

## REGIONAL UNIVERSITIES NETWORK (RUN) – SUBMISSION TO HOUSE SELECT COMMITTEE ON REGIONAL AUSTRALIA

### RESPONSES TO WRITTEN QUESTIONS ON NOTICE

***Q.1 In your submission, you say that there is an “opportunity to better recognise the place-based importance of regional universities, including in regional development policy and programs”. Could you elaborate on this?***

Regional universities are fundamental to growing regional economies and promoting their sustainability. As anchor institutions in their regions, RUN universities have a unique and critical role. Without our campuses, the economy of relevant regional towns would be severely diminished. However, in Australia, the contribution of regional universities to the regions has largely not been recognised in regional development policy and funding.

Regional development policies are “place-based”. That is, policy interventions are tailored to suit distinct environments in recognition that policy and funding frameworks that aren’t tailored to local circumstances do not deliver for all.<sup>1</sup>

With the exception of the regional loading for higher education delivery at regional campuses, and some loading for regional students in the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program, higher education policy is largely “one size fits all” i.e. in general, there is no particular recognition in it of the unique contribution that regional universities make to regional Australia, and the need to significantly lift higher education attainment in the regions.

The National Regional Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy is a place-based, education initiative which, if implemented, would go some way to addressing the issue. However, sufficient funding required for university infrastructure is unlikely to be available via the education portfolio – the former Education Investment Fund no longer exists.

Regional university infrastructure is important to improve research capacity, engagement and partnership with regional industry, and to provide social benefit to towns. A very large proportion of the users and beneficiaries of university assets – libraries, pools, gymnasiums, sporting arenas, events spaces, galleries, hospitality and retail outlets – are members of the public with no direct affiliation with the institution. Universities are also central to providing health and sporting

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<sup>1</sup> June 1, 2017, Caroline Perkins, The Conversation, *Regional Universities have a pivotal role to play in Australia’s city Deals.*

infrastructure and many of these same facilities function as disaster relief infrastructure in the greatest times of need e.g. bushfires and floods.

Despite the inclusion of regional universities in some city deals <sup>2</sup>, regional universities are largely ineligible to apply for regional development funds e.g. the Building Better Regions Fund. There is therefore a need to see regional universities as part of the regional development framework and to give them access to regional development funding.

***Q.2 In your submission, you suggest that a Regional, Rural and Remote (RRR) Commissioner who work across government to unblock barriers and follow up on the RRR Strategy released by the Minister for Education.***

***a. Could you elaborate on how you see this role operating, and what regional universities would get out of it.***

RUN strongly supports appointing a National RRR Education Commissioner to work across government to unblock barriers and follow up on implementing the National RRR Tertiary Education Strategy.

As in the case of the National Regional Health Commissioner, a National RRR Education Commissioner, appointed for longer than election cycle, would provide regional universities and their communities with a national focus on the issue of RRR education. The RRR Education Commissioner would be a champion for issues relating to regional education, and provide advice on the coordination of policy across portfolios and jurisdictions. The relevant person would, ideally, report to both the Ministers for Education and Regional Development, to better embed regional education in regional development policy.

We support the following functions of the Commissioner. To:

- report annually on progress with implementing the National RRR Tertiary Education Strategy and tertiary education participation and outcomes in RRR areas;
- be a champion for RRR education, keeping the issues at the forefront of government and the public and articulating relevance to broader policy and the national benefit;
- work closely and engage strategically with peak RRR parent, student and community bodies, universities and regional universities and TAFE/training bodies;
- bring together education-related and other relevant policy efforts across governments and communities to ensure connection and information sharing between initiatives (joined up approaches), including advocacy and sharing of emerging issues and best practice;
- provide advice on regional development issues by working with stakeholders to build partnerships and enhance the contribution of tertiary education to regional development;
- advocate RRR investment and philanthropy as a means of developing national social cohesion, economic development and nation building; and
- support RRR communities and industries to engage with universities to identify and deliver relevant research opportunities that support health, social, educational and economic development.

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<sup>2</sup> June 1, 2017, Caroline Perkins, The Conversation, *Regional Universities have a pivotal role to play in Australia's city Deals.*

***b. Could you comment on whether there is a lack of coordination currently, and what impact this has had on your network?***

Currently, there is a lack of coordination in some policy areas between different levels of government, and across portfolios, that has impacted on both regional universities and their communities.

A significant example is with respect teacher training policy. A report, *Secondary Teacher Education: A View from the Regions*, written for RUN by KPMG<sup>3</sup>, documents that the existing shortage of secondary teachers in RRR Australia is about to get worse, due to growing school student numbers in NSW, Qld and Victoria, and graduation rates and enrolments declining at our universities. Perceptions of declining prestige, recognition, and future career prospects, and a focus on ATARs, particularly at the state level, have all been detrimental.

