

# Response to the Australian Universities Accord Interim Report

1 SEPTEMBER 2023



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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY**

The members of the Regional University Network acknowledge the diversity of Traditional Custodians of the lands upon which we live and work. We pay our respects to the Elders past, present and emerging, for they hold the memories, the traditions, the culture and hopes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples across Australia. A better understanding and respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and knowledges develops an enriched appreciation of Australia's heritage and can lead to reconciliation. This is essential to the maturity of Australia as a nation and fundamental to the development of an Australian identity.

# Cover letter

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To Professor Mary O'Kane,

On behalf of the students, communities and most universities of regional Australia, I provide the following response to the Australian Universities Accord Interim Report from the Regional Universities Network (RUN).

Regional Australia hosts a tremendous quantum of stored skill and innovation potential, currently unrealised by historically lower levels of participation in higher education and diminished access to tertiary opportunities. As the Interim Report rightly acknowledges, unlocking the unmet skill and innovation potential of regional cohorts (and other traditionally underrepresented groups) must become an essential focus in meeting Australia's future skills needs and positioning our national economy for the ongoing prosperity of ensuing generations.

Metropolitan Australians enjoy access to a rich choice of world-leading institutions, state-of-the-art facilities, well-trodden pathways to research-training and extraordinary research infrastructure. As a result, they have achieved strong tertiary attainment rates. Metropolitan universities are capable of operating at a scale that enables excellent tertiary experiences for students, and ensures their communities have full access to the benefits of Australia's world-leading, publicly funded university system.

However, such access to the rich dividends of our publicly funded tertiary system is simply not replicated in the regions, where one-third of all Australians live. RUN argues that an inequity between student groups (i.e., traditional and underrepresented cohorts), and an inequity between institutions (i.e., scaled metropolitan institutions and subscale regional institutions) has been allowed to grow in Australia's university system over many years, and across successive Governments. In regional Australia, this manifests as lower levels of tertiary attainment, diminished choice in offerings, inconsistent access to facilities and opportunities, limited research capabilities, and a legacy of perpetual 'brain drain' of young regional talent relocating to the cities for study each year, often never returning.

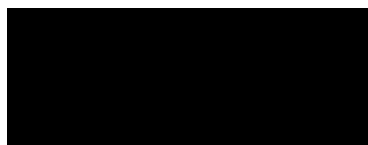
It is now clearly within the national interest to attempt a genuine replication of metropolitan Australia's tertiary accomplishments in regional Australia, not only on equity grounds, but in order to meet Australia's future skills needs. Doing so requires an acknowledgement that regional cohorts often have different (and more complex) support needs, and their chosen institutions need to have the opportunity to operate equitably and sustainably regardless of their location.



Australia's regions host many world-class universities generating vitally important benefits in the regional communities they serve through applied research, community engagement, and teaching/learning endeavours that specialise in successful outcomes for underrepresented cohorts. Regional universities will need to play a leading role in meeting the many equity objectives articulated by the Interim Report; however a reimagined and differentiated approach to policy setting is required for regional universities to meet equity objectives more effectively. These matters are the focus of RUN's response to the Interim Report.

RUN asserts that the Accord process should establish a framework and mechanisms for long-term support of regional universities, alongside specific timeframes and performance indicators. This can be achieved through genuine consultation and long-term commitments.

I provide to you and the Accord Panel this submission from RUN in response to the Interim Report, and I look forward to the opportunity to contribute further to this important process.



**Professor Nick Klomp**  
**Chair, Regional Universities Network**

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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.

The importance of greater equity within our higher education system is at the heart of the Australian Universities Accord Interim Report (the Interim Report). This focus is shared by RUN members who firmly believe in the fundamental principle that meeting Australia's future skills needs can only be achieved by unlocking greater participation from underrepresented Australians. Increased student equity will be the direct result of increased institutional equity for the betterment of all aspects of Australian society.

Strong regional universities are vital to unlocking stores of skill potential from students traditionally underrepresented in higher education. RUN leads the sector in underrepresented student access, participation, and attainment, and services communities that host some of the most educationally underrepresented groups and the lowest shares of tertiary attainment in Australia. RUN members understand the unique needs and characteristics of equity cohorts, and are well practiced at negotiating the complexities of supporting these cohorts to successful completion, albeit under the limitations of our current policy and funding landscape. Regional Australia will be essential to achieving many of the long-term objectives of the Australian Universities Accord (the Accord). RUN believes the equity aspirations of the Interim Report will only be achieved by establishing strong universities across Australia alongside the adoption of a systems approach in policy formation and delivery.

## Reflection one – a system approach to achieve the aims of the Accord

While the Interim Report provides an optimistic vision for a more equitable playing field among the participants of Australia's tertiary sector, there lies potential for unintended and detrimental consequences to arise from some of the key considerations promoted by the Interim Report in its pursuit of equitable outcomes. To avoid these unintended consequences, RUN first and foremost reflects upon the need for the Accord Panel and Government to undertake a systems approach in developing a holistic policy solution to the issues outlined in the Interim Report. A systems approach necessitates that the education ecosystem is viewed as a whole – a series of interconnected systems working together to achieve a collective aim rather than a series of individual actors. Such an approach will reduce the possibility of unintended consequences as well as protecting Australia's regions from potentially damaging consequences. There will be vital role for the Tertiary Education Commission to consider the educational ecosystem at a systems level.

In undertaking a systems approach to the reform intent of the Accord, RUN considers the following to be of vital importance:

- The alignment between higher education and industry and the role of universities in providing a broad-based education to graduates – Attachment V.

## Reflection two – the importance of equity between students

RUN welcomes the features of the interim report that seek to address matters of inequity that persist between different student cohorts, noting that traditionally underrepresented students who have been 'left behind' by the recent and rapid expansion of Australia's higher education system are those who characterise RUN's student profiles the most. RUN believes that Australia's tertiary education system must strive for, and achieve, equity for underrepresented student cohort participation and attainment. RUN is supportive of ensuring all Australians, no matter their background or location, are able to benefit from the life changing experience of higher education.

RUN's submission on the Interim Report covers the following in more detail:

- The need for consistent principles in higher education funding, providing consistent and certain funding to enable greater student participation – Attachment I.
- How a student-centred, needs-based funding model is essential to ensuring all students are supported in their studies – Attachment IV.
- The importance of nuanced, and considered targets in driving sectoral performance and accountability – Attachment III.
- How cost of study and cost of living support for students (including WIL placement support) can drive increased equity student participation and attainment – Attachment V.
- How Income Contingent Loan reform can lead to increased participation – Attachment IV.
- How student funding and support needs can be fit for purpose at all levels of study – Attachment II.
- The provision of research informed learning and teaching – Attachment VI and Attachment VIII.

### Reflection 3 – the importance of equity between institutions

The equity objectives of the Interim Report cannot be met by mechanisms that address 'equity between students' alone. A truly equitable higher education system is one that also seeks greater equity between its education providers, be that universities or Vocational Education and Training providers. That is, when a student accepts a place at an Australian university – whether they are from an underrepresented background or not – they should expect to see a comparable and equitable standard of fundamental tertiary provisions (such as support services and resources, facilities and infrastructure, research progression opportunities, and/or choice in offerings) regardless of the university they have chosen. This is becoming increasingly difficult to achieve for universities constrained by sub-scale operating environments, especially with a policy landscape geared towards scale. Institutional inequities threaten the long-term sustainability and reputation of Australia's higher education system. RUN urges the Accord Panel to intervene in this growing institutional disparity before student outcomes are compromised, recognising the interconnectedness of the educational ecosystem. Equity between students, can only be achieved through equity between institutions. In this submission, RUN proposes a number of practical measures designed to promote greater equity between institutions including:

- A Universal Higher Education Access Commitment – a high level framework that seeks to ensure a nuanced consideration of all providers during decision-making – Attachment I.
- A more effective and nuanced regional loading model that accounts for the true cost of supporting large proportions of underrepresented cohorts through to completion – Attachment IV.
- Strong, comprehensive and research-active regional institutions that can meet the broad needs of their diverse communities – Attachment IV and Attachment VIII.
- A dedicated new regional infrastructure funding pool, or a round of a dedicated new infrastructure pool set aside for regional institutions – Attachment IV.

Throughout the RUN response there will be a focus on these key three reflections, and how they can interact to meet the objectives and aims of the Accord while creating the most responsive and strategically policy aligned education system, from early childhood, right through to post-tertiary lifelong learning.

ATTACHMENT	AREAS OF SUBSTANTIVE AGREEMENT	AREAS OF SUBSTANTIVE DISAGREEMENT
I	The principles of funding for Australia's higher education ecosystem.	
II	Increasing access to preparatory and enabling programs to provide more pathways into higher education.	
III	Develop nuanced targets designed to attract new students to higher education.	
IV	Support moving over time to ensure National Competitive Grants cover the full cost of research.	Establishing a National Regional University.
	The need to examine potential changes to student contributions to reduce long-term financial burden for individuals and sustain successful increased participation in higher education.	
	Consideration of a student-centred needs-based funding model that is sufficient to provide access to high quality higher education and support for students from underrepresented backgrounds.	
	That changes to JRG and the implementation of a new funding model are necessary.	
	A new approach to mission-based compacts that will address future planning, distinctive place-based impact and institutional governance responsibilities.	
V	That micro-credentials and smaller stackable credentials will require industry input in their design and will require a sectoral approach to development, design and funding.	
	Jobs and Skills Australia, and their analyses, will be important pieces of work in informing sectoral stakeholders.	
	Increasing university-industry collaboration and university-VET collaboration.	
	Investigating how to improve RPL and exploring how to recognise micro-credentials across the sector.	
	There needs to be focus on improving the accessibility of placements and work integrated learning to students, especially in regional areas where placement availability increases student costs.	
VI	Launching a competitive funding program across multiple institutions (universities and TAFEs) with material produced to be available under open access.	Establishing a National Learning and Teaching Committee (within the Tertiary Education Commission).
	Rewarding institutions taking a leadership role in learning and teaching, fostering excellence and improved performance across the sector.	
VII		The application of a levy upon international student fees.
		The lack of any specific focus or mechanism that seeks to grow regional Australia's share of international student cohorts.
VIII	Increasing PhD stipend rates to make it more competitive with industry and public sector salaries.	

ATTACHMENT I

# Higher Education Principles



# ATTACHMENT I

## HIGHER EDUCATION PRINCIPLES

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RUN is pleased to see the majority of principles that are incorporated into the Interim Report are aligned with RUN's previous submission, especially the guiding principles for a new funding model section of the Interim Report. Throughout the RUN submission to the Interim Report, RUN will constantly refer to these principles understanding that the strength and success of the Accord will be reliant upon a well-reasoned and a consistent application of an established principles framework. Most important is the need for the Accord to be developed with systems thinking at the forefront of policy development.

### Universal Higher Education Access Commitment

In its initial response to the Higher Education Accord Discussion Paper, RUN advanced the notion that modern Australia – including its regions – has now reached a threshold of prosperity and technological capability where it is both viable and appropriate for the access and opportunities of university studies to be equitably distributed to all citizens, not just those living within reach of major capital cities.

*Regional Australians no longer believe that higher education is an opportunity for those with the means and desire to relocate to a major city, nor support the requirement for those individuals to remain in the cities to realise the value of their tertiary qualification.*

RUN argued that, as a highly advanced economy, Australia can and must ensure its regions have comparable access to the features and benefits of a higher education system as enjoyed by metropolitan Australians. In imagining a policy and/or legislative response, RUN proposed the concept of a Universal Higher Education Service Obligation (UHESO) that sought to ensure all Australians, regardless of postcodes or background, are able to access the life changing benefits of higher education as a fundamental right. RUN articulated what a UHESO might seek to recognise and achieve, and in subsequent engagement with the Accord Panel, provided further elaboration around issues of costing and measures of success.

