosting one-third of the national population. Regional Australia needs skilled migrants not only to alleviate critical skills shortages and to bolster workforces with higher tertiary attainment rates, but to address employment demographic imbalances. Regional Australia has a lower share of working age population than that of the capital cities, with a dependency ratio of 60 dependents per 100 working-age persons in regional Australia, as compared to 50 in the major capitals⁴³.

Regional Australia has a lower share of working age population than that of the capital cities, with a dependency ratio of 60 dependents per 100 working-age persons in regional Australia, as compared to 50 in the major capitals.

Settlement considerations amongst skilled migrants coming to Australia, among other factors, include proximity to important services and social infrastructure such as hospitals, airports, schools, and universities. Here, regional universities provide an important pull-factor for those valued skilled migrants that choose to live in Australia's regions, thus boosting regional productivity and reducing city congestion. Regional universities also play an important role in attracting skilled migrants to the regions via direct employment, and RUN acknowledges the important role played by skilled migrants in the operation of its institutions. RUN universities benefit from skilled migrants who occupy significant portions of highly specialised academic, research and professional staffing ranks. Furthermore, RUN communities benefit from the tremendous socio-cultural vibrancy that their university's skilled migrant workforces bring to each region.

International students who study outside of Australia's capital cities (particularly those who subsequently also graduate into regional workforces via a transition to permanent residency) represent a major opportunity for many regional communities. RUN believes there is a strong case for regional Australia hosting a far greater share of the international student cohort, and for regional Australia welcoming a greater proportion of those international students who choose to remain in Australia post-graduation.



PRINCIPLES, GOALS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

PRINCIPLES OF THE ACCORD

Noting the definition (below) from the Australian Universities Accord Discussion Paper⁴⁴ it is important that the Accord adheres to a set of well-considered and nuanced principles.

“Accords bring people together to discuss challenges and agree a joint path forward. In higher education this could mean a continuous dynamic partnership involving Government (with bipartisan support), higher education providers and their students and staff, businesses, unions and community leaders to agree on the best way that higher education can meet Australia’s economic, cultural and social aspirations.”

The RUN response, goals, and recommendations are underpinned by a series of principles that will enable the Accord to be implemented in a manner that is logical, transparent, fair, and ultimately achieve its overarching aims.

RUN believes that the Accord will be best served by the establishment of a clearly defined Australian Universities Accord Principles Framework. This Framework could be reviewed approximately every five years through a stakeholder consultation process against the agreed principles of the Accord Framework. Given the Accord will involve a clearly defined and stated purpose for higher education, RUN suggests that the Accord includes a commitment to productivity, skills, and social capital.

Principle 1: The Accord should be transparent and understood by all stakeholders, including students and the Australian public.

Principle 2: The Accord should recognise the diversity of providers in the Australian higher education sector and their associated missions.

Principle 3: The Accord should have inbuilt flexibility to allow Australia’s higher education sector, and Government to respond to changing needs.

Principle 4: The Accord should recognise the value of the contributions of regional universities to the social, cultural, and economic standing of regional Australia.

Principle 5: The Accord should promote balanced and equitable outcomes from Australia’s higher education system between metropolitan and regional Australia for students and institutions.

Principle 6: The Accord should ensure all Australians have genuine access to the qualification of their choosing.

Principle 7: In addition to ensuring access, opportunity, and outcomes for students, the Accord should ensure that regardless of location, students should find equity amongst the facilities and offerings within their choices of providers.

Principle 8: The Accord should replace the year-to-year volatilities of current arrangements with longer-term stability for the tertiary sector to provide confidence to universities, businesses, and communities for more strategic planning and investment decisions.

GOAL 1: UNIVERSAL HIGHER EDUCATION SERVICE OBLIGATION FOR ALL AUSTRALIANS

The concept of a Universal Higher Education Service Obligation builds upon the concept long established in the telecommunications sector of a Universal Service Guarantee. All Australians, regardless of postcodes or background, deserve to be able to access the life changing benefits of higher education as a fundamental right.

Modern Australia – including its regions – has now reached a threshold of prosperity and technological capability where it is viable and appropriate for the access and opportunities of university studies to be equitably distributed to all citizens, not just those living within reach of major capital cities. As a highly advanced economy, Australia can and must ensure its regions have comparable access to higher education opportunities, attainment, infrastructure, research, globalised classrooms, and social impact as that enjoyed by metropolitan Australia. It is simply not good enough for regional Australia to enter the second quarter of this century with tertiary attainment rates so far behind the OECD average. Undoubtedly there are challenges involved in the pursuit of a Universal Higher Education Service Obligation for all Australians, but modern Australia has the means and ability to unlock the stored potential of the regions through equitable higher education provision.

To ensure the success of the Universal Higher Education Service Obligation, higher education providers must be recognised and funded accordingly to offer a fuller diversity of courses in thinner markets where cost-effectiveness may otherwise limit a provider's ability to viably deliver lower-demand offerings. Regional Australia rightfully deserves access to the rich social dividends resulting in programs in the liberal arts; philosophy, history, creative and performing arts, and social sciences. Regional universities proudly educate the majority of Australia's regional, rural, and remote students. This is done by institutions



who recognise the social good in providing education services to all Australians. Lower-demand courses that are provided in the regions are not offered to pad university finances, but to increase educational opportunities for those living in regional Australia.

To further strengthen the educational attainment of Australians living in regional areas, a Universal Higher Education Service Obligation should be established that recognises the social charter obligations of universities providing educational services in otherwise non-or-lesser-sustainable markets. This recognition would be both legislative and financial.

RECOMMENDATION: *Establish a Universal Higher Education Service Obligation policy framework to enable greater provision of educational services to Australians living in less-served communities and/or thin markets.*

GOAL 2: INCREASING ATTAINMENT AMONG UNDERREPRESENTED GROUPS

Access to high quality, equitable educational opportunities is a foundation prerequisite to achieving sustainable employment, productivity, and wage prosperity at a national, community or individual level. Parity in access and attainment should be a fundamental right of all Australians, regardless of background or postcode.

Australia's national capacity to maintain and adapt its ongoing prosperity within an increasingly unpredictable global environment is one that could remain burdened by the entrenched educational disparities that exist between regional and metropolitan Australia. The Commonwealth must rethink its approach to regional Australian access and attainment of tertiary education using a policy philosophy of Universal Higher Education Service Obligation, as discussed in Goal 1. The one-third of Australia's national population that does not live in metropolitan Australia needlessly occupy a lower tier of educational opportunity and attainment, representing a major source of unmet social and economic potential.

RUN notes the assumptions made in the Australian Universities Accord Discussion Paper around Australia's bachelor's level attainment rates (for people aged 25 to 34) being highly competitive against other OECD nations. There is an indication that these OECD comparisons may be useful in setting new long-term targets for domestic attainment and participation rates. While there may be some merit to doing this, RUN urges the Accord Panel to view Australia's accomplishments in these international comparisons from a regional

If the one-third of Australians who live outside major cities were ranked as their own country, regional Australia would rank 35 of 38 OECD countries for bachelor degree attainment amongst 25 to 34 year-olds.



Australian context; that these triumphs of global ranking largely reflect metropolitan Australia's success, not regional Australia's. If the one-third of Australians who live outside major cities were ranked as their own country, regional Australia would rank 35 of 38 OECD countries for bachelor's level attainment amongst 25 to 34 year-olds⁴⁵. Regional Australia would need to almost double its attainment rates just to meet the OECD average while if metropolitan Australia were to be ranked against the OECD as its own country, it would shoot up to 8th position with a 49.4 per cent attainment rate⁴⁶.

RAISING ASPIRATIONS

The Accord must prioritise the participation of underrepresented cohorts – including regional and remote students – in its policy formation. Any policy response would need to involve the use of targeted initiatives that seek to raise awareness and lift aspirations amongst regional cohorts, such as promotional campaigns, outreach, targeted scholarships, and school-based initiatives that compliment those activities already undertaken by regional institutions.

Successful models that the Accord might look towards would include existing/previous Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) activities, for example, that have demonstrated success in raising the aspirations and academic preparedness of students from low SES backgrounds. In its 2017 report to the Department of Education and Training *Evaluation of the HEPPP*, ACIL Allen Consulting found "there is emerging evidence that the HEPPP objective to increase the

total number of people from low SES backgrounds who access and participate in higher education through effective outreach and related activities is being met by HEPPP outreach activities⁴⁷." The report highlighted that HEPPP outreach activities appear to be shifting the perceptions of low SES students regarding the feasibility of attending university and improving their ability to undertake higher education through targeted academic support⁴⁸. A vital aspect of closing the educational attainment gap between regional and metropolitan

Australians is ensuring that those from traditionally underrepresented backgrounds have pre-access understanding of the pathways, possibilities, and the requisite aspiration to post-secondary study.

