MEDIA RELEASE
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Concerns over Abbott Government’s proposed university changes

The Regional Universities Network (RUN) is concerned about changes to higher education proposed by the new Education Minister, the Hon Christopher Pyne MP, reported in today’s media.

The Minister has indicated that the Coalition will abolish the student services fee, axe the participation targets for students in higher education, and review the demand driven student system.

The Chair of the Regional Universities Network, Professor Peter Lee, said that the student services fee provides funding for services that are vital for students at regional universities and their communities.

“The student services fee supports services on campuses such as food outlets, sports facilities, extra medical and counselling services etc. Students in regional settings do not have an easily accessible alternative with respect to student services. This money raised cannot, by law, be used to support political activity. Facilities provided by universities are commonly used by regional communities more widely, providing a rich and sustainable community,” Professor Lee said.

“The funding provided to universities is significant – it totals hundreds of millions of dollars across the sector. On top of $3 billion cuts to universities and student support proposed by the former Labor Government and supported by the Coalition, universities will find it increasingly difficult to support their operations.

“Regional Australia lags behind capital cities in higher educational attainment compared with metropolitan cities, only half as many of the adults in regional communities have a degree. A third of Australia’s population lives outside capitals and without a professionally trained populace, it will be difficult for regional Australia to effectively participate in a modern economy,” Professor Lee said.

“More importantly, the demand driven system has been critical in lifting participation in regional Australia. It has enabled our universities to put on new courses in areas such as allied health and engineering, and contribute towards the number of professionals in regional Australia. We have built new infrastructure, largely funded by the former Federal Government, to support this growth.

“In any review of the demand driven system, RUN will vigorously put the view that any recapping of places at regional universities will impact on the ability of our institutions to grow participation in higher education in regional Australia, enhance regional development, and diversify regional industries and economies.”
“The quality of courses should be judged by the quality of the graduates. RUN universities specialise in supporting students who are less well prepared for university and producing well qualified graduates. The standards for professional courses are set by professional bodies,” Professor Lee said.

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