In responding to the Interim Report, RUN has further developed its thinking around the concept of a UHESO.

In doing so, RUN considers that a Universal Higher Education Access Commitment (UHEAC) is a more accurate description of this important principle.

RUN's concept of a UHEAC is not a dedicated funding stream, nor is it a raft of explicit legislation, nor policy dictums. Rather, a UHEAC is a high-level framework that might be used by Governments, including States and Territories, to inform the design of broader tertiary policy, new funding mechanisms or legislation that derive from the Accord process. As it exists as a high-level framework, the UHEAC simply seeks to act as a circuit breaker between meeting the necessary targets and opportunities of the future (as set out by the Interim Report), and the regressive operating environments of the past for regional institutions. In its most basic form, the UHEAC facilitates a 'do no harm, do not hold back' approach to regional Australian communities, students and/or their local institutions in the reform of Australia's higher education landscape, ensuring a nuanced consideration of regional matters have informed decision-making. By advancing the framework of a UHEAC, RUN seeks to suppress the equity dilemma that has emerged within Australia's tertiary system by initiatives designed to address matters of 'equity between students' and matters of 'equity between institutions'. Equity between institutions serves as an enabler for equity between students. The UHEAC framework is serviced by considerations already advanced within the Interim Report, and through various mechanisms articulated within this submission that seek to address issues of student and institutional equity.

### Institutional equity

RUN argues that a truly equitable, world-leading higher education sector is one that not only achieves equity between the students in accessing the system, but additionally achieves a base level of equity between the institutions who service the system. Those students from underrepresented backgrounds whom the Interim Report rightly focusses upon, particularly those residing in regional Australia, will only realise genuinely equitable outcomes from their tertiary experiences if their choice of institutions and the experiences and opportunities derived from them are also equitable.

RUN argues that currently, an emerging characteristic of Australia's higher education system is an accelerating gulf of inequity that has been allowed

to develop between institutions. This phenomenon of growing institutional imbalance is largely determined by issues of scale, which are then further compounded by a mostly undifferentiated metropolitan-centric policy landscape that rewards scale. The manifestations of growing institutional inequities feature at all levels of tertiary service delivery (some of which are catalogued in this section), and unless arrested by the Accord process, these widening institutional inequities will compromise student outcomes, particularly in the regions. RUN believes this emerging tertiary environment characterised by growing institutional inequalities to be incompatible with meeting the equity targets set by the Interim Report.

In seeking to bridge the considerable gap that exists between the attainment rates of regional and metropolitan Australians, care must be taken to ensure that policy does not expect, nor incentivise, regional students to relocate to major cities for their studies. It is important for the students and communities of regional Australia to have access to strong, viable and locally responsive universities. The Accord process must recognise that not all aspiring regional students have the means, nor the desire, to relocate to a major city to study. To illustrate this point, approximately 33 per cent of domestic undergraduate RUN students in 2021 were aged over 25 and enrolled part-time.<sup>1</sup> Such students are more likely to have dependants and care duties, a mortgage, and/or employment responsibilities that make relocation complex, if not impossible. For context, the average proportion of domestic undergraduate students studying at all other universities who are aged over 25 and enrolled part-time was just 11.5 per cent in 2021. For regional Australia to receive equitable dividends from our higher education system, regional universities must be viable, comprehensive, research-active and as resourced as those accessed by metropolitan Australians. The Accord process has an opportunity to address the accelerating phenomenon of institutional inequity by recognising and addressing the conditions under which it arises.

### Equity of financial sustainability and security

Australia's tertiary sector is dominated by a handful of capital city institutions whose operations, underwritten by densely populated urban markets and legacies of substantial public funding over

decades, investment and property portfolios, considerable financial surpluses and bequests, and large numbers of international students, allows them to operate at a scale magnitude that is unachievable for many other universities, particularly regional universities. Issues relating to a more equitable and sustainable approach to university funding and financing are discussed in Attachment IV.

### Equity when supporting different cohorts

The student cohorts hosted by regional universities are distinct. When compared to metropolitan student cohorts, regional cohorts are more likely to enter university as a mature age student, study part-time, and already be engaged in the workforce as a part- or full-time wage earner. This means students at regional universities are more likely to have dependants and care duties, a mortgage, and/or employment responsibilities. They are far more likely to be representative of equity group profiles, and more likely to cross multiple equity categories. As a result of these complex cohort pressures and characteristics, regional students are more costly to support<sup>2</sup>, and are also less likely to successfully complete their studies.<sup>3</sup> RUN argues that the additional, true cost of supporting regional students to successful completion are not reflected in current funding models, a matter that compromises the equity targets of the Interim Report. Issues relating to a more sustainable and equitable approach to the support of large equity cohorts are discussed in Attachment II.

### Equity in offerings

Institutions providing tertiary services in sub-scale regional communities face major limitations in their ability to provide lower-demand offerings. Nonetheless, regional Australians deserve equitable access to a comprehensive range of tertiary opportunities, and not be limited to only those tertiary opportunities that can pass basic viability tests in thin markets. As such, regional Australia is often denied the opportunity to generate its own workforces from many important areas of tertiary study/research, including health, social sciences, or the arts.

Conditions that allow a more comprehensive suite of offerings to be available in the regions will be a necessary component in achieving the Interim Report's equity targets. Funding models that better support smaller providers in sub-scale environments to remain comprehensive, research-active institutions

<sup>1</sup> Department of Education, *Higher Education Statistics Student Data* [unpublished data], Department of Education, Canberra, 2023

<sup>2</sup> Marcia Devlin, Liang-Cheng Zhang, Daniel Edwards, Glenn Withers, Julie McMillan, Lynette Vernon & Sue Trinidad (2023) *The costs of and economies of scale in supporting students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds in Australian higher education*, Higher Education Research & Development, 42:2, 290-305, DOI: 10.1080/07294360.2022.2057450

<sup>3</sup> Cherastidtham I, Norton A, *Dropping out: the benefits and costs of trying university*. Grattan Institute, 2018, accessed at: <https://grattan.edu.au/report/dropping-out/> accessed on 10 August 2023

capable of providing lower-demand teaching/research opportunities is discussed in more detail in Attachment IV.

### Equity in research

Regional Australia hosts many pockets of world-class research, with its universities undertaking applied research that is in many cases aligned to the unique social, industrial, and cultural needs of their respective regions. Regional Australia rightfully deserves to participate equitably in our publicly-funded national research agenda, and to share equally in the profound benefits generated by research-trained workforces, and research-informed teaching. Yet despite regional Australia's clear appetite for research and innovation capabilities, and its hosting of world-class institutions, there remains an ongoing maldistribution of national research funding, activity, and infrastructure between metropolitan and regional Australia. Australia's research funding, research-informed teaching and research-trained workforces have continued to gravitate towards large urban centres, to the detriment of regional industries, communities, and workforces. This not only represents a major equity issue for regional Australia, but unless these entrenched imbalances are addressed, the issue will also become incompatible with the Interim Report's targets for research-trained equity cohorts. Matters relating to a more equitable and sustainable approach to regional university research are discussed in more detail in Attachment VIII.

### Equity in access to facilities and infrastructure

Access to high quality tertiary facilities has a profound impact upon student attraction, retention, and success and is an important mechanism in lifting the aspirations of students, especially those from underrepresented backgrounds.<sup>4</sup> It is important for regional students to experience an equitable standard of teaching/research facility as their metropolitan peers. Their choice in campus location should not determine the benefit they derive from Australia's higher education system. Regional universities lack the same capacity as metropolitan universities to routinely generate significant operating surpluses to adequately and sustainably service the tertiary infrastructure needs of regional communities. Unaddressed, this will compromise the meeting of equity targets (as set out by the Interim Report) in underrepresented regional communities. Matters relating to more equitable and sustainable funding mechanisms for regional facilities

and infrastructure are discussed in Attachment IV.

### Equity in access to globalised classrooms

International students play an important role in the globalisation and cultural diversification of Australia's university classrooms, and subsequently, the workforces they graduate into. In an increasingly globalised world, Australia's continued national prosperity depends on a citizenship who are informed and engaged members of the global community, and who value and celebrate cultural and linguistic differences.<sup>5</sup> As such, the global-cultural exposure and exchange that international students provide to domestic cohorts is invaluable. Regional cohorts, however, are far less likely to benefit from the perspectives and diversity of an internationalised classroom, with just 3.5 per cent of all onshore higher education international students enrolled at a regional university campus (year to date December 2022).<sup>6</sup> RUN believes there is a strong case for regional Australia hosting a far greater share of the international student cohort, and for regional Australia welcoming a greater proportion of those international students who choose to remain in Australia post-graduation. Matters relating to a more equitable distribution of Australia's international student cohorts are discussed in Attachment VII.

### Funding Principles

The higher education ecosystem is complex and multifaceted, with many moving, yet importantly interconnected pieces. In the past, policy has too frequently been siloed and has resulted in unintended consequences. As such, RUN believes that the guiding principles of funding as outlined in the Interim Report are predominantly correct and appropriate for a world-leading higher education ecosystem.

There are however, three additional fundamental principles that need to be addressed.

#### Area of substantive agreement

The principles of funding for Australia's higher education ecosystem.

First, institutional autonomy and flexibility is paramount and should be enshrined in any guiding principles, that is, universities must be able to experiment and innovate when responding to social

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Education Council, *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration*, December 2019, accessed at: <https://www.education.gov.au/alice-springs-mparntwe-education-declaration/resources/alice-springs-mparntwe-education-declaration> on 14 August 2023

<sup>6</sup> Department of Education, *International student enrolment and commencement data by ABS SA4*, accessed at: <https://www.education.gov.au/international-education-data-and-research/international-student-enrolment-and-commencement-data-abs-sa4> on August 2023

need within an outcome-based framework, and not be constrained by overtly prescriptive or universal regulation. Secondly, regulation of Australia's higher education ecosystem must be light touch, and remain risk based. Thirdly and finally, accountability measures should adhere to a report once, use often reporting framework.

