MEDIA RELEASE

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RUN dismayed by Coalition policy on Australian universities

The Regional Universities Network (RUN) has expressed disappointment with elements of how the Federal Coalition would deliver on its own reform of the higher education sector.

In his David Davis Memorial Lecture, the Shadow Minister for Education, Christopher Pyne, spoke about the “reforming zeal” for higher education in Australia that he shares with the Shadow Minister for Universities and Research, Senator Brett Mason.

“No one can dispute the assertion of the Shadow Minister that our universities need to facilitate excellence in research, innovation and scholarship,” RUN Chair, Professor David Battersby, said.

“However, there is a failure to recognise that Australian universities are at different stages of their development, with some established in the last couple of decades, while others have been in existence since the mid-1800s.

“There are elements of the Shadow Minister’s speech which now suggest that the Coalition would wish the higher education system to return to a binary divide.

“This ‘two-size-fits-all uniformity’ model, where for some universities research would not be regarded as important, or even a necessary role, presents a back-to-the-future arrangement for universities in Australia,” Professor Battersby said.

“It fails to acknowledge what the recently released review of base funding described as ‘Australian universities are institutions with highly complex goals and operations...the sector is diverse’.

“Disappointingly, the Shadow Minister for Education in this major speech made no reference to how regional universities have a distinctive role to play in the national research and innovation framework being contemplated by the Coalition.

“Presumably regional Australia has some importance given that it is at the centre of major national challenges and opportunities including climate change, food security, agricultural production, water security, biosecurity and health services reform.

“Moreover, strong regions make significant contributions to national prosperity and effective regional development depends on locally embedded applied research,” Professor Battersby said.
“Equally, regional universities and their research make a strong contribution to the regions in which they serve.”

The Regional Universities Network was established in October. The foundation members are CQUniversity, Southern Cross University, University of Ballarat, University of New England, University of Southern Queensland and University of the Sunshine Coast. It has three key objectives:

1. To provide policy advice to government, particularly with regard to tertiary education and regional development.

2. To strengthen and promote the contributions of regional universities to regional and national development.

3. To build institutional capacity and sustainability through the sharing of best practice in educational delivery, training, research and organisational management, particularly with reference to regional contexts.

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