REGIONAL STRENGTH. NATIONAL SUCCESS.

Regional Universities Network (RUN) submission to the

House Standing Committee on Education, Employment and Training inquiry

into the efficiency, effectiveness and coherency of Australian Government

funding for research

The Regional Universities Network (RUN) welcomes the opportunity to provide input to the inquiry into the funding of Australia's research. RUN comprises six regionally headquartered Australian universities: CQUniversity, Federation University Australia, Southern Cross University, the University of New England, the University of Southern Queensland, and the University of the Sunshine Coast.

RUN universities are committed to delivering excellent research that is important to their communities. They are characterised by their focussed, innovative, and socially-connected research agendas and their rapidly growing research capacity. Their research has been assessed at the highest international standards in fields such as agricultural sciences and forestry; biological sciences; earth sciences; pure and applied mathematical sciences; and nursing and other medical and health sciences.

General comments

The Australian Government supports research via an extensive array of programs. This reflects the complex interplay between the breadth of the Government's own objectives and priorities, and the Australian research system which is highly diverse in terms of its key players, and the scope, purpose, mode of delivery, and the impact of research which they undertake.

RUN universities are important participants in this system and are committed to a well-resourced, effective and coherent funding system for university research. They are committed to the principle of efficiency provided it is appropriately balanced by other key considerations and that actions to increase efficiency are fit for purpose.

Comments on specific terms of reference

- **The process and administrative role undertaken by research institutions, in particular universities, in developing and managing applications for research funding**

RUN universities strive to manage the grant submission process as effectively as possible, and act as gate keepers to ensure the quality of applications to granting bodies such as the Australian Research Council (ARC).

A point of difference between RUN universities and larger institutions is that they typically have fewer research active staff but they must still be familiar with the guidelines for each scheme. Typically, research active staff are simultaneously providing peer review and writing their own grant applications, across multiple programs. These stresses are experienced to a lesser extent in larger research-intensive institutions where there are more research active staff available to participate in

internal peer review processes. RUN universities also have fewer staff in their research offices than larger universities, meaning that it is generally not feasible for staff members to specialise in particular schemes. These factors result in RUN universities bearing a disproportionate burden of the complexity of funding guidelines and of changes to funding schemes, with all relevant staff required to remain up-to-date on all of the major schemes.

- **The effectiveness and efficiency of operating a dual funding system for university research, namely competitive grants and performance-based block grants to cover systemic costs of research**

RUN universities are committed to the dual funding system for university research. This approach has operated in Australia for decades and is also widely used internationally. Allocating funding through peer reviewed, competitive grants fosters excellence and supports researcher-led projects that expand the boundaries of knowledge. RUN understands that the ARC, one of the two largest granting bodies, operates efficiently as its administrative expenses represent a small percentage of its overall budget.

The Research Support Program (RSP) provides block grants based on institutions' relative performance in attracting research funding. Universities use their RSP funding to help support the indirect costs of research, and to enhance their research capabilities and the capabilities of their staff. The ability to use RSP grants in this flexible and strategic manner is particularly important for RUN universities as they develop and grow their research profiles.

Universities have autonomy in determining how best to spend their block grants. As the Department of Education and Training's website notes, "In this way, the Australian research funding system recognises that these sorts of decisions are best made by the provider, its researchers and stakeholder communities."

RUN notes that recent changes to the research block grant programs (such as the RSP), implemented in accordance with the recommendations of the Watt review, have ensured that they are streamlined, cost efficient and effective.

- **Opportunities to maximise the impact of funding by ensuring optimal simplicity and efficiency for researchers and research institutions while prioritising delivery of national priorities and public benefit.**

RUN universities understand that the ARC and some other Commonwealth funding providers have signalled interest in the ability for applicants to link their ORCID profiles to applications for funding to reduce duplication across application processes. RUN universities would welcome consideration of that and any other mechanisms by which the amount of data entry involved with parts of applications that are common across applications and schemes could be reduced.

Researchers spend a significant amount of time updating their publications lists for applications but, for many, that data is already publicly available in a forum like ORCID. The ability to link to an ORCID profile or import data directly from a profile into an application would result in a genuine efficiency gain for researchers with such profiles. It would also reduce the likelihood of data entry errors and the use of out-of-date publication lists, and negate possible compliance issues like incorrect headings or font. In the case of applications submitted to the ARC via the Research Management System (RMS), the link to the ORCID profile could exist within the researcher RMS profile which would negate the need for it to be entered into each new application.

In addition to achieving efficiencies by linking ORCID profiles to competitive grant applications, other possible enhancements could include:

-   Adopting minimum data due dates similar to the approach adopted by the NHMRC for some of their funding programs. This mechanism would assist research offices to capture clear indications of intending applicants and would assist researchers to stagger the development of their applications.
-   Providing more extensive feedback on unsuccessful applications to assist researchers to develop better applications and research office staff to support developing and managing applications.
-   Improving the training of reviewers in order to provide improved feedback and support internal peer review.

Any changes to Commonwealth and/or ARC programs should not inhibit the range of research areas funded or the ability of researchers to access funding.