Consistent policy interventions across jurisdictions and across the various parts of education portfolios are urgently required to address the situation. With fewer teachers working in RRR Australia, the educational disparity between the regions and capital cities, including with respect to year 12 completions as well as higher education participation and attainment, will further grow. A National RRR Education Commissioner could help coordinate a national response with focus on the teaching workforce which could include: encouraging student uptake of teacher education; addressing the shortage of specialist teachers and reconceptualising admission standards for teacher education programs.

Another relevant policy area is that of increasing the numbers of international students studying in the regions and migration to regional Australia. Actions such as priority visa processing, and improvements in arrangements for advantageous post study work rights and permanent residency points for individuals who wish to study and work in regional Australia should be prioritised. A National RRR Education Commissioner could assist in coordination across portfolios and jurisdictions.

***Q.3. Could you comment on your own university's experience and perspective in its region?***

***a. What role does the university have in its region?***

Charles Sturt University

Charles Sturt fulfils multiple roles in the regions in which it operates. In addition to training a substantial part of the regional workforce, especially in the professions, the university has a substantial economic impact in regional NSW, and plays a significant community leadership role.

A recent example is Charles Sturt's involvement in local efforts to support recovery from the coronavirus pandemic. The University is represented on the regional recovery committees in the areas around the Bathurst, Dubbo, Orange, Port Macquarie and Wagga Wagga campuses. In some cases, Charles Sturt was instrumental in the establishment of the committee. In the last month,

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<sup>3</sup> 2019, Report for RUN by KPMG *Secondary Teacher Education: A View from the Regions*.

<http://www.run.edu.au/resources/Secondary%20Teacher%20Education%20A%20View%20From%20the%20Regions,%20KPMG%20report%20for%20RUN.pdf>

three Mid North Coast councils – Port Macquarie-Hastings, Kempsey<sup>4</sup> and Bellingen – have joined forces with Charles Sturt to train a network of local community leaders to help the region’s recovery from bushfires, floods, drought and COVID-19. The three councils will fund scholarships<sup>5</sup> for council employees and local community members to study subjects from Charles Sturt’s Graduate Certificate in Community Leadership and Resilience<sup>6</sup>.

### CQUniversity

CQUniversity is the only Australian university with a campus presence in every mainland state, including a significant regional presence in Queensland and Western Australia. The university plays a significant role in supporting every community in which it operates, through education and training the regional workforce, collaborating with local industry on research, and being a major regional employer.

CQUniversity is entrusted with a regional mission and plays an active role in the development of the economic, social and culture of surrounding communities.

As a leader in local and online education, CQUniversity understands the complexities of accessing high-quality education and research in regional and remote Australia. It has designed its geographically dispersed footprint specifically to support the needs of local communities with local campuses and study centres that bring educational opportunity closer to regional communities.

It is also a driver for local growth and prosperity, regional innovation, and a catalyst for regional development. Its campuses are regional hubs, providing access to and disseminating information and knowledge. It spearheads projects and transform lives.

Similarly, its partners and communities play crucial roles by helping in the delivery of education and research services that are matched to the requirements of students and graduates, their employers, local industry, government and others.

### Federation University Australia

Federation University operates across Victoria in the Wimmera, Ballarat, Berwick and Gippsland. It also has a campus in Brisbane, Queensland. As a dual sector provider, Federation offers trades training, VET and higher education to around 24,000 students. In addition, Federation educates international students from across the world, who live and work in our communities and contribute to the diversity of our campuses and regional locations. Graduates from Federation are employed in regional and rural hospitals, welfare services, schools, businesses, government and environmental agencies. The university employs almost 2,000 staff (fulltime and casual) and also operates Technology Parks in Ballarat and Morwell which provide over 2,000 additional jobs through 60 enterprises. Federation has an important role in undertaking regionally relevant research that contributes to improving health, quality of life, the environment and economic development. The university is a key partner and stakeholder in community and regional development and works collaboratively to achieve its mission of transforming lives and enhancing communities.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.macleayargus.com.au/story/6781474/managing-adversity-kempsey-links-with-university/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://about.csu.edu.au/community/scholarships/mid-north-coast-community-leadership-and-resilience-network-scholarship>

<sup>6</sup> Charles Sturt University media release – <https://news.csu.edu.au/latest-news/port-macquarie-hastings-kempsey-and-bellingen-councils-unite-with-charles-sturt-for-crisis-recovery>

### University of New England (UNE)

UNE was Australia's first regional university with a founding mission to help its communities and industry partners adapt to a changing world. UNE remains driven by its commitment to rural communities and regional educational frameworks targeted at social and economic opportunity. The university, together with its partners, has made a substantial impact on Australia's regional economic growth e.g. Australia's livestock industries, and the related resilience and wellbeing of its communities.

