

RUN SUBMISSION TO THE INQUIRY INTO THE VALUE OF SKILLED MIGRATION TO AUSTRALIA

REGIONAL UNIVERSITIES NETWORK
January 2026





ABOUT THE REGIONAL UNIVERSITIES NETWORK

The Regional Universities Network (RUN) welcomes the opportunity to provide a response to the Joint Standing Committee on Migration's Inquiry into the value of skilled migration to Australia.

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, and University of Southern Queensland.

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.

The development of RUN's submission to this inquiry, and the content put forward has not been assisted by artificial intelligence. RUN agrees to this submission being made publicly available by the Joint Standing Committee.

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OVERVIEW

Regional Australian communities are enriched socially, culturally, and economically when they are able to welcome international students, international graduates, and other skilled migrants to live and work. International students and graduates who choose to study and settle in regional communities help fill critical regional skills gaps and narrow the skills disparity with metropolitan Australia. They help to broaden the global perspectives of regional classrooms and workplaces, and they make vibrant contributions to the cultural tapestry of regional communities and industries.

While the regions value the contributions made by international students and graduates highly, Australia's regions enjoy just a modest share of the pool of talent available to the nation. RUN believes there is a strong case for regional Australia to host an increased share of Australia's international student cohorts, and for regional Australia welcoming a greater proportion of those international students who choose to remain in Australia post-graduation. A more robust pipeline of domestically educated and qualified international graduates progressing into regional workforces will inevitably benefit the regions socially, culturally, and economically.

Previous migration policy recognised the acute need for greater numbers of international students and skilled graduates settling in regional Australia. As a result there were differential regional migration incentives set. These incentives produced mixed results across different regions, with limited effectiveness in some regions, and clear benefit to others. While the concept of a regional policy differential was welcomed, it did not adequately distinguish between regions. Effectively by way of policy design, Tamworth was incentivised the same as Adelaide or Alice Springs or The Gold Coast. It is imperative that Australia seek a better understanding of how differential migration policy can be better designed to incentivise a more equitable flow of international students to all regions hosting a regional university campus, alongside incentives for international graduates to remain in the regions post-study. It is important this understanding not only reflects the differences between metropolitan and regional Australia, but the diversity that exists within and between different regions themselves.

RUN RECOMMENDS

That the Government undertake a comprehensive review into the effectiveness of previously differentiated migration settings that were designed to meet regional objectives, in order to gain a better understanding of what initiatives were working across different parts of regional Australia.

To achieve a more equitable distribution of international students and graduates towards Australia's regions, more sophisticated and nuanced student visa and migration policy settings are required. The migration settings must include a comprehensive suite of significant regional visa differentials in international study and poststudy work rights policy, aligned specifically to key areas of regional skills need, in a way that strategically favours the Asia-Pacific region.

RUN believes there is a social expectation and clear national interest in redistributing the benefits of Australia's international student and migration settings more equitably towards the regions by trialling new approaches.

RUN RECOMMENDS

The trialling of more sophisticated and nuanced student visa and migration policy settings that are designed to more effectively redistribute international students/graduates and skilled migrants towards regional Australia.

RUN's response to the Terms of Reference below articulate the value of skilled migration as it applies to regional Australian contexts.



STATEMENTS RESPONDING TO THE TERMS OF REFERENCE

The ongoing economic, social and cultural value of skilled migration to Australia

Regional Australia benefits greatly from the social, cultural, and economic contributions made by international students, and international students graduating into regional workforces. Australia's regions are made more vibrant, inclusive, and prosperous by the welcoming of students and skilled migrants from all cultures. International students and graduates who settle in regional communities play an important role in addressing key regional skill shortages, boosting global perspectives within regional classrooms and workforces, and in suppressing the growing skills divide with metropolitan Australia.

