Regional Universities Network (RUN) Submission to the House of Representatives Standing Committee Inquiry into the School to Work Transition

Introduction

The Regional Universities Network (RUN) welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Standing Committee's inquiry into the school to work transition.

Since 2000, higher education enrolments have effectively doubled, extending higher education participation to many students who would not have considered university study as a realistic proposition in previous decades. This has opened up professional job opportunities for many. The growth has been driven, in part, by the introduction of the demand driven student system for university places, whereby universities can enroll as many students as they wish in most courses, by programs such as the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP), designed to increase and support the participation in higher education of students from low SES backgrounds and other equity groups at university, and by broader developments within Australia and internationally. It is therefore essential that institutions adapt to ensure that they support this new cohort to study successfully.

Our submission addresses

- The characteristics of RUN universities and their students.
- How RUN universities are informing and supporting students in relation to post-school education and training (*Opportunities to better inform and support students in relation to post-school education and training, including use of employment outcomes of students who undertake school-based vocational education or post-school tertiary pathways* - ToR 2).
- *Other related matters*, including the impact of various proposed higher education reforms (ToR 3).

With respect to ToR 2, we consider that the best mechanism to inform and support students in relation to post-school education and training is via competent and up-to-date careers advice in schools, and outreach activities from universities (and other tertiary education and training providers) to schools.

Employment outcomes for university graduates are the result of numerous factors. We therefore **do not** support using them to gauge the performance of universities.

RUN universities

Through their teaching and learning, research and innovation, and regional development and service functions, regional universities make a fundamental contribution to regional Australia and the 30 per cent of Australians who live there. Regional universities have made strategic decisions to invest in those areas of education and research that resonate with the needs of their regions and which enable them to make strong contributions to regional development. They help to educate their communities' future professional workforce and enhance the social and cultural amenity of their regions through the contributions of their students, staff and facilities. Sixty to eighty percent of RUN graduates are employed in regional Australia within months of graduating.

RUN comprises six universities with headquarters in regional Australia: CQUniversity, Federation University Australia (Fed Uni), Southern Cross University (SCU), the University of New England (UNE), the University of Southern Queensland (USQ), and the University of the Sunshine Coast (USC). RUN universities play a key role, educating over 112,000 higher education students[1] (about 9 per cent of Australia's total enrolments), employing more than 7,300 staff[2], and managing annual revenues of $1.7 billion and combined assets of $3.6 billion[3]. They deliver services through more than 60 campuses and learning centres, encompassing all states except Tasmania. They are among the leading employers in their communities.

RUN universities have strong connections with their communities and other educational providers including schools and VET. Students in regional and remote Australia move relatively frequently between the VET and HE sectors, reflecting the close relationships which often exist for pathways, articulation and infrastructure-sharing between institutions from both sectors in the regions.

Two RUN universities are dual sector institutions delivering vocational education and training programs to around 17,000 students in addition to higher education programs. Three RUN universities host, or plan to host, university colleges which deliver a range of secondary and post-secondary programs. RUN universities are also major providers of enabling courses which provide to pathways to undergraduate studies.

Compared with major metropolitan universities, the proportion of students at RUN universities who are admitted as traditional year 12 school leavers on the basis of their ATAR score as is relatively low. Many RUN students are admitted on the basis of alternative criteria and articulation pathways, such as vocational qualifications gained as part of secondary or post-secondary education, other higher education study, and relevant work experience.

How RUN universities are informing and supporting students in relation to post-school education and training

---

[1] Department of Education and Training, 2016, Selected Higher Education Student Statistics, 2015
[2] Department of Education and Training, 2016, Selected Higher Education Staff Statistics, 2016
[3] Department of Education and Training, 2016, *Finance 2015, Financial Reports of Higher Education Providers*

RUN universities are committed to improving student access, participation and success. However, there still exists a significant gap in higher education attainment (and Year 12 school completion) between the regions and major cities. RUN universities are playing a leadership role within the sector, both individually and collectively. Individually, each university offers an extensive range of student-focused programs and services.

Outreach activities from universities to schools, such as those funded under the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP), designed to increase and support the participation in higher education of students from low SES backgrounds and other equity groups at university, has assisted both regional students and regional universities. The program has been crucial to informing students about post-school education and training.

