

Regional Universities Network (RUN) – Regional Development Policy Position

Australia’s regional universities play a key role nationally in developing regional economies, and contributing to social, cultural and environmental development of the regions. As public institutions, this is their civic mission and regional development is “core business” rather than an add-on to learning, teaching and research functions.

Regional universities will be crucial for any future regional or industry development strategy for Australia. Economic diversification would pave the way for regional Australia to open up new economic activities including new service industries, niche manufacturing, creative technology, sustainability and green jobs etc.

While the current approach to regional development brings together various players in the regions, it would be enhanced by the injection of more regionally based, professional expertise.

The Regional Universities Network (RUN) universities are ideally placed to contribute in this way. They are immersed in the regional community on a day-to-day basis and have a deep understanding of regional contexts and issues.

The network calls for a new, systematic national 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, organisations 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.

Two complementary approaches are advocated which would maximise, through enhanced engagement, the alignment of RUN teaching, research and service/civic engagement effort with other regional strategies to enhance regional innovation and development, and skills and workforce planning.

1) University representation on regional committees

Regional committees should have a broad membership of individuals with corporate knowledge and expertise from key stakeholder groups including:

- regional universities;
- industry;
- local government;
- vocational education providers;
- schools;
- health providers,
- social development organisations; and
- environmental organisations.

It is critical that regional communities and their universities are at the heart of their skills and workforce development solutions, as well as regional development more broadly. The overwhelming majority of graduates from regional universities work in the regions. Among other functions, universities have an important role to play in ensuring that teaching and learning in regions is aligned with regional employment and workforce development. Representation from universities and other key stakeholders on regional committees would enable, among other things, the better coordination of the workforce at a regional level to increase the effectiveness of any strategy and the efficiency of relevant resource allocation.

The broader expertise of the universities would also be harnessed by the regional committees through the following initiative:

2) National Network for Regional Innovation and Engagement (NRIE)

A virtual network, NRIE, should be established to:

- provide leadership, including advice, facilitation, and expertise in innovation, knowledge exchange, research translation and regional development to regional committees and other stakeholders to ensure the projects proposed are well developed, supported by a strong evidence base, outcome focussed, linked to the broader policy agenda and represent value for money.

- The network would achieve these objectives by:
 - Hosting regional development “knowledge exchange” officers, based at each of RUN’s six universities, who would work with stakeholders (e.g. regional committees, industry groups, local councils, schools, TAFEs, health providers, Commonwealth and State departments) to deliver improved project management, improved knowledge transfer and other relevant outcomes;
 - hosting local micro-businesses “in-house” to give these companies direct access to local expertise to assist them to prosper and grow; and
 - developing a technological platform that would integrate spatial knowledge and policy into an easily accessible information tool, and making this freely available to stakeholders and the community.

The strategy would sit outside the current funding arrangements for universities and regions.

It would be a multi-million dollar project with funding provided by the Commonwealth Regional Development/Infrastructure portfolio over three years. The universities would make an “in-kind” contribution.

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