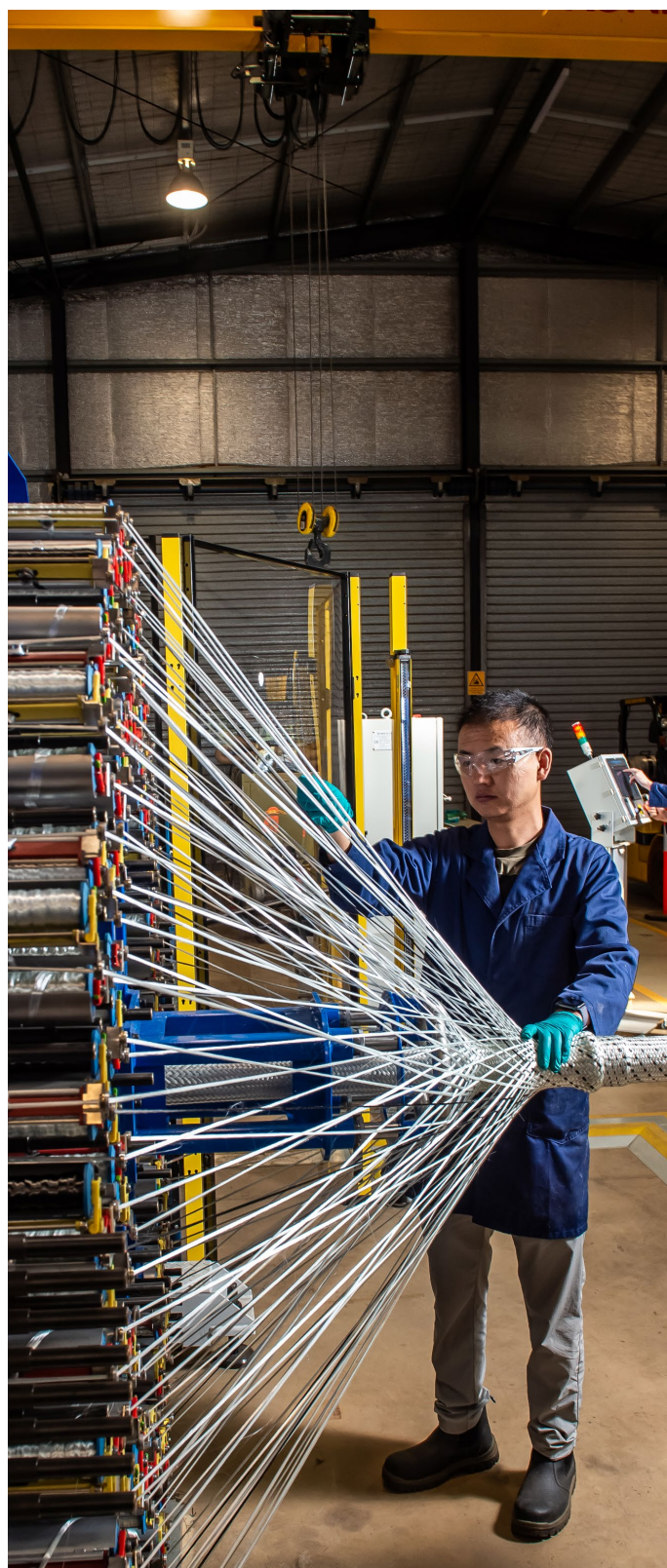
Institutional autonomy and accountability are not necessarily competing constructs, and it is pivotal that the Accord balances the two. RUN understands that universities are recipients of large amounts of taxpayer monies and understands the need for institutions to be accountable for how those funds are spent and the outcomes of that expenditure.

However, this accountability while vitally important must not undermine institutional autonomy and academic freedom. Accountability should derive itself from robust internal governance procedures; University Councils; and light-touch report once, use often reporting frameworks. Notwithstanding concerns outlined in the Interim Report regarding university governance, the strength of Australia's higher education system is in part due to institutional autonomy which allows institutions the freedom to explore how to best do old things in new ways, leading to innovative research, excellent learning and teaching, and impactful community focussed activity. Autonomy cannot and must not be used to excuse distressing outcomes, however the benefits of autonomy and academic freedom need to be considered before regulatory overreach limits the abilities of institutions to discover innovative ways in meeting their unique missions.

## Recommendation

That additional principles be considered to be part of the guiding principles of funding for Australia's universities recognising:

- The importance of institutional autonomy and academic freedom.
- Regulation remains light touch, risk-based, and outcome focussed.
- Accountability and reporting measures adhere to a report once, use often reporting framework.



## ATTACHMENT II

# Equity in opportunity, access, and participation



## ATTACHMENT II

# EQUITY IN OPPORTUNITY, ACCESS, AND PARTICIPATION

### Focus on Equity

RUN welcomes the equity-driven focus of the Interim Report and the overall goal of ‘growth for skills through greater equity’. A commitment to improving outcomes for underrepresented cohorts is intrinsic to the role of RUN universities within our communities. RUN is pleased to see recognition in the Interim Report that the true cost of supporting students from underrepresented cohorts has increased over recent years and places a significant cost burden upon universities, regional universities in particular. RUN is currently unable to agree or disagree with the proposed Universal Learning Entitlement in the Interim Report as there are not enough details provided. RUN does support the principle of ensuring that students who have demonstrated ability to undertake higher education be funded to do so. This should encompass bridging programs, sub-bachelor, and bachelor degrees, supported by more robust and equitable student support policies and funding.

The student compositions at RUN universities represent the highest proportions of equity cohorts of any other university network. As acknowledged within the Interim Report<sup>1</sup>, RUN universities are already exceeding population parity for Low Socio-Economic Status (SES), Regional and Remote, and First Nations enrolments. RUN universities are proud of the role they have played in achieving meaningful progress toward many of the targets of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap. Notably, one in every four Indigenous undergraduate students in Australia today is studying at a RUN university, and rates of Indigenous enrolment at RUN universities exceed the sector average.<sup>2</sup> Australia’s regional universities have a pivotal role in nurturing the ambitions, participation, and achievements of underrepresented cohorts.



### Compounding impacts of disadvantage

RUN commends the Interim Report’s focus on equity, however one crucial dimension that has been overlooked is the compounding challenges that students can face when they belong to multiple underrepresented cohort.

*Students at RUN universities are 2.5 times more likely to be both First Nations and Low SES, or nearly twice as likely to be Indigenous and living with disability or living with disability and Low SES.<sup>3,4</sup>*

Research has also shown that students belonging to an equity category are more likely to experience poor mental health, particularly students with a disability, which has a demonstrated negative impact on attrition.<sup>5</sup> The students that sit at the intersection of multiple categories of underrepresentation face cumulative challenges to their participation,

<sup>1</sup> Department of Education, Australian Universities Accord Panel Interim Report accessed at <https://www.education.gov.au/australian-universities-accord/resources/accord-interim-report> on 16 August 2023, p.60, Table 2.3-1.

<sup>2</sup> Department of Education, Higher Education Statistics, Section 11 – Equity Groups, accessed at <https://www.education.gov.au/higher-education-statistics/student-data/selected-higher-education-statistics-2021-student-data>

<sup>3</sup> Institute for Social Science Research (2020). *Investigating the effects of cumulative factors of disadvantage*. Brisbane: . Accessed at <https://espace.library.uq.edu.au/view/UQ:2a76ba9>

<sup>4</sup> Productivity Commission Staff Working Paper 2013, *Deep and Persistent Disadvantage in Australia*, Canberra. Accessed at <https://www.pc.gov.au/research/supporting/deep-persistent-disadvantage>

<sup>5</sup> Zajac, T., Perales, F., Xiang, N., Tomaszewski, W., & Zubrick, S. R. (2022). Investigating the relevance of mental health for the current equity groups framework: An analysis of multi-agency linked-administrative data. National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education. Accessed at <https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/publications/mental-health-equity-groups-framework/>



engagement, and completion.<sup>6,7</sup> This is equally true for institutions in providing comprehensive student support services.

The emphasis on equity should not just recognise these groups in isolation, but also pay attention to the nexus of these challenges.

### Recommendation

When designing the needs-based funding formula, investigate appropriate mechanisms to address the compounding impacts of disadvantage.

## Mode of study and equity

Research has shown that a student's mode of study is a crucial determinant in their academic completion, with part-time students much less likely to complete their studies than students enrolled full-time.<sup>8</sup> Part-time students are more likely to already be engaged in full-time work and are more likely to have children, requiring them to balance their education with competing work and life pressures, and these students often cite work or family responsibilities as reasons for withdrawing.<sup>9</sup> The longer time frame of part-time study also means there is an increased likelihood of

a student's life circumstances changing to the degree that they are no longer able or willing to continue with study.

Students attending a RUN university are much more likely to be part-time than the sector average, with data showing 45 per cent of RUN domestic undergraduate enrolments in 2021 were part-time compared to a sector average of 27 per cent.<sup>10</sup> Analysis recently performed by KPMG on behalf of RUN reveals that, on average, students at RUN universities study at a load equivalent to 57 per cent of a full-time schedule, compared to the sector average of 69 per cent. This trend is consistent for students from underrepresented backgrounds, with 46 per cent of undergraduate domestic students enrolled at RUN universities in 2021 who are First Nations, Low SES or have a disability studying part-time rather than full-time, against a sector average of 32 per cent.<sup>11,12</sup>

Given a student's part-time status is such a major indicator of whether they are likely to complete their studies<sup>13</sup>, to meet the Accord objective of 'growth for skills through greater equity' RUN recommends exploring bursaries or incentives that may enable willing underrepresented students to engage in study full-time.

<sup>6</sup> Bennett, D., Coffey, J., Bawa S., Carney, D., Dockery, A. M., Franklyn, K., Koshy, P., Li, I. W., Parida, S., & Unwin, S. (2022). Ameliorating disadvantage: Creating accessible, effective and equitable careers and study information for low SES students. National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education. Accessed at <https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/2022-NCSEHE-BennettCoffey-Final-Formattd.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Delahunty, J. (2022). 'You going to uni?' Exploring how people from regional, rural and remote areas navigate into and through higher education. National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education. Accessed at [https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Delahunty\\_UOW\\_EquityFellowship\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Delahunty_UOW_EquityFellowship_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Cherastidtham I, Norton A, University attrition: what helps and what hinders university completion? Grattan Institute, 2018, accessed at: <https://grattan.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/University-attrition-background.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> Cherastidtham I, Norton A, Dropping out: the benefits and costs of trying university. Grattan Institute, 2018, accessed at: <https://grattan.edu.au/report/dropping-out/>

<sup>10</sup> Department of Education, Higher Education Statistics –Student Data [unpublished data], Department of Education, Canberra, 2023

<sup>11</sup> KPMG, 2023, Regional Universities Network – Financial Analysis Report

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Cherastidtham I, Norton A, University attrition: what helps and what hinders university completion? Grattan Institute, 2018, accessed at: <https://grattan.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/University-attrition-background.pdf>

## Recommendation

Explore incentives that seek to reduce attrition pressures on underrepresented cohorts.

## Recommendation

Explore incentives that will support underrepresented students to complete their studies by identifying barriers to completion.

stand to benefit the most from access to additional services, the current funding model falls short in allocating the necessary resources for its intended purpose.

## Recommendation

Investigation of income contingent loans, bursaries or other mechanisms that help to overcome financial barriers to study.

## Financial barriers to improving equity outcomes

RUN's initial submission to the Australian Universities Accord Discussion Paper outlines the challenges regional universities experience in resourcing support for students due to the current funding methodology. Currently, student support funding is distributed based on Equivalent Full-time Study Load (EFTSL) rather than on an individual head count. This approach works against the cohorts identified as having the most significant challenges to retention and completion, and who have likely been previously underserved in educational settings.

As outlined above, regional universities enrol a significantly higher proportion of part-time students in the communities they serve. As well as being part-time, these students are more likely to come from underrepresented backgrounds. The current EFTSL-based model assumes that a part-time student would only use a fractional share of resources, however there is no evidence to show that part-time students access fewer support services than their full-time counterparts. Indeed, it is possible the opposite may be true. In 2022 one RUN university found that their part-time students accessed an average of 11 student support services, while full-time students utilised just below five services.<sup>14</sup> Regional universities with multiple campuses also face the compounding challenge of having to duplicate the range of student services across separate locations to ensure that a student can access the support they need where they are. These differences in student profile and campus distribution mean that regional universities are often forced to limit the breadth of support they can provide to students.

Given universities provide services regardless of a student's study load, and students attending part-time

RUN commend the recognition that financial barriers to study need to be addressed, and that these barriers disproportionately impact students from already underrepresented and educationally disadvantaged backgrounds. These barriers include the obvious upfront costs of study but extend into the ongoing costs of study for instance, the financial pressures experienced by disadvantaged cohorts in attending multiple, lengthy blocks of unpaid regional/rural/remote placements as conditions of their educational attainment.

RUN is supportive of exploring how income contingent loans could be used to support students in covering upfront and ongoing costs of higher education. Careful consideration should be made before adding to any student's prospective debt level, given that while students already in a financially disadvantaged position may benefit from these loans, they may also be more debt averse.

