Regional Universities Network

SMARTER REGIONS, SMARTER AUSTRALIA

POLICY ADVICE FOR AN INCOMING GOVERNMENT

CQU, Southern Cross University, University of Ballarat, University of New England, University of Southern Queensland, University of the Sunshine Coast
Regional Australia plays a key part in Australia’s national prosperity and productivity. Sixty-seven per cent of the nation’s economic assets and productive activity are located outside Australia’s capital cities.

Regional universities enable the best use of regional human capital and resources and contribute to educational opportunities, economic prospects and community capabilities for the 30% of Australians who live in non-metropolitan Australia.

Regional Australia and its universities perform strongly.

The teaching and learning, research and community engagement undertaken by regional universities are essential to the national identity, its prosperity and our future as a nation.

RUN, the Regional Universities Network, an alliance of Australian regional universities, is dedicated to further enhancing the role that regional universities play in contributing to the economic, social, cultural and environmental development of their regions.

The network consists of CQUniversity, Southern Cross University, University of Ballarat, University of New England, University of Southern Queensland, and University of the Sunshine Coast. All institutions are headquartered in, and therefore have a fundamental commitment to, regional Australia.

Regional Australia has relatively low levels of educational attainment. By improving opportunities for people to access higher education, RUN universities help unlock the full human potential of regional Australia. This contributes to Australia achieving the level of graduate skills needed to ensure its international competitiveness.

RUN universities teach more than 100,000 students across 29 campuses or 9% of enrolments in Australian public universities. They educate 25% of Australia’s regional higher education students, 34% of its distance education students, 16% of its low socio-economic students, 15% of its Indigenous students and 32% of its students in enabling courses.

Overall in 2011, RUN contributed $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.

RUN research focuses on pressing regional, national (and indeed global) concerns associated with food and water security, climate change, social cohesion, health and wellbeing, environmental and resource management, and technology because these are the realities confronting regional communities. It is practical and urgent research, much of which would not be undertaken without RUN universities contributions and provides a model for research in regional areas globally.

RUN universities are working with schools and TAFEs demonstrating commitment to working in partnership at a community level for better pathways and educational outcomes for students. RUN universities are also leaders in mature age and professional education, educating people throughout their lives, and contributing to changing skills needs in the workplace.

Distance education can play a significant role in the provisions of regional higher education. It diversifies regional economies, runs counter to the cycles of other regional industries (e.g. agriculture) and reduces pressure on infrastructure in capital cities.

The network is committed to strengthening its institutions, their sustainability, engagement, performance and contribution to regional and national development. It is working towards these goals in a variety of ways, and proposes further initiatives to contribute to realising the full potential of RUN universities and regional Australia.
RUN considers that the economic, social, cultural and environmental development of Australia will be enhanced by further building human, social and cultural capital, employment, entrepreneurship, productivity and industry diversification within Australia’s regions. This will contribute towards an Australia which is healthy and safe, socially culturally and economically prosperous with increased productivity and innovation.

RUN contends that regional universities provide the most direct and cost-effective way of further harnessing talent, developing skills and contributing to knowhow to our regions for the benefit of all Australians. The institutions play a key role in fostering vibrant, diverse and resilient communities.

To further contribute to regional communities and raise the aspiration of students for tertiary education, RUN universities must continue as comprehensive teaching, learning and research institutions. They should be sustainable and engaged. They must continue to give students a choice of qualifications across the broad spectrum of professional and other qualifications needed in regional Australia. Many students should stay in regional Australia for university qualifications and regional institutions need to offer them the opportunities they require.

Regional research investigating resource and environmental management, economic rejuvenation and development, community integration and service provision is the best means of advancing knowledge, sharing insights and building capability in the national interest.

A REGIONAL ACCORD

RUN universities are committed to enhancing their capacity and sustainability and positioning themselves for the future through greater collaboration as a network of like-minded universities.

In a national first for Australia, RUN is committing to a multi-lateral Accord which covers the following:

- making subjects available to students across the RUN universities;
- collaborating to support improved policy development for the regions;
- collaborating in research and research training, including in joint supervision of higher degree by research students;
- collaboration in international activities;
- funding joint appointments;
- offering multi-badged degrees;
- formalising credit transfer arrangements for students between RUN universities;
- making internal staff vacancies and professional development activities available to staff at other RUN universities; and
- consolidation of appropriate support functions across the RUN universities.

While RUN universities are investing to make these goals a reality, structural adjustment funding would facilitate the consolidation of appropriate support functions.

Other areas where RUN institutions are active but where further policy development and initiatives would enhance performance are: regional development; regional teaching and learning outcomes; research; and attracting students to regional universities.
Regional Development

Australia’s regional universities play a key role in developing regional economies, and contributing to the social, cultural and environmental development of the regions.