RECOMMENDATION: *Expand specific programs, scholarships and campaigns that lift the aspirations of students to attend universities, including expansion of initiatives consistent with proven HEPPP activities.*

INCREASING DEMAND

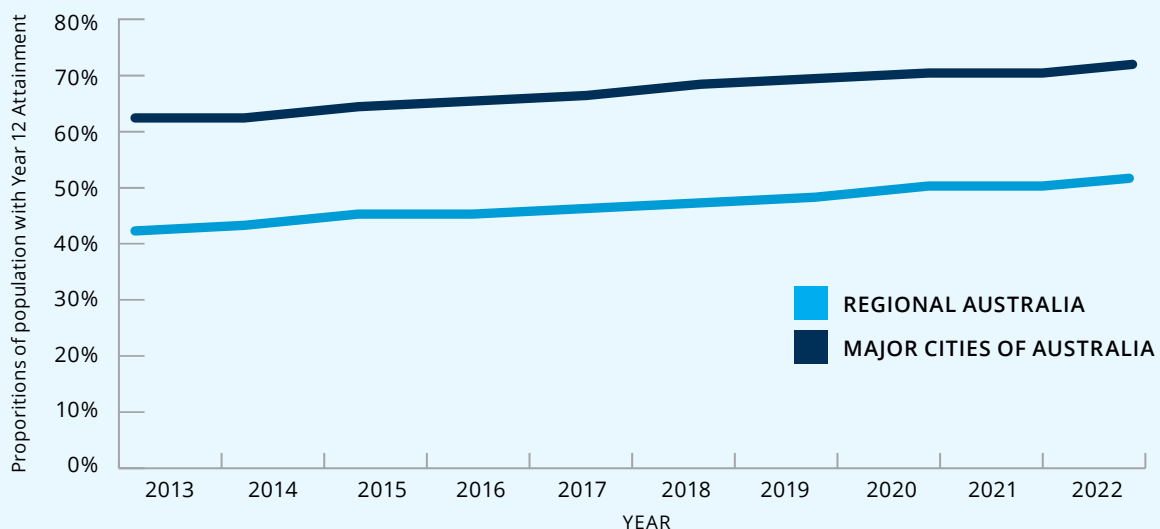
Individuals who grow up in regional, remote and rural locations are around 40 per cent less likely to gain a higher-level tertiary education qualification and less than half as likely to gain a bachelor's and above qualification by the time they are 35 years old, compared to individuals from metropolitan areas⁴⁹.

This difference results in over 49 per cent of people living in capital cities (aged 25 to 34 years old) having obtained a bachelor's degree or above, compared to just 25 per cent in inner regional and 29 per cent in outer regional Australia⁵⁰. This educational disparity is not limited to higher education as shown in Figure 6. There remains

a persistent gap between metropolitan and regional year-12 or equivalent attainment rates with a difference of up to 21 percentage points between metropolitan and remote and very remote Australians aged between 15 and 74⁵¹.

RUN urges the Accord Panel to be mindful of Australia's two-tier system of higher education as it exists between metropolitan and regional Australia, and to resist an undifferentiated 'one-size-fits-all' approach to policy and target setting. An example here being the assertion made in the Accord Discussion Paper that (amongst 25 to 34 year-olds) "the target set by the Bradley Review of Australian Higher Education for 40 per cent higher education attainment has been met". The Bradley

FIGURE 6: ATTAINMENT OF YEAR 12 OR EQUIVALENT, 2013 TO 2022 BY LOCATION OF RESIDENCE



Australian Bureau of Statistics, Education and Work, Table 18 Australia, May 2022, accessed at <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/education/education-and-work-australia/latest-release#data-downloads> on 11 March 2023.

Note: Persons aged 15-74. Regional Australia = Inner Regional + Outer Regional + Remote and Very Remote.

Review attainment targets remain entirely unmet for the one-third of Australia's population living in regional Australia, and other equity groups, which contrasts starkly against the 49.4 per cent of metropolitan 25-34 years-olds who currently hold a bachelor's degree⁵². There is a concern that a national-aggregate approach to attainment target setting, such as Australia's pursuit of Bradley Review targets, conceals the maldistribution of benefits between metropolitan and regional Australia in the acquisition of these targets.

The years of demand-driven student funding had proven to facilitate growth in regional student participation and provided one of the few authentic opportunities for regional, rural, and remote Australia to make modest gains in tertiary participation/attainment. In the five years preceding the reinstatement of capped university places in 2018, the number of domestic undergraduate university enrolments amongst regional and remote students rose from just over 150,000 students (2013) to over 172,000 students (2018), a 14.28 per cent increase⁵³. As the regional, rural, and remote students who commenced their studies during the pre-2018 years of uncapped university places progressed through to

eventual graduation, the proportion of people aged 25 to 34 years in regional and remote locations with a bachelor's degree (or above) attainment rose by 3.5 percentage points from 19.2 per cent to 22.7 per cent⁵⁴. Figure 7 shows the welcomed improvements in tertiary participation amongst different equity groups during the period that included the demand-driven student system and, while the results varied between institutions, they demonstrated encouraging progress being made at a national level. The results do highlight however that the growth in regional and remote participation lagged well behind that of other equity groups⁵⁵.

SUPPLY SIDE CONSTRAINTS

Improving the higher education attainment rates for regional Australians requires both demand and supply side policy measures, otherwise there is a risk that increased demand through raising aspirations will not be matched by the limitations of capped Commonwealth Supported Places (CSPs).

The decision to end the Demand Driven System had a number of consequences for Australia's regions and regional universities. Regional participation and

FIGURE 7: DOMESTIC UNDERGRADUATE ENROLMENTS BY EQUITY GROUP, 2013-2019

| | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 | Growth 2013-19 |
|---------------------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| National | 679,222 | 706,278 | 727,786 | 743,030 | 759,151 | 764,652 | 765,594 | 12.72% |
| Low SES | 107,219 | 111,004 | 115,840 | 126,293 | 129,554 | 129,858 | 128,839 | 20.16% |
| Students with disability | 37,032 | 40,679 | 44,856 | 47,970 | 51,773 | 55,565 | 58,739 | 58.62% |
| Indigenous | 10,018 | 10,939 | 11,845 | 12,878 | 13,855 | 14,314 | 14,892 | 48.65% |
| Women in non-traditional areas | 119,810 | 124,159 | 125,888 | 128,210 | 131,452 | 134,406 | 135,649 | 13.22% |
| Regional | 140,510 | 145,018 | 149,001 | 150,441 | 153,800 | 151,636 | 150,100 | 6.83% |
| Remote | 5,682 | 5,848 | 5,911 | 6,036 | 6,167 | 6,076 | 6,107 | 7.48% |
| Non-English Speaking Background | 22,927 | 25,129 | 26,661 | 27,158 | 27,185 | 25,793 | 24,488 | 6.81% |

Source: National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, <https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/data/national-data/> accessed on 11 March 2023.



attainment rates were effectively frozen in place to approximately half of that enjoyed by Australia's major cities. Furthermore, many of the investments made by regional universities in new courses and facilities designed to accommodate expected future student demand were undermined by the recapping of student places in regional Australia.

While there may be an argument that higher education attainment levels are at, or are approaching, saturation levels in metropolitan areas, the experience in regional Australia is one of high scarcity and demand for tertiary qualifications. While some regional institutions are currently experiencing the anomaly of student enrolments falling at or below their capped allocation of places, this must be viewed within the context of unusual social/economic pressures such as record low unemployment, a strong labour market, rising inflation and costs-of-living and other social dynamics that act as a deterrent to study. Indeed, immediately prior to the emergence of these atypical circumstances, such was the demand that regional universities were operating over their allocated caps. The sector's preceding period of demand-driven funding had proven to encourage growth in regional student participation and provided one of the few authentic opportunities for regional, rural and remote Australia to make modest gains in tertiary participation and attainment.

Regional Australia can readily boost Australia's productivity, suppress unemployment, and stimulate wages growth through higher skills attainment. In parts of Australia with deep saturation of educational provision and attainment, the impact of additional investment will be minimal compared to the return on investment and returns on education attainment in regional Australia. The greatest repositories of untapped social and economic potential are in Australia's regions. RUN therefore supports renewed policy focus on closing the rates of educational attainment between metropolitan and regional, rural and remote Australians, and importantly, doing so without hollowing out the regions by incentivising the departure of regional talent to the cities for study. This can be achieved by concerted efforts to raise the tertiary aspirations of regional Australians and heighten the visibility and equity of regional institutions, alongside the targeted uncapping of student places at regional universities.

RECOMMENDATION: *Uncap student places at regional universities.*

CELEBRATING THE LEARNING AND TEACHING OF UNDERREPRESENTED STUDENT COHORTS

What one university may find effective in delivering educational content to its distinct student cohorts may be incompatible with the structure, technologies, facilities, mission and cohorts of another university. In recognising this, there may also need to be a shift away from the use of 'best practice' terminology, towards something more akin to 'effective practice' terminology.

RUN supports the continuation and expansion of various platforms designed to recognise and promote effective practice learning and teaching, with an increased focus on the delivery to students from underrepresented cohorts. This might include Commonwealth and/or sector driven initiatives such as awards, webinars, conferences/workshops, professional development opportunities or centralised resource repositories. RUN supports a focus on universities having opportunities to communicate the success and/or limitations of their own models of learning and teaching, and opportunities to consider and/or adapt from the experiences of other universities. As such, RUN

supports the establishment of a dedicated national centre that drives improvement across learning and teaching in higher education. Such a centre may utilise tested research and experience to identify effective practice in teaching, learning and assessment. It may drive uptake by promoting targeted programs that develop sector-wide standards of practice, foster collaboration and celebrate success.

RECOMMENDATION: *Establish a dedicated national centre that drives improvement across learning and teaching in higher education.*

TARGETS FOR UNDERREPRESENTED STUDENT COHORTS

To ensure Australia is working towards targets that can be met, it is important to understand limitations in previously used targets, most notably the targets assigned by the Bradley Review utilising the Australian Bureau of Statistics publication Education and Work.

While the headline target works at a sectoral, national level, this statistic is inadequate at a more detailed level, especially when considering equity targets. The statistic is a point in time geographical measure, rather than a measure that looks at the specific characteristics of a respondent. The typical example is the Education and Work statistic about degree attainment for 25 to 34 year-olds living in outer regional Australia at the time of the survey. This is a measure of the current number of people living in outer regional Australia, not a measure of where they have come from, thus it may not capture regional Australians who have attained a degree and subsequently relocated to another part of the country. It is important that the Accord ensures the targets, and measurements to achieve the targets are correctly designed and targeted.