In addition to exploring the potential of extending income contingent loans, RUN urges consideration for the role bursaries could play in reaching the objectives of the Interim Report.

Equity scholarships are shown to be effective in retaining recipients, reducing stress, boosting morale, and allowing students to dedicate more time to their studies.<sup>15</sup> RUN supports a recommendation to increase the range and pool of Australian Government scholarships available to students as well as considering how universities could be better resourced to administer internal scholarships, particularly smaller universities with fewer philanthropic and industry opportunities available. The design of additional scholarships should also ensure that while the criteria is targeted, it remains easily accessible to the students it seeks to support.

<sup>14</sup> Regional Universities Network. (2023). Submission to the Australian Universities Accord Discussion Paper, accessed at: [https://www.run.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/RUN\\_Australian\\_Universities\\_Accord\\_Submission.pdf](https://www.run.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/RUN_Australian_Universities_Accord_Submission.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> Zacharias, N., et al. (2016). Moving beyond 'acts of faith': effective scholarships for equity students. National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education. Deakin University, Queensland University of Technology, The University of Sydney, accessed at <https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/publications/moving-beyond-acts-of-faith-effective-scholarships-for-equity-students/>

## Recommendation

Shift from EFTSL to a headcount basis for student support funding to better enable universities to provide necessary pastoral support.

## The role of enabling courses

RUN universities play a pivotal role in cultivating tertiary aspirations within the communities they serve, and in facilitating aspirations into enrolment. This includes an emphasis on preparing students for academic success through enabling programs. As recognised in the Interim Report, enabling programs are a proven way to build academic preparation and provide a supportive pathway for students from underserved backgrounds. As of 2021, RUN universities enrolled more than 3.5 times as many students in enabling programs as a proportion of total students than the sector average. First Nations, Low SES, and students with a disability comprised 42 per cent of enabling students at RUN universities.<sup>16</sup>

Enabling programs that provide a robust academic foundation for students are indispensable in lifting the rates of student participation and ultimately, successful underrepresented cohort attainment. Given 50 per cent of new jobs are expected to require a bachelor degree or higher, as established in the Interim Report<sup>17</sup>, the expansion of enabling programs will play an integral role in achieving the targets for the Accord. Enabling places as well as enabling loading will need to be expanded.

## Area of substantive agreement

Increasing access to preparatory and enabling programs to provide more pathways into higher education.

## Recommendation

Uncap places for enabling programs for equity students, and explore extending to all students as well as increasing the enabling loading.

## CASE STUDY



### Enabling Students at University of the Sunshine Coast

In a previous job, Moana cleaned soil science laboratories for a large mining company in Western Australia, and often imagined herself wearing a white lab coat and running tests on samples with other scientists.

She is now completing a degree in Environmental Science at UniSC Moreton Bay, with the aim of becoming a research scientist, specialising in using living organisms to reduce and detoxify waste and pollutants.

It took just one free workshop at the University of the Sunshine Coast to alter the course of her life, and give Moana the confidence to enrol in UniSC's Tertiary Preparation Pathway (TPP).

Through TPP she gained the entry requirements to begin undergraduate study at UniSC Moreton Bay, and is on her way to achieving her aim to become a research scientist, delving deeper into using living organisms to reduce or detoxify waste and pollutants.

Her experience has also influenced her family, and her children and husband now study at UniSC.

<sup>16</sup> Department of Education, Higher Education Statistics –Student Data [unpublished data], Department of Education, Canberra, 2023.

<sup>17</sup> Department of Education, Australian Universities Accord Panel Interim Report accessed at <https://www.education.gov.au/australian-universities-accord/resources/accord-interim-report> on 16 August 2023

## ATTACHMENT III

# TARGETS



# ATTACHMENT III

## TARGETS

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RUN is encouraged by the Interim Report's emphasis on increasing the enrolments of historically underrepresented groups. However, RUN can only cautiously support the use of targets in driving sectoral focus upon improving access, participation, and tertiary education attainment for underrepresented student cohorts. While the macro targets of the Bradley Review were met, many of the equity targets were not adequately focused upon and went unmet. This presents an opportunity for Australia's tertiary sector to additionally focus on these important student cohorts, however there are many challenges in meeting equity targets which require a nuanced approach to target setting, monitoring, and contextualising of student outcomes. In setting targets, it is important to understand the current quantum of academically prepared students, and the need for targets to focus on attracting new students to the sector, otherwise an environment is created that only leads to inter-institutional student poaching. Shuffling the deck chairs on the titanic will not achieve greater educational attainment.

At any one time there are a set number of students ready to attend university. With the inclusion of institutional targets, the Government will need to be careful to avoid driving providers to aggressively compete for students to meet their targets. If universities were driven to compete for underrepresented students, universities who do not have the fiscal resources available to offer generous scholarships to attract or poach students from existing providers will be disproportionately impacted. Not only will this approach fail to increase the numbers of underrepresented groups attending university, but it also has the potential to adversely impact upon those institutions who are currently excelling in the provision of tertiary education to students from equity cohorts. This has the potential to remove students from the regional communities where their skills will be needed after graduation.

RUN universities exceed population parity for First Nations, regional, and Low SES cohorts. While RUN is appreciative of the acknowledgment in the Interim

Report that bolstering higher education attainment rates is a priority, it is important to note that this is a collaborative effort and cannot be achieved by universities in isolation. This is evident when looking at school educational attainment rates, where students from low socio-economic backgrounds have significantly lower attainment rates than high SES peers. Likewise regional Australians have a significantly lower schooling attainment rate than those Australians residing in metropolitan Australia.<sup>1,2</sup> Most concerning is the gap in apparent retention rates from year 10 to year 12 between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and non-Indigenous students, which has grown to the largest amount since 2014; a gap of 24 percentage points.<sup>3</sup> Without improvement in school outcomes, closing the tertiary attainment gap will simply not be possible without significant investment in academic preparedness education programs (i.e. enabling programs as outlined in Attachment II).

Broadly speaking, there are four types of potential tertiary student:

- i. School leavers who are academically prepared and transitioning to tertiary study straight from school;
- ii. School leavers who are not academically prepared to transition to tertiary education;
- iii. Adults who already have a tertiary education qualification; and,
- iv. Adults who do not hold a tertiary education qualification.

To achieve the equity objectives set out in the Interim Report it is essential that the broader policy settings are such that students who themselves have not previously studied, and/or who represent groups not traditionally engaged with higher education, are empowered to, and supported through, their journey to tertiary education.

Meeting the equity and skilling challenges outlined in the Interim Report will not be achievable without attracting new students, specifically student types ii and iv (outlined above), into the sector. This

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, Year 12 certification rates, Australia 2009-2021, accessed at: <https://www.acara.edu.au/reporting/national-report-on-schooling-in-australia/year-12-certification-rates>

<sup>2</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, Education and Work, Table 18 Australia, May 2022, accessed at <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/education/education-and-work-australia/latest-release#data-downloads> on 11 March 2023

<sup>3</sup> 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](https://dataandreporting.blob.core.windows.net/anrdataportal/ANR-Documents/ANR2022/nationalreportonschoolinginaustralia_2022_Chapter4.pdf)

raises considerable challenges as the barriers for these potential students to tertiary education are complex, individually unique, and potentially costly to individuals, educational providers, and governments. Plans to increase equity cohorts in universities need to be based on careful modelling of the pipeline of school students capable of transitioning to higher education, and measures to increase the size of that cohort over time. There are also the additional challenges of declining participation rates which necessitates a focus on stimulating demand and aspiration for tertiary education in school and non-school cohorts as well as improving participation from underrepresented cohorts who do not see higher education as a viable pathway.

RUN is supportive of the development of nuanced targets for established equity cohorts and emergent equity cohorts (such as first in family, children from a single parent family, and care givers) as well as cohorts representing cumulative disadvantage. While RUN is supportive of the need for institutional transparency and targets designed to ensure that university enrolments reflect the diversity of Australia's population, this needs to be instituted in a way that does not introduce an unnecessary administrative burden and is informed by a 'report once, use often' principle.

RUN recommends that before introducing targets for existing or emerging cohort groups there should be robust definitions with clarity around collation, tracking and reporting. Regarding current equity cohorts, definitions for regional students and parity figures for disability need to be more appropriately defined to ensure that the measurement is fit for purpose and more clearly understood. Tracking of students as they move in and out of the post-secondary system will be essentially to ensuring targets are effective.

Targets will need to be considered across the full scope of the educational ecosystem, including postgraduate and enabling level studying. This will be vitally important to ensure targets drive improvement in equity participation and attainment across the full scope of tertiary education delivery. This will also drive institutions to seek increasing opportunities for equity cohorts at all levels.

When considering appropriate targets for equity participation RUN also recommends considering metrics relating to student outcomes and satisfaction in order to avoid the pitfalls of cruder measures relating to attainment and participation that do not account for the additional challenges that universities and students face in educational delivery.

### Area of substantive agreement

Develop nuanced targets designed to attract new students to higher education.

### Recommendation

That targets for equity cohorts in universities be developed based on modelling of the pipeline of school students capable of transitioning to higher education.

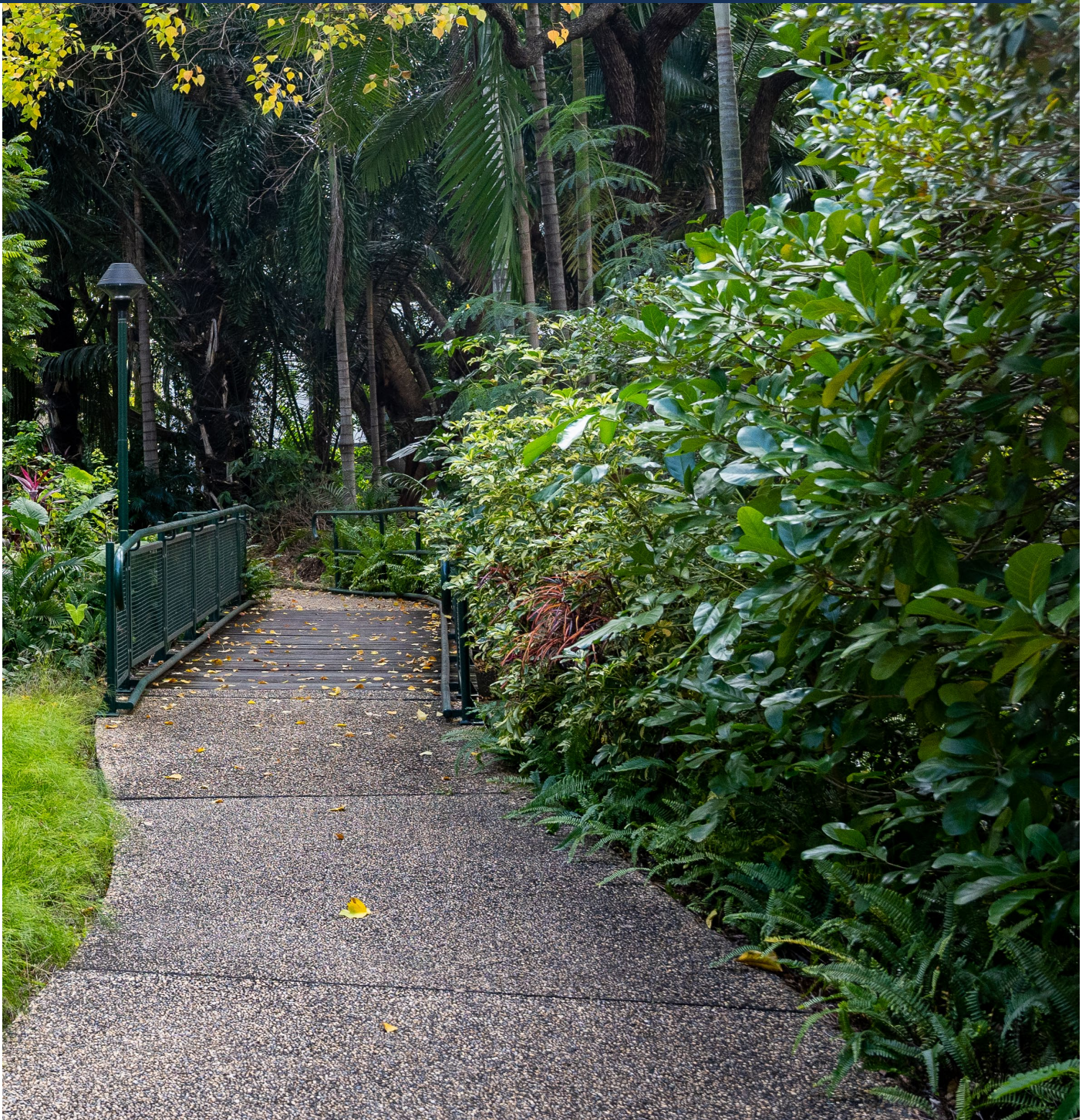
### Recommendation

That there should be clear, robust definitions around collation, tracking, and reporting.



