MEDIA RELEASE
24 May 2016

RUN launches Clever Regions, Clever Australia policy plan

The Regional Universities Network (RUN) has released its policy plan, Clever Regions, Clever Australia, Policy Advice for an Incoming Government - 2016.

The Chair of RUN, Prof Jan Thomas, said that the plan outlined the network’s vision to enhance the contribution of regional universities to their regions and the nation.

“Regional Australia must be better connected with the world, innovative economy. The jobs and industries of the future will need highly skilled university graduates. Despite the gains in higher education participation of low SES students and regional students in recent years due to the demand driven student system, the proportion of people from regional and remote Australia who participate in higher education continues to decline in relative terms,” Professor Thomas said.

“It is in the national interest to provide adequate, sustainable support to regional universities and students to address educational inequality. Regional universities provide the only realistic option for many regional students to attend university.

“RUN is advocating for:
- Adequate funding for and recognition of the role of regional universities in regional development;
- Better support for regional universities and students to produce more highly skilled university graduates in the regions; and
- Enhancement of research and innovation in regional universities, including in partnership with industry.

“We have proposed policies on regional development, teaching and learning, supporting student success, the Higher Education Loans Program and Youth Allowance, postgraduate places, distance education, infrastructure funding, international students, and research and innovation.

“Further, we strongly support university autonomy and the ability of institutions to respond quickly and flexibly to changing circumstances,” Professor Thomas said.

“We hope that all parties will consider the issues raised in the plan and our proposed policies in the context of the 2016 election and beyond.”

The RUN policy plan is attached. The document, Clever Regions, Clever Australia, Policy Advice for an Incoming Government – 2016 is available at: www.run.edu.au
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Find out more about the Regional Universities Network at www.run.edu.au
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The RUN Policy Plan:

Regional development

- A holistic approach to funding and policy should be adopted across Government portfolios with respect to the support for regional students, regional communities and regional universities.

- RUN seeks the development of a comprehensive new strategy that recognises the role played by regional universities in facilitating and strengthening regional development. As part of this:
  - Regional universities should be directly eligible for regional development funding; and
  - A strategic, regional and/or regional city-based approach should be adopted to bring together universities and industry along with local government, not-for-profit organisations and other key stakeholders. Models which could be followed include the UK’s Cities Deals and/or Local Enterprise Partnerships.

Teaching and learning

- RUN supports sustainable base funding in line with the findings of the 2011 Higher Education Base Funding Review, and strongly opposes a reduction in funding.

- RUN supports a review and enhancement of the regional loading for regional universities to deliver teaching and learning in regional Australia.

- Clinical placement funding must appropriately fund regional universities for clinical placements in regional, public (and private) health providers to ensure that the regions have an appropriately trained health workforce.

- The demand driven student system must be retained for bachelor places and expanded to sub-bachelor places to improve pathways to undergraduate study for those who are not adequately prepared to enter directly into a bachelor’s degree. The system must not be capped, including via “soft caps”.
Supporting student success

- The Higher Education Participation Program should be retained and funding reinstated to at least the pre-2016 Budget level. Consideration should be given to options which will focus the program more effectively to make a significant difference in higher education participation by regional and low SES students.

- The performance of universities should be measured by the “value add” they provide to students.

- Universities should not be penalised for student attrition which would create perverse incentives to pass students.

- Funding needs to be restored to the Office for Learning and Teaching to at least pre-2016 Budget levels to enable ongoing broad-based support for innovation in teaching and learning.

Higher Education Loans Program and Youth Allowance

- Regional students should be given adequate financial support to attend regional universities, including through Youth Allowance and the Higher Education Loans Program.

- Higher Youth Allowance funding could be considered for students to attend regional universities to build regional economies.

Postgraduate places

- Commonwealth supported postgraduate places must be distributed equitably and should include support for areas of specific skills shortage and student demand in regional Australia.

Distance education

- RUN supports initiatives to keep students online and accessing the internet via reliable, high speed connections.

Infrastructure funding

- RUN supports a new infrastructure fund or loan facility, including for digital infrastructure and deferred maintenance, to enable regional and outer metropolitan universities to undertake transformative infrastructure investments.

International students

- International students should be encouraged to study at regional campuses and to stay and work in regional Australia in areas of skills need. This could be achieved by:
  
  - Providing additional bonus points to students towards Australian residency for attending regional campuses, particularly for those studying in areas of regional skills need;
Extending the work rights of international students who study in non-metropolitan locations (RUN, for example, supports provision of an extra year on completion of undergraduate or post-graduate study);

Providing work rights to students who have completed a bachelor’s or master’s degree at a regional campus regardless of the duration of study; and

Provision of scholarships by AusAID for students to attend university in regional Australia.

Research and innovation

- Regional universities must be adequately funded for research engagement with industry to drive regional development in the national interest. Support for university research engagement must address the heterogeneous mix of “industry” organisations in regional Australia. These include small-medium enterprises, big business, not-for-profits, local and state government and community organisations. There is need for a comprehensive program which provides an incentive for regional universities and regional industry to connect to drive innovation in regional Australia.

- Government funding incentives should be provided for research students to go to regional Australia in areas of national priority to facilitate regional development. This could include working in partnership with regional industries e.g. industry PhD scholarships, focussing on SMEs and non-commercial partners, partly funded by Government and partly by partner organisations.

- RUN welcomes tax incentives to assist SMEs invest in research and training. Tax incentives could be provided to companies to take on students as interns or to employ them as part of a PhD program.

- RUN welcomes initiatives to help start-ups in regional Australia.

- Regional universities must not be relatively disadvantaged by the new research block grant arrangements. Consideration should be given to looking at the proportion of funding raised from industry rather than the absolute dollar value.

- New measures of engagement and impact must be based on broader considerations than in pure monetary terms.