



Submission from the Regional Universities Network on the HIGHER EDUCATION SUPPORT (JOB-READY GRADUATES AND SUPPORTING REGIONAL AND REMOTE STUDENTS) BILL 2020

The Regional Universities Network (RUN) urges the Senate to pass the Higher Education Support (Job-ready graduates and Supporting Regional and Remote Students) Bill 2020 as soon as practicable. Funding is needed to grow places in the 2021 academic year to meet growing demand from domestic students, and some time is required for arrangements to be put in place prior to the start of the year.

RUN welcomes those measures in the bill, and in the package more broadly which will be delivered through other instruments, which will be positive for regional students, regional universities and their communities.

Measures in the package which will implement some of the recommendations of the National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy include:

- 3.5 per cent growth in places for regional campuses;
- \$5000 scholarships/Tertiary Access Payment (TAP) for regional students to move to study at university (\$160m);
- significant weighting for regional students (45 per cent) in the fund paid to universities to help student success (the Indigenous, Regional and low SES Attainment Fund);
- a new regional research fund for regional universities (\$49m);
- funding for new Regional University Centres (\$21m); and
- funding for Regional, Rural and Remote Education Commissioner (\$6m).

Implementation of these measures is needed to address educational equity in regional Australia and contribute to the national good.

In response to issues raised by RUN on the draft legislation, the Government has made significant concessions which will assist outcomes for regional students, universities and their communities.

These are:

- *Reduced student contribution for students studying social work and psychology for professional practice*

Given the need to meet community needs in the regions, particularly in times of crisis, we wish to encourage students to study social work, behavioural science and mental health in regional Australia. Seven out of ten of RUN's graduates work in the regions. Previously, we proposed moving these disciplines from Band 1, where the student contribution is \$14,500, to Band 2/2, with allied health where the student contribution is \$7,950. This change has been reflected in the bill, in instances where social work and psychology (including mental health/behavioural science) are studied for professional practice.

While the student contribution for Bands 1 and 2 has been increased by \$250, repayment can be deferred via HECS-HELP.

- *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)*

As originally proposed, the \$5000 TAP would have been paid to regional students to cover the cost of moving to study wherever they wished.

RUN advocated for regional students to be encouraged to study at regional campuses – more students studying in the regions will provide regional Australia with the professionals it needs and facilitate regional development.

The Government has now changed its approach, and is proposing to pay the scholarship money to universities based on their proportion of regional, rural and remote students. Universities will distribute the funding to eligible students who accept places at the relevant institution. Regional universities will receive a significant proportion of the scholarship funding to encourage regional students to study in regional Australia. Some funding will still go to metropolitan universities.

- *Minimum basic grant amount*

The legislation now provides a minimum basic grant amount for universities, giving funding certainty.

Other

- Another issue raised by RUN on the draft legislation was the prescriptive nature of the sections and clauses relating to the progression rate for students to access HECS-HELP or FEE-HELP (s. 104-1A, 36-13). RUN questions why any legislation would need to be so prescriptive. While the objective of the proposed measure is reasonable, RUN would not support reducing the autonomy of universities to determine their own student progression requirements. Universities already have course

progression rates and procedures in place which could easily be linked to eligibility for continued funding support.

- To give certainty to the sector, RUN supports the inclusion of the growth in places for universities and indexation in some sort of legislative instrument - if not in the bill itself, in guidelines.
- Further, RUN suggests that the impact of the legislation is reviewed in two years, during the period of transition funding, to determine any unintended consequences.

General comment on broader Higher Education Policy

- The RUN Group welcomes the proposed formation of a Working Group to determine the future direction of Enabling Loading. It agrees that this underlines the importance of maintaining and expanding enabling programs in the Australian Higher Education sector. At the same time, the preponderance of enabling programs amongst RUN universities is noteworthy. RUN urges that this should be reflected in the allocation of Enabling Load and in the composition of the planned Working Group. These measures will ensure that regional, rural and remote populations are best-served by the expansion of these crucial enabling pathways in their communities.