

2026 NATIONAL RESEARCH INFRASTRUCTURE ROADMAP

NOVEMBER 2025





ABOUT THE REGIONAL UNIVERSITIES NETWORK

The Regional Universities Network (RUN) welcomes the opportunity to provide a formal response to the Department of Education's 2026 National Research Infrastructure (NRI) Roadmap Issues Paper.

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.

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.

REGIONAL CONTEXT

RUN's feedback is primarily focussed upon the research infrastructure and research-trained workforces available to the economies, industries and communities of regional Australia.

Since its inception in 2006, successive NRI Roadmaps have done little to address the accelerating concentration of Australia's national research infrastructure and research-trained workforces gravitating towards the largest capital cities. Despite the appetite for enhanced, place-based innovative research capabilities within Australia's regions, and the incredible talent and world class universities that the regions host, this trend continues at pace. The disproportionately diminished dividends flowing to regional Australia from the national RD&I system remains one of RUN's foremost concerns.

Dedicated regional representation on key RD&I advisory and decision-making bodies, such as the NRI Advisory Group, play an important role in ensuring that the unique needs and policy contexts of Australia's regions are not overlooked. The appointment of the NRI Advisory Group membership in 2025 featured nine highly respected and eminent Australians who represent a broad range of research and/or industry expertise. However, the collective career and lived experience reflected within this composition of the membership appears to overwhelmingly and disproportionately represent metropolitan Australian contexts. It is RUN's hope that the members of the NRI Advisory Group take considerable care in responding to the complex nuances that distinguish regional Australia, in terms of the unique challenges and opportunities of providing access to research infrastructure and research-trained workforces.

■ RUN RECOMMENDS:

That a dedicated regional representative is included within the membership of the NRI Advisory Group.

When considering the future focus of NRI investments, it is important that an exclusively historic view of where Australia's research capacity has previously gravitated is avoided. Such an approach will only deepen existing concentrations while limiting opportunities to broaden and diversify Australia's place-based research capabilities. Rather, new investments ought to take a future focus of where Australia's capacity needs to grow in order to meet the evolving national interests.

■ RUN RECOMMENDS:

That new NRI investment decisions take a future focus of where increased capacity is needed to meet Australia's evolving national interests, with a particular strategic focus upon regional Australia.



REGIONAL CONTEXT

REGIONAL CASE STUDY

Supported by the Department of Education through the Trailblazer Universities Program, the University of Southern Queensland's iLAuNCH program is a leading example of the national interest RD&I impact that has been generated from a public investment in regional research infrastructure. Hosted and led by the University of Southern Queensland, the \$180 million Innovative Launch, Automation, Novel Materials, Communications, and Hypersonics (iLAuNCH) program is building Australia's enduring space capability through the commercialisation of projects, a fast-track accelerator, and skills development to build the workforce of the future. In collaboration with 20+ industry organisations and three universities, the program is building Australia's burgeoning space industry via industry research, commercialisation and manufacturing by growing commercially viable civil rockets, rocket test and launch facilities, rapid satellite manufacturing, communication technologies and integrated sensing systems.



REGIONAL RESEARCH INFRASTRUCTURE

It is in Australia's interests for regional universities to be more involved in the nation's cutting-edge research, clinical trials, and new knowledge and innovation opportunities. This includes the hosting of future strategic NRI investments. Australia's most pressing sovereign RD&I challenges and opportunities of the 21st century are primarily place-based within regional Australia. For instance, the national research imperatives 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 the 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.

AUSTRALIA'S REGIONS AT A GLANCE

Australia's regions are a powerhouse of economic activity and growth. Australia's regions host¹:

- Greater than 33 per cent of Australia's total workforce
- Two-thirds of national export wealth
- Over one-third of total national economic output
- More than 36 per cent of Australia's total population (6.3 per cent growth since 2019)
- Regional Australia leads productivity (output per worker) in seven of the 19 industry categories recorded by the ABS.