Without HEPPP funding, our outreach activities couldn't happen at the same scale. Regional universities are faced with the tyranny of geography in terms of their large student catchment areas – HEPPP funding covers the costs of travel over hundreds of kilometres for staff and students to visit communities, and to bring potential students to university campuses. RUN is pleased that the Government has proposed legislating the HEPPP in the Higher Education Support Legislation Amendment (A More Sustainable, Responsive, and Transparent Higher Education System) Bill 2017.

i.   Addressing the higher education attainment gap in regional Australia

RUN universities are characterised by a relatively high proportion of higher education students from low socio-economic status (SES), regional and remote, Indigenous and first in family backgrounds. Approximately 30 per cent of domestic, undergraduates at RUN universities come from low SES backgrounds, more than half come from regional and remote backgrounds and 3 per cent are Indigenous.

A high proportion of students are mature age and study on a part-time, distance or multi-modal basis. Many RUN universities are significant distance education providers, offering students who are unable to participate in on-campus study with the opportunity to pursue university studies in a flexible manner that accommodates their family, work and other commitments. RUN universities are also leaders in mature age and professional education, providing opportunities for life-long learning and enabling graduates to respond to changing skills needs in the workplace.

RUN universities are playing an important role in helping to address the significant gap in educational attainment that exists between Australia's major cities and its regions. Educational attainment has been improving across Australia in recent years but the proportion of young, working age people with a bachelors' degree or higher, living in regional or remote Australia, remains at about half that for people of a comparable age living in major cities. In 2014, about 15-19 per cent of working age Australians living in regional and remote areas held a bachelor degree or above (there are lower levels of attainment with increasing distance to major cities) compared with around 33 per cent of the population in major cities. Year 12 attainment levels among young, working age people are also significantly higher in major cities at around 80 per cent, compared with around 60 per in regional and remote Australia[4].

Poorer higher educational attainment rates in regional Australia are linked to lower participation and completion rates. There has been extensive research undertaken in recent years to examine the reasons

---

[4] ABS *Education and Work 2015*, 6227 2015

for these disparities. One such study explored the completion rates of equity students at RUN universities[5]. It found that the differences between metropolitan and regional universities are attributable to structural, financial, geographical (e.g. time and cost of distance travel) and employment-related factors that inhibit participation by regional students and which contribute to attrition and delays in apparent completion rates.

ii.   Providing Choices – Colleges, VET offerings and Enabling courses

Careers advice and outreach activities by universities are crucial in helping students understand their options for post-secondary or further education. The provision of student readiness diagnostics is also a useful tool for allowing students and mentors to assess whether preparatory or bridging courses might be a useful step in preparing students for a successful transition to higher education. Specifically-targeted funding for such outreach and preparation activities should be directed towards rural and remote students, whose opportunities to access such resources is much less than that of their metropolitan counterparts.

Better careers advice is needed in schools to provide students with information relevant to today's world. Students need qualifications that will give them transferable and higher level skills that will help them in the range of careers they will participate in throughout their working lives.

Widening participation activities that have been funded under the HEPPP fall into three sequential groups. Firstly outreach activities to schools and community groups to raise awareness of and aspiration for university study. These activities involve establishing relationships with students through their schools and are targeted at students from late primary through to the middle secondary years. The focus of these activities is to demystify university and build confidence that 'people like us' can go to university. These activities involve key influencers: parents / carers and teachers, student role models /mentors and importantly, experiential learning activities. The second group of activities involve those that promote access to university and include pathways on-campus programs, admissions procedures and aimed at promoting enrolment at university. The third group of activities focuses on supporting students once they have accepted an offer and includes scholarships, to increase affordability / relieve some of the (non-HECS related) financial burden.

The nature of the work is built on stable long-term relationships between education providers and their communities. Major change cannot be achieved in a few years.

All RUN universities have significant outreach projects. Some specific projects of note follow (further details and information about specific projects can be provided by individual universities):

- *Opening Doors* and *Choices* projects (USQ) which involve outreach to schools have resulted in increased participant aspiration and awareness levels concerning pathways to higher education.

- *Student experience day* events (USQ) report a 60 per cent rise in interest of previously disinterested participants in attending university and 86 per cent of student participants indicating that event attendance helped them learn about possible career choices.

- *UNIBOUND PROGRAM YEAR 5-9* (SCU). Working closely with partner schools and academic areas of the university the UNIBOUND program provides experiences that were exciting, motivating and empowering, increasing students' access to and understanding of university and associated career pathways. Over 3,645 students from 38 schools (18 primary, 17 high schools and 3 central schools)

---

[5] Nelson, K et al, 2017, *Understanding the completion patterns of equity students in regional universities*
https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/publications/completion-patterns-of-equity-students-in-regional-universities/

across years 5, 6, 7, 8 &9 participated in more than 75 school-based and on-campus activities in 2015.

