

Regional Universities Network (RUN) Submission to Senate Select Committee on COVID-19

The Regional Universities Network (RUN) makes the following submission to the Senate Select Committee on COVID-19.

a) the Australian Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

As anchor institutions in their regions, the seven regionally-headquartered universities of the Regional Universities Network (RUN) (Charles Sturt University, CQUniversity, Federation University Australia, Southern Cross University, University of New England, University of Southern Queensland, and University of the Sunshine Coast), have a vital role to play in supporting their communities through the restrictions imposed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and in the recovery period, once the economy starts to come out of “hibernation”.

Our universities are fundamental to growing regional economies, providing regional sustainability, facilitating digital transformation, providing life-long learning and upskilling regional workforces to align with national priorities and goals. They enable a focus on human capital and resources, and contribute to the educational opportunities, economic development, innovation and community capabilities for the more than thirty per cent of Australians who live outside the capital cities.

Seven out of ten graduates from regional universities work in regional Australia, and, commonly, our institutions are the most internationally connected organisations in their regions.

In 2020, RUN universities have been faced with major challenges. We provided crucial support during the bushfire crisis, including supporting students, staff and communities, and emergency services.

The COVID-19 pandemic has posed particular challenges. RUN members and our communities have been impacted to varying degrees by the decline in international student numbers, and the transition to online delivery. The transition to online learning may facilitate higher attrition rates in the first session of 2020, and lower re-enrolment rates for subsequent sessions.

The Higher Education Relief Package, announced by the Minister for Education, The Hon Dan Tehan MP, on 12 April 2020, provides important support for our universities with respect to funding for domestic students during the pandemic. It also provides welcome increased flexibility in use of Commonwealth Grant Scheme (CGS) funding across designated and non-designated places; new short online courses; and some regulatory fee relief.

However, the Commonwealth package does not cover the following:

- hardship support for domestic and international students (currently in Australia) who may have lost casual jobs due to the pandemic, and, in the case of the former, who don't qualify for other government assistance; and
- loss in international student revenue - modelling suggests that Australia's universities face a cumulative loss of between \$10 billion to \$19 billion from 2020-2023 because of the collapse in international student revenue¹.

RUN member universities are providing significant hardship support for domestic and international students in need:

- Federation University Australia has established a Coronavirus Special Assistance Scheme, which may include weekly assistance of up to \$300 per student (for an initial grant of up to five weeks); funding for computer and/or technology assistance for students who are unable to study remotely, accommodation assistance, and student tuition fee due-date extensions.
- The University of Southern Queensland introduced the \$5.2M COVID-19 Student Support Scheme which includes needs-based, personalised financial support for both domestic and international students facing hardship as a result of COVID-19. The Scheme provides students with funds to cover the cost of rent, food and household essentials, assist with unexpected costs of studying online such as purchase of computer, mobile data or Wi-Fi not previously available at place of residence, and assists with the cost of textbooks and other learning support materials where former access has been impacted as a result of COVID-19.
- Charles Sturt University has provided the following support to students in relation to their studies:

Item	Description
Online learning	Transitioned all learning and teaching activity for domestic cohorts to our online-platform for all courses. Where possible, implementation of a face to face virtual model for our international student cohort.
Critical face to face learning	Planning opportunities to bring small cohorts back on to campus for critical face to face learning where this is required, in alignment with the staged lifting of COVID-19 social distancing restrictions.
Workplace Learning	Waiving late enrolment fees to enable students to transfer out of work placement subjects and into other subjects.
Proactive Enrolment	Contacting students proactively to inform them of their options to withdraw their enrolment, take leave of absence, or reduce their study load.
Graduating Students	Raising awareness with students who are preparing to withdraw they may be eligible for a lower (exit) award.
Withdrawals	Extending the withdrawal date without financial or academic impact.
COVID19 Grants	A grant of up to \$500 for full-time students (and pro-rata for part-time students) was offered to current students.
2021 admission criteria	Reviewed 2021 admission criteria to allow current year 12 students who have been disadvantaged by COVID-19 to apply for entry on the basis of their year 11 results.

¹ Peter Hurley and Nina Van Dyke, Australian Investment in Higher Education, 2020, Mitchell Institute.