Regional Australia receives a disproportionately small share of the deep pool of international student/graduate talent available to the nation, but is eager to welcome more. Despite the regions being home to almost four in every ten Australians, and featuring many world-class universities, just three per cent of onshore international students attended a regional campus¹. Within the enrolment profiles of RUN universities, just 17 per cent of all students were international in 2024 compared to the sector average of 35 per cent². Due largely to the unintended consequences of recent student visa processing policy, regional Australia's share of the international student market has diminished substantially since COVID. While some large metropolitan universities have seen international enrolments double since the pandemic, regional universities have experienced the sector's slowest post-COVID recovery of international student enrolments. In fact, of the four Australian universities whose 2026 international student enrolment allocations remain lower than 2019 levels, all four are regional universities.

RUN believes there is a strong, national-interest case for regional Australia hosting a greater share of Australia's international student cohort, and for regional Australia welcoming a greater proportion of those international students who choose to remain in Australia post-graduation to live and work.

In an increasingly globalised world, Australia's continued prosperity relies on a citizenship who are informed and engaged members of the global community. Regional Australia connects the nation to the world by driving two-thirds of all national export wealth, and hosting one-quarter of all international visitor overnight stays in Australia³.

AUSTRALIA'S REGIONS AT A GLANCE

Australia's regions are a powerhouse of economic activity and growth. Australia's regions host⁴:

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

1 Department of Education, International student enrolment and commencement data by ABS SA4, Year-to-date December 2024, accessed at: <https://www.education.gov.au/international-education-data-and-research/international-student-enrolment-and-commencement-data-abs-sa4>, accessed on 15 December 2025.

2 Department of Education, Selected Higher Education Statistics – 2024 Student data, accessed at <https://www.education.gov.au/higher-education-statistics/resources/2024-section-2-all-students>, accessed on 15 December 2025.

3 Australian Trade and Investment Commission. Visitor Economy Facts and Figures 2025. Accessed via <https://www.tra.gov.au/en/economic-analysis/visitor-economy-facts-and-figures> on 8 December 2025.

4 Regional Australia Institute. Research and Policy. 2025. Accessed via: https://www.regionalaustralia.org.au/Shared_Content/Smart-Suite/Smart-Library/Public/Smart-Library-Search.aspx

STATEMENTS RESPONDING TO THE TERMS OF REFERENCE

Despite this, regional Australian university campuses lack the same degree of global experiences, opportunities and perspective as that typically enjoyed by metropolitan university campuses. This disparity poses significant vulnerabilities in the ability for key regional graduate workforces to effectively engage with global opportunities from a position of real-world experience.

International education is a national interest, and the immense benefits ought to be more equitably distributed, rather than continue to become increasingly concentrated to Australia's largest capital cities. Attracting international academic talent towards the regions, however, is made more difficult by a complex range of challenges that are largely absent within metropolitan contexts. Many international students elect to study at a regional campus for a variety of reasons, including, the reputation of regional universities, regional communities and universities providing a more welcoming community atmosphere, smaller class sizes and friendly colleagues, higher scores of teaching quality and graduate outcomes, greater access to natural environments, specialised offerings and employment opportunities, higher levels of study support, and unique study-life experiences. However, for most international students, regional study often comes with additional, and at times prohibitive, challenges.

These challenges include:

- Generally greater distances between regional campuses and places of employment, housing and social amenities.
- Limitations of regional public transport and a greater reliance on private vehicle ownership.
- The cost of additional flights from the home country to a regional centre.
- The limited size of diaspora communities in regional locations, which are often a source of support, housing, and employment opportunities.
- The relative lack of nighttime economies in regional areas to provide income support.

An effective regional migration strategy must therefore examine the pathways available to an international student to train in Australia's regions and then becoming a skilled permanent resident living and working in regional Australia. Such a strategy must begin at promoting regional Australia as an attractive study destination to potential international academic talent, feature incentives to enrol at a regional university over metropolitan (or other global) options, including the pathway to permanency.

■ **RUN RECOMMENDS**

A comprehensive review be undertaken to better understand the factors and incentives that may attract an international student to study in the regions and subsequently retain an international graduate to live and work in the regions.



STATEMENTS RESPONDING TO THE TERMS OF REFERENCE

The effectiveness of current skilled migration settings in meeting the current and future needs of the states and territories, while recognising the ongoing need for housing and infrastructure.