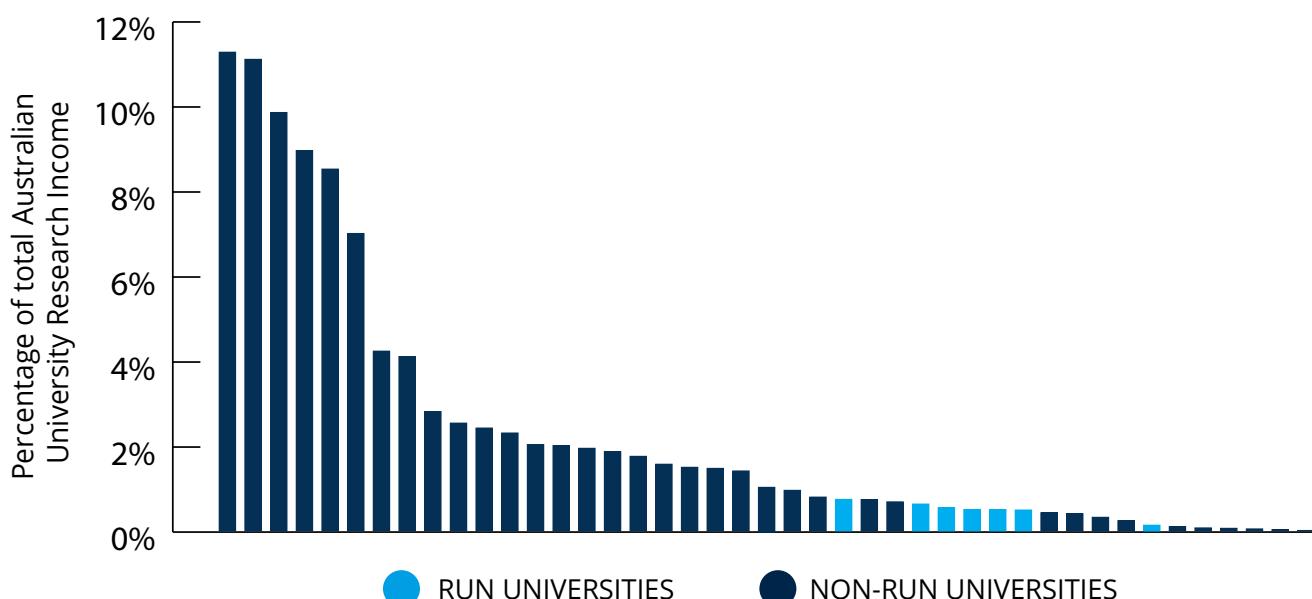
Regional Australia is a major driver to national prosperity and sits on the frontline to so much of Australia's future opportunities and challenges.



REGIONAL RESEARCH INFRASTRUCTURE

Regional Australia's ability to meet these growing challenges and economic opportunities while participating more fully in the national RD&I ecosystem is limited by the inconsistent availability of research infrastructure and, as a consequence, research-trained workforces, located outside of Australia's largest capital cities. Historically, Australia's research infrastructure and funded activity have become increasingly concentrated to just a small handful of universities located within three capital cities. In 2023, just five of Australia's 42 universities received 50 per cent of Australia's total research income. Conversely, 26 universities – including all RUN universities – received less than 15 per cent combined of Australia's total research income², as depicted by Figure 1.

Figure 1. Percentage of research income, 2023



In an increasingly competitive and volatile global environment, Australia's growing concentration of research infrastructure and with it, research-trained workforces towards metropolitan clusters, and away from the regions, represents a vulnerability in the diversity, accessibility, and culture of Australia's research ecosystem. As highlighted by the Australian Universities Accord there is significant national interest in redistributing the weight of Australia's university services more equitably towards regional Australians³. It found that Australia's future productivity gains lie within the untapped academic potential of historically underrepresented student cohorts participating in our university system, particularly regional Australians. This has significant flow-on impacts to the future research workforce.

There must be an equal focus upon the national interest of a more strategic distribution of Australia's research infrastructure and research-trained workforces towards the regions. Australia's RD&I mindset has not followed the incredible growth path of the regions, nor the economic heavy lifting that regional Australia performs today.

2 Australian Government Department of Education. Research and Development Income Time Series. 2023. Accessed via: <https://www.education.gov.au/research-block-grants/resources/research-income-time-series>

3 Australian Government. Australian Universities Accord Final Report. 2023. Accessed via: <https://www.education.gov.au/australian-universities-accord/resources/final-report>

REGIONAL RESEARCH INFRASTRUCTURE

In seeking to maximise the national interest benefits arising from Australia's RD&I landscape, RUN argues the importance of building regional research infrastructure and diversifying the current metro-centric concentrations of Australia's RD&I base.

Regional universities host modest yet critically important pockets of highly successful collaborative research clusters in many key national interest areas, such as engineering, environmental science, agriculture, healthcare, astronomy and space sciences, geology, oceanography, technology and neurosciences. RUN research activity and their subsequent impacts are typically targeted and highly applied to meet the distinct economic, social, cultural, and environmental needs of the diverse regional communities they serve. RUN universities recognise the importance of place-based research and responsive engagement with key industry and community sectors. As such, the regions are well-positioned to play a much stronger and more strategic role in Australia's national interest research priorities.

RUN is broadly supportive of the proposed (refined) definition of National Research Infrastructure, but recommends a broader explanation of the concept of 'NRI distribution'

RUN RECOMMENDS:

Additional context be added to the refined definition of National Research Infrastructure, to read:

"NRI comprises the nationally significant assets, facilities and highly-skilled personnel providing services that together support leading-edge research and innovation. It is accessible to publicly and privately funded users across Australia and internationally and may be single-sited, virtual or distributed across Australia's cities and regions".

RUN would support the proposed (revised) definition listing additional detail as that reflected in the respective United Kingdom and European definitions.



REGIONAL RESEARCH WORKFORCES

As with national research infrastructure, Australia's training of national research workforces is similarly skewed towards the largest cities. RUN universities enrol less than six per cent of Australia's domestic research students. Conversely, almost half of all postgraduate research students attend just eight metropolitan universities⁴. This is not due to any lack of research talent, aspiration, or employment outcomes in the regions. Rather, the phenomenon can be attributed to disproportionately fewer research training and progression opportunities, and research infrastructure, available to regional universities and their students.

