Regional Universities Network
REGIONAL STRENGTH. NATIONAL SUCCESS.

STRENGTHENING UNIVERSITY GOVERNANCE: EXPERT COUNCIL ON UNIVERSITY GOVERNANCE

APRIL 2025

CHARLES STURT UNIVERSITY | CQUNIVERSITY | FEDERATION UNIVERSITY AUSTRALIA | SOUTHERN CROSS UNIVERSITY
UNIVERSITY OF NEW ENGLAND | UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN QUEENSLAND | UNIVERSITY OF THE SUNSHINE COAST

The Regional Universities Network (RUN) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback to the *Expert Council on University Governance (the Expert Council)* to support the development of the draft University Governance Principles and Recommendations to the Education Ministers. RUN is pleased to provide this feedback freely and openly and does not require confidentiality in the Expert Council's consideration of this submission.

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 the 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 live outside of metropolitan centres in regional, rural and remote locations.

For further information please contact RUN on 0408 482 736 or info@run.edu.au.

OVERVIEW

RUN is supportive of the Expert Council's review process and lends in-principle support to reforms that are designed to retain the best-practice governance, integrity, and diversity outcomes that Australia's universities are globally renowned. RUN recognises the importance of Australian citizens continuing to hold the utmost faith in the integrity of their most trusted institutions, including our nation's universities.

Australian universities have widespread support of and adherence to the ten priority areas identified by the Expert Council on University Governance, and the University Chancellors Council 'Code of Governance Principles and Practice for Australia's Public Universities'. These priority areas are in accordance with the Acts of State Parliament that govern each respective RUN university.

RUN universities consistently act with integrity and accountability while demonstrating high standards of robust governance, as evidenced (for instance) via annual reporting to respective State Parliaments, and engagement with the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA). RUN universities are committed to their missions of bringing the opportunities of higher education and research to regional Australia while broadening participation. RUN universities stand by the strong management and governance arrangements they employ to achieve these goals in ways that are highly responsive to the communities they serve.

In reviewing the governance arrangements overseeing Australia's universities, it is important to recognise that different universities exist to meet the distinct needs of the unique communities they serve. These distinctions are perhaps more obvious when considering the social missions of those typically smaller universities servicing multiple yet diverse regional communities, characterised by traditionally underrepresented student cohorts. RUN universities and students differ markedly from the sector norms that are weighted towards metropolitan universities and metropolitan student profiles. For instance, when compared to metropolitan universities and metropolitan students:

- RUN universities host the highest concentrations of students from underrepresented backgrounds in the sector: one in four First Nations students studying in Australia today, and one in four students from a low SES background, are enrolled at a RUN university.
- RUN students are more likely to be older, studying part-time and/or online, and already in the workforce, with their studies often competing with the pressures of employment and caregiver responsibilities.
- RUN universities service regional communities that generally have lower levels of university aspiration, participation, and attainment.
- RUN students are more likely to be studying essential front-line service courses, such as teaching and healthcare. Almost half of all RUN domestic students in 2023 were enrolled in such disciplines.
- RUN universities service large and dispersed geographic footprints, often operating multiple duplicated regional campus services in thin student markets. As a result, RUN universities cannot achieve the scaled operations of metropolitan universities operating single-campus models in dense urban student markets.
- RUN universities typically host fewer international students.

- RUN universities develop essential workforces that graduate into regional communities with often higher levels of skills shortage. More than 70 per cent of RUN students remain living and working in regional areas following graduation.
- RUN universities pursue highly engaged and localised partnerships with the communities and industries they serve, and host many modest, yet world-class pockets of research expertise that is generally highly applied to the social and economic drivers of their local communities.

In acknowledging that the characteristics of regional students, and the social missions of regional universities, differ considerably from those of metropolitan Australia, one must also acknowledge that these characteristics lead to governance arrangements, policies, procedures, and practices that will need to differ to metropolitan universities. This difference is needed to ensure that RUN universities meet the distinct needs of RUN students and serve the respective social missions, identities, and characters of regional communities.

