

31 March 2023

The Regional Universities Network (RUN) welcomes the opportunity to comment on the paper: *Developing Australia's Science and Research Priorities and National Science Statement – a National Conversation Starter*.

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.

RUN supports the concept of the national science and research priorities and firmly believe that the principles that have been outlined are fundamentally correct to shape Australia's priorities. RUN believes that the refreshed priorities need to include a clear statement regarding the contribution of First Nations knowledge to the science and research priorities.

While RUN supports the priorities, we believe it would be useful to consider the impact the existing priorities have had on Australia's science and research ecosystem. Noting that one of the principles for the refreshed science and research priorities is informing investment, and that "the priorities will signal areas the Australian Government considers important" and will "aim to encourage activity and growth in these areas" it is strongly recommended for the existing priorities to be reviewed so lessons about their effectiveness can be incorporated into the refresh.

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## **1. What are Australia's greatest:**

### **a) Challenges that science could help address?**

RUN unanimously endorse Australia's climate targets and efforts to transition to a net zero economy by 2050, noting that regional Australia hosts the majority share of the nation's natural assets, biodiversity, and renewable energy potential. Similarly, regional Australia hosts a major share of the nation's fossil fuel assets and workforces, emission-intensive industries, and loss of habitats and biodiversity. As such, regional Australia is likely to wear the brunt of environmental and economic destruction linked to Australia's changing climate and could well face greater industrial/economic disruptions from the transition to net zero by 2050 than metropolitan areas.

### **b) Opportunities we should seize?**

Regional universities are eager to meet these challenges, guided by our distinct social charter that directs our teaching and research activities towards the needs of our respective communities. To be effective in meeting these challenges however, the ongoing sustainability of our regional universities as accessible, equitable, and high-quality providers of teaching and innovative research is crucial. Unfortunately, regional universities simply do not enjoy the same wealth of surpluses and resources that many metropolitan universities deployed to sustain themselves against the preceding years of the pandemic and unfavourable higher education policy and funding settings. Therefore, it is essential that Australia seize the opportunity to ensure a more equal distribution of science and research infrastructure, funding and opportunities across all of Australia. Noting the concentration of potential economic disruption to Australia's regions, it is vital that Australia's science and research priorities are shared by and provide opportunities for all Australians.

### **c) Strengths we should maintain or build?**

Regional Australia and its universities must play a lead role in reshaping Australia's industries, technologies, and workforces for the transition to a 'green economy' and net zero emissions by 2050. While RUN acknowledges the tremendous opportunities for many regional communities that

may present from the transition to a net-zero economy, we also recognise the legitimate concern that these opportunities may not be evenly distributed across Australia.

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## **2. Does Australia have the capability and capacity needed to address these challenges, opportunities, and strengths? If not, how could we build on this?**

RUN calls for the establishment of a dedicated regional research fund that seeks to build regional Australia's understanding of, and ability to respond to, the opportunities and challenges of the net zero energy transition. This research would not only drive capacity for regional innovation and resilience, but also inform the teaching and training of transitioning regional workforces. RUN supports policies that enable increased access to universities, especially for students from traditionally underrepresented cohorts.

RUN universities host many highly successful and collaborative research clusters which are recognised as performing at, above or well above world standard in multiple key research areas. RUN research efforts and their subsequent impacts are typically targeted and highly applied to the unique social, industrial, and cultural needs of their respective regions.

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## **3. Are the principles the right principles to shape the priorities**

RUN is supportive of the 7 principles that have been designed to guide discussion on Australia's Science and Research priorities and the National Science statement. In particular, the first principal, "be community-informed" is a fundamental approach for RUN institutions and drives research activities across regional and remote communities.