Regional institutions have historically been underrepresented in research grant success due to a lack of research infrastructure and/or critical researcher workforces but are equally unable to build infrastructure and/or human capital due to lack of research grant funding. As such, emerging regional research talent are often compelled to relocate to major cities to expedite their research careers, and their long-term loss to regional workforces is almost inevitable. The drain of emerging research talent from Australia's regions to its cities follows a similar path to that seen amongst young regional school leavers. Here, Jobs and Skills Australia found that 76.9% of regional school students who moved to a major city to study at university were living in a major city 5 years later. (Similarly, 70.0% of regional school students who attended a university in regional Australia remained living in a regional area 5 years later⁵.) This perpetuating cycle is entrenching a national RD&I imbalance that limits regional Australia's ability to develop the research workforces, capabilities, and infrastructure required to respond to vital matters of national interest. This trend is particularly concerning when considering the national objective of growing Australia's base of First Nations researchers, given approximately 60 per cent of all First Nations Australians live outside of the capital cities⁶, where research activity, infrastructure, and career opportunities are weakest. RUN supports and celebrates the research careers and achievements of First Nations Australians wherever they chose to apply their talents. However, a continuation of the drain of emerging research talent from regional Australia towards our largest cities as direct result of diminished local/ regional research opportunities acts as a limitation to the critical integration of First Nations knowledge into place-based regional research. In terms of the NRI Roadmap supporting First Nations knowledge systems, RUN would advocate for future investment decisions taking a multi-disciplinary approach, with long time frames and horizons to ensure that NRI investments occur in culturally (and geographically) appropriate ways with genuine consultation.

When considering the RD&I workforce objectives and impact of future NRI investments, and the nuanced factors that distinguish regional Australia, RUN would urge decision-making processes to be informed by the policy design principles for Regional Australia that underpin the JSA Roadmap for Regional Australia⁷. RUN believes that these principles provide an effective basic framework to guide the design of more effectual national workforce policy settings.

4 Department of Education, Selected Higher Education Statistics – 2024 Student data, accessed at <https://www.education.gov.au/higher-education-statistics/student-data/selected-higher-education-statistics-2024-student-data>

5 Jobs and skills Australia, Jobs and Skills Roadmap for Regional Australia – Phase 1, July 2025, accessed via: <https://www.jobsandskills.gov.au/publications/jobs-and-skills-roadmap-regional-australia-phase-1>

6 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Profile of First Nations people, July 2024, accessed via: <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-welfare/profile-of-indigenous-australians>

7 Jobs and skills Australia, Jobs and Skills Roadmap for Regional Australia – Phase 1, July 2025, accessed via: <https://www.jobsandskills.gov.au/publications/jobs-and-skills-roadmap-regional-australia-phase-1>

REGIONAL RESEARCH WORKFORCES

RUN RECOMMENDS:

That future NRI investments that aim to enhance Australia's skilled RD&I workforces be guided by the policy design principles for Regional Australia as found in the JSA Roadmap for Regional Australia. These principles should be explicitly incorporated into the NRI Roadmap as a key important consideration for NRI investment.

RUN believes that humanities research – alongside a broad range of other research strengths – plays a role that is critical for Australia's economic, social and environmental national interests. On the Issue Paper's question of whether there should be a national focus on developing a specialist humanities research infrastructure workforce versus a generalist research infrastructure workforce, RUN would argue that this important proposition ought to be applied to the broad range of Australia's research gaze, and not just humanities research alone. As an advanced economy, Australia should aspire to a national RD&I workforce – across all research fields of national importance – that can demonstrate a range of complimentary specialist and generalist capabilities.

RUN supports the objective enhancing Australia's ability to grow and retain our NRI workforces as a crucial element of the nation's research efforts. In terms of the critical skillsets that an effective NRI workforce should possess regardless of specific technical expertise or geographic location, RUN would argue that general proficiencies in research translation, research integrity, and AI competency would be among those that would contribute to a more fully evolved NRI workforce. Priority should also be placed on a national NRI workforce that values the importance of, and has the skills and opportunities to, collaborate with industry and with international researcher peers.

RUN RECOMMENDS

Diversifying the current metro-centric concentrations of Australia's research infrastructure and research-trained workforces to align more closely to place-based national interests.

The role of International Education

Against finite Commonwealth resources to fund university RD&I infrastructure in Australia's regions, there is potential to consider the national RD&I impact of supporting smaller and/or regional universities to host greater volumes of international students. This would not only drive a greater diversification and placement of international student cohorts around Australia, but would also result in a more robust geographic diversification of RD&I infrastructure and workforces beyond the current metropolitan concentrations. If regional Australia were to realise a more equitable access to RD&I infrastructure, workforces and services, then the enduring disparities with regional NOSC allocations must be acknowledged and remediated. This must occur alongside a pivoting of Australia's RD&I investments towards the regions.



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