## ATTACHMENT IV

# Funding and sectoral sustainability



# ATTACHMENT IV

## FUNDING AND SECTORAL SUSTAINABILITY

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### Regional Loading

The rationale for a regional loading is well established and RUN welcomes the Interim Report's appetite to redesign the regional loading model. RUN sees this as a critical step in addressing many persistent issues relating to 'equity between students', and 'equity between institutions' that have historically disadvantaged regional Australia's returns from our national HE system.

An effective reimaged regional loading model would also support the population parity targets set out by the Accord process. RUN argues that the following considerations would need to inform the development of a more effective regional loading formula, which would be applied to core funding:

- The eligibility being for those universities that are regionally headquartered, and therefore regionally oriented in their individual mission and social purpose.
- The discrepancy between institutional EFTSL and enrolment headcount.
- The propensity for regional universities to have larger enabling pathway student loads than metropolitan universities.
- The need to account for infrastructure provisions, including infrastructure for underrepresented cohorts, cyber security, and digital infrastructure.
- The need to account for the true costs of supporting underrepresented cohorts through to completion, recognising that regional universities have larger underrepresented cohorts.
- The need to account for diseconomies of scale for regional institutions: thinness of regional markets, operating multiple, dispersed campuses with duplicated services/facilities across multiple communities.
- The role of regional universities in supporting their communities and hosting shared community services and facilities.
- A focus of institution and deriving loading funding on a per campus basis.
- Ensuring sustainability of regional loading funding.



## Research funding

Regional Australia hosts many world class universities undertaking pockets of world class research. This research is often applied to the distinct needs of the respective regional communities and/or industries, generating tremendous impact on the ground in regional Australia.

Regional Australia contributes its fair share towards the funding of our national tertiary research efforts. In return, there is an expectation that regional communities, and the industries and economies they support, share equally in the profound benefits of our national research outputs, including access to local research infrastructure, research-trained workforces, and research-informed teaching. This does not detract from the need to pursue the drivers of research excellence and servicing national research priorities. To ensure that these drivers align to the needs of Australia's regions the research system must remain competitive, but a more place-based approach to Australia's innovation agenda to assist with a more equitable distribution of research capability and impact should be explored. Currently, opportunities to provide regional research expertise and infrastructure required by Australia's regional industries remain unmet, equating to reduced economic opportunity and innovation potential outside of metropolitan Australia. The continued concentration of research activity within metropolitan Australia represents a vulnerability in the diversity, accessibility, and culture of Australia's world class research ecosystem.

It is imperative to recognise that additional support is needed to lift research outcomes in regional Australia, not only to boost the living standards and prosperity of those living outside our major cities, but to also service the clear equity objectives of the Accord process.

The Accord process must ensure that regional Australians benefit from reimagined policy settings that addresses their exclusion from the fundamental research and innovation component of our higher education system. The Accord process can take practical steps to better support the growth in regional Australia's research and innovation capabilities.

### Area of substantive agreement

The need to examine potential changes to student contributions to reduce long-term financial burden for individuals and sustain successful increased participation in higher education.

### Recommendation

Cover the full cost of research for all National Competitive Grants, not just category one.

### Recommendation

Set a timeframe and clearly articulated targets to grow research funding, post-graduate attainment, regional research staffing levels and regionally dedicated infrastructure funding to raise the research capabilities of regional areas.

### Recommendation

More equally distribute research funding to enable all institutions to partake in a broad range of research.

### Recommendation

Population parity targets for underrepresented groups extend beyond the undergraduate level to include postgraduate attainment.

### Recommendation

For the comprehensive, research-active status of regional universities to be not only preserved but enhanced when developing individual institutional compacts.

### Recommendation

Reimagined systems of research funding should seek to grow the sector, and not just maintain Australia's current investment. An aspirational quantum/growth target should be set via the Accord process.





## Income Contingent Loans

RUN is supportive of a national loan program that enables access to high quality, equitable, post-school educational opportunities – both vocational and university study. Australia's Higher Education Loan Program (HECS-HELP) provides loans to students studying approved higher education courses. Australia's income contingent loan system is world leading and has been replicated in other jurisdictions. It provides Australians with the opportunity to access world class education without the need to take out private loans and reduces the upfront burden to students by ensuring they only begin to repay their government subsidised loans when they are able. The benefits of Australia's income contingent loan system are numerous, however the most notable of these are the removal of any upfront cost to students – which is often a significant barrier to entry for students (especially those from low socioeconomic backgrounds), the fact the loan does not attract interest (as would a commercial loan), and is collected through the taxation system whereby graduates begin repaying their loans when their income reaches certain thresholds. While RUN understands the recent focus on cost-of-living pressures impacting Australians, the need for Australia's higher education system to be funded in a sustainable way is vital to ensuring access for future Australians, and this means the subsidy/investment from the income contingent loan system must be affordable to the Government.

RUN is therefore supportive of the Interim's Report considerations for Australia's world leading income contingent loan system, noting the need for the income contingent loan system to work seamlessly, transparently, and fairly with Australia's other social security systems. RUN is also mindful of the need to ensure that there is further alignment between income contingent loans offered to students undertaking studies at different tertiary levels.

### Area of substantive agreement

The need to examine potential changes to student contributions to reduce long-term financial burden for individuals and sustain successful increased participation in higher education.

## National Regional University

Issues relating to the inherent diseconomies of scale characteristic of how regional universities have historically operated within Australia's metropolitan-centric tertiary policy landscape were the primary focus of RUN's initial submission to the Australian Universities Accord Discussion Paper. RUN therefore welcomes the Interim Reports' acknowledgement of the additional true costs of supporting students from

underrepresented backgrounds, and the distinct challenges facing regional universities in their pursuit of equitable tertiary opportunities across dispersed campus sites in thin regional markets. The members of RUN feel that the subsequent Interim Report demonstrates an understanding of the issues raised by RUN relating to equity and viability in regional Australia's access to our tertiary system, and the need for differential policy approaches to regional cohorts, regional communities, and their local institutions. This acknowledgement will be crucial in supporting the role regional universities will play in realising the equity targets set by the Interim Report.

While RUN is satisfied that the Interim Report accurately articulates the challenges facing regional tertiary education and research, the Report's keynote proposal – the establishment of a National Regional University – raises concerns. RUN remains unconvinced that the proposed solution would in practice address the challenges.

The idea of a National Regional University is not new and has been the subject of occasional consideration over past decades. The idea remains prohibitive today due to the tremendously disruptive, overtly complex, drawn-out, and high-cost nature of the undertaking. Compounding these complexities is a fundamental question around the rationality of centralising essential services across regional communities that exhibit incredible diversity. As such, there remains an important need for regional Australia to host local tertiary institutions that are highly responsive to local need via proximal decision-making. It is also important that regional Australia retains access to choice among regional institutions. While areas of collaboration between regional providers should be encouraged and supported, a healthy degree of competition must also be retained to ensure regional Australia's tertiary providers remain vibrant, agile, and responsive. It is difficult to see how a National Regional University would be compatible with these needs.

Moreover, it is difficult to see how the consolidation of geographically dispersed universities into a single organisational entity would overcome the fiscal difficulties of operating in thin markets, unless course offerings were to be consolidated into a smaller number of locations. This would irretrievably undermine the comprehensive nature of regional universities and therefore reduce their attractiveness to students and limit their benefit to regional communities.

RUN strongly believes the objectives that a National Regional University seeks to achieve can be far more effectively and efficiently attained via mechanisms that provide regional communities with stronger universities, while promoting greater collaboration

between existing regional providers. Regional universities could, for instance, be supported and incentivised to form greater collaborations on research, the sharing of student load in low demand locations, or even co-locate Regional University Centres at existing, smaller regional campuses. Regional Australia already hosts a quantum of world class tertiary institutions that, with the right support and policy settings, can overcome challenges of scale and equity. RUN would urge the Accord process to strongly consider how the objectives of a National Regional University might be more effectively met by alternative approaches.

### Area of substantive disagreement

Establishing a National Regional University.

### Recommendation

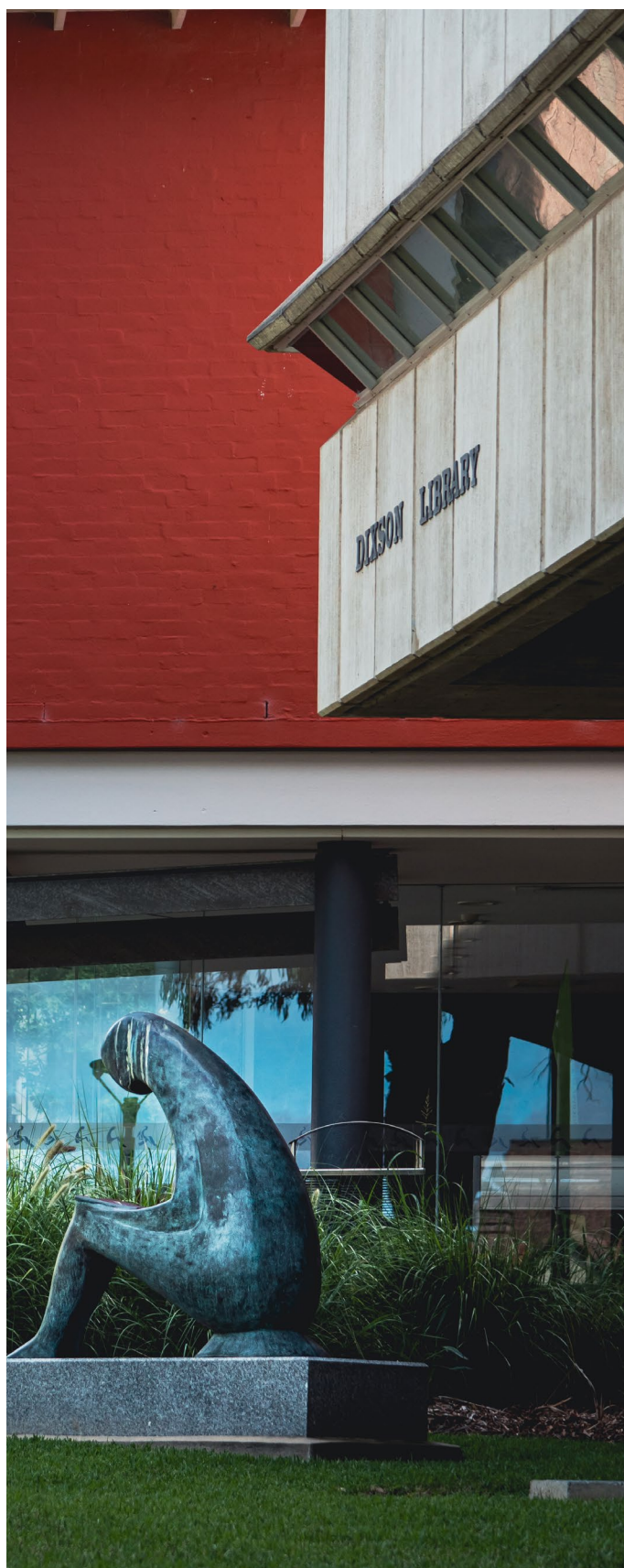
That the Accord Panel consider how the objectives of a National Regional University might be more effectively met by alternative approaches.