RECOMMENDATION: *Develop a series of appropriate targets to ensure equity participation and attainment are being measured and met across the sector, including considering metrics relating to student outcomes, and student satisfaction.*



GOAL 3: SUPPORTING STUDENTS TO SUCCEED

CONTEXTUALISING REGIONAL STUDENT COHORTS

In designing an Accord that helps students to succeed at university, there must be a recognition of the considerable differences between metropolitan and regional student cohorts.

Metropolitan cohorts are typically more likely to be school-leavers studying full-time with an ATAR entrance pathway to university. They are more likely to be from higher socio-economic backgrounds, and less likely to be representative of equity group profiles. Metropolitan students are more likely to have parents or siblings with university attainment who can act as academic role models⁵⁶. They are more likely to complete their studies successfully, and less likely to require support. The most common field of study amongst metropolitan students is 'society and culture', representing a quarter of all metropolitan undergraduate domestic enrolments⁵⁷. They are far more likely to benefit from different global perspectives and cultural diversity within their classrooms, with 97 per cent of Australia's total onshore international students (in 2018) lured to major cities⁵⁸. They are slightly less likely than regional students to be employed following graduation, with a full-time employment rate of just 77.6 per cent in 2022⁵⁹. Metropolitan students are more likely to attend a university operating at scale, and therefore enjoy access to high-quality facilities, amenities, services, and scholarships. When they graduate, they are



highly unlikely to relocate to regional Australia to pursue regional careers – and this remains true even for the regional students who study at metropolitan universities.

Regional cohorts are more likely to enter university as a mature age student, studying part-time, and already engaged in the workforce as a part or full-time wage earner. This means they are more likely to have dependants and care duties, a mortgage, and/or employment responsibilities. They are far more likely to be representative of equity group profiles such as low socio-economic, Indigenous, and/or regional/remote backgrounds, and are more likely to enter university via a non-ATAR pathway. Regional students are less likely to come from homes with academic role models and are more likely to require financial or academic support during their studies (which holds true for part time and/or online students as well). As a result of these complex cohort characteristics, regional students are also less likely to successfully complete their studies. Regional cohorts are less likely to benefit from the global perspectives and cultural diversity of an internationalised classroom, with just three per cent of onshore international students (in 2018) attending a regional campus⁶⁰.

The most common fields of study amongst regional cohorts are 'health' and 'education', representing approximately one in every four regional undergraduate domestic enrolments⁶¹. They are more likely to gain employment upon completion, with a full-time regional graduate employment rate of 83 per cent in 2022⁶². Indeed, the nation's three top performing universities for domestic full-time graduate employment in 2022 were all regional universities, with all RUN universities performing above the national average⁶³. Unless they relocate to a city, regional students will not have access to a university capable of operating at scale, meaning they may face some limitations in access to lower-demand offerings, facilities, amenities, and scholarships. Upon graduation, they are significantly more likely to pursue careers in regional Australia. Without access to a regional university, many regional students would have no viable opportunity to pursue tertiary participation, due to the financial and social costs of relocating to a metropolitan location.

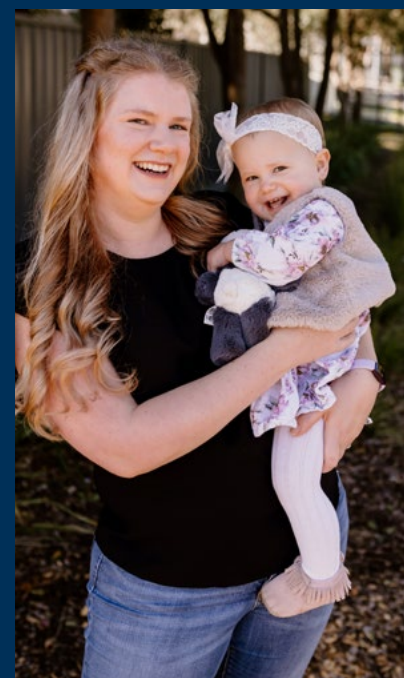
FEDERATION UNIVERSITY STUDENT SUPPORT CASE STUDY

Sarah lives in Horsham with her husband and young daughter. She has completed her Diploma of Nursing at Federation University's Wimmera campus and is currently studying a Bachelor of Nursing while working as an endorsed Enrolled Nurse at the Horsham hospital.

Sarah has overcome a life of adversity, having been diagnosed with dyslexia and being a foster child who felt that she was not smart enough to engage in post-secondary study. Growing up in a small town, she felt the opportunities were not great, and that she could one day be a manager of the local supermarket. The thought of taking on further education was not an active thought until she saw advertisements to consider studying nursing at her local university, Federation University.

Sarah received a scholarship from Federation University during each year of her Diploma which covered her placement accommodation cost, and also towards her costs for textbooks. Living in a regional area, the scholarship and support from Federation University meant that Sarah did not have to drive to and from Stawell from Horsham each day for her placement.

Sarah was able to access Federation University's learning access plan and learning liaisons which enabled her to get support to assist her with her dyslexia and further her education. Since completing her Diploma, she has started as a second-year student for the Bachelor of Nursing. The fact that the course is flexi-learning with online learning is so important to her, allowing her to continue past her Diploma and has allowed her and daughter to remain living in the Wimmera region.



ENABLING STUDENTS AT CQUNIVERSITY

Katrina Johnson completed CQUniversity's STEPS enabling program in Bundaberg, the year she turned 30, having left school 15 years prior at year 10.

Katrina left school convinced she was never going to be 'university material', however years of being engaged in various low-paid, low-skills jobs left her wondering if a degree would be a ticket to a more secure and prosperous future for her family. Katrina was married with 2 young children when she enrolled in STEPS. She began not knowing how to write sentences correctly and without any concept of how emails and the internet worked. STEPS was a huge learning curve for Katrina who saw her knowledge and skills expand dramatically. STEPS taught Katrina how to write an academic essay, and gave her confidence with IT, university systems, accessing the library, delivering presentations and learning key academic skills. Katrina was astounded by her success, "I received High Distinctions for every STEPS unit and those grades gave me the belief that I could go into undergraduate study

and succeed. Without STEPS I would have failed in my first semester and I'm not sure that I would have persevered." After 9 years of juggling family and study, Katrina graduated with a bachelor of Informatics, and eventually went on to complete a Graduate Certificate in Adult Education and a Master of Information Technology majoring in Mobile Application Development. Katrina now works as a university Lecturer at CQUniversity's School of Access Education in Bundaberg.

Katrina's decision to commence STEPS also inspired her mother to enroll in the enabling program as well, eventually graduating with an Associate Diploma in Multimedia. Their successful study journeys 'caught like wildfire' amongst the family, and inspired Katrina's husband, daughters, sister, 2 nephews, 2 nieces, and her brother-in-law to also enroll in and complete STEPS.



ENABLING STUDENTS TO SUCCEED

RUN is a diverse grouping, but united behind a shared philosophy of inclusion, support, regional impact, and community-responsive social licencing. RUN members pride themselves on the support they provide and the graduates they produce.

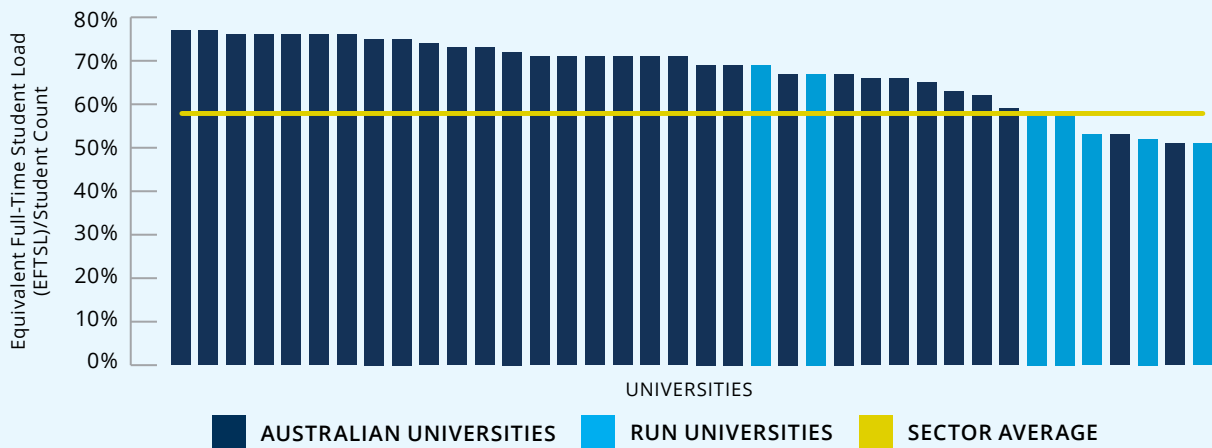
Regional universities understand the tremendous lifelong, inter-generational impact that educational attainment has on Australia's underrepresented cohorts and are also aware of the inherent at-risk characteristics of regional and underrepresented cohorts, and the substantial support that many students require to succeed. RUN is proud to do the sector's heavy lifting with raising the participation and attainment of Australia's underrepresented groups, but in doing so RUN is not apologetic in seeking special recognition regarding attrition thresholds that are otherwise designed around the success characteristics of nationally aggregated student outcomes. Universities who proactively and predominantly enrol underrepresented cohorts ought not to be penalised unduly against the attrition metrics characteristic of more privileged cohorts. Instead, attainment thresholds should be individualised with specific stretch targets developed on an institution-by-institution basis that account for institutional context and aims.

