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Regional
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2 November 2022

The Regional Universities Network (RUN) welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Higher Education Standards Panel's *Consultation paper: Next steps on improving the transparency of higher education admissions.*

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. RUN member universities may also make their own submissions to address in detail any specific issues they wish to explore with the discussion paper.

Overview

RUN believes in improving transparency and consistency across the sector to support prospective students' ability to access, consider, and compare details regarding higher education admissions. RUN believes that a strong, accessible, and equitable tertiary sector enables students to pursue their ambitions of higher education, at the institution of their choice, studying the subjects that they want, to work in the careers of their choosing.

RUN's response endorses several of the proposed changes that are considered beneficial for prospective students and/or providers; while also outlining concerns to the proposals that may be burdensome or not generate the intended outcome. RUN commits to working constructively with the Higher Education Standards Panel to provide the data and transparency necessary for informed student choices of tertiary provider.

Inclusion of postgraduate courses

RUN supports the proposed inclusion for two applicant groupings for prospective postgraduate students. The intended benefits not only inform prospective applicants but assist with managing expectations and improving their experience with tertiary education.

RUN is supportive of processes that provide prospective postgraduate students increased clarity regarding their future study options, whether that be progression within current roles or seeking to transition into a new industry or sector. RUN believes that initiatives that will improve the experiences of students at regional universities and enabling them to make informed decisions about their postgraduate studies will be incredibly valuable.

By tailoring and ensuring admissions information is accessible and consistent across the sector, universities can increase awareness about their postgraduate study options. Regional universities have close connections with local industry and the proposed postgraduate groupings could create further opportunities for industry linkages and supporting skills development and training in regional Australia. Greater admissions transparency can contribute to longer-term benefits for the regions – including enabling closer engagement with industry to enable greater upskilling and reskilling of their workforce.

RUN does however caution that there may be challenges associated with ensuring the data currently captured allow universities to identify two segments of postgraduate coursework – completed higher education study, and work/study/life experience. We note that if the information sets are an extension of the already established undergraduate sets, then with minor adjustments this requirement could be met. To ensure greater admissions transparency for prospective postgraduate students, and that implementing the updated information sets is not burdensome on providers, RUN endorses the proposed trials outlined in the implementation timeline.

RUN notes the benefits of providing prospective students with information about the availability of Commonwealth Supported Places (CSP) in postgraduate courses so that students have an informed choice of tertiary provider. RUN universities currently inform prospective students of the availability and allocation of CSPs in postgraduate courses option where it is applicable, such as notifying the prospective student within the offer letter and/or listing. Creating greater consistency across the sector of how this information should be communicated to students would be beneficial. However, publicising the allocation of CSPs may reduce organisational flexibility to respond to student demand. We recommend that institutions signal to students if CSPs are an option for postgraduate courses, for example "CSPs may be available on request".

Overall RUN is supportive of the proposed inclusion of information signalling the availability of CSPs, however would caution against detailing the allocation. It is felt that providing upfront information about whether CSPs are an option for a postgraduate course, allows universities to maintain some flexibility while also enabling students to make informed decisions about their postgraduate study opportunities.

Inclusion of information for international students

RUN universities note the proposed approach of integrating the minimum required admission information to enable course comparisons for international students without creating a separate applicant grouping may be possible at a broad level, as universities already provide minimum required admission information for international students. This includes various mechanisms to translate these to the foreign qualification equivalent.

RUN universities are supportive of separating out different cohorts of international students in the student profile tables on the same applicant grouping basis as domestic students, however, RUN note that it would require significant investment and system changes to support the implementation. It should be noted that if institutions have a diverse international student intake, and this would create more categories to implement and manage. If this approach is adopted, RUN recommends allowing at least 18 months for necessary system changes to be adopted.

RUN acknowledges the increase in transnational education (TNE) arrangements, and notes international offshore online enrolments are evolving. RUN is supportive of increased reporting for offshore students in enrolment profiles to support prospective international students making informed choices between selecting an offshore or onshore course. RUN believes that it is important to compare like for like and thus an "on an equal basis" is mandatory.

RUN is also supportive of the proposal to maintain the exclusion of purely offshore course offerings.

Enhancing the reporting of ATARs for places offered to recent secondary students

While RUN acknowledges the intended benefits to prospective students by including the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) of all recent secondary students offered a place in the ATAR profile table for a course; we are not supportive of the implementation of this approach.

Universities have several school-leaver cohorts such as early offers, recommendation schemes, and international direct entry for which ATAR data is not routinely collected as it is not the basis of admission for those students. Students admitted in such circumstances do adhere to robust entry requirements. Reporting ATARs when it is not a determining factor for admissions, is not an accurate representation of the process for prospective students. Regional universities service vastly different student cohorts to the traditional school leaver cohorts of metropolitan universities with historical characteristics of inequity and disadvantage, who require complex and resource-

intensive support to succeed. These students are often admitted on the basis other than ATAR so the reporting of ATARs for the purpose of transparency may create a misleading perception of the admissions requirements for these courses at regional institutions.

Universities do not routinely collect ATAR information from admissions where it is not a determining factor. If this is adopted, RUN is concerned by the prospective administrative burden that the systems change to reporting would involve. Given the extra workload involved and that the information reported would not be reflective of the admissions process, RUN is not supportive of adopting this approach in the proposed format.

Overall feedback on admissions transparency initiatives
To support prospective students' ability to find and access information regarding higher education admissions, RUN endorses the standardisation of information across providers. RUN is also supportive of the agreed common terminology definitions and information specifications as described in the consultation paper. If implemented, the examples provided in the consultation paper appear easy to navigate; however, RUN encourages the review and consideration of stakeholder feedback from the initial trials proposed for 2023. There may be reduced benefits to implementing this initiative if providers are publishing the same admissions information, but it is not accessible in a consistent or uniform format for prospective students. RUN recommends the Higher Education Standards Panel provide direction to providers by standardising where they publish their admissions information to ensure consistency and accessibility as part of this process.