RUN acknowledges the need for state and national approaches to the supply of housing and critical infrastructure to more effectively keep pace with the migration demands of Australian industries and economies. However, any linking of visa/migration policy to housing particularly in relation to the intake of international students must be sophisticated enough to account for the obvious nuance that distinguishes regional Australia from metropolitan contexts.

Specifically, the allocation of New Overseas Student Commencement (NOSC) places to universities is currently determined by a metro-centric methodology that will inevitably inhibit the national objective of distributing international student enrolments more equitably towards the regions. Under current settings, a university's ability to grow its NOSC allocations is conditional on its supply of new 'Purpose Built Student Accommodation' (PBSA). In Australia's largest capital cities where the largest universities host the highest concentrations of international students, the scaled market conditions readily allow for private equity to build new PBSA at no cost to university balance sheets. However, in Australia's regions where international student concentrations are at their lowest, a market simply does not exist for private equity PBSA, meaning regional universities are often required to draw upon their already limited cash reserves to fund PBSA ventures themselves. This adds to the existing challenges of maintaining education and research services in unscaled regional operating environments and managing multiple campus and accommodation locations across thin regional markets. The limited financial capacity of regional universities also limits their borrowing capacity to take on major capital expenditure projects such as new PBSA, especially when compared to metropolitan universities who can leverage robust balance sheets derived from scaled operations in dense urban markets.

Compounding the disadvantage of unscaled operations in regional higher education is the elevated cost of construction, maintenance, equipment, and supply chains in regional Australia. For instance, the 2024 Rawlinsons Construction Guide recorded that, compared to the nearest capital city, the cost of construction on projects \$1.5m and above were 10 per cent higher in Armidale; 8 per cent higher in Dubbo; and 17 per cent higher in Rockhampton, Mackay, or Gladstone⁵. These inflated regional construction costs represent a disproportionate cost burden for regional universities when seeking to grow their limited share of Australia's international student cohorts via new PBSA requirements.



⁵ Rawlinsons Construction Cost Guide 2024 – Edition 32, accessed at <https://www.rawlhouse.com.au/publications/2024-construction-cost-guide> on 27 June 2024.

STATEMENTS RESPONDING TO THE TERMS OF REFERENCE

Furthermore, the accommodation needs and study profiles of international students tend to exhibit differences between metropolitan and regional settings. For instance, RUN universities tend to host higher proportions of post-graduate international students who undertake and subsequently complete their qualifications at an older age than those attending metropolitan universities. International post-graduate students studying at regional locations are often accompanied by partners and children, meaning they are more likely to seek private market accommodation over PBSA. Additionally, regional campuses are not always located near the services, amenities, and places of employment that international students require, and these students will often preference accommodation options that are off-campus, and more suited to their specific needs and circumstances. These factors combine to erode the business case for new PBSA in regional areas.

RUN believes the linking of new PBSA requirements to allocated NOSC growth should not be applied to regional universities, and that regional universities should be better supported to accommodate a growth in international student enrolments.

■ **RUN RECOMMENDS**

That regional universities be excluded from the PBSA requirements of above NOSC growth in international student enrolments.

RUN recommends the consideration of a Commonwealth capital fund or loan mechanism to support the development of PBSA in regional areas, for utilisation by domestic and international students alike.



STATEMENTS RESPONDING TO THE TERMS OF REFERENCE

The scope to more effectively target skills gaps and shortages in critical sectors to improve services that benefit Australian communities.

Australia's migration system has been used effectively in the past to address skills gaps and shortages in critical sectors, and it should continue being utilised for these purposes into the future. A particularly successful component of Australia's highly effective skilled migration system is international education. International students not only gain Australian qualifications from Australia's world class universities, but they also absorb Australian cultures and ways of life. They also learn about Australia's civic processes and responsibilities during their multi-year study journeys. International students who choose to stay in Australia post-graduation and apply their skills and talents to the workforces and communities of Australia play a lead role in Australia's continuing migration success story.