RECOMMENDATION: *Adopt contextualised attrition thresholds for underrepresented cohorts.*

Lifting future participation amongst regional cohorts will require a much greater supply of high-quality enabling pathways. Enabling programs are proven to be a highly effective mechanism in preparing underrepresented students from non-traditional pathways for academic success and course completion. To highlight an example, the student completion rate amongst enabling cohorts at one RUN university in 2021 was slightly higher than the completion rate of students who did not utilise an enabling pathway to enter university (82.5 per cent to 81.6 per cent respectively). Indeed, the enabling pathway students for this particular university example experienced higher rates of success than non-enabling pathway students in 50 of the 79 available course offerings. Nonetheless, the Commonwealth's provision of enabling places is limited, and falls well short of demand. Enabling programs that provide a robust academic foundation targeting underrepresented groups are an indispensable component to lifting the rates of participation and ultimately, successful attainment amongst regional and/or underrepresented cohorts.

RECOMMENDATION: *Uncap funded enabling places for equity group cohorts.*

FIGURE 8: STUDENT LOAD TO STUDENT COUNT



Department of Education, Higher Education Statistics, Student Load Pivot Table accessed at <https://www.education.gov.au/higher-education-statistics/resources/student-load-pivot-table-2021> on 11 March 2023.

INCREASING STUDENT SUPPORT

RUN urges the Accord Panel to rethink the way student support is distributed. Currently this is done with little consideration for regional nuance, and as such, hampers the ability of regional universities to better support greater numbers of higher-need cohorts through to success.

Regional universities enrol far higher proportions of part-time students, many of whom may also be from underrepresented backgrounds that may typically require more resources and supports to succeed. The experience of RUN universities is that part-time students access a higher average number of supports per EFTSL than full-time students. As an example, one RUN universities recorded an average student support service utilisation of 11 services for part-time students compared to 4.8 services for full-time students in 2022. This results in a higher spend on student support per EFTSL for part-time students attending this RUN university than full-time students.



The problem with the way that student support is currently funded is linked to its distribution on an EFTSL basis. This means that regional universities are expected to ration their student support allocations between more students, as compared to metropolitan institutions who generally have fewer part-time enrolments and greater capacities to self-fund student support as demonstrated in Figure 8.

Regional universities have the most high-need student cohorts, but by virtue of limited scale typically have fewer resources, offer fewer scholarships, and can least afford the extra support required. There is no such thing as a part-time student with fractional support requirements. A part-time student does not utilise just one half of the library, or one half of a prayer room, or one half of a keyboard in a computer lab. Indeed, part-time students often require additional resourcing such as the after-hours availability of IT and/or study support due to their increased likelihood of holding daytime employment commitments. Each part-time student represents a human with unique individual needs, pressures and risk factors linked to non-completion. The current support funding model being distributed on an EFTSL basis therefore represents a failure of equity as subsidised support provisions are disproportionately penalising the cohorts who are recognised as highest need.

Data shows that Indigenous higher education students have lower access, participation and completion rates compared with non-Indigenous students. Indigenous students from regional and remote areas face additional challenges and barriers in accessing and participating in higher education and are further under-represented in the national Indigenous higher education student population. They are likely to belong to multiple equity groups, attracting significant educational disadvantage when the appropriate systems are not in place to support them⁶⁴.

If raising attainment amongst underrepresented groups is a priority of this Accord – and RUN argues strongly on behalf of its communities that it should be – then centralised student support provisions should be distributed on a Gonski-style ‘as need’ basis in place of the current regional and support loading formulas. Consideration must be given to the rapidly

growing numbers of students identifying as living with disability. While this cohort’s growing participation in tertiary education is a welcomed phenomenon, the Accord must consider how these students, as well as how their universities – particularly smaller-scaled universities – may be better supported to enable greater participation and success.

RECOMMENDATION: *Change the allocation of subsidised support provisions away from an EFTSL basis, to a head-count basis.*

RECOMMENDATION: *Adopt a needs-based approach to the provision of subsidised student support provisions, making it available when it is needed, wherever it is needed.*

RECOMMENDATION: *Provide a dedicated infrastructure fund designed explicitly to support the access and experiences of students living with disability within their campus and online study environments.*

UNIVERSITY OF THE SUNSHINE COAST SCHOLARSHIP SAVES UNIVERSITY DREAM

CASE STUDY

A tragic family loss and financial hardship almost derailed Maryborough mother-of-four Kristie Loweke’s plans to become a teacher. Then, on the same day she decided her only option was to put her studies on hold, she found out she had been awarded a UniSC scholarship.

“The timing was incredible, and so is the difference it is making,” said the mother-of-four from Maryborough who is studying to become a teacher.



“I was so happy that someone chose me out of so many worthy recipients and thought that I have got what it takes and deserve this,” she said.

“I have been dealing with the loss of my mother, who was also one of my greatest supporters when it came to making my university dream a reality, and who helped my husband look after our children, who have special needs.

“My husband is also a lower leg amputee and is not working at the moment. At the start of this semester, we were struggling to cope financially and find childcare so I could keep on studying.

“I was absolutely blown to get the email the very day I was ready to withdraw, saying I had been awarded a Thompson Study Support scholarship.”

USC VC Professor Helen Bartlett and scholarship recipient Kristie Loweke.

FISCAL CHALLENGES OF PLACEMENTS AND STUDY

Many students, regardless of location, will face financial barriers to study. These may include the upfront costs of study (textbooks, laptops, software etc.), the opportunity costs of study (forgoing paid employment to study), as well as ongoing costs of study (childcare, uniforms, transit etc.). Australia's higher education system should support access for any student wherever they are located. Students who struggle to manage their living costs, or balance their work/study/family commitments, are at risk of non-completion, which would represent lost opportunities for Australia's workforces.

In assessing more appropriate levels of direct support to students to ensure their costs of study are not prohibitive to attainment, the Accord should consider the nuance peculiar to regional cohorts. By the nature of this cohort, regional students are among the highest risk of non-completion.

Regional students are more likely to come from low socio-economic backgrounds, immediately placing them at a financially disadvantaged position to absorb the upfront and ongoing costs of study, while also often making them more debt averse. Regional cohorts also comprise higher proportions of mature-aged students, and higher proportions of students enrolled part-time, highlighting the fact that many already have care-giver responsibilities for dependants (and as a result, higher costs of living), and workplace responsibilities that compete with the affordability and balance of study. Regional students often face greater distances to their place of study, may often have to relocate to study, and have limited public transport options.

The costs of mandatory placements and residential schools embedded within many courses act as a particularly significant financial barrier for regional students. Many of the core offerings of regional universities are in service-related fields that require unpaid clinical or industry placements as a condition of accreditation and qualification attainment. This includes, for instance, the fields of health and education disciplines



that comprise more than four out of every ten RUN undergraduate domestic enrolments⁶⁵. The placement requirements of social work undergraduate courses can demand 25 weeks or more of unpaid fulltime attendance over the course of the degree while registered nurse placements can be in excess of 800 hours. In addition, many courses also require online students to attend residential blocks of study once or twice a year for periods of up to a week at a time for various subject studied. For many regional students the cost of travel, accommodation, and lost earnings associated with extended periods of unpaid placement requirements and residential schools can simply be incompatible with participation or successful completion. As a result, students in regional Australia often face higher financial and personal/family costs of study, compared to the experiences of other student cohorts.

RECOMMENDATION: *Explore a more effective and nuanced system for student income support that accounts for the study costs faced by regional Australians to ensure they have the time and resources to devote to the completion of their studies.*

RECOMMENDATION: *Establish a student support mechanism that provides financial assistance to students undertaking mandatory placements.*

GOAL 4: RECOGNISING THE SOCIAL VALUE OF REGIONAL UNIVERSITIES AS COMPREHENSIVE UNIVERSITIES

While RUN members continue to meet the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) requirements to be formally recognised as universities, RUN nonetheless firmly rejects any policy setting that would turn existing universities into specialised “teaching only” universities, given the over-representation of regional institutions that could potentially lose formal university status via such a transition.

At a time of emerging regional economic potential and simultaneous regional shortages of critical skills, it would be undesirable for regional, rural, and remote communities to see their regional universities having their formal status tested. Regional Australia requires prioritised investment in the research capabilities of its universities, and a safeguarding of their comprehensive nature, as part of the Government’s Universal Higher Education Service Obligations to regional Australia.



RECOMMENDATION: *Ensure regional universities are retained as comprehensive research active universities.*

Each university in Australia exists to meet a distinct need of the communities they serve. Supporting each university to meet its unique social charter should be a design feature of the Accord. In the case of regional universities, the social charters that shape their operations, their investments, and their values are markedly distinct from those universities servicing metropolitan Australia.

Regional universities are indispensable to the communities they serve. Regional universities fuel regional workforces with highly skilled graduates suppressing critical skills shortages in some of the most underserved yet high value pockets of the economy. Regional universities deliver world class research that drives innovation in their local industries and raises the standard of living for regional communities. Regional universities are deeply embedded within and are inseparable from their communities and industries in ways that are not as easily replicated in metropolitan environments.

Should one of Australia’s metropolitan universities close, a multitude of surrounding providers would be able to absorb the resulting student demand, while academics, research projects, and research staff would likely find continuity at other institutions and employers in the city workforce environment. While it would represent a significant loss to the sector, the overall community disruption resulting from the closure of a metropolitan campus would be relatively minimal and manageable.

If a regional university were to close the disruptive impact upon regional communities, industries and economies would be more pronounced. For many regional students, a local university is their only viable study option especially for those who study courses that require residential schools and clinical/industry placements. Local employers and industries would see their only reliable pipeline of skilled graduates diminish resulting in workforce shortages. The local re-employment options for displaced researchers, academics and professional university staff would be highly restricted, resulting in a likely exodus of intellectual

capital from regional communities, alongside the departure of one of the largest employers in the region. In many cases, regional industries would find no viable university partnership alternatives to meet their applied, on-the-ground innovation and research needs, resulting in lost regional potential. In most cases regional communities will also see the complete loss of their only source of vital community services and infrastructure, employment, and economic drivers, local research, and innovation capabilities, and much of their cultural and intellectual capital.

