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## The Regional Universities Network calls for infrastructure funding

As the often misquoted line from the 1989 film *Field of Dreams* goes: “build it and they will come”. In the case of Australia’s regional universities, this line – misquoted or not – is an inescapable truth.

Built they were, and come they did. Students, academics, administrators and industry partners are some of those that have come to create vibrant and engaging regional university campuses, that serve as far more than just a collection of buildings.

The critical importance of regional universities to their communities and the role regional communities will play in Australia’s post-Covid recovery is often overlooked, but not by regional Australians.

Simply put, regional universities are not “nice to have”, they are essential to the regional communities in which they operate.

Australia’s regional universities are fields of dreams for regional, remote and rural Australians. They change the lives of Australians and open doors that otherwise would have been closed.

Since 2001, the Regional University Network universities have seen more than 350,000 students graduate, most of whom have been from non-traditional university backgrounds including many who were first-in-family or low socio-economic students.

Regional universities are often the only option for regional, remote and rural students who have prior work, or life commitments, meaning relocating to a metropolitan location is impractical.

To support students, regional universities have become big regional employers, bringing highly skilled labour forces to the regions. Regional universities ensure more people stay in the regions for their training, as well as their post-graduation lives.

It is important to note regional graduates do not just fill jobs, they create jobs and businesses, and establish families and communities, which enrich regional communities. New and expanding industries regularly choose their location based on the supply of highly skilled local graduates, access to cutting-edge research and new knowledge, and the opportunity to take advantage of student placements, emerging technologies, staff training and modern infrastructure.

Regional universities are important anchor organisations that drive local economies, and are also critical partners in regional community activities, supporting and collaborating with

regional communities and industry to provide benefit to all Australians.

Despite the overwhelming benefit regional universities provide to Australia, delivering world-class education, research and training in thin, regional markets is complex and costly. Higher costs and staff shortages, distances and remoteness, delivering across multiple campuses, a lack of economies-of-scale, and many other challenges are “business-as-usual” for regional universities, but all of them place increased pressure on regional university finances. This is before consideration of the impact Covid has had on university finances.

There is a lot of historically embedded inequality within regions of Australia and Australia’s higher education system is no different. Younger, regional focused universities have found themselves at a resource disadvantage compared to metropolitan universities. With changing regional migration patterns, resulting in more Australians moving to regional Australia, it has never been more important to support Australia’s regions and Australia’s regional universities.

One key element of support is dedicated university infrastructure funding. Since the closure of the Education Investment Fund, infrastructure funding for the higher education sector in Australia has been scarce and ad hoc. A forward-looking, coordinated approach to investing in the sector is needed to ensure competing national, regional and local priorities are managed appropriately and universities are able to access the infrastructure required to remain world class educational establishments that support their communities. Infrastructure funding is vital to ensuring that regional Australia and regional communities are not left behind their metropolitan counterparts.

The Australian government recognises this through creating region-specific funds such as the Building Better Regions Fund (BBRF), which provides for local government and the not-for-profit sector to bid for funds to improve the resilience and economic prospects of regional communities. Since mid-2020, more than \$1.25bn in infrastructure funding has been delivered or committed through the BBRF, yet regional universities – despite being not-for-profit organisations, and being key players in regional economies – have been explicitly excluded from the BBRF, despite the abolition of any other dedicated university infrastructure funding.

Such narrow policy thinking risks undermining the decades of work that regional universities have undertaken to improve the educational outcomes of regional, rural and remote Australians and risks creating a two-tiered higher education system where opportunities for regional, rural and remote Australians become even more sparse due to the location of their residence.

Reducing the ability of regional universities to invest in infrastructure risks handicapping the regions at a time when regional economic development has never been more important to Australia’s post-pandemic economic recovery. With increasing regional populations, enhanced regional economic development through key infrastructure in partnership with regional universities is vital to ensure future generations of regional Australians can pursue their dreams of higher education and highly skilled jobs.

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