



Submission from Southern Cross University on the Higher Education Support (Job-Ready Graduates and Supporting Regional and Remote Students) Bill 2020

09 September 2020

As a progressive, regionally-headquartered institution – with a proud history of educating high percentages of first-in-family, Indigenous, and low SES students – Southern Cross University supports passage of the *Higher Education Support (Job-Ready Graduates and Supporting Regional and Remote Students) Bill 2020* as amended. The aspirations of the Bill to promote and support regional education have our strongest support. These have been clearly articulated by the Regional Universities Network of which we are a member.

Acknowledgment of Amendments

We acknowledge and appreciate the Ministerial amendments made to the Job-Ready Graduates reforms during the consultation process. These include confirmation of:

- Reduced student contribution for students studying social work and psychology for professional practice;
- Adjusting the Tertiary Access Payment (TAP) to encourage more regional students to study at regional campuses (while not in this bill, we understand that the TAP will be in subsequent social security legislation); and
- Establishing a minimum basic grant amount - the legislation now provides a minimum basic grant amount for universities, giving funding certainty.

Preservation of Enabling Loading

Further, our University deeply appreciated Ministerial advice provided to Vice Chancellor Professor Alex Zelinsky AO on 4 September 2020, that confirmed:

- support for enabling programs will continue under the Job-Ready Graduates reforms, and the operation of the enabling loading will be unchanged (notwithstanding distribution will be via the Indigenous, Regional and Low SES Attainment Fund [IRLSAF] as an umbrella vehicle);
- the draft Guidelines will be amended to it make clear that the enabling loading grant is to assist providers to enrol students in enabling courses, "with a focus on students with educational disadvantage, such as those from a low SES background, regional and remote areas, and Indigenous people" and
- a working group will be established to review the operations of the IRLSAF from 2024. We would welcome participation on such as group.

Maintaining a secure future for enabling loading is vital for Southern Cross University because we know that:



- **Enabling programs increase higher education participation in regional Australia.** Students from SCU's enabling Preparing for Success Program (PSP) routinely make up 10% of our commencing load enrolments, and for some intakes in the School of Health of Human Sciences over 20% (e.g. Bachelor of Nursing).
- **Enabling works.** Undergraduate students who gain admission via our enabling program PSP have, on average, a higher success rate and a higher retention rate than students who gain admission via other means. Their retention rate in some years is 14% higher than their peers.
- **Enabling demand continues to grow.** SCU's 416 EFTSL designated enabling places per year are oversubscribed. In 2019 we saw a 20% increase in demand on our enabling places (from 461 in 2018 to 551 EFTSL). Year-on-year demand has seen even more growth in 2020 on 2019's strong enrolments.

Amendment sought to Progression Provision

While acknowledging the value of amendments made to the reforms during the consultation process, we call for the removal of sections and clauses relating to the progression rate for students to access HECS-HELP or FEE-HELP (s. 104-1A, 36-13). Under these legislative amendments, students who fail 50% of units studied (minimum of four units studied) would lose access to Commonwealth funding to progress through their Bachelor degree (or higher degree).

In the context of increased mental health presentations to our health clinics during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the clustering of such presentations alongside grade distribution periods, we believe this legislated change would unfairly affect the health and economic circumstances of already highly-vulnerable people. Moreover, it will act as a material disincentive for aspirant Australians to pursue university studies, at the same time that economic circumstances dictate many Australian will need to upskill and retrain. For these reasons, we respectfully request this section is removed.

Conclusion

Subject to the specific amendments we have outlined in this submission, Southern Cross University supports the ethos and aspiration of the Bill. We remain grateful for the committed responsiveness of the Federal Ministry and its favourable consideration of our continued growth trajectory.

Professor Adam Shoemaker
Vice Chancellor