However, the social, cultural, and economic benefits arising from international students and graduates have historically and overwhelmingly tended to favour metropolitan Australia. Today, Australia's regions are home to almost four in every ten Australians, generate one-third of total national economic output, and host over one-third of the national workforce⁶. Regional Australia is a major driver to national prosperity and sits on the frontline to many of Australia's future opportunities and challenges. Despite being home to many world-class universities, just three per cent of onshore international students attended a regional campus⁷. Within the enrolment profiles of RUN universities, just 17 per cent of all students were international in 2024 compared to the sector average of 35 per cent⁸.

Furthermore, the unintended consequences of recent student visa processing policy have resulted in the share of Australia's international student intake hosted by regional universities diminishing substantially since COVID, while some large metropolitan universities have seen a doubling of international enrolments since the pandemic.

There is a clear case for a differentiated visa and migration system that more concertedly incentivise international students and graduates towards regional universities and regional post-study settlement, particularly when aligned more strategically to fields of study linked to areas of critical regional skills shortage.

There is also a case for a regionally differentiated migration system to be supported by a regional priority skills list, as any national assessment of priority skills will be unavoidably weighted towards metropolitan Australian contexts. Here, the work of Jobs and Skills Australia (JSA), policy design principles for Regional Australia that underpin the JSA Roadmap for Regional Australia should inform this approach to new migration settings⁹.

RUN RECOMMENDS

RUN recommends that the scope for regional Australian priority skills lists to be examined as a feature of Australia's migration system.

6 Regional Australia Institute. Research and Policy. 2025. Accessed via: https://www.regionalaustralia.org.au/Shared_Content/Smart-Suite/Smart-Library/Public/Smart-Library-Search.aspx

7 Department of Education, International student enrolment and commencement data by ABS SA4, Year-to-date December 2024, accessed at: <https://www.education.gov.au/international-education-data-and-research/international-student-enrolment-and-commencement-data-abs-sa4>, accessed on 15 December 2025.

8 Department of Education, Selected Higher Education Statistics – 2024 Student data, accessed at <https://www.education.gov.au/higher-education-statistics/resources/2024-section-2-all-students>, accessed on 15 December 2025.

9 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>, accessed on 15 December 2025.

STATEMENTS RESPONDING TO THE TERMS OF REFERENCE

The scope for skilled migration settings to more effectively support Australian businesses, boost productivity and encourage innovation

Within regional contexts, RUN believes there is scope for skilled migration settings to more effectively support businesses, boost productivity, and encourage innovation. In addition to settings that more favourably attract international students to regional universities in increased numbers, there must also be migration settings that provide highly incentivised and regionally differentiated pathways to permanent residency amongst both international student graduates, and other skilled migrants.

RUN universities play an important role in regional Australia's migration profile through our welcoming of international students and our recruitment of highly skilled migrant academics, researchers and innovators, and professional staff. RUN universities are often the largest employers and educators in their respective communities, and as such our regional communities are made far more diverse, vibrant, and resilient by the contributions of our international students/graduates and professional migrant colleagues.

Similarly, international graduates play a vital role in the globalisation and cultural diversification of regional Australia's skilled workforces. The importance of global perspectives within regional workforces is underscored by the fact that two-thirds of Australia's export earnings are derived from regional industries¹⁰, and eight of Australia's top 10 exports are commodities or produce from our regions¹¹. In an increasingly globalised world, Australia's continued national prosperity depends on a citizenship who are informed and engaged members of the global community, and who value and celebrate cultural and linguistic differences¹².



10 Australian Government. Australian Universities Accord Interim Report, 19 July 2023, accessed at <https://www.education.gov.au/australian-universities-accord/resources/accord-interim-report>

11 Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2022-23 Australia's top 25 Exports, Goods and Services, Trade and Investments Economic Branch p.1

12 Education Council, Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration, December 2019, accessed at <https://www.education.gov.au/alice-springs-mparntwe-education-declaration/resources/alice-springs-mparntwe-educationdeclaration> on 20 February 2023.

STATEMENTS RESPONDING TO THE TERMS OF REFERENCE

The metro-centric concentration of benefits arising from international student placement (and subsequent settlement) poses significant vulnerabilities in regional Australia's ability to effectively engage with global opportunities from a position of real-world experience. Nonetheless, the many world-class universities hosted by regional Australia are eager to further grow their share of international students – and subsequently graduates – who choose non-metropolitan locations as their destination of choice.