- *ACCESS4U* Year 11-12 (SCU). Forty-one students participated in 2015, and 60 per cent successfully completed the program with 19 post-access offers made (SCU).

- *Gippsland Access and Participation (GAP) Project* (FedUni) – an integrated and comprehensive program of activities involved secondary maths and science teachers and students from across Gippsland. Teacher feedback on activities is positive, encouraging and reflective. Student feedback indicates greater involvement and awareness.

- *Discord to Harmony* (FedUni) – addressing the challenges of mature aged VET students in partner institutions as they adjust to higher education. An online space was developed to give the students a place to connect with other students, give support, and confidence in tackling the skills required for higher education.

- *Integrated Access and Pathways Strategy* (USC) – involving STEM, non-STEM and Career development activities.

- The *Growing Regional and Agricultural Students in Science (GRASS)* program (UNE) engages teachers and students in target schools from rural, remote and low socioeconomic regions, engendering strong links and widespread participation in the educational access activities. The UNE GRASS program inspires students towards careers in science, and helps develop a greater understanding of the science-based careers supporting agriculture that are available via a tertiary pathway. Analysis has been completed to confirm the students who have completed this UNE GRASS IPS and who then decide to continue studies at UNE are performing at a higher grade point average (GPA) and are making faster progress to completion of their degrees when compared with their peers at the university.

Two RUN universities, CQUniversity and Federation University Australia, are dual sector institutions offering extensive certificate and diploma vocational education and training programs to around 17,000 students in addition to higher education programs.

Three RUN universities host, or plan to host, university colleges which deliver a range of secondary and post-secondary programs e.g. Southern Cross University College offers pathways to success at university for both domestic and international students. Programs include: preparation programs, undergraduate courses and English language courses.

RUN universities are also major providers of enabling courses which are non-award courses which prepares students for general and/or discipline specific university study. A third of Australia's students who undertake enabling programs study at RUN universities.

iii.   Supporting students to complete their studies

The findings and recommendations of the recently completed study involving all RUN universities and CSU and JCU, *Shaping the 21st Century Student Experience at Regional Universities*[6] identified five mechanisms required for student success and made a series of recommendations for institutions and the sector.

RUN universities are conscious of implementing pedagogical and curriculum reforms, which have been shown to enhance student success and the completion of an award. These include:

- Careful design of the first year, crucial in establishing the foundations for success in higher education, including the development of contemporary academic literacies, ensuring threshold skills are developed, and bridging gaps in subject knowledge;
- Peer-assisted learning establishing genuine academic and social support networks for students;
- Pathways through the curriculum that allow successful completion of sub-degree awards;
- Diagnostic learning analytics allowing tailored support to be quickly provided to students at risk of disengaging;
- Mentoring and academic advising programs linked with assessment;
- A focus on employability skills within discipline context, links with industry, professional mentoring, authentic pedagogies and assessment, work integrated leaning, cadet and internships as a required part of all higher education programs (attracts credit).

Employment outcomes

Employment outcomes for university graduates are the result of numerous factors. We therefore do not support using them to gauge the performance of universities.

Employment outcomes of RUN universities are as comparable to, or better than, the university sector average (shown on the grey line in Figure 1):
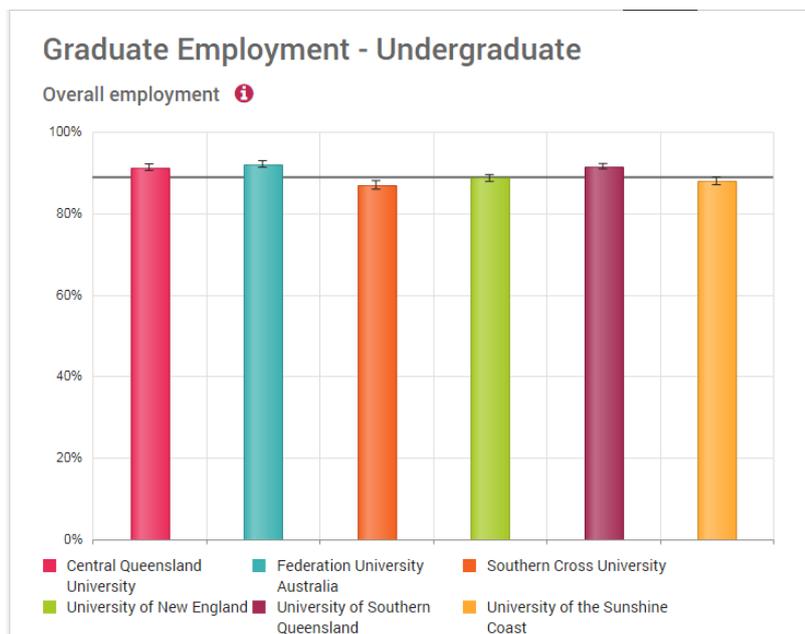