As impressive as Australia's metropolitan universities are, they cannot replicate the embedded social, cultural, and economic impact that regionally-based universities generate in regional Australia. It is for these reasons that regional universities must remain comprehensive institutions. It is important that regional universities never be driven by policy design to become too specialised in their offerings and must be supported to remain research active. RUN institutions witness the value of research-informed teaching alongside the impact of their research upon their communities. While regional universities excel in areas of teaching and research, their social purpose as sole regional providers require a comprehensive approach to teaching and research. RUN also advocates for universities being recognised and supported to service their distinct social charters, reflected via a whole-of-Government approach. One

mechanism that may achieve this is the establishment of a dedicated funding pool and/or distributive funding model as a feature of the Accord.

RECOMMENDATION: *Establish a dedicated funding pool and distributive funding model to support the social charter of universities through a whole-of-Government approach.*

REGIONAL WORKFORCE TRANSITION

Australia's regional communities look to their regional higher education institutions to play a leading role in overcoming the challenges and seizing the opportunities of Australia's green energy transition.

RUN unanimously endorses Australia's climate targets and efforts to transition to a net zero economy by 2050, noting that regional Australia hosts the majority share of the nation's natural assets, biodiversity, and renewable energy potential. Similarly, regional Australia hosts a major share of the nation's fossil fuel assets and workforces, emission-intensive industries, and loss of habitats and biodiversity. As such, regional Australia is likely to wear the brunt of environmental and economic impact linked to Australia's changing climate and could face greater industrial/economic disruptions from the transition to net zero by 2050.

SOUTHERN CROSS UNIVERSITY'S CENTRE FOR COASTAL BIOGEOCHEMISTRY

CASE STUDY

Southern Cross University's Centre for Coastal Biogeochemistry undertakes world class research on the global change issues of nutrient over-enrichment, ocean acidification, climate change, greenhouse gases, hypoxia and waste management.

The Centre works in estuaries, rivers and catchments, nearshore coastal waters, mangroves, seagrasses, salt-marshes, wetlands, muds, permeable sands and coral reefs.

The Centre's research tools include stable isotopes, process measurements, automated instrumentation, experimental manipulations, material mass balances and ecosystem modelling and comparative studies.

The Centre for Coastal Biogeochemistry is a major contributor to Southern Cross University's Geochemistry area, which received the top 2018 ERA rating of 5.0.

CHARLES STURT UNIVERSITY'S PATHWAY FOR TEACHERS' AIDES

CASE STUDY

A new Charles Sturt University program aimed at upskilling teachers' aides, Aboriginal Education Officers, and other classroom support personnel to become qualified teachers is on track to help address the critical shortage of teachers in Australia with more than 180 enrolments in 2022.

The Collaborative Teacher's Aide Pathway works with schools and focuses on recognising the skills and previous study of teachers' aides such as Certificate III or IV of Education Support, or a Diploma of School Age Education and Care, to support them to complete an online primary or secondary teaching degree.

Teachers' aides and others in support teacher roles can enrol in the Charles Sturt Bachelor of Educational Studies/ Master of Teaching pathway, which is designed to facilitate completion of an online teaching degree in as little as two or three years full-time (depending on credit), while still being employed at their current school in the same capacity. The pathway can be studied online, full-time or part-time, from anywhere in Australia, and has three commencement sessions across the year.



Senior Lecturer with the Charles Sturt School of Education Dr Libbey Murray, recipient of the Charles Sturt Yindjamarra Scholarship Ms Teaghan King, and Director of External Engagement Dubbo Mr James McKechnie.

UNIVERSITY OF SUNSHINE COAST'S THOMPSON INSTITUTE

The University of the Sunshine Coast's Thompson Institute is a world-class hub for research, teaching and clinical services for mental health issues.

The UniSC Thompson Institute uses the latest neuroscience to research and deliver community programs and treatment options for Australia's most pressing mental health issues, including suicide prevention, youth mental health, PTSD and eating disorders.

UniSC are committed to the wellbeing of not only their immediate communities, but to rapidly translating research into safe and effective treatments for all Australians.

The UniSC Thompson institute is home to one of Australia's most commercially and clinical knowledgeable research teams in neuroscience.

It also hosts the Alliance for Suicide Prevention – Sunshine Coast, which is working to combat the rate of suicide rate across the Sunshine Coast region. The Alliance, which has 125 member organisations since forming in 2018, has trained more than 2,000 people in suicide prevention while raising community awareness and providing support and clinical services for high-risk groups. The Alliance has been so successful, with impact data made publicly available, that they are now looking to share the model freely to other regions in Australia looking to emulate the Alliance.

In one year, the national economy loses \$13.1 billion from the consequences of mental illness, which is on top of the considerable impacts on the wellbeing and lives of those impacted, their families and friends, which is why research into mental health is so vital.

While RUN acknowledges the tremendous opportunities for many regional communities the transition to a net-zero economy will present, RUN also recognises the legitimate concern that these opportunities may not be evenly distributed across Australia. RUN advocates for a renewed policy focus that supports regional universities to play a more proactive role in servicing the innovation, research, and workforce transitions required of regional Australia in the pursuit of a net-zero economy.

There are several voices within the sector advocating for the establishment of some form of green energy transition training and research hubs to ensure Australia's green energy transition is made more seamlessly and sustainably. RUN would be highly supportive of such an initiative but would

stress the importance of the model being hosted and operated by the regions, delivering for the regions and regional Australians, especially given that the regions will be at the centre of Australia's green energy transition⁶⁶.

RECOMMENDATION: *Establish a dedicated regional research and workforce transition fund that seeks to build regional Australia's understanding of, and ability to respond to, the opportunities and challenges of the net zero energy transition. This fund would not only drive capacity for regional innovation and resilience, but also inform the teaching and training of transitioning regional workforces.*

OPERATIONAL COSTS IN REGIONAL AUSTRALIA

A recognition of the social value of regional universities must be accompanied by a recognition of the additional cost impost upon regional universities. There are many hidden operational factors unique to regional universities that compound these scale limitations even further.

Regional universities typically have more campuses that are further apart, often with hundreds or thousands of kilometres between them. This imposes costs upon regional universities and has infrastructure and maintenance implications. Multiple campuses also require considerable duplication of facilities, services, and personnel, necessary to ensure students receive acceptable and equitable university services.

Frequently, the costs of doing business in regional Australia are higher. Insurance costs are typically inflated in regional areas due to the frequency of natural disasters. The limited competition in the regional electricity market has an inflationary effect, and fuel is often more expensive away from capital cities. The cost of construction, maintenance, equipment, and supply chains are also frequently higher in regional Australia.

Additionally, raising the aspirations and participation of regional and/or other underrepresented groups via outreach campaigns and marketing into small populations is very important and represents a vital component of the social charter of regional universities, but it is expensive to conduct these activities within smaller communities due to diseconomies of scale.

The travel and accommodation costs related solely to accreditation requirements for one RUN institution's physiotherapy offerings in an outer regional campus location exceeds \$50,000.

There are major costs associated with being physically located outside of major capital cities. The cost of travel, for instance, is a large and unavoidable budgetary burden to regional universities and their staff. While the campuses of many metropolitan universities are connected to each other and to major sector services via short, inexpensive public transport routes, travel to or between regional campuses most often involves flights, accommodation and car hire (accounting for limited public transport in regional locations). For example, the travel and accommodation costs related solely to accreditation requirements for

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN QUEENSLAND'S BARLEY BREEDERS

CASE STUDY

Each year, plant pathogens cause millions of dollars in damage to Australia's barley crops, attacking roots, stems and leaves. A project led by the University of Southern Queensland is set to equip Australian barley growers with novel biological and genetic tools to aid in their fight against a fungal disease that has caused \$177M in yield losses each year for the Australian barley industry.

Funded by a \$586,728 Australian Research Council (ARC) Linkage Grant, in collaboration with InterGrain Pty Ltd, a team of scientists will develop a disease resistant barley variety will be used to prevent industry losses.

The applied outcomes of this research will be valuable new knowledge and biological and genetic resources to guide the Australian barley breeding community so that they will be able to provide long term protection of this important Australian crop from disease losses through the creation of a poly-virulent fungal strain and through the potential identification of resistance barley germplasm genes.



one RUN institution's physiotherapy offerings in an outer regional campus location exceeds \$50,000. This is a considerable and unavoidable cost to support a course in a region with modest student numbers that is a necessary offering to develop crucial health workforces in a growing region. Additionally, the myriad of essential sector meetings, Government hearings, conferences and liaison with Ministers, political representatives, industry leads, or embassies/consulates occur in capital cities, imposing high travel and accommodation costs upon regional universities that metropolitan universities can often avoid.

REGIONAL STAFF RELOCATION COSTS

Attracting and retaining high quality staff in regional areas is often more difficult and expensive. Recruitment costs can include market loadings required to incentivise people coming to areas with fewer health and other amenities. Regional recruitment also carries additional costs such as travel and accommodation for in-person interviews, relocation costs, and spousal employment requirements.

RECOMMENDATION: *Provide support to universities to assist with the recruitment of staff to areas where housing and services are not readily available.*

A WHOLE-OF-GOVERNMENT APPROACH

Universities provide a vital social good that benefits all Australians, not least the nation's economic strength. These benefits span the full spectrum of Government agency operations. It is therefore logical that the resourcing of such services be supported by a fuller cohort of stakeholders. This could include the involvement of many Government Departments such as Regional Australia, Industry, and Infrastructure.

