

25 July 2025

The Regional Universities Network (RUN) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the consultation phase of The Treasury's Economic Reform Roundtable. RUN supports the submission being made to this consultation process by Universities Australia, and those submissions made by RUN's individual member universities.

RUN is a national collaborative group of seven world-class 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 the communities which RUN universities serve; the one-third of Australians who today live outside of metropolitan centres in regional, rural, and remote locations.

Australia's regions are a powerhouse of national economic activity. Today, regional economies account for over one-third of national economic output, more than one-third of Australia's total skilled workforce, and approximately two-thirds of sovereign export wealth¹. Australia's regions are also experiencing strong population growth, hosting more than 36 per cent of Australia's total population – a 6.3 per cent growth since 2019 – with more Australians currently relocating from capital cities to the regions than vice versa². Yet despite this historic economic impact and population growth, regional Australia exhibits significant and persistent inequities when compared to metropolitan Australia in terms of tertiary education outcomes and the development of high-skilled workforces.

The Australian Universities Accord Final Report highlighted the fact that regional Australians are almost half as likely to obtain a university degree by age 35 than metropolitan Australians, with this disparity being characterised as 'long-term and stubborn'³. Indeed, if regional Australia were viewed as its own country, it would rank 35th of 38 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries for bachelor degree attainment by age 35, while metropolitan Australia would rank 8th^{4,5}. This disparity widens even further when considering the proportions of research-trained (higher degree) attainments between regional and metropolitan Australians.

- 1 Regional Australia Institute. (2022). Rebalancing the Nation, Regionalisation Consultation Paper. Accessed via: <https://rebalancethenation.com.au/common/Uploaded%20files/Files/Regionalisation-Consultation-Paper-DIGITAL.pdf> on 3 June 2025
- 2 Regional Australia Institute. (2025). Regional Movers Index March 2025 Quarter Report. Accessed via: www.region-alaustralia.org.au/common/Uploaded%20files/Files/2025/Regional%20Movers%20Index/RMI%20March%2025%20Quarter%20Report.pdf on 3 June 2025.
- 3 Australian Government. (2023). Australian Universities Accord Final Report. Accessed via: <https://www.education.gov.au/australian-universities-accord/resources/final-report> on 4 June 2025.
- 4 Australian Bureau of Statistics, Education and Work, Table 34 Australia, May 2022
- 5 OECD.Stat, Educational Attainment and Labour-Force Status [Data Set]

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Australia's most pressing sovereign challenges and opportunities of the 21st century are primarily place-based within regional Australia: for instance, the national interest linked to food, soil and water security; mineral, resource and energy security; climate change; natural disasters and disaster resilience; border and bio security; defence assets and capabilities; Australia's transition to net-zero emissions, and our Closing the Gap targets. In the regions, many of these challenges co-exist with the industries and business that constitute Australia's majority share of export wealth and activity.

When developing responses to Australia's stagnating productivity, the Government should look first to the untapped skills potential of regional Australia. It is clear to RUN that Australia's long-term productivity and ongoing prosperity will rely upon significant enhancements to the system of developing highly skilled, adaptable, and innovative regional workforces. This cannot occur without:

- Greater investments in the Vocational Education and Training (VET) and university services that regional Australia's rely upon.
- Enhanced harmonisation between regional Australia's VET and Higher Education sectors.
- A reduction in red tape and regulation, and
- An incentivisation of meaningful engagement between the businesses, industries and education/research providers of regional Australia.

However, achieving this vision also requires addressing persistent barriers that limit participation in learning and workforce development, especially for students from underrepresented backgrounds and/or regional communities.

RUN views the recommendations of the Australian Universities Accord as being the most effective, efficient and realistic pathway to unlocking the full skills and productivity potential of regional Australia. As such, RUN urges the Government, Australia's Members of Parliament, the Higher Education and VET sectors, and Australia's business and industry community, to unite behind a prioritised and expedited process of legislating and implementing the key recommendations of the Australian Universities Accord as a national interest imperative.

Australia's world class regional universities and VET providers stand ready to work alongside Government and industry to realise the full socio-economic impact of a more equitable system of workforce development as it occurs between metropolitan and regional communities.

For further information please contact the RUN Secretariat on +61 408 482 736 or at info@run.edu.au.