Item	Description
Residential Schools	The majority of Residential Schools will be delivered on-line or postponed. All out-of-pocket travel costs associated with cancelled or postponed Residential Schools will be refunded.
Higher Degree by Research	All HDR students have been contacted and they are being supported on a case by case basis so that their candidature is not disadvantaged. Support includes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - allowance for the deferral of study until next year (for students commencing in 2020), - flexibles option for enrolments: changing study modes, session of leave or allowance for short periods of leave, - extensions to submit thesis if close to submitting on Census date of first session, with no additional financial charge, - automatic extension being provided to domestic AG RTP full time scholarship holders whose scholarships were going to expire in mid-2021, - on-campus HDR student provided with appropriate support and equipment to continue their project off campus.
Exams	All Session 1 exams will be delivered in an on-line exam style during early June to meet social distancing requirements.
Graduations	August graduation ceremonies have been cancelled to meet social distancing requirements.
Free learning support	All students can access free one-on-one support from academic support advisers and access a free Introduction to Online Learning subject.

Item	Description
Reduced fee courses for Covid-19 affected workers	Student fees for 14 graduate certificates have been reduced as part of the Federal Governments Higher Education Relief package.
Research projects on impact of COVID-19	<p>\$200,000 of university funds to a quick-turnaround research grants program, for projects focused on helping regional communities cope with, and recover from, the impacts of the pandemic.</p> <p>The 11 successful proposals 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.</p> <p>All the projects will be completed up by the end of 2020 so that the results can inform regional communities’ recovery plans.</p>

International students

The loss of international student fees in 2020 is very significant for some of our members e.g. CQUniversity estimates that it will have a reduction of around \$100 million in income from

international students, and Charles Sturt University estimates that it will lose \$64 million in international student revenue this year².

There will be further impact in 2021 and 2022 for all RUN universities with lower numbers of international students continuing in the pipeline from 2020, and, potentially, a lower intake in 2021 and 2022.

The Government needs to work with the sector to encourage international students to return to Australia under conditions which are safe for all. Pilots have been proposed for later in 2020 for some international students to return under Stage 3 restrictions, with health checks pre- and post-arrival, and two weeks quarantine once arriving in Australia. RUN would support a pilot being undertaken in regional Australia. It is hoped that the number of incoming international students can be increased in 2021, under relevant health and safety arrangements.

The issue of post-study work rights for international students studying remotely must be resolved. The time taken for online learning in another jurisdiction (in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic) must be counted towards the two years of required study for post-study work rights.

Universities are also sustaining a loss in revenue from student residential accommodation operating at a much reduced capacity, due to both the decline in domestic and international students living on campus e.g. University of New England estimates a loss of \$30 million in 2020 due to around 4,500 residential students having to move off campus, with the costs related to the upkeep of the infrastructure continuing³.

Support for Sustaining and Rebuilding Regional Communities

We are keen to encourage a Federal Government focus on supporting our regionally-headquartered universities to fully contribute to sustaining and – in time – to rebuilding the communities in which we operate.

Job losses from regional universities have a significant impact on regional communities when there are few alternatives for professional employment locally. It is of critical importance to retain university staff in the regions to train the next generation of professionals to work in regional Australia, including in health care, teaching and agriculture.

Public universities have been effectively excluded from JobKeeper, which would have assisted this year.

A potential way that the Commonwealth Government could help regional universities get through the current crisis and support our employees and communities is via the mechanism already in place to assist the delivery of higher education in the regions - the regional loading.

Regional loading provides additional funding to universities with regional campuses to assist them meet the higher costs associated with those campuses. A doubling of the current funding level of around \$74 m per annum would greatly assist regional universities to manage the impact of COVID-19, particularly in retaining staff in regional locations.

² 21 May, 2020, Regional Universities Network, House of Representatives Select Committee hearing, Inquiry into Regional Australia.

³ 21 May, 2020, Regional Universities Network, House of Representatives Select Committee hearing, Inquiry into Regional Australia.

Implementation of the recommendations and actions from the 2019 National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy would help support regional industry and boost economic development, including targeting our research expertise and capability to align with areas of need in our communities.

Our three priorities for implementation from the strategy are: more university places funded for regional Australia to develop regional human capital; investment in research and in infrastructure that improves research capacity, supports partnerships with regional industry and provides social benefit to towns to address regional challenges; and appointment of a Regional, Rural and Remote Education Commissioner to drive the strategy through a holistic and long-term commitment.