

25 February 2022

The Regional Universities Network (RUN) welcomes the opportunity to comment on the International Student Diversity at Australian Universities discussion paper, February 2022.

RUN is a national collaborative group of seven regional Australian universities: Charles Sturt University, CQUniversity Australia, Federation University Australia, Southern Cross University, University of New England, University of Southern Queensland, and University of the Sunshine Coast. This RUN submission does not prohibit RUN universities from making their own submissions addressing in detail any specific issues they wish to explore with the discussion paper. It should be noted that RUN is supportive of the submission from Universities Australia.

Diversification of international student cohorts at national, institution, and field of study levels

The majority if not all of Australia's universities have diversification strategies in place which are appropriate to their institutional contexts, goals and operational strategies. This means that some universities will have a focus on certain markets or segments of an international student population, be that at undergraduate or postgraduate level, or particular subjects. As much as diversification strategies are in place, it is important to understand that the international student market is just that, a market. This means that international students themselves ultimately decide where they will study, at what level and in what discipline to meet their life and career goals. This decision is influenced by a multitude of factors. For example, in excess of 80 per cent of international students return to their home country after the completion of their post study work rights in Australia, which suggests that international students are choosing degrees that would increase their employability in their home country. This is also an important decision factor for domestic students in choosing their field of study, which also impacts upon domestic student diversity. Because of market forces and the importance of international student choices and decision making, it is imperative that the guidelines suggested in this paper remain as guidelines. RUN would also like to note that there are risks to interrogating data at increasingly detailed levels as particular analysis could result in findings that do not hold at an institutional level. For instance, multi-campus universities will have increasingly different campus student profiles.

The benefits of a diverse international student cohort and the benefits to universities

RUN universities do not disagree that students and universities benefit from a diverse range of students. A key element of that is ensuring that student learning environments remain diverse on a variety of student characteristics. Despite this, universities operate in a market environment and students, both domestic and international, chose universities for a variety of needs. There is no optimal makeup of student cohorts, and institutions, like their students, should be free to make decisions that align with their priorities. As such, there will never be a one-size fits all solution to classroom, subject or even institutional diversity. Similarly, the choices that international students make, combined with institutional choices will differ on a country-by-country basis and what works for one country at a collective level, may not necessarily work for another country. It would be remiss to think that study decisions are the sole factors for student choices. The attractiveness of a country, the appeal of various postgraduation work rights, the cost of study, along with any family, community or cultural ties are all important factors in the decision-making process of students.

Policy measures

RUN is fully supportive of increased transparency measures across the sector, but it is important that any data associated with this are presented in a meaningful value adding way. We would also note that there could be increased Government assistance in assuring business resilience, including greater coherence between and across Government and Departments. It is important to understand that the Government plays a vital role in the promotion of Australia's higher education sector, and at present this largely focusses on markets which have been historically strong for student recruitment, rather than focussing on new or emerging markets. The Department's Education Counsellors for instance, while incredibly useful, are largely focussed on existing markets with large potential student pools which may lead to less diverse international student populations.