As an example, and in particular in relation to Australia's livestock industries, UNE was instrumental in developing a world-first beef grading system, now commercialised by Meat & Livestock Australia as MSA (Meat Standards Australia), with the strategic imperative to be able to supply more consistent quality beef to market (later expanded to also include sheep meat). Based on numbers of beef cattle graded through MSA, the cumulative retail-level economic benefit of MSA to 2010/11 was estimated to be around \$523 million, with an annual benefit of about \$77 million. Since then, both cattle and sheep numbers graded through MSA have continued to increase exponentially, with 3.1 million cattle and 5.3 million lambs being MSA-graded over a recent period, thereby significantly increasing the 2011 estimates of the impact of MSA, with an estimated additional \$153 million in annual farm-gate returns, improving the profitability of farming enterprises and enhancing the economic resilience of regional communities.

#### ***b. Do students tend to stay local after they have graduated?***

Information on the proportion of graduates working in regional areas from six RUN universities (excluding Charles Sturt University, which joined the network after the relevant investigation was undertaken), is included in the publication *Jobs and Productivity Effects of the Regional Universities Network*.<sup>7</sup> In general, around 7 out of 10 of RUN graduates work in regional Australia, compared to 2 out of 10 university graduates nationally.

#### CQUniversity

More than 90% of CQUniversity students who studied at a regional campus, or who lived regionally and studied by distance, are still living in the regions.

#### Charles Sturt University

At Charles Sturt, on average, 80% of on-campus students, and 75% of online students, go on to work in rural, regional and remote areas.

#### Federation University Australia

While on average just under 70% of Federation University graduates are employed locally, for teaching and nursing graduates at the Ballarat, Gippsland and Berwick campuses the proportion is even higher.

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<sup>7</sup> 2018, Nous, Jobs and Productivity of the Regional Universities Network, <http://www.run.edu.au/resources/RUN%20Jobs%20and%20productivity%20report%20final.pdf>, p.3-4.

Around 60% of IBM's workforce in Ballarat graduated from the university's Bachelor of IT (Professional Practice).

***c. What more would you like to be able to do to support your regional community?***

Regional universities are deeply engaged in their communities and this is central to their mission and strategic planning. However, the current funding model limits the extent to which universities can allocate resources to engagement. With greater funding recognition of their critical role as anchor institutions in their communities, regional universities would be able to do more, e.g. sustained outreach to engage young people in post-secondary education, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders; research to address regional issues; and joint planning with local government.

CQUniversity is committed to cementing its status as Queensland's first and only dual sector university by continuing to create pathways between trades training and higher education, in a way that reflects industry needs and workforce demand in the regions.

CQUniversity is also committed to creating opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in regional Australia. That includes higher attraction, retention and completion rates for Indigenous students; more Indigenous PhD candidates; higher levels of Indigenous staff; and more research, engagement and social innovation partnerships with First Nations people.

Federation University is working with key stakeholders to establish Ballarat as a university city, where big transformative ideas can be pursued through a shared vision.

***Q. 4 In your submission, you suggest that agencies could be decentralised to be located near a regional university. Could you tell the Committee more about how you see this working? What types of agencies would work best for each university?***

Given the research profile of our universities, agencies related to agriculture, health and technology are the most relevant to be located near university campuses.

Charles Sturt University

The new \$6 million Equine Isolation Facility at the Charles Sturt University's Wagga Wagga campus could support the work of government agencies with a technical focus.

Federation University Australia

GovHub in Ballarat is a new decentralised government services facility creating some 600 jobs. Federation University is working in partnership to support the professional and training needs of the workforce that will be relocated.

Federation has partnered with IBM in Ballarat at its Technology Park for over 20 years to deliver work integrated learning for its Bachelor of IT Professional Practice course.

The new Gippsland Hi-Tech Precinct in Morwell is hosted by Federation University to create a centre for research, business incubation, new product development, start-up support, and education and training. It will support the growth of local industry and play an important role in expanding the region's growth sectors e.g. health, food and fibre, advanced manufacturing and new energy.

***Q.5 Could you comment on the type of research and study undertaken at regional universities, and comment on the value of this work to the nation?***

**Research**

General comments

The research undertaken at RUN universities is focused on areas of importance to our communities, is internationally recognised, applied and performed in close partnership with the users of the research.