RECOMMENDATION: *Shift the funding of Australia's higher education from a limited number of agencies and Department to a whole-of-Government approach.*

GOAL 5: BALANCING AUSTRALIA'S RESEARCH CAPABILITIES

CONCENTRATION OF RESEARCH ACTIVITY

RUN universities host many highly successful and collaborative research clusters that are recognised as performing at, above, or well above world standard in many key research areas.

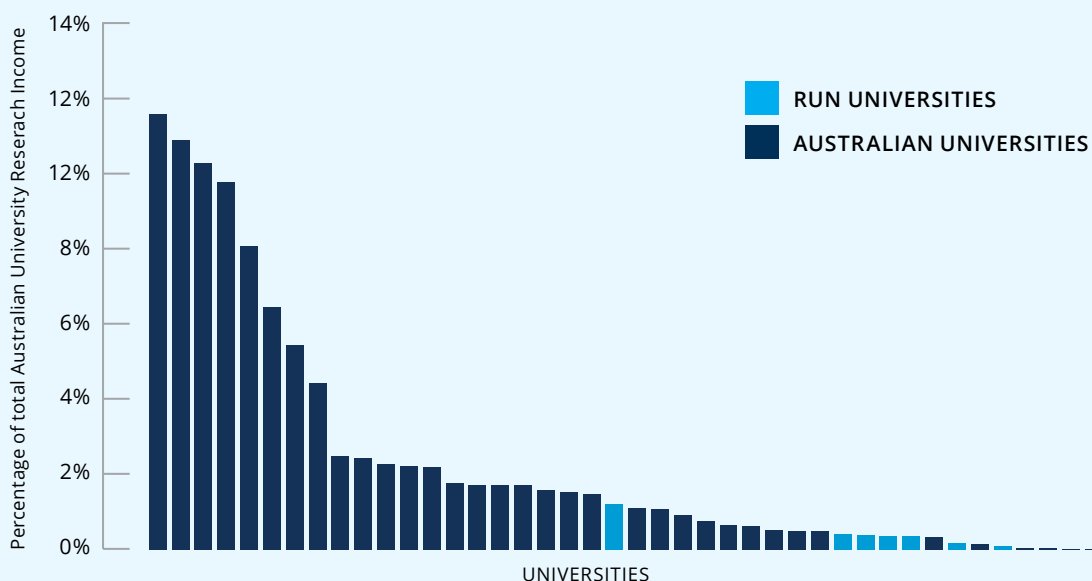
Regional university research efforts and their subsequent impacts are typically targeted and highly-applied to the unique social, industrial, and cultural needs of their respective regions. Despite the tremendous impact of regional university research outputs, there are geographic imbalances in the distribution of national research funding, activity, and infrastructure.

Australia's tertiary research landscape sees a disproportionate share of its research capability becoming increasingly concentrated within a small handful of higher education institutions⁶⁷. The pockets of world class research hosted by regional Australia – and undertaken for the benefit of

regional Australia – are significantly overshadowed by the research income of a small group of metropolitan universities. In fact, five universities account for 50 per cent of Australia's research income in 2021, with 17 universities receiving five per cent of the nation's research income collectively⁶⁸. The concentration of research income is shown in Figure 9.

Australia's research funding and research-trained workforces are gravitating towards large urban markets. In an increasingly competitive and volatile global environment, this growing concentration of research effort and the dilution of balance represents a vulnerability in the diversity, accessibility, and culture of Australia's research ecosystem. In addition to the Accord focussing on redistributing the benefits of Australia's degree attainment rates more equitably to regional Australians, there must be an equal focus on a more equitable redistribution of Australia's research capabilities and research-trained workforce. Regional universities should be more involved in the nation's cutting-edge research, clinical trials, and new knowledge and innovation opportunities. Regional teaching and learning also deserves to be informed by world class research as that provided by metropolitan teaching and learning experiences.

FIGURE 9: 2021 DISTRIBUTION OF AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITY RESEARCH INCOME



Department of Education, Research Income Time Series, accessed at <https://www.education.gov.au/research-block-grants/resources/research-income-time-series> on 23 March 2023.

Smaller scale universities are often not able to attract research grants due to a lack of infrastructure and/or human capital but are equally unable to build infrastructure and/or human capital due to lack of research grant funding. The imbalance in research opportunity limits regional Australia's ability to improve its research capabilities. Furthermore, opportunities to study beyond undergraduate education into research degrees are similarly limited for Australians living in regional, rural, and remote areas, who account for 27.3 per cent of the working-age population, yet only 13.4 per cent of research training students and 9.8 per cent of research degree completions⁶⁹. As a result, local research expertise and infrastructure required by regional industries is lost, reducing economic opportunity, and innovation potential outside of metropolitan Australia. Regional universities are well placed to address these geographic discrepancies directly, through a more equitable distribution of the Australian Research Council National Competitive Grant Program via regionally-targeted funding rounds. Leveraging Australia's existing research capacity such that partnerships with regional universities are incentivised may also address the geographic imbalances of Australia's research capabilities.



RECOMMENDATION: *Set attainment targets and providing adequate funding for increasing the numbers of research higher degree graduates in regional Australia.*

RECOMMENDATION: *Increase the distribution of Australian Research Council National Competitive Grant Program, via targeted rounds, to ensure greater opportunities across Australia, including incentives for grant recipients to partner with regional universities.*

RECOMMENDATION: *Increase funding and infrastructure that grows the research capacity, infrastructure and workforces of regional Australia and their universities.*

RUN also supports the retention of the existing ERA ranking model. RUN does not support the expansion of ERA ranking parameters to include additional scores that exceed the current 'Well Above World Standard' categorisation. While such an expansion may seek to further the reputations of select universities, on balance such a move would have a net negative effect on the sector and on Australia's research reputation. Additional, higher ranking ERA parameters will only serve to devalue entire swathes of Australia's national research output that is already identified as 'at', 'above' or 'well above' world standard. This has the potential to diminish Australia's national interests in research on the global stage.

RECOMMENDATION: *Maintain the existing ERA ranking model that assigns institutional scores of between one-to-five for different research categories.*

CASE STUDY

LOW EMISSION LIVESTOCK AT THE UNIVERSITY OF NEW ENGLAND

The University of New England are in a \$19 million research collaboration with Meat and Livestock Australia, the NSW Department of Primary Industries and Angus Australia to reduce methane emissions from Australian livestock.

The project will examine the variation in methane emissions between animals, and data will be used to predict which animals have the genetics that will result in the breeding of animals that naturally produce lower amounts of methane.

Over the next five years the methane output of 8,000 cattle and 10,000 sheep living in both feedlot and grazing conditions will be measured alongside each animal's feed intake to cumulatively reduce the methane emissions by one percent per head per year.

This project will benefit Australian breeders and producers and the next generation of agricultural scientists and researchers as several students will work with researchers on these projects, while all institutional research will flow directly into UNE's teaching which will produce graduates at the forefront of innovation in agriculture.



THE MANNA INSTITUTE

Funded by a \$3.66 million Commonwealth grant the Manna Institute unites leading mental health researchers from seven universities in the Regional Universities Network (RUN) – Charles Sturt University, CQUniversity, Federation University, Southern Cross University, the University of Southern Queensland, the University of Sunshine Coast and lead institution the University of New England.

The Manna Institute seeks to create the educational pathways that will ensure future generations of mental health researchers capable of developing targeted solutions to regional Australia. The Institute will build regional Australia's mental health

research capacity. This unprecedented collaborative effort will foster relevant research, professional workforces, and the translation of research findings into practical, place-based programs.

The Manna Institute represents a serious, long-term commitment to the mental health and wellbeing of the one-third of Australians experiencing much poorer mental health than their metropolitan counterparts. Leading national mental health researchers across a vast geographical footprint are partnering with industry and community partners (including Everymind, Lifeline Direct and the ANU Centre for Mental Health Research) to tailor solutions specifically to their regions.

GOAL 6: INVESTING IN INFRASTRUCTURE

World class teaching, training and research facilities produce world class graduates. There are many types of critical tertiary infrastructure that need to be funded beyond the obvious teaching/learning and research facilities, including digital and cybersecurity infrastructure, disability and accessibility infrastructure, cultural spaces, modern student accommodation (especially in regional areas experiencing high levels of housing shortages), and maintenance backlogs.

Access to high quality tertiary facilities and experiences has a profound impact upon student retention and success and is an important mechanism in lifting the aspirations of students, especially those from underrepresented backgrounds. Special attention must be given to the growing numbers of domestic enrolments from students living with disability – the fastest growing of all equity cohorts⁷⁰ – and the specialised on-campus/online infrastructure required by these students. In the case of regional universities, university infrastructure is often utilised not just by students and staff but also by regional communities. This brings many benefits, including in some cases less need for Government investment in traditional community infrastructure. The facilities and experiences that students encounter at university prepares them for their future industries and careers. Just as the quality of teaching and learning is standardised and regulated across all institutions, so too must be the quality of Australia's educational infrastructure.

Policy frameworks that continue to disproportionately reward large-scaled operations accelerate the emergence of a two-tiered higher education system, and this needs to be recalibrated for the collective good of Australia. Without intervention, Australia may continue further down a path of student experience divergence where the location of the campus determines the standard of tertiary facilities and experiences of university students. Furthermore, ageing and lower-quality facilities at regional universities will contribute



to the drain of regional students to metropolitan universities, to the detriment of regional productivity and workforce needs.

