MEDIA RELEASE
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2015 Budget – Some Positives, but Uncertainty Remains

Although the 2015 Budget offers some positive measures for higher education, the Regional Universities Network (RUN) is disappointed that the Parliament has still not resolved the long-term, sustainable funding of the sector.

The Chair of the Regional Universities Network (RUN), Professor Peter Lee, said that the continuing uncertainty is particularly detrimental to non-traditional students who may lack the confidence and familial history and preparedness – but not the academic ability – to embark on university studies.

“The 20 per cent reduction in Government support for student places, combined with the efficiency dividend in 2015, passed without the deregulation of student fees would be a terrible outcome for regional universities. We do welcome the repayment of the 2014 efficiency dividend money to universities. The higher education system must be adequately funded to ensure quality and sustainability, and the deregulation of fees provides the most realistic way to achieve this,” Professor Lee said.

“The Government’s initiative to enforce the same HECS repayment obligations on Australians living overseas to those that apply to those who remain in the country is fair and equitable.

“RUN welcomes the provision of $28 million for a university-based, specialist centre, to replace the Office of Teaching and Learning. Teaching and learning, at which regional universities excel, should be rewarded and recognised for quality, in a similar way to research. The centre must be independent and adequately funded.

“However, in providing savings for the smaller government initiative, it is important that the Department of Education and Training is adequately funded to support the higher education sector.

“RUN welcomes the provision of $16.9 million to the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership to improve teacher quality.

“While we support $5m to go to the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies for preservation of the collection, we are disappointed that the funding has come from the Higher Education Participation Program which aims to lift the participation of under-represented groups at university.”

“Research funding is of great importance to regional universities which have a strong, vibrant, innovative, connected and growing pure and applied research effort. Research embedded in our communities is key to regional development. We welcome $300 million to fund National Collaborative Research Infrastructure until 2017 but are disappointed that this is being drawn from the Sustainable Research
Excellence program. It is disappointing that there isn’t increased funding for research.

“We note the end of the Collaborative Research Networks program. Although we are disappointed that the remaining $11.4 million will not be spent on this initiative we look forward to working with the Government on a successor program to continue to grow the research effort in regional universities,” Professor Lee said.

“We are disappointed that funding for the Collaborative Research Centres is reduced by $26.8 million over four years, but note that the Government will continue to provide $732.4 million over the forward estimates for the program pending the outcome of the review,” Professor Lee said.

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