We have a unique contribution to make in research relevant to regional Australia and therefore the nation – embedded in regional Australia, our research has a unique and important perspective on issues of key national importance such as:

- Agriculture, land and farm management; animal production; crop and pasture production; forestry sciences; geochemistry; geology; oceanography; environmental science and management; soil science; ecology;
- Health and mental health in regional Australia; human movement and sports science; nursing; complementary and alternative medicine; psychology and cognitive sciences; and
- Digital analytics.

Some example of our applied research are included in the publication RUN Women in Science, Technology and Engineering in Regional Australia<sup>8</sup>. These include protecting human and animal health, enticing young people to careers in agriculture; using micro-technology in sports science; combating disease in plants and animals; investigating ocean pollution; and supporting management of the Murray-Darling Basin etc.

Our network has recently agreed to collaborate across the following research themes: food and crops for the future; health and wellbeing in regional, rural and remote Australia; and new industries.

Charles Sturt University

Australian Research Council evaluations of research at Charles Sturt University has been show that it is high quality, high impact, and highly engaged with industry and the community. The University's research is above or well above world standard in physical sciences, environmental sciences, agricultural and veterinary sciences, pedagogy and ethics, and has demonstrable impact on policy and practice in ecosystem management, aged care, Indigenous cultures, childhood literacy, and community resilience, among other fields.

Examples of research focused on RUN themes includes:

- The Murrumbidgee Monitoring, Evaluation and Research (MER) Program, which monitors and evaluates the ecological outcomes of Commonwealth environmental watering actions in part of the Murray-Darling Basin. The project helps to build knowledge about the best way to improve

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<sup>8</sup> 2019 RUN Women in Science, Technology and Engineering in Regional Australia, <http://www.run.edu.au/RUN-women-in-STEM-2019>

the health of the rivers and wetlands of the Basin. Charles Sturt is also part of the Long Term Intervention Monitoring Project for the Edward-Wakool river system.

- The Fish Ecology Collaborative Research Unit provides a hub for collaborative research into conservation, environmental management and freshwater fisheries management. This includes influencing public awareness, management and conservation of fish populations and aquatic ecosystems through the dissemination of science.
- The National Grape and Wine Industry Centre is undertaking work on the detection and management of grapevine pathogens. This research, funded by the Grape and Wine Research and Development Corporation, involves the development of practical solutions for the management of grapevine trunk diseases so as to minimise their impact on a key Australian export industry.

More recently, and in response to the coronavirus pandemic, Charles Sturt committed \$200,000 of its own funds to an internal grant scheme to support projects intended to help regional communities cope with, and recover from, the impacts of the pandemic. The 11 projects funded through this program address issues like health care, including mental health; disruptions to children's education; assessing the effectiveness of containment measures; and designing privacy and security features for contact tracing apps like the Australian Government's COVIDSafe. All of the projects will be complete by the end of 2020, so the results and findings can inform regional recovery efforts

#### CQUniversity

CQUniversity has an applied research focus, which means achieving real impact for communities and stakeholders. It aims to achieve complete relevance in its research efforts through strong links with industry, government and communities, as well as through close collaboration with national and international researchers and research networks. From agriculture to health, its research institutes and centres facilitate activity that involves our stakeholders and in turn makes a tangible impact to end-users.

CQUniversity places a focus on research that will deliver solutions to complex challenges. In particular, research is focused on regional development, growth in resource industries, environmental management, healthcare and health promotion in regional and remote communities, social and human development, and equity and education delivery. The engaged research agenda is vitally important because, more so than ever before, universities have a crucial role to play in influencing the growth, success and prosperity of Australia. They also have a specific responsibility to find innovative, sustainable, and accessible solutions to the complex economic, social, and environmental challenges currently impacting the world around us. Working with end users to understand problems and uncover solutions sets CQUniversity apart when it comes to the delivery of real-world research.

#### Federation University Australia

Federation University's research is focused on three priority areas with regional, national and international relevance: health and wellbeing, society and the environment, and virtual, digital and computational environments.

Examples of major recent programs include: to improve the mental health and wellbeing of residential aged care workers through digital monitoring, funded by Worksafe Victoria; Interpreting Health Information and Low Value Care using Data Science Techniques with the



Digital Health CRC; Visualising Australasia's Soils project with the Soil CRC; Ensuring long-term survival of 'Halosarcia Lylei' in Low-open Shrubland funded by the NSW Office of Environment and Heritage.