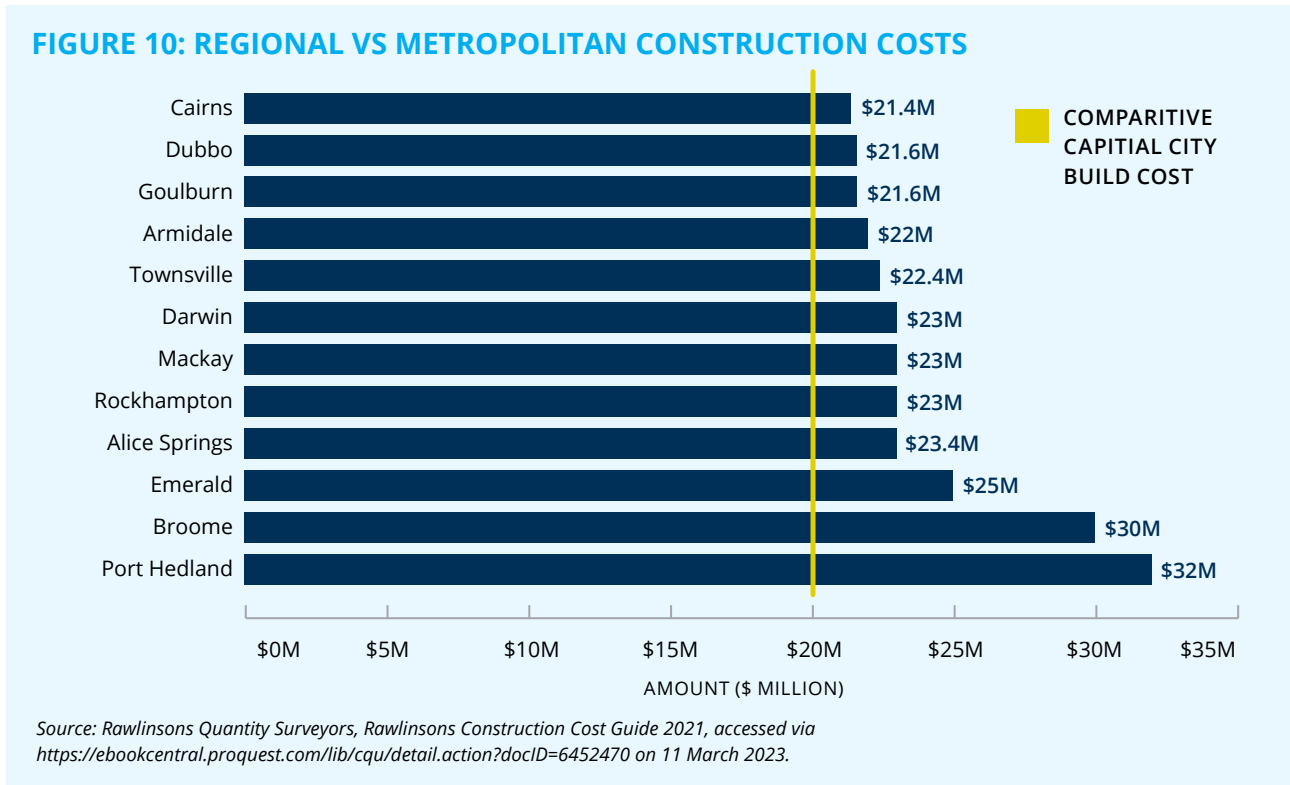
COSTS OF REGIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE

There are growing systemic disadvantages facing the universities of regional Australia in terms of an institution's capacity to finance, build and maintain world class tertiary infrastructure. Whereas most metropolitan universities concentrate their infrastructure upon a single campus operating at scale within a large and densely populated urban market, regional universities are expected to operate multiple campuses (often with duplicated facilities, services and personnel) dispersed across many smaller regional communities with much lower student volumes and higher cost inefficiencies.

Regional Australia's universities also lack the scale of revenues and endowments derived from international students, robust share portfolios, prime urban real estate holdings, and sophisticated philanthropic machinery that many metropolitan universities enjoy. Regional universities are also much younger and do not have the legacies of accumulated assets, grants and bequests that characterise older, more established universities.

Compounding these imbalances is the reality that infrastructure costs more in regional Australia. The 2021 Rawlinsons Construction Cost Guide⁷¹ quantifies and compares the regional construction indices for different parts of metropolitan and

regional Australia. As demonstrated in Figure 10, if a major capital city university builds, say, a Nursing and Midwifery training facility that costs \$20M, building the exact same facility in regional Australia would cost:



Regional universities are used to doing ‘less with more,’ however this financial impost must be recognised if Australia is to prioritise the lifting of attainment and the provision of equitable tertiary opportunities/experiences among regional Australians. Many of these unique cost imposts are captured by other recommendations within this submission.



The diseconomies of scale experienced by regional Australia’s universities, combined with existing policy and other factors related to the delivery of high-quality tertiary education and research in non-metropolitan Australia is creating an unequal distribution of opportunity and access to world class university infrastructure. While metropolitan Australians enjoy the benefits of accessing tertiary institutions capable of generating billion-dollar surpluses, regional Australians do not. Regional universities have strong demand for new infrastructure, including digital infrastructure, as well as revitalisation of existing infrastructure to grow their impact and world class reputations, but often struggle to move major capital projects past the planning stage simply due to lack of resources. RUN sees this as a major flaw and a significant vulnerability of any equitable, sustainable, and high performing national higher education system.

Without intervention regional Australia will have tertiary institutions that can no longer afford to provide the same level of world class teaching, training, and research facilities as those enjoyed by students in capital cities. This will inevitably lead to a split in the national population which will see students from regional areas – already characterised by disadvantage and underrepresentation – having inferior access to learning experiences and opportunities compared to their metropolitan peers.

RECENT HISTORY OF EDUCATION INFRASTRUCTURE FUNDING

It has been almost a decade since the last wave of recurrent investment in Australia's higher education infrastructure, weakening Australia's global competitiveness in both higher education, and research/innovation. Even before the closure of the Education Infrastructure Fund (EIF) in 2019, universities lacked dedicated infrastructure funding because no funding was released from EIF for the final years of its operation.

The EIF was an \$11 billion fund adding to the success of the Higher Education Endowment Fund and was designed to ensure that Australian higher education providers had the requisite funding to meet their infrastructure needs. The EIF was not focussed solely on research infrastructure but funded a wide range of infrastructure needs including infrastructure for teaching.

Over the active life of the fund, \$4.2 billion was spent on vital education infrastructure across the country including \$312.6 million in a dedicated 2011 regional priority round⁷². This was a significant investment in Australia's tertiary teaching, training, and research capabilities. The lack of access to dedicated infrastructure funding since EIF closed remains a particularly challenging issue for regional universities which do not operate in environments conducive to amassing large surpluses.

This represents a significant gap in any eventual Universal Higher Education Service Obligation to regional Australia that would need to be met. To ensure that Australia's higher education providers can meet the skilling and research needs of all Australians into the future, the Accord must explore how to re-establish dedicated infrastructure funding, not only for new university infrastructure but also the maintaining and/or upgrading of existing infrastructure. There should also be consideration given to the growing need for adequate digital infrastructure to ensure world-class student learning, safety, and outcomes. This is especially important for institutions that perform vital services in smaller markets and for distance education for remote and outer regional areas. This consideration must also extend to the growing cyber-security responsibilities of smaller-scaled universities, where the cost of financing robust protective measures becomes increasingly unserviceable, while the risk of threats escalates. Such measures will help mitigate against a two-tiered system of educational outcomes in Australia.

RECOMMENDATION: *Re-establish a dedicated, significant education infrastructure fund. This must be designed either explicitly for smaller institutions or include dedicated rounds exclusively for those institutions. The infrastructure fund must carry scope to accommodate digital infrastructure (including cyber security), and the maintenance needs of institutions.*

GOAL 7: AN ENVIRONMENT FOR LIFELONG LEARNING

LIFELONG LEARNING

As the pace of change quickens, and technology increasingly disrupts industry, the need for lifelong learning will only increase.

The opportunity for Australians to upskill, reskill or develop new skills will be paramount to the future prosperity of Australia. Therefore, the Accord Panel should be investigating mechanisms to encourage increased uptake of short courses/micro-credentials, while limiting barriers that effectively ration these opportunities. This may include, for instance, further consideration of extending income-contingent loans to cover short courses and micro-credentials and broadening the tax deductibility of short course and micro-credential fees when aligning with a student's current or alternative/aspirational career in recognised skills shortage fields. Indeed, lifelong learning engagements are more likely to be on part-time basis resulting in a fundamental shifting of the EFTSL-to-enrolment ratio. RUN supports further exploration of the appropriate funding and legislative frameworks to enable lifelong learning.

Lifelong learning will require a strong and robust Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector enabling students to engage with the upskilling they require when they require it. This will involve consideration of current policy differences between the higher education and VET sectors that currently prohibit closer collaboration. From a student perspective, one large difference is the treatment of income contingent loans. As such, a key aspect of any lifelong learning system is ensuring an appropriate funding mechanism is in place to guarantee that upfront costs are not a prohibitive impairment to study and that a social mobility divide is not created between those who can and cannot afford it. A possible mechanism for this would be the opening-up of Australia's HECS-HELP income contingent loan scheme to include lifelong learning.



RECOMMENDATION: *Incentivise the uptake of lifelong learning via the further extension of income-contingent loans to cover short courses and micro-credentials while broadening the tax deductibility of their fees from those relating to a person's current job to those that may relate to a person's alternative/aspirational career in recognised skills shortage fields. This includes specific incentives targeting underrepresented/ equity student cohorts.*

RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING

A key aspect of an inclusive and easily accessible environment for lifelong learning is ensuring a universal Recognition of Prior Learning mechanism is in place to allow learning outcomes to be recognised across the full spectrum of Australia's post-secondary learning environment. This will further allow for the utilisation of stackable credentials. This system will also drive greater recognition of student choices relating to their study be that from the VET system to universities or vice-versa.