### CASE STUDY

#### Regional collaboration: the Manna Institute

Funded by a \$3.66 million Commonwealth grant, the Manna Institute unites leading mental health researchers from the seven RUN universities.

The Manna Institute seeks to create the educational pathways that will ensure future generations of mental health researchers are capable of developing targeted solutions for regional Australia. This unprecedented collaborative effort will foster relevant research, professional workforces, and the translation of research findings into practical, place-based programs.



## Infrastructure funding

Access to high quality tertiary facilities has a profound impact upon student retention and success and is an important mechanism in lifting the aspirations of students, especially those from underrepresented backgrounds. An institution's inability to provide consistent, modern learning/research spaces reduces opportunities to be innovative in teaching and furthers inequalities in student success and experiences when compared to better-resourced institutions. RUN is pleased to see an acknowledgement in the Interim Report of the important role played by a student's access to world class tertiary infrastructure and facilities. RUN is also pleased to see the Interim Report acknowledge that the challenges for some smaller institutions, including regional universities, in servicing the infrastructure needs of their cohorts and communities is intensifying, yet limited by their inability to access the full sources (and magnitude) of income realised by larger institutions. Understanding and addressing these limitations will become increasingly important given the pivotal role of regional universities in meeting the equity targets of the Accord.

While RUN is buoyed by the Interim Report's acknowledgement of the importance of equitable access to tertiary infrastructure and facilities, and the conditions that currently prevent that equity across institutions from occurring, RUN would like to see more from the Accord process in terms of possible solutions. No dedicated infrastructure funding pool has been available for regional universities to access in almost a decade, with the Interim Report not referencing the return of any comparable mechanism. Compounding these limitations further have been the ineligibility of regional universities in recent years to compete for various other (broader community) grant programs, despite regional universities being major employers and economic drivers in their communities while also hosting shared infrastructure utilised by communities. During this time the demands on regional tertiary infrastructure including maintenance, disability access, digital and cyber security, and new teaching/research facilities has grown considerably. This has coincided with the rising cost of construction in regional economies that has continued to outpace metropolitan areas.<sup>1</sup> What has not changed during this period is the capacity for regional universities to adequately fund their own maintenance and infrastructure needs, due largely to diseconomies of scale, limited sources of income, and the nature of their dispersed multi-campus models.

<sup>1</sup> Rawlinsons Quantity Surveyors, Rawlinsons Construction Cost Guide 2021, accessed via <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/cqu/detail.action?docID=6452470> on 16 August 2023.

Analysis recently performed by KPMG<sup>2</sup> on behalf of RUN reveals the extent to which smaller regional universities, and larger non-regional universities differ in terms of their ability to provide a comparable standard of world class teaching and research infrastructure. Key findings include;

- Due to the nature of multi-campus models in thinner markets, and further compounded by the need to supplement the under-funded cost of supporting equity students and teaching in thin markets, RUN universities have less financial capacity to maintain their assets with non-regional universities spending more than three times the RUN university average on maintenance expenses; and nearly five times as much on capital expenditure as RUN universities.
- The borrowing power of RUN institutions is considerably lower than that of metropolitan universities.
- When looking at Property, Plant & Equipment spend, the five-year average for RUN members is \$26.8m compared to \$134.2m for non-regional universities. This shows that non-regional universities are investing five times the amount that RUN members are into capital projects.
- Regrading maintenance, KPMG found that the average maintenance expenditure at RUN universities was found to be below the sector average, and has trended lower in recent years. The aging infrastructure of one RUN institution examined is driving an increase in maintenance requirements and the need for capital improvements that would equate to a cost 10 times the annual RUN maintenance expense average to bring the infrastructure to a respectable standard.

There is a clear difference in the abilities of different providers operating within Australia's higher education system to provide a comparable, consistently equitable standard of access to the teaching and research infrastructure needs of their students. Ultimately, if left unaddressed, a divergence of student experiences and outcomes within Australia's higher education system will occur. This not only represents a growing vulnerability for Australia's otherwise world-leading sector but will also undermine the ability of smaller regional institutions to meet the equity targets of the Interim Report. RUN would like to see solutions to the issues of sustaining equitable standards of tertiary infrastructure for regional Australians, including opportunities that might allow regional tertiary infrastructure to be planned and funded for shared community/industry utilisation. Such an approach may promote greater scale, efficiency, and community collaboration in managing infrastructure needs.

### Recommendation

Re-establish a dedicated, significant education infrastructure fund which must carry scope to accommodate digital infrastructure (including cyber security), and the maintenance needs of institutions.

### Recommendation

Establish a rolling, dedicated tertiary infrastructure fund for the exclusive use of enabling tertiary infrastructure enhancements in regional Australia.

### Recommendation

Include an infrastructure provision within a new regional loading model that recognises the routine, ongoing infrastructure needs and challenges of sub-scale regional campus operations, complimentary to a re-established competitive education infrastructure fund.

## Needs-based Student Funding Model

RUN supports the proposed introduction of a student-centred, needs-based funding model which considers the socio-economic mix of students at each institution and better reflects the actual costs of course delivery, particularly the additional costs associated with supporting underrepresented cohorts. If executed effectively and combined with a renewed model for regional loading, such a model would help unlock the unrealised learning potential in regional Australia by ensuring that universities have the necessary resources to ensure every student receives the adequate level of support to succeed at university. Any move to a needs-based funding model must be modelled on a detailed analysis of the actual costs to supporting students with varying support needs. The analysis should be granular enough to identify the differential supports required for all equity cohorts and consider the complexity of supporting students who experience multiple levels of disadvantage.

RUN endorses a funding model such as the Schooling Resource Standard (SRS) which provides a base amount per student with additional equity loadings. It would be essential, however, that any proposed model ensures that funding follows the student through a consistent and coherent national funding system including the vocational education system.

RUN strongly advocates that equity loadings (for both teaching and student support) be distributed on a headcount rather than EFTSL basis. The

<sup>2</sup> KPMG, 2023, Regional Universities Network – Financial Analysis Report

difficulties that regional universities face in meeting student needs as a result of support funding being provided on an EFTSL basis were outlined in RUN's initial submission to the Australian Universities Accord Discussion Paper, and are further argued in Attachment II. An effective needs-based funding model must also take into consideration the fact that equity factors can have a compounding effect when combined, with multiple layers of disadvantage compounding the levels of support required by those students.

### Area of substantive agreement

Consideration of a student-centred needs-based funding model that is sufficient to provide access to high quality higher education and support for students from underrepresented backgrounds.

## Job-ready Graduates (JRG)

RUN concurs with the consensus derived by the Interim Report that JRG has failed to deliver upon many of its intended objectives and has indeed generated unintended outcomes for some providers and student cohorts. As such, RUN supports the Interim Report's conclusion that changes to JRG and the implementation of a new funding model are necessary to avoid long-term and entrenched damage to Australian higher education. In attempting to remedy some of the impacts of JRG, RUN recommends consideration of grandfathering arrangements that may continue to impact current students with disproportionate debt through to their eventual graduation and beyond.

RUN welcomes the holistic approach being taken by the Accord process insofar as reimagining key aspects of our system that were exposed to the influence of the JRG package – student/public split of contributions and subsequent loan repayment provisions, incentivising enrolment aligned to workforce need, base funding, and the true cost of course delivery, and the objectives/distribution of regional loading, among others. RUN welcomes the opportunity provided by the Accord process to contribute its views towards these important aspects of our tertiary system through this submission, under relevant sections. It is important to ensure that the next suite of university funding reform supports students and institutions to achieve increased student participation and success.

### Area of substantive agreement

That changes to JRG and the implementation of a new funding model are necessary.



## Compacts, community funding and funding certainty

RUN universities are supportive of the proposal to recognise and formalise the crucial role individual institutions play in their distinct communities through mission-based compacts. This is particularly important in regional areas, where a considerable diversity of needs, interests, industries, and universities exist between regions.

It is critical to ensure that the establishment and operation of compacts are based on guiding principles with the student and student outcomes at the heart of each compact. For instance, universities must maintain the flexibility and autonomy to define their missions, and have agency to function competitively in local and international markets to meet the needs of students. The quantum of public funding assigned to each university must be sufficient and tailored, to enable each university to pursue its distinctive mission, meet the needs of their students, and allow universities to excel in their area(s) of expertise. Universities have a responsibility to define their socio-economic purposes, and to report publicly on how well they have performed against their own goals and the performance standards expected of them according to a 'report once, use often' reporting framework. In addition, all decision making around agreements and fundings should be open to scrutiny, applying fair and consistent regulations.

Finally, compacts should be structured in a way that encourages long-term planning and provides financial certainty for the life of the compact.

*Regional universities are at the forefront of community engagement and perform pivotal roles in the development and progress of their respective communities.*

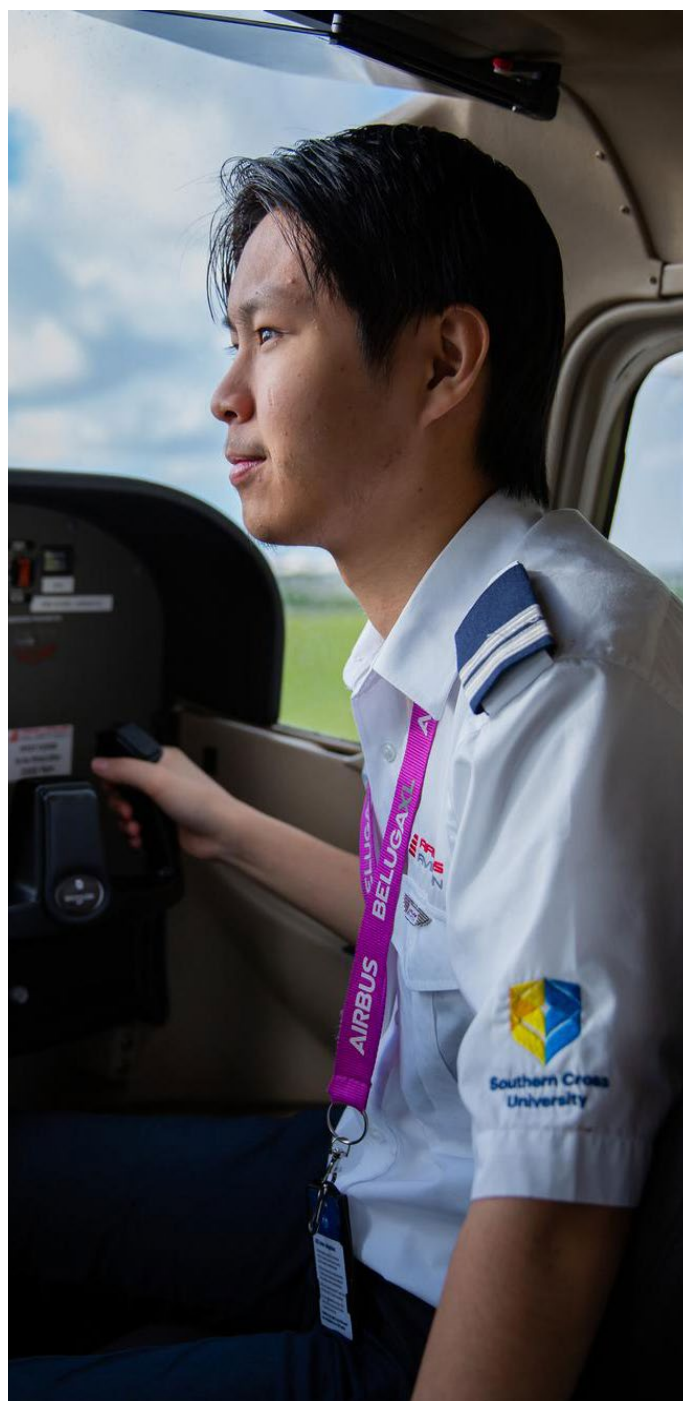
They are deeply embedded in their communities and go beyond the traditional expectations of a university to drive local initiatives and bolster community well-being. To ensure the sustainability of the important work of regional universities, mission-based compacts should detail how institutions will be recognised and funded for their community contributions. To ensure the effectiveness of this focus, there may be value in considering the involvement of key community representatives in compact negotiations. This would ensure that universities receive the recognition deserved and resources needed to play a proactive role in enhancing their communities while maintaining core academic pursuits.