### University of New England

UNE is renowned for its expertise in regional communities and industries, as well its enduring commitment to supporting the people, culture and environment that sustain them. Maximising the translation of knowledge into community benefits is the focus of this strategy. Collaboration is seen as one of the most powerful catalysts for achieving this. By expanding its partnerships, UNE aims to enhance its reach in the community, and to promote, support and participate in adoption and innovation amongst our stakeholders. UNE also understand that the challenges facing our communities continue to grow in scale and complexity. Significant societal challenges — such as environmental degradation, rural suicide, declining agricultural productivity, drought and social exclusion — require multifaceted strategies and input from a range of expertise if they are to be successful.

As an example, UNE's Ecohealth program delivers a collaborative approach to integrating science, management and communication of river health to communities in NSW North Coast catchments. The development of the program by UNE's Aquatic Ecology and Restoration Research Group (AERRG) was facilitated through effective partnership with the Northern Rivers Catchment Management Authority (now North Coast Local Land Services; NCLLS) in conjunction with staff from the Coastal and Estuaries Section, Regional Operations Division Office of NSW OEH, and major regional natural resource management stakeholders. The delivery of the program involves ongoing collaboration with a technical reference group and an advisory committee. The program has been adopted by 17 Local Government Areas (LGA) on the North Coast of NSW to provide a scientifically robust, co-ordinated and standardised monitoring and reporting program for waterways in the Northern Rivers. Ecohealth's quality assured sampling regime, that uses the health of ecosystem components to indicate stressors, has informed State government policy revision and development, and enabled LGAs to prioritise on-ground management activities, and develop investment planning that builds on reliable data.

Our interdisciplinary health and medical research represents a range of disciplines: biomedical sciences; stress and depression; social work; mental health; clinical and health psychology.

A key focus is health and wellbeing in rural communities: social exclusion, health inequity, mental health, social policy. UNE staff have contributed to the National Mental Health Commission and UN reports on rural mental health and suicide. UNE is the founding host of the national network on rural health, 'SPINIFEX' and launched the new virtual hospital network for New England (NEViHN).

### **Teaching and Learning (Study)**

The RUN universities teach around 160,000 students, or about 10 per cent of enrolments at Australian universities<sup>9</sup>. Our universities offer courses from ranging from enabling and sub-degree to PhDs. Courses cover a comprehensive range of disciplines and include education, nursing, business

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<sup>9</sup> 2019, RUN <http://www.run.edu.au/index.php>

and IT, allied health, medicine, science, engineering, agriculture, environmental science, hospitality, and creative arts.

Two RUN universities, CQUniversity and Federation University Australia, are dual sector, and deliver vocational education and training courses as well as higher education.

Charles Sturt University offers a number of courses with hands-on experience including industry placements. The University's new, innovative and world-leading engineering degree was developed in response to community and industry needs, and has been implemented in partnership with employers across regional NSW and beyond. The program three semesters of on-campus, problem based learning followed by a four years of combined on-line learning and paid cadetships in regional firms. The university's innovative approach led MIT to include Charles Sturt as one of the four 'emerging leader' case studies in a 2018 report, *The Global State of the Art in Engineering Education*.

Federation University is a new university with a 150 year history. Established in 2014, it brought together the University of Ballarat and Monash University Gippsland.

Federation is known for its quality teaching and graduate employability. It is rated first in Victoria by the *Good University Guide 2020* for teaching quality, full-time graduate employment, starting salary, student support, skills development, overall student experience, first in family and social equity.

***Q.6 In your submission, you refer to place-based initiatives such as city deals. What is the value of place-based operation?***

As outlined in the response to Q.1, place-based initiatives tailor policy interventions to suit distinct environments. They are crafted in recognise that policy and funding frameworks that aren't tailored to local circumstances do not deliver for all.

City deals are a good example of place-based regional development policy. Under the model, stakeholders commit to a shared vision, and development priorities for an area. The resulting program may build on existing regional advantages and business strengths, or seek to develop expertise in areas of growing need. In the UK and Australia, city deals have brought together various levels of government, regional development bodies, universities, industry etc.<sup>10</sup>

For the sake of national cohesion and prosperity, Australia cannot afford to leave regions and regional cities behind. City deals in Australia include those for Launceston, Darwin, Townsville and Western Sydney. Universities are contributing to these deals e.g. the University of Tasmania is relocating a campus to central Launceston as part of the Launceston City Deal; Charles Darwin University is locating a campus in Darwin CBD; CQUniversity and James Cook University are participating in the Townsville City deal; and Western Sydney University is participating in the development of a technology park associated with the new Sydney airport.

We are awaiting future roll out of future city and regional deals with universities playing a key role.

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<sup>10</sup> June 1, 2017 Caroline Perkins, The Conversation, *Regional Universities have a pivotal role to play in Australia's city Deals*.