RECOMMENDATION: *Develop a Recognition of Prior Learning framework that enables the recognition of qualifications and learning across all elements of the post-secondary learning environment.*

GOAL 8: BALANCING THE BENEFITS OF INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION

AUSTRALIA'S CONCENTRATION OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

Australia's higher education ecosystem would benefit from a more equitable redistribution of the benefits stemming from Australia's engagement with international student cohorts.

There is a strong case for regional Australia hosting a greater share of the international student cohort, and for regional Australia welcoming a greater proportion of those international students who choose to remain in Australia post-graduation. Despite being home to over eight million Australians and featuring many world-class universities, regional Australia hosted just three per cent of onshore international students (from all education sectors) in 2018⁷³. Of this share of international students who were welcomed by regional Australia during their studies, only 16 per cent are likely to have remained in Australia following graduation via a transition to permanent residency⁷⁴.

International students play a vital role in the globalisation and cultural diversification of Australia's classrooms. In an increasingly globalised world, Australia's continued national prosperity depends on a citizenship who are informed and

engaged members of the global community, and who value and celebrate cultural and linguistic differences⁷⁵. Here, the contextual global-cultural exposure and exchange that international students provide to domestic cohorts is invaluable. Australian universities enjoy a significant advantage over almost every OECD nation in terms of globalisation, as measured by the proportion of international students to total tertiary student enrolments. Australia is ranked second in the world under this measure of international student mobility, with 26 per cent of tertiary classrooms being populated by international students⁷⁶. But within Australia the benefits of the socio-cultural contributions made by international students in university classrooms is not equally shared. This poses significant vulnerabilities in regional Australia's ability to effectively engage with global opportunities from a position of real-world experience.

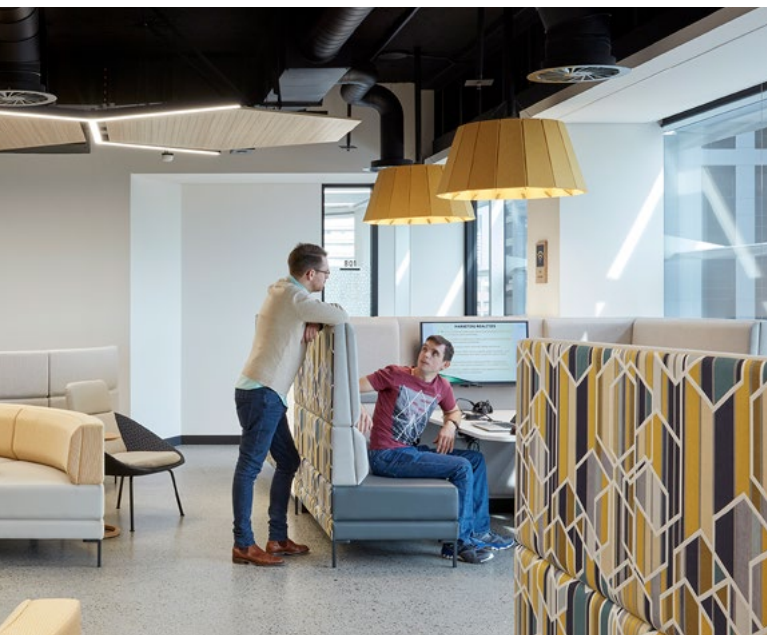
RECOMMENDATION: *Provide Commonwealth support in; promoting the unique socio-cultural benefits of studying in regional Australia to international markets; providing positive regional differentiation in visa policy settings; providing onshore international students with clear, assured pathways from study-to-skilled migration; and as migration policy evolves, grandfathering these assurances as to not disadvantage international students who have already commenced affected study-to-migration pathways.*

DIVERSITY OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENT COHORTS

The majority, if not all, of Australia's universities have diversification strategies in place which are appropriate to their institutional contexts, goals, and operational strategies. This means that some universities will have a focus on certain markets or segments of an international student population, be that at undergraduate or postgraduate level, or for particular subjects.

As much as diversification strategies are in place, it is important to understand that the international student market is a free market system with international students themselves ultimately





deciding where they will study, at what level and in what discipline to meet their life and career goals. This decision is influenced by a multitude of factors. For example, in excess of 80 per cent of international students return to their home country after the completion of their post study work rights in Australia, which suggests that many international students are choosing degrees that would increase their employability in their home country. This decision factor is equally important for domestic students in choosing their field of study, which also impacts upon domestic student diversity.

There is no optimal makeup of student cohorts. Institutions, like their students, should be free to make decisions that align with their priorities. As such, there will never be a one-size fits all solution to classroom, subject, or even institutional diversity. The choices of international students and the choices of institutions will differ on a country-by-country basis and what works for one country at a collective level, may not necessarily work for another country. It would also be remiss to think that study decisions are the sole factors for international student choices. The attractiveness of a country, the appeal of various postgraduation work rights, the cost of study, along with any family, community or cultural ties are all important factors in the decision-making process of international students.

MECHANISMS TO ATTRACT INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS TO REGIONAL AUSTRALIA.

Regional Australia would value and benefit from any opportunity to welcome more international students, including those who eventually graduate from regional university campuses into regional workforces. To encourage this, additional Commonwealth and State Government support in promoting the unique socio-cultural benefits of studying in regional Australia to international markets, complemented by positive regional differentiation in visa policy settings would be greatly welcomed.

Previous Government policy recognised the need for greater numbers of skilled migrants and international students to live and thrive in regional Australia, so regional migration incentives were accordingly implemented. Without incentives that are attractive to international students, regional Australia will undoubtedly see a reduction of international students choosing to study in regional Australia, and subsequently settle as permanent residents, which will result in imbalances upon Australia's economic prosperity.

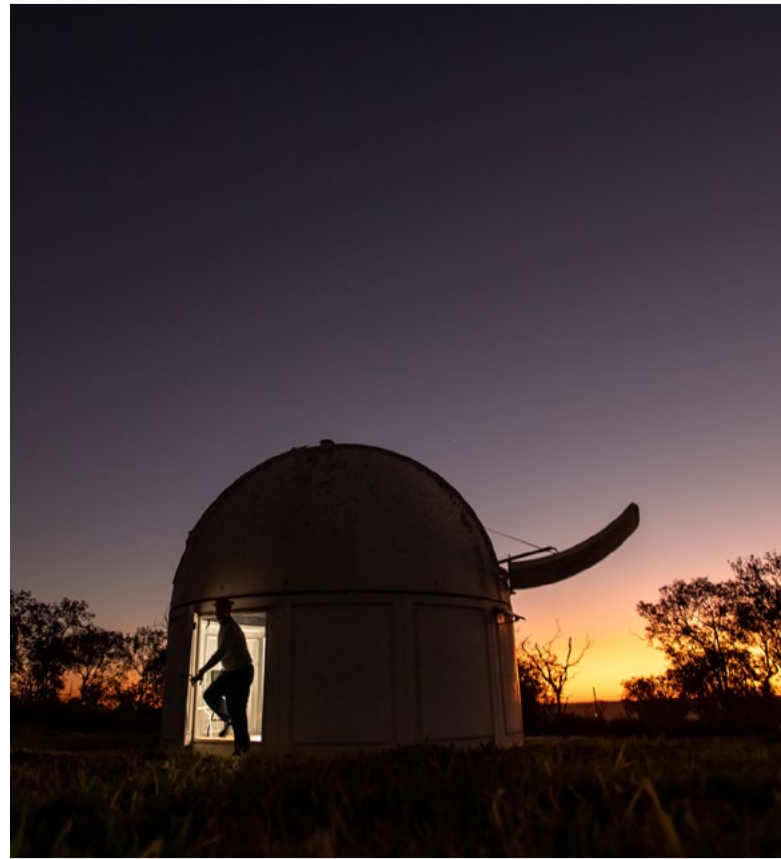
RECOMMENDATION: *Create a simplified and dedicated pathway to residency for students who study in, and then subsequently work in regional Australia, such as ensuring that international students receive additional points towards skilled visa applications if they have studied in regional Australia, with extra points for applicants who remain in regional Australia.*

GOAL 9: A SUSTAINABLE REGULATORY FRAMEWORK

Australian universities operate in a highly regulated environment, which is an important and necessary feature of a robust and sustainable tertiary sector. Nonetheless, there are features of this regulatory environment that represent avoidable duplication in reporting and data collection, resulting in unnecessarily complex regulatory burdens worn by providers.

Australia's higher education regulatory framework is multi-jurisdictional, with providers being accountable to the regulatory requirements of the TEQSA at a Commonwealth level (in addition to regulatory requirements for dual-sector providers via the Australian Skills Quality Authority), and various other requirements at a State and Territory level. Often, the data and reporting requirements across this multijurisdictional landscape are duplicated, resulting in unnecessarily higher costs of compliance.

In recent years, several new compliance requirements have been introduced with associated cost burdens. These include Foreign Interference registers, Tertiary Collection of Student Information, Unique Student Identifier, and Transparency in Higher Education Expenditure Data Collection. While RUN recognises the importance of these compliance initiatives and supports their inclusion in Australia's tertiary regulation framework, the cumulative cost of compliance continues to grow with no corresponding provisions made in funding models. The continual growth in regulatory compliance equates to a significant investment in resourcing that otherwise diverts from core business. These costs are more difficult to absorb when operating in sub-scale environments.



RECOMMENDATION: *Conduct a comprehensive multi-jurisdictional review of the sector's regulatory environment that has scope to reduce the duplication of reporting and data collection and to ease the regulatory burden upon universities via a more streamlined "report once" model.*

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