Given that more than 70 per cent of regional university graduates remain in the regions post-graduation¹³, as well as the fact that regional universities lead the country in employer satisfaction of graduates and graduate employability and starting salaries¹⁴, it is the nation's interest to have migration settings that encourage international students to Australia's regions, and appropriate migration settings to provide pathways to permanency.

Post-study work rights for international students have long been an effective mechanism in transitioning skilled graduates into workforces and subsequently, into citizenship, for those who have earned Australian qualifications in areas linked to the greatest skills need. For many years this pipeline has been working to great effect, albeit with the greatest benefit flowing to those metropolitan workforces/communities who host the highest concentrations of Australia's onshore international student cohorts. Without robust and regionally differentiated study and post-study work right visa/migration settings that are more attractive to international students, regional communities will undoubtedly see limited further growth in international students. This will have a natural flow on effect on the numbers of international students who subsequently settle outside of Australia's largest cities. Ultimately, this will deny opportunities for regional businesses to innovate or grow their productivity.



13 Jobs and Skills Australia, Jobs and Skills Roadmap for Regional Australia – Phase One. Accessed via: <https://www.jobsandskills.gov.au/publications/jobs-and-skills-roadmap-regional-australia-phase-1> on 10 December 2025.

14 Australian Government, Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching, 2025 survey results, accessed via: <https://qilt.edu.au/> on 10 December 2025.

STATEMENTS RESPONDING TO THE TERMS OF REFERENCE

Strategies to enhance public awareness and understanding of the role of skilled migration in Australia.

RUN would welcome the implementation of public education and awareness campaigns that seek to build the public awareness of skilled migration in Australia. RUN would support public awareness campaigns that focussed upon regional contexts and regional audiences, including those that seek to highlight the role played by international students studying at the regional campuses of regional universities.

I RUN RECOMMENDS

The implementation of public education and awareness campaigns that include a focus upon the contributions made by international students who study at regional universities, and who graduate into regional workforces.

There is a role for awareness campaigns to extend beyond Australian audiences, and towards targeted offshore talent who may consider bringing their skills to Australia, in particular, to regional Australia. A key component of bringing offshore talent to regional Australia would be via the training of international students with Australian qualifications at regional universities. The development of promotional campaign collateral, designed to showcase the benefits of studying at regional locations to prospective international students, is supported by recommendation 22(b) from the Australian Universities Accord Final Report;

“...support the growth of international education in regional and remote areas, encouraging providers to communicate the benefits of studying and living in regional and remote Australia¹⁵.”

An effective campaign would target prospective students within the Asia-Pacific region, particularly aligned to areas of study identified as being amongst the highest workforce need within the economies of regional Australian communities. The development of high-quality digital collateral promoting the benefits of studying and living in regional Australia would include adverts, case studies, student testimonials, and other digital campaign material. This would be made available to regional providers, their offshore partners, and university stakeholders to assist with the recruitment of international students to regional areas, alongside a migration system that more overtly incentivises regional study and post-study settlement.

I RUN RECOMMENDS

The creation of education and awareness campaigns that targets academic talent from the Asia-Pacific region to study and work in Australia's regions.



¹⁵ Department of Education. (2024). Australian Universities Accord Final Report. Accessed via <https://www.education.gov.au/australian-universities-accord/resources/final-report> on 22 September 2025

STATEMENTS RESPONDING TO THE TERMS OF REFERENCE

Approaches taken in other countries with similar migration objectives.

RUN believes that Australia's rich migrant past, and the challenges and opportunities posed by Australia's evolving migration system into the future, are truly unique. The complex tapestry of issues linked to migration settings such as key skills need, population growth and aging demographics, housing supply and critical infrastructure, productivity, or Australia's dynamic role in the Asias-Pacific region, are difficult to compare neatly to the contexts of other nations.

As such, RUN would urge policy makers to design bespoke migration settings that are nuanced specifically to serve Australia's national interest and to avoid the adoption of migration settings designed for the interests of other nations.

I RUN RECOMMENDS

A migration system designed exclusively to meet the nuanced interests of Australia including regional Australia be developed.





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