Fig 1. Graduate employment outcomes for RUN universities, compared to the sector average (extract from QILT indicators website https://www.qilt.edu.au/)

---

[6] http://shapingtheregionalstudentexperience.com.au/findings-and-recommendations/

People who study in the regions largely stay in the regions to work. A study undertaken for RUN[7] using Graduate Careers Survey data on the employment location of a graduate approximately four months after graduation, showed that, between 2007-2011, between 60-80 per cent of RUN graduates with Bachelor level qualifications were initially employed in a regional location. The data is shown in Fig. 2:

Fig. 2 Percentage of Bachelor level graduates that were employed in a regional location at the survey census date, 2007-2011. Please note that UB refers to the former University of Ballarat, now Federation University Australia.
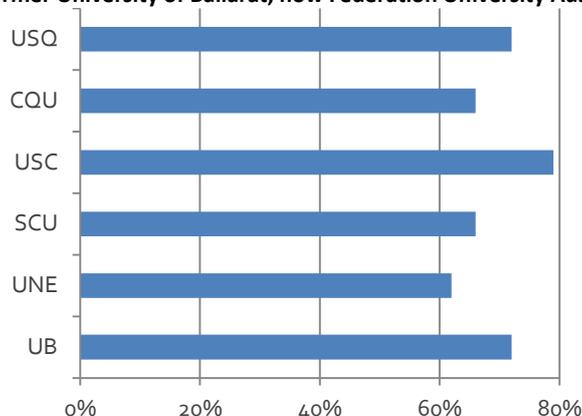
A report by Cadence Economics for Universities Australia has estimated that for every 1000 university graduates entering the workforce 120 new jobs are created for people without a university degree.[8] Regional universities therefore boost regional employment more broadly than just through their graduates.

Hillman and Rothman (2007) referenced in ACER (2011)[9] found that students who leave regional areas to study in an urban institution are unlikely to return – 74 per cent of regional students remain in cities after graduation.

Potential impact of the Government's proposed Higher Education Reforms (ToR3)

RUN is concerned about various aspects of the Government's proposed higher education reforms, contained in the Higher Education Support Legislation Amendment (A More Sustainable, Responsive and Transparent Higher Education System) Bill 2017, and their potential for lowering the participation rate of regional students in higher education.

The efficiency dividend on universities, and performance funding under the Commonwealth Grant Scheme, will negatively impact on the ability of our universities to support students.

RUN is opposed to the proposed efficiency dividend of 2.5 per cent per annum in each of 2018 and 2019 on our institutions as it will cause considerable damage to the ongoing capacity of universities, both regional

---

[7] RUN, 2013, *Economic Impact of the Universities within the Regional Universities Network*, page 10. Available from http://www.run.edu.au/cb_pages/news/Economic_Impact_Study.php.

[8] Cadence Economics, 2016, *The Graduate Effect: Higher Education Spillovers to the Australian Workforce*. Report for Universities Australia. Available from https://www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au/Media-and-Events/commissioned-studies/The-graduate-effect--higher-education-spillovers-to-the-Australian-workforce

[9] ACER (2011) 'Higher education & community benefits: The role of regional provision', Joining the Dots, Research briefing, Vol 1, No. 5, September 2011

and non-regional, to adequately service their communities. The consequent loss of this capacity will have considerable detrimental economic and social impact across Australia.

Regional universities are, proportionally, more reliant on government funding for teaching and learning (around 40 per cent for RUN members), than older, metropolitan universities (e.g. less than 20 per cent for the Group of Eight). The impact of the CGS efficiency dividend and performance funding will therefore be greater for our universities.

We do not support the introduction of performance contingent funding under the CGS as currently outlined as "performance" is not occurring on a level playing field across the sector.