### Area of substantive agreement

A new approach to mission-based compacts that will address future planning, distinctive place-based impact and institutional governance responsibilities.

### Recommendation

To establish a transparent and stakeholder informed framework for creating and monitoring compacts.



## ATTACHMENT V

# Meeting Australia's future skills needs



# ATTACHMENT V

## MEETING AUSTRALIA'S FUTURE SKILLS NEEDS

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### The role of industry and universities in the provision of skills

The Interim Report rightly finds that an increase in Australians holding post-secondary school qualifications is going to be essential for Australia in meeting the skilling challenges of the future. This will include ensuring migration policy settings are correct to attract not only already-skilled migrants, but to attract those with an interest in migrating to Australia for the purposes of their education followed by possible post-graduation migration. This issue is covered Attachment VII. The need to reskill and upskill will increase as the disruptive nature of technological change continues to impact the way Australians live and work. This will be compounded by the changing nature of the Australian economy, i.e. the shift to the green economy or the impact of AI, which will see many Australians needing to change careers or apply their skills in new contexts. As such, the policy settings must be correct to ensure that all Australians will be able to engage in the formal and informal education they require, when they require it. This necessitates a systems approach in aligning skills, migration and immigration settings and tertiary education policy.

Achieving this will require tripartisan coordination involving Government, employers, and tertiary education providers. It is vital that each party plays its part, and will require a nuanced understanding of industry need, Government funding priorities and the nature of a university degree (and the myriad of benefits that it brings beyond technical knowledge alone). There are arguments to be made that this will also require a role for schools, communities, local and State and Territory Governments. The core benefit of a university degree is that it not only teaches specific field of education knowledge, but it also teaches generic skills alongside instilling in a graduate the ability to 'learn how to learn'. It would be far too simplistic to simply view university education as a pathway to a narrowly-defined field of work. In fact, such a view will certainly lead to policy settings that would undermine Australia's workforce's ability to meet the changing nature of work that the future will hold. An unintended consequence of such an action could be graduates who would need increased and more in-depth technical education later in life due to the narrow focus of their studies.

Furthermore, the evidence base for universities not meeting the needs of industry is unfounded. In fact, outcomes from the Employer Satisfaction Survey, Graduate Outcomes Survey, and Student Experience Survey suggest that employers are overwhelming satisfied with graduates and the skills they possess. Graduates overwhelmingly obtain employment post-graduation, and the majority of former students were satisfied with their education experiences. While these positive graduate indicators dipped during the pandemic, this was a unique set of circumstances that impacted all education delivery, globally, and this experience (while unfortunate for the students impacted at the time) has placed the future of Australia's education setting on more secure footing as delivery models were tried, tested and modified to meet the needs of students. This has resulted in an increase in educational engagement and learning opportunities for those studying in hybrid or distance models.

It is important to remember that in producing a well-rounded workforce with a variety of skills, industry has an essential role in taking graduates with a foundational education and shaping and developing them to apply their skills to their specific contexts. Industry hires staff from a variety of contexts based not only on broad competencies, but also on the basis of a potential employee's ability to take their knowledge and apply it to that specific employer's circumstances. And it has always been so. One does not need to search far or hard to find cases of industry being unsatisfied that graduates are apparently not fit for their specific application, ignoring the broader knowledge that graduates bring to the workforce. If the lack of skills were as profound as stated by select industry stakeholders, then one would not expect to see employers so satisfied with university graduates, nor high employment outcomes for graduates.

RUN is broadly supportive, however, of the potential proposal to increase recognition of early exit pathways. This does raise challenges around agreed levels of skill competency for credentialing and creating new barriers for entry to the workplace. There may also be additional complexities for industry in understanding early exit qualifications and how they fit within the broader credentialing environment.

## Micro-credentials

The rapid impact of change will not negate the need for Australians to have the core fundamental educational knowledge that a post-secondary school education provides. This requirement will increasingly become the norm as the needs for skills rapidly evolves in increasingly specialised and smaller models of competency demonstration. This will require broad based fundamental educational attainment to succeed. RUN therefore agrees that micro-credentials and smaller stackable credentials will require industry input into their design, however we do not agree that the role of traditional university undergraduate education should be solely focussed on aligning with the needs of industry. Universities are already embedding industry recognised credentials into existing degree structures improve graduate capability and graduate employability.

### Area of substantive agreement

That micro-credentials and smaller stackable credentials will require industry input in their design and will require a sectoral approach to development, design, and funding.

## Central planning versus student choice

RUN cautions against crude mechanisms to produce graduates in particular fields by limiting student choice, or by limiting the ability of universities to enrol students in fields driven by student choice. Students choose their degrees on a wide range of factors, and evidence suggests they choose degrees aligned to their interests and those that largely fit the evidenced demand for jobs. Take for instance the employment outcomes for graduates from science that are below sector average.<sup>1</sup> In this case, students who have a deep interest in science are likely to choose science as a degree, however an undecided student may also consider the employment outcomes for graduates and choose a field with a more enticing salary or employment outcome. Students are best placed and equipped to make the right decision for them. There is an inherent risk in limiting student choice or limiting the ability of providers to deliver a full range of courses in that it may deter students from higher education study and ultimately, limit the number of graduates to Australia's workforces. The industry of employment vs field of education choices that graduates make should not be viewed so much as a direct correlation, rather it is important to note that graduates bring a wide range of skills, experiences and knowledge that enhances adjacent industries of employment.

Furthermore, there are very few examples where a central control model of place allocation has been successful. This was a common complaint in the pre-demand driven system era of Australia's higher education sector. As such, RUN encourages a degree of caution around the involvement of Jobs and Skills Australia, or of a Tertiary Education Commission, in determining the extent of places to be funded, and the location in which they will be funded. RUN does however agree that the advice and analysis from Jobs and Skills Australia will be important bodies of work for Australia's higher education system, Ministers, the Department of Education, the Regional Education Commissioner, and a possible Tertiary Education Commission.

### Area of substantive agreement

Jobs and Skills Australia, and their analyses, will be important bodies of work in informing sectoral stakeholders.

### Recommendation

The Accord Panel considers carefully how Jobs and Skills Australia, and the Tertiary Education Commission would learn from recent history in the allocation of educational places and ensure no unintended consequences that would undermine Australia's future workforce.



<sup>1</sup>Department of Education, Australian Universities Accord Panel Interim Report accessed at <https://www.education.gov.au/australian-universities-accord/resources/accord-interim-report> on 16 August 2023, p.132

## Increased collaboration

RUN supports the desire of the Accord in increasing university-industry collaboration alongside increasing collaboration with the vocational training sector. However, such a desire must respect university autonomy and recognise that part of a university's autonomy is mission determination, course approval, student mix, admission criteria and research orientation. The other key aspect to increasing collaboration is ensuring alignment between student outcomes, community need and economic necessity. While there is additional work to be done across the sector on the recognition of prior learning (RPL) and establishing transparent pathways between all aspects of the tertiary education sector, this should not restrict or lessen university autonomy. Universities utilise a broad range of approaches to ensure their pedagogies are fit for purpose. These approaches include the use of professional accreditation, internal and external benchmarking, and of course utilising the latest in research in producing research informed teaching.

### Area of substantive agreement

Increasing university-industry collaboration and university-VET collaboration.

### Recommendation

Investigating how to improve RPL and exploring how to recognise micro-credentials across the sector.



## Placements, WIL and the Job Broker

RUN is pleased to see the Interim Report's acknowledgement of the issues impacting students, particularly regional students, in accessing mandatory placements.

*The costs of mandatory placements and residential schools embedded within many courses act as a particularly significant financial barrier for regional students.*

The cost of mandatory placements is likewise a cost impost for universities. For many regional students the cost of travel, accommodation, and lost earnings associated with extended periods of unpaid placement requirements and residential schools can simply be incompatible with participation or successful completion, particularly for low SES and/or other equity cohorts, or students studying part time with existing employment and/or care-giver responsibilities. As a result, students in regional Australia often face higher financial and personal/family costs of study, compared to the experiences of other student cohorts. Without these prohibitive financial constraints being adequately addressed the role of the Job Broker will be critically undermined in its role.

### Area of substantive agreement

There needs to be focus on improving the accessibility of placements and work integrated learning to students, especially in regional areas where placement availability increases student costs.

### Recommendation

Develop a framework for the National Jobs Broker to ensure it is fit for purpose and can deliver upon its mission.

## ATTACHMENT VI

Excellence in learning,  
teaching, and student  
experience.



# ATTACHMENT VI

## EXCELLENCE IN LEARNING, TEACHING, AND STUDENT EXPERIENCE

RUN universities are proud of the unique student experiences they provide, and the excellence in learning and teaching they promote, especially noting the strong equity focus of RUN's student cohorts. It is not surprising that regional universities often lead the country in terms of graduate and employer satisfaction, graduate outcomes and starting salaries.<sup>1</sup> RUN celebrates this excellence and further encourages it through collaborative initiatives such as the RUN Learning and Teaching Showcase (now in its second year of operation, demonstrating, sharing and celebration excellence across the RUN network), and the RUN Learning and Teaching Awards (which rewards innovation in teaching and learning pedagogy while simultaneously showcasing excellence in learning and teaching at regional universities). Regional universities in particular have long been regarded as world-leaders in the provision of distance and online education which have been innovations that have enabled many students to overcome the significant geographical changes faced in regional Australia.

RUN is pleased to see there is a keen focus on excellence in learning, teaching and the student experience within the Interim Report. RUN supports the proposal to launch a competitive funding program to better promote and share learning and teaching excellence. RUN members are eager to participate in this program, and to share their experiences in pursuing excellence in teaching and learning as it relates to underrepresented cohorts, in the context of meeting population parity targets.

### Area of substantive agreement

Launching a competitive funding program across multiple institutions (universities and TAFEs) with material produced to be available under open access.

However, RUN does not support the establishment of a National Learning and Teaching Committee. RUN would consider this a largely unnecessary and resource-intensive venture. The resourcing and focus directed towards this committee would be better utilised by recognising, supporting and promoting best

practice already occurring within the sector such as funding the Australian Awards for University Teaching (AAUT).