Regional universities are important to any future regional or industry development strategy. Economic diversification can take regional Australia into new economy challenges including new service industries, niche manufacturing, creative technology, sustainability, green jobs etc.

While the current approach to regional development brings together various players in the regions, RUN calls for a new systematic strategy that puts regional universities at the centre of facilitating and strengthening regional economic development.

Such a strategy would sit outside the current funding arrangements for universities and regions. It would further facilitate bringing universities together and engaging with local communities and industry to fund specific regional partnerships or initiatives to diversify the economic base of regional Australia, develop and maximise the contribution of regional human capital, encourage investment and deploy technology and research.

RUN seeks the development of a comprehensive new strategy, the Regional Development and Innovation Initiative, that recognises the role played by regional universities in facilitating and strengthening regional economic development.
Regional universities are recognised for human capital development through the quality of their teaching and learning outcomes as measured by a range of indicators including career enhancement and student satisfaction. RUN universities are among the leaders in teaching to students with diverse needs.

RUN teaching programs demonstrably meet regional needs, assist regional populations, engage with regional industries, and contribute to regional community wellbeing. Regional loading, paid to higher education providers in recognition of the cost of providing places at regional campuses, is important in allowing regional universities to effectively deliver higher education in the regions.

The result is that 66% of those trained in regional universities find employment in regional localities, thereby investing professional skills, qualifications and knowhow to regional Australia. This outcome represents fundamental ‘value adding’ and capacity building for the nation.

Such outcomes are possible only because regional universities understand, are engaged with and relate to regional communities. They have pioneered higher education access schemes that enable low socio-economic status, regional or remote students, first-in-family, mature aged and Indigenous students to participate and succeed at university. They provide programs with input from local industries, consumers and communities that target local and regional skill needs. They are leaders in distance education.

Higher education at RUN universities transforms lives. This is why RUN institutions are so focused on judging ‘education quality’ on ‘outputs’ or ‘outcomes’ that measure the end product of tertiary education programs rather than ‘inputs’ that set eligibility criteria for entrance to university (such as ATAR scores which provide the basis on which most school leavers, but not the majority of students, are admitted to university).

RUN supports collaboration among institutions in teaching and learning, particularly in areas where there is regional or national need (e.g. in mathematics, science and health), and where the critical mass of students across two or more regional universities provides greater efficiencies to offer courses of study. Through its Accord, RUN supports making subjects available to students across its universities, formalising credit transfer arrangements for students between its universities, and offering multi-badged degrees.

Further initiatives could enhance collaborative partnerships between regional institutions across teaching and learning.
Attracting Students to Regional Universities

Building student numbers at regional universities increases the human capital and economic productivity of the regions and facilitates regional development.

Many of RUN’s universities are significantly growing domestic student numbers. New campuses are expanding, and new courses tailored for regional needs in high demand areas such as health and engineering are being rolled out.

For many students, RUN universities represent the only option for higher education. It is in the national interest to get these students to university in the regions.

RUN supports further incentives to encourage regional students to study at regional universities and to potentially attract metropolitan students to the institutions. Such policies would increase the pool of skilled professionals to work in regional Australia. They would also ease demand on key infrastructure, such as student accommodation.

RUN supports incentives to encourage students to study at regional universities, such as regional university scholarships and allowing HECS-HELP loans to cover regional accommodation costs.

Continuing to attract Indigenous students to RUN universities and increase participation will further build human capital in the regions. RUN universities support dedicated, university scholarships for Indigenous students to attend regional universities.

Initiatives such as the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program are key to aspiration building for students in the regions.

Year 12 completions in regional Australia are 20% less than in capital cities. Lifting Year 12 completion rates will increase participation at regional universities. Initiatives to target regional schools through linkages with regional universities assist in building human capital in the regions.

RUN supports the targeting of Year 12 students to lift the completion rate for university eligible students.

Affordable and reliable high speed internet access must be available to students. Distance education is a sophisticated service industry exported from regional Australia to around the nation and more widely. Some of RUN’s institutions pioneered distance learning - in 2010 RUN institutions delivered courses to 34% of all distance students.
RUN supports greater international student enrolment in regional universities. Such students diversify regional communities, and facilitate and enrich cultural development. They also provide students in disciplines not necessarily in demand from domestic students who can potentially fill areas of skills shortage in the regions.

Increasing student engagement and exchange with Asia has been proposed in the Government’s ‘Australia in the Asian Century’ report, and announcement of the AsiaBound scheme to facilitate university study in Asia by Australian students. The Opposition has advocated a new Colombo plan which would encourage two-way student-staff exchanges with the Asia-Pacific.