An important consideration to make – if attempting to determine an 'ideal' threshold of diversity indicators for all university governing bodies to abide – is the fact that each university (with the exception of the Australian National University) is enabled by its own State-based) legislative instrument which often dictates membership size and composition. Even within the universities of RUN there is considerable variance on legislated membership structures. This variance in the total number of members, and in the composition of members (in terms of official and elected member appointments) means it is more challenging for those universities with smaller sized governing bodies and/or legislated compositions to achieve a membership structure that meets a prescriptive balance of skills, abilities, experience and backgrounds while seeking to discharge its duties effectively. While legislated university governing body membership remains so significantly varied in terms of size and composition, it could be challenging for many universities to fully achieve the goals of Priority Areas 1,3,4,5,6, and 7 as outlined by Education Ministers.

In order to be responsive to the distinct communities each university exists to serve, and the unique social missions they follow, all universities, be they regional or metropolitan, need a strong degree of autonomy in their decision-making and strategy setting. As such, RUN would caution against an overtly prescriptive 'national' governance model that may erode this decision-making autonomy by seeking to encroach upon the operational decision-making and strategy-setting of governing bodies and university executives. RUN holds concerns that a prescriptive approach to governance could ultimately lead to a model that might suit the traditionally 'default' metropolitan university with a single main campus and less diverse student cohorts.

RUN would also caution against any shift in monitoring and evaluation becoming more focussed upon compliance, and less upon quality and responsiveness. Instead, RUN would support a principles-based approach to monitoring and evaluating university governance to ensure diversity and social responsiveness within Australia's higher education system. Potential principles could be:

- **Autonomy:** universities must remain autonomous, self-governing institutions.
- **Accountability:** universities must be held accountable for the decisions that they make in meeting

their unique social missions, acknowledging the strong and effective role of TEQSA in this regard.

- **Transparency:** university governance decision-making and strategy-setting should be transparent to university stakeholders.
- **Fairness**: governance decisions should be made utilising a natural justice framework aligned to contemporary community standards and values.
- **Responsibility**: the individual and collective responsibilities of governing bodies should be clearly defined.
- **Responsiveness**: university governing bodies should be responsive to their unique social missions and emerging operational issues.
- **Proportionality**: university governance decisions should be proportionate to their operating conditions and distinct social missions.
- **Management and oversight:** broader university and governance councils should employ appropriate oversight functions to their decision-making and strategy-setting.

Public institutions, such as universities, should rightly be held to the highest standards. The recent spotlight upon issues such as instances of university staff underpayment, and student safety on campus, are justifiable matters of national interest. RUN universities take these matters seriously, and approach such matters with high degrees of vigilance, transparency, and accountability. As such, RUN believes the 10 priorities areas identified by the Education Ministers, and the Code of Governance Principles and Practices for Australia's Public Universities, provide a robust framework that enables universities to continuing meeting these issues (and other complex challenges as they arise) from positions of strength, expertise, and effective action. However, RUN also believes that TEQSA's current powers to act on national interest matters that arise within Australia's university system are appropriate for the current regulatory and legislative framework, and meet the evolving expectations of government and community. TEQSA's regulation of the sector appropriately considers how governance systems are designed and operate. RUN supports a strong and appropriately-resourced TEQSA that continues to take a proportionate risk-based approach to regulatory oversight.

Over many decades, Australia's universities have demonstrated a strong and proactive approach to continually improving governance protocols to remain at the forefront of world's best practice. While there will always be aspects of university governance that are the subject of constant review and enhancement, there are also fundamental aspects of university governance that must be preserved. Perhaps the most important of all is the need for universities to remain autonomous in their decision-making and strategy setting, in order to be responsive to the distinct communities they serve, and the unique social missions they follow. Australia's has a world-leading university sector due in no small part to the diversity found within it. Pegging all universities to an overtly-prescriptive, one-size-fits-all governance model will ultimately have an erosive effect on the diversity and autonomy that defines our world class university sector. This has the potential to lead to a more monolithic and unresponsive national university system, where compliance is prioritised over quality.

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