



SUBMISSION REGARDING THE HIGHER EDUCATION SUPPORT AMENDMENT (RESPONSE TO THE AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITIES ACCORD INTERIM REPORT) BILL 2023.

25 AUGUST 2023

ABOUT REGIONAL UNIVERSITIES NETWORK

The Regional Universities Network (RUN) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission regarding the Higher Education Support Amendment (Response to the Australian Universities Accord Interim Report) Bill 2023.

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 submission reflects the positions of RUN institutions, and in doing so, also aims to represent the views of those students and communities which RUN universities serve; the one-third of Australians who live outside of metropolitan centres in Regional, Rural and Remote locations.



OVERVIEW

At a broad level, RUN support this Bill, especially the focus on increasing the educational opportunities, tertiary education access rates and participation rates for Indigenous Australians.

RUN, however, has concerns over the timing of the implementation of this Bill, especially Part 2 – Supporting students to succeed. RUN recommend the implementation of these clauses be delayed until the Guidelines and their impact can be more fully assessed and the impact upon universities is better understood.

RUN also recommends considering which aspects of student support measures would be best placed inside of the Bill versus which to include in Guidelines to best achieving the policy intentions of the Bill.

RUN supports the submission made by Universities Australia.

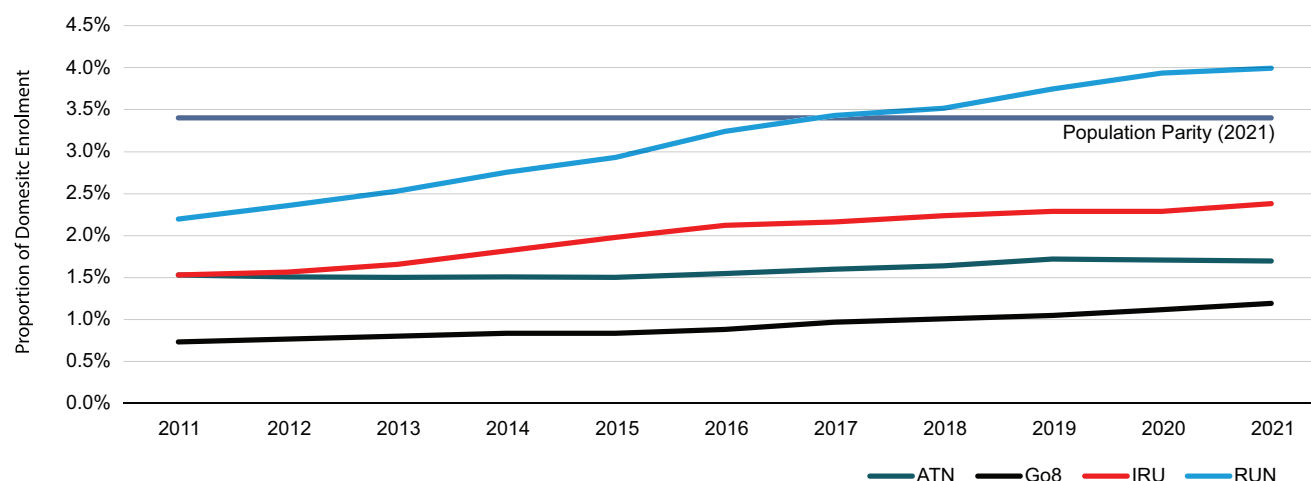
For further information please
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PART ONE – INDIGENOUS STUDENTS

Increasing the educational opportunities, access rates and participation rates for Indigenous Australians is strongly supported by RUN. Indigenous Australians are one of many underrepresented student cohorts in Australia’s higher education ecosystem.

RUN universities have, and continue to enrol the nation’s highest numbers and possess the highest proportions of Indigenous enrolments. Approximately one in every four Indigenous undergraduate students in Australia today is studying at a RUN university. As displayed below in Figure 1., RUN is the only network of Australian universities which exceed population parity for Indigenous rates of education participation, having doubled our Indigenous enrolments over the last decade. Regional universities are proud to have played such a key role in Indigenous student enrolments more than doubling from 2010 to 2021.

Figure 1. Proportion of Domestic Indigenous Enrolments by University Network^{1,2}



RUN is aware however, that simply enrolling students and receiving a Commonwealth Supported Place, while a positive first step, will not solve the issue of educational participation and completion. Ensuring institutions receive adequate funding to conduct vital outreach and aspiration raising activities, as well as supporting universities to provide additional student support will be essential in increasing student participation and success.

Additionally, there are a broad range of issues to address to improve the tertiary participation, access, and completion rates of Indigenous Australians, across the entire education system. For example, the rates of year 12 attainment need to be significantly addressed, with the gap in apparent retention rates from year 10 to year 12 between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and non-Indigenous students having grown to the largest amount since 2014; a gap of 24 percentage points.³

¹ Department of Education, Higher Education Statistics, Equity Statistics, accessed at: <https://www.education.gov.au/higher-education-statistics/student-data>, accessed 23 August 2023

² Department of Education, Australian Universities Accord Interim Report 2023, accessed at: <https://www.education.gov.au/australian-universities-accord/resources/accord-interim-report>, accessed 23 August 2023

³ Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, National Report on Schooling in Australia 2022, Chapter 4: Enrolment and Attendance accessed at: https://dataandreporting.blob.core.windows.net/anrdataportal/ANR-Documents/ANR2022/nationalreportonschoolinginaustralia_2022_Chapter4.pdf

Without improvement in school outcomes, closing the tertiary attainment gap will simply not be possible. Further work will also be required across all educational providers to raise aspiration as well as improving pre-tertiary educational attainment.

RUN support the expansion of the demand driven system to all Indigenous Australians, removing any and all potential barriers to Indigenous Australians from engaging and partaking in higher education.

PART TWO – SUPPORTING STUDENTS TO SUCCEED

RUN believes that universities should and must support students to succeed at university. Further, RUN agrees that the 50 per cent rule was creating unintended consequences. However, RUN is cautious about the proposed amendments to the Higher Education Support Act as outlined in this Bill.

First and foremost, RUN is concerned that vital elements of this Bill are being placed in the Guidelines. Placing specific information in the Act, rather than in the Guidelines will provide universities, students and the Department of Education with additional certainty and surety. There is a real risk that putting the measures to which universities will be held accountable in the Guidelines could result in the measures being changed to suit political need rather than driving the policy reform they seek to achieve.

There is a further issue with the timing of the Bill and the Guidelines. At present, a discussion paper on the Guidelines has only just been released for comment. Given the proposed Guidelines remain in the early stages of consultation, RUN believes passing the Bill before the consultation process of the Guidelines is complete is poor process and it is difficult to support the passing of the Bill when so much uncertainty about the particulars of the Guidelines remains.

RUN is also concerned that, as currently drafted, Section 19-43 would enter into force immediately upon receiving Royal Assent. This will not allow universities enough time to develop, implement and then report on new measures that have been put in place to support students. While universities have a range of existing supporting mechanisms in place, the Guidelines suggest additional supports and subsequent reporting will be required. This will take time for institutions to understand, implement and collect the requisite data for compliance with the Bill. RUN therefore recommend considering an amendment to this section that would bring the provision into force from 1 January 2024. This will allow universities to understand their obligations under the new policy more fully, and to make any necessary changes as required to enhance and ensure the supporting of student success.

