

MEDIA RELEASE
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Funding freeze will damage important progress in building Regional Australia

Seven regional universities have slammed the Federal Government's decision to freeze their funding because important advances in living and education standards for Regional Australia will be dismantled.

Although regional communities were on the brink of benefitting from new education and work opportunities, many new initiatives will be put on hold as a result of the decision to freeze funding for Commonwealth Grant Scheme places for two years.

"Regional universities hold the key to unlocking a new future for regional Australians, helping create new businesses and a re-skilled workforce – but those initiatives have suddenly and unfairly been put on hold by the Federal Government funding freeze," Professor Greg Hill, the Chair of RUN said.

"The Federal Government's policy change has pulled the plug on a raft of new opportunities which will hit regional communities hard."

The Vice-Chancellors of seven regional universities – the six member universities of the Regional Universities Network (RUN) and Charles Sturt University – met to analyse the impact of the proposed changes on their universities and communities.

Examples of initiatives under threat include:

- Changes to funding have put Charles Sturt University's plans for a \$45 million expansion of vital health courses in Port Macquarie in jeopardy. The campus in Port Macquarie has delivered significant economic benefits to the region as well as providing students with vital opportunities to become job ready. The Federal Government's cuts means that the future growth and expansion of Port Macquarie will be put at risk.
- USQ has a new campus at Ipswich in South East Queensland concentrating on health sciences, in one of Australia's most rapid population growth areas, with some programs still in development. Future growth to meet the needs of the community will be jeopardised by the freeze.
- A new \$12m allied health sciences facility in Coffs Harbour to offer new programs in areas of community need such as Mental Health, Nursing and Midwifery, Paramedic Nursing, Indigenous Health and Exercise Science is under threat. While the government has provided funding to

construct the facility – which is due to start imminently – Southern Cross University will not be funded to enrol any students into the new courses.

- Student fees will not cover the cost of student nurse hospital placements, so even if the communities that CQUniversity serve need nurses, the University won't be able to train them. This will therefore impact nursing courses across the University footprint.
- USC will not be able to recoup the significant investments already made in campus initiatives at Hervey Bay, Caboolture and the Sunshine Coast University Hospital and the well advanced partnership, with the government, for a major (\$200 million+ for Stage 1) campus development at Petrie, in partnership with Moreton Bay Regional Council.
- In 2016, UNE completed infrastructure upgrades in Armidale and Tamworth for teaching and research in agriculture and science. UNE has invested significantly in ensuring a strong future for the agribusiness sector, only to be undercut by lack of support and understanding of the significance of the funding freeze on regional universities.
- In 2017 Federation University Australia began operating at a new campus in Berwick, an area of growing student-age population and significant unmet demand for Higher Education. The funding freeze puts in jeopardy the ability of FedUni to meet this demand and creates a negative economic impact as industry and public services in this rapidly expanding outer metropolitan area East of Melbourne will not receive the necessary supply of quality graduates.

“We’ve all made very substantial financial investments in the initiatives in which we will be left high and dry. Our business models, entered into in good faith, and in most instances with government blessing and co-investment, mean we can only remain financially viable if we have growth in student numbers to cover outlays already made,” Professor Hill said.

“These initiatives have been under development, in most cases, for years so the government should be fully aware of the outcomes of universities not being able to meet their commitments to their communities, to business, as well as the more direct threat to the financial viability of the institutions themselves.”

“This policy is likely to see some regional campuses close and will terminate many initiatives which have been cross-subsidised by universities to build capacity in regional communities,” Professor Hill said.

“The Federal Government’s policy is slamming the door on the future of thousands of regional Australians. Meanwhile regional universities are all concerned that they are being pressured to sign new, inadequate funding agreements within the next week.



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“This policy is a blunt instrument which will have a vast and disproportionate impact on regional Australia – and we are calling for a re-evaluation of this policy as quickly as possible.”

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