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INTERIM UNIVERSITY ACCORD REPORT DELIVERS HOPE FOR REGIONAL AUSTRALIA

Regional communities hoping for a major reform of Australia’s city-centric higher education ecosystem can be encouraged by key ideas proposed by the Australian Universities Accord Panel’s interim report.

The Regional Universities Network (RUN) said the Panel clearly recognises the pivotal role of regional universities and is considering a variety of reforms to bolster outcomes for the regions.

In welcoming the release of the report, RUN Chair Professor Nick Klomp said it was pleasing to see the views of regional students, communities, and their universities reflected in the Panel’s initial considerations.

“Often with tertiary reforms, regional universities are expected to bend to the shape of metropolitan-centric policy landscapes. Today’s report, however, signals a departure from the one-size-fits-all approach and actually asks questions about how to build a system that services the needs of all Australians,” Professor Klomp said.

“We welcome the report’s theme of ‘*Skills growth through greater equity*’, as this is a tenet the regional university sector has embraced for decades, and it’s a great starting point for the sorts of reforms we want to see.

“Perhaps the most encouraging signal is the consideration given to RUN’s proposal to establish a universal service obligation based on the principle that all Australians should enjoy the same access to higher education as a fundamental right.

“RUN universities host the highest rates of underrepresented student cohorts in the nation, and as a result, we are poised to play an important role in growing our sovereign skill base through major equity endeavours.

“RUN also believes the universal learning entitlement, which builds upon the concept of the universal service obligation, will have a profound, intergenerational ripple effect upon regional Australian communities, and will bring us closer to parity with the world-leading tertiary education outcomes seen in metropolitan Australia.

“As a highly advanced economy, Australia can and must ensure regional Australians have comparable access to higher education opportunities, attainment, infrastructure, research, and globalised classrooms and the Interim report is a promising first step in ensuring this occurs,” Professor Klomp said.

RUN also welcomes the immediate considerations outlined in the report that are designed to enhance opportunity, equity and certainty within the system, namely:

- The establishment of new Tertiary Study Hubs.
- Removal of the rule that students must pass 50 per cent of their subjects in order to retain HELP eligibility.
- Demand-driven, Commonwealth-supported places for all First Nations students seeking a university education regardless of location.
- Extension of the Maximum Basic Grant Amount funding arrangements (which guarantee funding to universities up to the level of their student caps) for two more years, and:
- Exploring university governance arrangements to ensure greater student and staff wellbeing.

While the Interim Report contains a range of big ideas that RUN will consider and discuss with the government, these ideas should not distract Australia's focus on addressing the immediate needs of regional universities. Specific policy highlights provided within the Interim Report and supported in-principle by RUN include:

- A student-centred, needs based funding model for student support.
- Improving the affordability of study and cost-of-living pressures for students.
- Closer collaborations between universities, schools and the VET sector.
- Establishment of a Tertiary Education Commission.
- An increased focus on mission-based compacts and possible mission-based funding.
- Ongoing work to ensure the HECS/HELP system remains equitable and fit for purpose into the future.

RUN looks forward to a continuation of its productive dialogue with the Accord Panel – as well as the Department and political stakeholders – over the six-week consultation period and the eventual implementation of many of the report's considerations.

RUN's full submission to the Higher Education Accord Panel can be accessed [here](#).

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