

## **Submission from Southern Cross University on the Draft Legislation to implement the Australian Job-Ready Graduates (JRG) Package**

As a progressive, regionally-headquartered institution – with a proud history of educating high percentages of first-in-family, Indigenous, and low SES students – we support the ethos and aspiration of the JRG package. However, the challenging strategic circumstances facing our institution will not be meaningfully assisted by it. These circumstances have not been created by COVID-19 alone.

Taken in isolation, the aspirations of the JRG 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.

They include:

- the flexibility to trade non-designated places between universities;
- the Tertiary Access Payment;
- demand-driven funding for Indigenous students;
- regional students driving 45% of the funding under the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships program;
- the new \$49m research fund for regional universities; and
- the National Priorities Linkage Fund and the Regional Education Commissioner.

We further support the changes proposed by the RUN Group with respect to:

- Changing the student contribution for social work, behavioural science and mental health studies (s.93-10 of the draft legislation);
- the indefinite grandfathering arrangements for students who commenced a course prior to 1 January 2021 (s 22);
- removal of reference to mandatory progression rates as a condition for students to access HECS-HELP or FEE-HELP;
- Although it is not included in this bill, to avoid a significant exodus of aspirant regional students to metropolitan areas, the Tertiary Access Payment (TAP) needs to be double weighted towards regional and outer metro campuses. The full \$5,000 TAP should only be accessible if a regional student moves to study at a regional or outer metro campus. Otherwise, a regional student should receive only \$2,500 to move to an inner metro location to study.

For Southern Cross University, the JRG package will serve to lock in inequitable historical market share through maintaining the structure of allocation for Commonwealth Supported Places (CSPs). This historical allocation has underpinned the growth trajectory of many universities; however, in the case of Southern Cross, the University has been locked into a sub-economies of scale position that is inefficient and inequitable. In this context, the JRG is essentially non-competitive as it preserves historical market share and disincentivises growth by younger emerging universities, such as ourselves.



Reflecting on the primary functions of the University as articulated in the *Southern Cross University Act 1993*, a primary function is to meet the education needs of the communities of Northern New South Wales through education and research activities. The JRG will constrain the University's ability to respond to identified needs as evidenced by workforce demand in critical sectors. It will block our institution from enrolling additional students in the in-demand fields of Nursing, Education, English, Mathematics, Statistics and Agriculture – the very areas that the JRG Package seeks to promote.

In the decade leading to 2017 Southern Cross enrolments were very small compared to the sector. In the years since – through the introduction of innovative degrees and personalised delivery of student support – we have grown our domestic enrolments to exceed our Commonwealth funding allocation (effectively capped at 2017 levels). It is increasingly unsustainable for us to teach students above our funding cap based on student contributions alone. In the fields where the JRG Package seeks to lower the student contribution to \$3,700 per student (such as Nursing) this will be counter to both regional demand for employment and our own local mission. It also runs against the urgent national interest to sustain and train the health workforce in the context of COVID-19.

We would therefore welcome a broader discussion around specific university funding parameters for fast growing regional institutions such as Southern Cross University.

**Professor Adam Shoemaker**  
Vice Chancellor  
17 August 2020