For example, if retention was to be one of the metrics used to measure relative performance, we do not know the mechanism that could take account of the significant differences between students at regional and metropolitan universities. Our research shows that students at regional universities commonly have complex lives and competing priorities. Many of these students are parents, and many have other caring responsibilities. Many need to engage in paid employment whilst studying and experience significant financial pressure. The cost of study materials and travel to university, on top of the usual expenses of living, including sometimes supporting a family while on a reduced income, mean that students may have to make difficult choices about their priorities that other more traditional students do not need to make. This includes withdrawing from studies. Our research shows significant evidence of a phenomenon that is familiar to those who lead and work in regional universities and that is now increasingly evident in the Commonwealth Department of Education and Training statistics – that regional students dip in and out of study and, on average, take longer than metropolitan students to complete their awards.

The potentially perverse consequences resulting from performance measures include further lowering the rate of the participation of regional students in higher education.

We consider that the proposed increase in contributions may deter some students, particularly those who are mature age and/or part-time. Students from these groups make up a large proportion of RUN's student cohort. The decrease of the first threshold for the repayment of student loans from around $52,000 to $42,000 is a significant change and will disproportionately affect low income households, which may also be subject to an increased burden under other budget measures (e.g. the Medicare levy). It will impact some students who are both studying and working part time - financial circumstances have been shown to be a major contributor to students dropping out of university.

In addition to the changes to the arrangements for student loans, students will also be negatively impacted by the efficiency dividend on universities which will constrain us in what we can provide.

The new distribution mechanism for the enabling courses appears to be bureaucratic, potentially costly and may not be transparent.

It is unclear what body or organisation will undertake the tendering process for enabling places and allocate load to universities, or how will the places will be allocated. There will need to be due consideration given to the distribution of places to universities which serve student cohorts that require this pathway, including in the regions.

It is essential that there are adequate enabling places provided, and there is no guarantee that this will be the case. As a result, some students may be channelled into sub-bachelor rather than enabling courses, where the latter might suit them better.

RUN strongly supports the legislation of the Higher Education Participation and Partnership Program (HEPPP) to protect the fund from further cuts, and the uncapping of the per head loading.

Supporting students to complete their studies

A recent completed study involving all RUN universities and CSU and JCU, *Shaping the 21st Century Student Experience at Regional Universities*[10] identified five mechanisms required for student success and made a series of recommendations for institutions and the sector. These included:

Recommendations for institutions

1. Design and enact administrative practices, including admissions pathways, to ensure all students are able to participate fully in the university's formal and informal activities.

2. Intentionally design all curricula and co-curricular activities to activate student motivation, build academic skills, promote discipline and student identity, and develop students' self-efficacy.

3. Design and universally implement curricula and co-curricular interventions to ensure that previous disadvantage and structural risk factors are mitigated through systematic institutional practices that privilege behavioural, cognitive and affective student engagement.

4. Assure quality in learning, teaching and student experience practices, measured by positive student learning outcomes and achievement, and high levels of student satisfaction and well-being.

5. Focus, within discipline curricula, on developing future-proof employability skills, including advanced digital literacy, enterprise skills and entrepreneurship.

6. Minimise the socio-cultural incongruence between communities and higher education institutions, through sustained attention to cultural, structural and practical organisational change.

Advice for the sector

1. Provide access to information about students' movements, over time and among institutions.

2. Review the learner engagement scale in the Student Experience Survey (SES) to ensure the collection of data is aligned with contemporary understandings of student engagement.

3. Review indicators in student and graduate surveys, to ensure the collection of information about students' engagement, experience and skills is aligned with the key findings of this study.

RUN universities are conscious of implementing pedagogical and curriculum reforms, which have been shown to enhance student success and the completion of an award. These include:

- Careful design of the first year, crucial in establishing the foundations for success in higher education, including the development of contemporary academic literacies, ensuring threshold skills are developed, and bridging gaps in subject knowledge;

- Peer-assisted learning establishing genuine academic and social support networks for students;

- Pathways through the curriculum that allow successful completion of sub-degree awards;

- Diagnostic learning analytics allowing tailored support to be quickly provided to students at risk of disengaging;

- Mentoring and academic advising programs linked with assessment;

---

[10] http://shapingtheregionalstudentexperience.com.au/findings-and-recommendations/

- A focus on employability skills within discipline context, links with industry, professional mentoring, authentic pedagogies and assessment, work integrated leaning, cadet and internships as a required part of all higher education programs (attracts credit).

In addition there are a number of non-academic support measures that facilitate successful completion, especially for regional and remote students:

- Enabling education for communities that are under-represented in higher education;

- Fee remission for students who successfully articulate into a degree program;

- High speed broadband wireless connections – to regional and remote Australia.