

Regional Universities Network: Engaging with regions, building a stronger nation

Summary for media

The Regional Universities Network regional impact study – *Regional Universities Network: Engaging with regions, building a stronger nation* – demonstrates many of the ways in which the RUN universities are contributing to the social, cultural, environmental and economic development of their regions.

This new study builds on the work already undertaken in RUN’s economic impact study published in March 2013 which provided a conservative estimate that the group contributed at least \$2.1 billion in gross domestic product, \$1.2 billion in household income and more than 14,000 full-time equivalent jobs to the Australian economy in 2011. In support of RUN’s commitment to improving policy developments in the regions and strengthening the contributions of member universities to regional development, the Network commissioned this second, complementary, study to investigate the social, cultural and environmental contributions of the RUN member universities to their regions and the nation. Some economic impacts were also described in the study.

In addition to enrolling almost 65,000 internal or multi-modal students each year, RUN member universities enrol approximately 47,000 distance education students living in rural, regional and city locations across all Australian states and territories, and overseas. This study, however, focuses on the contributions of the RUN universities to their regional communities, as defined by their campus and study centre locations in regional and rural Australia.

Internationally validated framework adopted

Utilising the Pascal International Observatory’s framework for benchmarking the regional contributions of universities, the Regional Universities Network (RUN) undertook to assess and report on the member universities’ social, cultural, environmental and economic contributions to their regions and the nation. More information about the methodology used can be found on pages 4-5.

Core functions measured across a range of dimensions

The RUN universities make contributions to their regions through three interrelated core functions: learning and teaching; research and innovation; and service. The study examines the interplay between each of these core functions and a range of “dimensions” categorising different forms of community engagement and impact. The dimensions covered in the study, which cover the main elements of the Pascal framework presented in the context of current policy issues are: Human capital development; regional governance and planning; community

development; health and ageing; arts, culture and sport; environmental sustainability; and industry and business development.

The importance of place and being embedded in a region

The study found that a regional university represents one of the largest and most visible assets in a region and is looked to for “thought leadership”. It coexists with its regional community in closer physical, social and cultural proximity than is the case in capital cities, and shares close interdependencies with other regional organisations.

Universities headquartered in regional Australia are unique in their ability to deliver an integrated and place-based public service to their regions. It is difficult to imagine, for example, how a capital city university operating on a ‘fly-in fly-out’ model of regional educational delivery or research could play an equivalent role in the social, cultural, environmental and economic development of regions.

Interconnectedness of regions and their universities demonstrated

The study found substantial evidence to indicate that the distinctive attributes and needs of their regions have been, and continue to be, highly influential in the selection and development of the universities’ niche areas of expertise. The RUN universities have made strategic decisions to invest in those areas of education and research that resonate with the needs of their regions and equip them to make strong contributions to regional development. To illustrate this, a range of specific examples of “research concentrations” are listed on page 7 of the study.

‘Virtuous cycles’ created

The study findings highlight two important aspects of the research and innovation activities of the RUN universities. Firstly, research undertaken to address regional issues, or research undertaken in regional settings, often leads to innovations in policy and practice that are taken up nationally and internationally. Many of the case studies clearly demonstrate this point. Secondly, research projects undertaken by universities at the three levels (regional, national and international) are mutually reinforcing and cumulative in nature, creating “virtuous cycles” of knowledge generation, knowledge exchange and innovation that produces benefits for the institutions, their regions and the national research and innovation system.

Service activities and knowledge exchange

The study also reveals substantial evidence of the contributions made by the RUN universities to their regions through mutually beneficial service activities and knowledge exchange. These activities benefit regions by providing access to the universities’ physical and intellectual resources, including the academic, technical and management expertise of their staff and students. The activities also deliver benefits to the universities by providing access to networks, information and knowledge that inform institutional agendas and strengthen their education and research functions, building goodwill and enhancing institutional reputations. A wide range of these activities are detailed in the study and accompanying case studies.

Community expectations of regional universities

Consultations with regional stakeholders revealed a clear and strong expectation that regional universities will actively contribute to the regions in which they are based, through an alignment of their education, research and service activities with the distinctive economic, social, cultural and environmental needs of their regions. The study identified many examples of the RUN universities, as brokers, boundary spanners and 'boundary crossers', making significant contributions to community capacity building in their regions. Some of the specific ways this is being done are listed on page 11.

Realising the full potential of regional engagement

The study contains substantive evidence of the RUN universities' positive performance against the dimensions of the Pascal framework. Through distinctive regional engagement processes, the universities are delivering regional and national benefits, and strengthening their academic outcomes. The findings also highlight that there are further opportunities for regional engagement.

It has been shown that the RUN universities have engaged proactively with their regions in shaping their regional agendas and building capacity for effective regional governance and planning, with a virtuous cycle again at play. By building partnerships with regional governing bodies and contributing their knowledge and capacity to regional governance and planning, the universities help build thriving regions. At the same time, thriving regions create an environment in which higher education can also thrive, helping institutions to attract and retain talented staff and students. The strength of this interdependent and reciprocal relationship between regional universities and regional governance is a key factor that distinguishes regional universities from those located in large capital cities.

RUN calls for a new policy position

In conjunction with the publishing of this study and in response to the finding that there are further opportunities for regional engagement by the universities, RUN is also advocating for a new policy position that charts a new, systematic national strategy that allows regional universities to link up their unique contributions with other parties at the centre of facilitating and strengthening sustainable regional development.

The new policy framework would enable regional innovation and development, and skills and workforce planning. RUN also proposes that regional universities should be positioned as regional hubs of knowledge exchange and development through a distributed network leveraging the universities' regional engagement strengths to provide leadership, advice, facilitation and expertise in innovation, knowledge exchange and transfer to ensure that regional programs and services are well developed and supported by a strong evidence base.

About us

The Regional Universities Network (RUN) is an alliance of Australian regional universities committed to making strong contributions to the economic, social, cultural and environmental development of their regions. The members of RUN are CQUniversity, Southern Cross University (SCU), University of Ballarat (UB), University of New England (UNE), University of Southern Queensland (USQ) and University of the Sunshine Coast (USC). All members are headquartered in regional Australia.

Acknowledgement

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