### Area of substantive disagreement

Establishing a National Learning and Teaching Committee (within the Tertiary Education Commission).

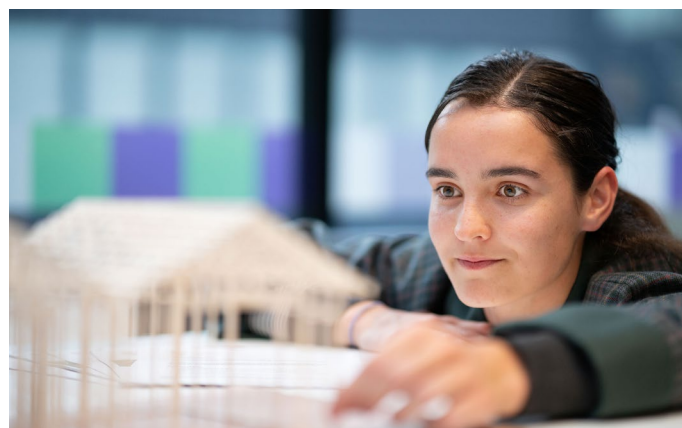
While RUN universities believe there is merit in rewarding institutions that are taking a leadership role in learning and teaching, and fostering excellence and improved performance across the sector, RUN wishes to ensure that this would be an additional reward based upon a clearly defined and transparent excellence framework.

### Area of substantive agreement

There needs to be focus on improving the accessibility of placements and work integrated learning to students, especially in regional areas where placement availability increases student costs.

### Recommendation

Develop a framework for the National Jobs Broker to ensure it is fit for purpose and can deliver upon its mission.



<sup>1</sup> Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching, accessed at: <https://www.qilt.edu.au/> on 16 August 2023.

## ATTACHMENT VII

# International students



# ATTACHMENT VII

## INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

### International Student Fee levy

RUN acknowledges the compelling need to grow the quantum of funding that supports the diverse activities of Australia's tertiary sector into the future, particularly in core areas such as research and tertiary infrastructure. However, the mechanism proposed by the Interim Report to achieve this growth in funding for infrastructure and/or research, a levy on international student fees, is not supported by RUN.

The little detail provided by the Interim Report about the proposal does not adequately define the explicit purpose of such a levy, nor how such a levy may be applied, redistributed or safeguarded against political interference. RUN holds concerns about the impacts a new taxation mechanism may have on the competitiveness of Australia's international student industry, the tens of thousands of Australians that it employs, or to what extent the levy may erode the perception of Australia as an attractive destination for international students.

RUN holds concerns that fundamental aspects of our tertiary system (such as the surety of research and infrastructure funding) may find itself at the mercy of uncontrollable and unforeseeable volatilities in the international student market (such as currency fluctuations, border closures, disruptions to normative aviation, international trade disputes, natural disaster, etc.). RUN notes the Interim Report highlights the "unhealthy degree to which core research capability in Australia's universities is (already) funded through volatile international education revenue" and the need to reduce "the extent to which core higher education functions rely on funding from insecure income streams and decreasing the extent of cross-subsidisation throughout the system." RUN would agree with this assessment in the context of considering a levy on international student fees.

Furthermore, RUN questions the logic of a 'collect now, hold as insurance' approach to funding future priorities when there are obvious and unsustainable pressures on institutional resourcing occurring

today. RUN would urge the Accord Panel to consider alternative solutions.

### Area of substantive disagreement

The application of a levy upon international student fees.

### Recommendation

That the proposal for a levy applied to international students be removed from consideration as part of the Accord process.

### Fair share for the regions

International students generate profound social, cultural, and economic benefits to Australia. International students bring diverse, global perspectives to our university classrooms, enhancing the extent to which our own domestic students and workforces become informed, engaged, and connected members of the global community.

*Australia's reputation as a safe, welcoming, and highly regarded international student destination has also resulted in the growth of a national intellectual export industry worth \$31.6 billion from March 2022 until March 2023<sup>1</sup>, supporting almost a quarter of a million local jobs.<sup>2</sup>*

However, the benefits of Australia's engagement with international students via our higher education system is poorly distributed, and unsustainably concentrated within metropolitan Australia.

Despite regional Australia hosting many world class universities, just three and a half per cent of onshore international students (year-to-date December 2022)

<sup>1</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, Balance of Payments and International Investment Position, Australia, Table 8. Services Credits, accessed at: <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/economy/international-trade/balance-payments-and-international-investment-position-australia/latest-release> on 15 August 2023.

<sup>2</sup> Universities Australia, International Students Boost Australian Jobs, Growth & Global Ties, June 2019, accessed at: <https://www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au/media-item/international-students-boost-australian-jobs-growth-global-ties/> on 15 August 2023.

attended a regional campus.<sup>3</sup> As such, regional cohorts who comprise the highest proportions of underrepresented groups targeted by the parity objectives of the Interim Report are far less likely to benefit from the global perspectives and diversity of an internationalised classroom. Likewise, regional universities find themselves more disconnected from the international cohorts who concentrate within our major cities, further compounding the equity dilemma between metropolitan and regional institutions. Regional economies too – particularly small-to-medium enterprises seeking to grow their export capacity – face reduced potential to globalise their businesses via diminished access to regionally-based international graduates.

In its initial submission to the Australian Universities Accord discussion Paper, RUN put forward several sensible, practical recommendations designed to incentivise greater numbers of international students towards regional communities and regional universities. These recommendations sought not only to provide more equitable experiences for regional students, and more equitable benefits from international students for regional institutions, but would also represent an important advantage towards regional Australia's efforts to relieve skills shortages via skills-based migration. RUN was disappointed to see that the subsequent Interim Report did not acknowledge the maldistribution of international students between metropolitan and regional Australia, despite the obvious opportunities that regional incentivisation would deliver to the regions and to the underrepresented cohorts who reside there.

### **Area of substantive disagreement**

The lack of any specific focus or mechanism that seeks to grow regional Australia's share of international student cohorts.

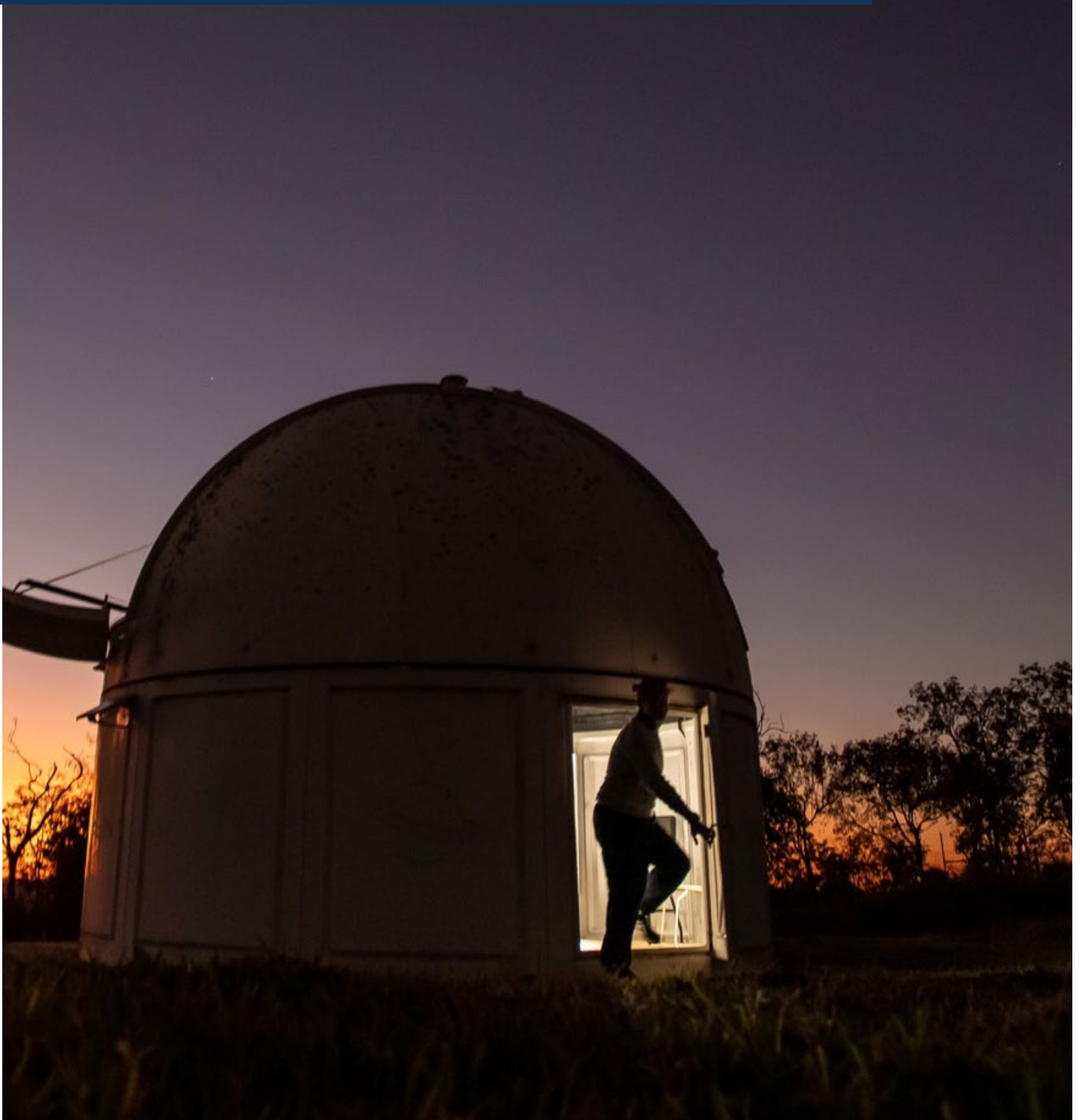
### **Recommendation**

Apply differential policy to incentivise international education in regional Australia.

<sup>3</sup> Department of Education, International student enrolment and commencement data by ABS SA4, accessed at: <https://www.education.gov.au/international-education-data-and-research/international-student-enrolment-and-commencement-data-abs-sa4>. Accessed on 25 August 2023

## ATTACHMENT VIII

# Research innovation and research training



# ATTACHMENT VIII

## RESEARCH INNOVATION AND RESEARCH TRAINING

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RUN welcomes the Interim Report's recognition that Australia is in need of additional PhDs. The Interim Report correctly concludes that the existing PhD stipend is inadequate and a significant deterrent to Australia's best and brightest undertaking a PhD. The current stipend is not competitive with graduate starting salaries and is well below minimum wage. Combined with a period of increased cost of living pressures and low unemployment, it is no surprise that domestic PhD enrolments have been falling. To that end RUN supports increasing the PhD stipend.

### Area of substantive agreement

Increasing PhD stipend rates to make it more competitive industry and public sector salaries.

### Recommendation

the Accord Panel explore additional funding mechanisms for equity students that increase the attractiveness of PhD study

To increase the benefits of Australia's research knowledge stock, RUN commends the Interim Report for recognising the need to increase the number of First Nations PhD students as well as those with a disability and from low SES backgrounds. This will require a nuanced understanding of the needs of each equity cohort and the need for uniquely developed support strategies.

As well as ensuring that all Australians have access to the highest levels of learning no matter their background, a PhD cohort that truly reflects the diversity of backgrounds, experience and perspectives of all Australians will result in research that will be more inclusive, holistic, innovative and relevant. The cost pressures that students face when taking on higher research degrees are amplified for equity cohorts. The opportunity cost of foregoing full-time employment, which can be prohibitive for all students, is even more pronounced for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Also, students in regional, rural and remote Australia face additional barriers due to their location, including the cost and time burden of travelling to conferences and research facilities that are not present in regional areas.





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