RUN calls for implementation of incentives to enhance international student recruitment to regional campuses and implementation of programs to facilitate university study by Australian students in Asia including:

- Providing additional bonus points to students towards Australian residency for attending regional campuses, particularly for those studying in areas of regional skills need;
- Extending the work rights of international students who study in non-metropolitan locations (RUN, for example, supports provision of an extra year on completion of undergraduate or post-graduate study);
- Providing work rights to students who have completed a bachelors or masters at a regional campus regardless of the duration of study;
- Implementation of a 21st century plan for the Asia-Pacific which would act to encourage two-way student and staff exchanges from regional Australian universities to Asia-Pacific universities.

RUN members are strategically engaged with research. Research is a key part of being a university - without this, many benefits would be lost to regional Australia. Research at RUN institutions attracts quality academics, builds institutional quality and capacity, including in teaching and learning, is essential for the training of research students, creates a pool of research-trained professionals, and supports and contributes to regional industries and commercial activities. It builds inter-regional, national and international knowledge and information networks. The impact of research undertaken by regional universities on the regions is significant. It contributes regional productivity and innovation.

RUN universities are increasing their collaboration in research, including with the formation of a Regional Development Network across areas such as:
- economic development;
- enterprise and innovation;
- environment and sustainability;
- health and wellbeing;
- social impacts and education.

RUN institutions are strategically growing their research effort to maximise their contribution to research and innovation in regional Australia. Results from the Excellence in Research in Australia 2012 assessment show that RUN universities undertake research of well above, above, and at world standard in a range of fields of strategic importance, including geochemistry, forestry sciences, crop and pasture production, agriculture and land management, zoology, biological sciences, mathematics, law, policy and administration, health and clinical science and human movement.

The universities are relatively young and the research effort is increasing significantly. Funding invested in research will be highly productive, focused and yield a high return.

RUN is therefore seeking the continuation of programs and new initiatives to build the research and research training capacity of the network universities. It is committed to continuing and strengthening higher degree by research training at its universities to enhance innovation and research in regional Australia.

RUN supports continuation of the Collaborative Research Networks program beyond 2015 to further build research capacity in our institutions and to enable them to undertake regionally, nationally and internationally relevant research and research training.

RUN calls for development of an impact measure of research and community engagement and supports the further use of Excellence in Research for Australia results in the research block grants only with the inclusion of an impact measure.

RUN is committed to strengthening higher degree by research training in regional Australia.
Regional development, quality teaching and learning as measured by outputs, enhancement of the research effort and increased student recruitment to regional institutions are key policy themes advocated by RUN. Adoption of RUN policies will build regional strength for national success.

**The Policy Plan is:**

1. RUN calls for a new structural adjustment fund to facilitate consolidation of appropriate support functions across regional universities.

2. RUN seeks the development of a comprehensive new strategy, the Regional Development and Innovation Initiative, that recognises the role played by regional universities in facilitating and strengthening regional economic development.

3. RUN proposes that the value of teaching and learning should be measured by meeting agreed outcomes as a result of education.

4. RUN calls for initiatives and incentives which facilitate partnerships among regional universities in teaching and learning, including in areas of national and regional need.

5. RUN supports incentives to attract students, including urban students, to regional universities. This would include regional university scholarships, including dedicated scholarships for Indigenous students, and allowing HECS-HELP loans to cover regional accommodation costs making regional universities more accessible to students and increasing the pool of human capital in the regions.

6. RUN calls for the development of a Regional University-Regional High School Partnership and Linkage initiative to improve the Year 12 completion rates for university-eligible students in regional communities.

7. RUN supports initiatives to keep students online and accessing the internet via reliable, high speed connections.

8. RUN calls for incentives to enhance international student recruitment to regional universities including:
   - Providing bonus points to students towards Australian residency for attending regional campuses, particularly for those studying in areas of regional skills need;
   - Extending the work rights of international students who study in non-metropolitan locations (RUN, for example, supports provision of an extra year on completion of undergraduate or post-graduate study);
   - Providing work rights to students who have completed a bachelors or masters at a regional campus regardless of the duration of study;
   - Implementation of a 21st century plan for the Asia-Pacific which would act to encourage two-way student and staff exchanges from regional Australian universities to Asia-Pacific universities.

9. RUN supports continuation of the Collaborative Research Networks program beyond 2015 to further build research capacity in our institutions and to enable them to undertake regionally relevant research and research training.

10. RUN calls for development of an impact measure of research and community engagement and supports the further use of Excellence in Research for Australia results in the research block grants only with the inclusion of an impact measure.

11. RUN is committed to strengthening higher degree by research training in regional Australia.