Government welcomes new Regional Universities Network

The Australian Government welcomed the announcement today of a new Regional Universities Network to advocate on behalf of universities based in regional areas.

“Regional universities play a vital role for the future of regional Australia,” said Chris Evans, Minister for Tertiary Education.

“I look forward to working with the new Regional Universities Network to ensure all regional universities have a strong and vibrant future.

“The Gillard Labor Government is strongly committed to regional higher education and research and our record of reform reflects this.”

Minister for Regional Australia Simon Crean said universities played an important role in regional economic development.

“With our economy in transition, regional universities can help local communities diversify and drive growth and new development well into the future,” Mr Crean said.

Innovation Minister Senator Kim Carr said regional universities have strong links with local communities and have particular research strengths in areas like health, social and environmental sciences.

“The new network provides a unique opportunity for member universities to promote high-quality collaborative research and enhance their contribution to the well-being of regional Australia,” Senator Carr said.

In recognition that regional areas face particular challenges in accessing higher education opportunities that are sometimes taken for granted in metropolitan areas, the Commonwealth Government has significantly increased funding to regional universities since 2007.

In 2011, Australia’s regionally headquartered universities will receive about $1.4 billion in Commonwealth funding to support teaching, learning and research – an increase of 28 per cent from 2007.
Over the same period, the number of Commonwealth supported student places at these universities has risen from 62,600 in 2007 to 74,100 this year – a rise of 18 per cent.

The Australian Government has made a number of major investments in regional higher education to support the reach and capacity of our regional institutions.

Last Friday, the Government opened applications under the $500 million Regional Priorities Round of the Education Investment Fund.

This new funding round will help build world class education and training facilities for students in regional Australia, supporting increased participation in tertiary education.

This targeted investment will contribute to economic growth and development in regional Australia by addressing the skills needs of regional communities.

The Government will shortly announce successful applicants under the $400 million Structural Adjustment Fund.

This will assist universities, particularly those in regional and outer metropolitan areas, to improve the quality of teaching and learning by delivering high quality learning experiences for students, expanding course offerings and enhancing pathways to higher education.

In this year's Budget, the Government increased the regional loading by $109.9 million over four years, to help overcome the higher costs of regional campuses.

Earlier this year, the Government announced that twelve universities would receive funding of $61.5 million through the Collaborative Research Networks program to assist less research-intensive smaller and regional universities. This initiative will build research capacity through enabling universities to partner with others in areas of common interest.

Regional students are benefitting strongly from the major reforms to Youth Allowance introduced in 2010, which have delivered major increases in funding to assist students to access university education.

The most recent figures released by the Government show the Bradley reforms are working to make Youth Allowance fairer for regional university students. Overall, the number of regional students accessing Youth Allowance is up from 28,900 to 36,300 – an increase of 26% in just more than a year.

The Government has introduced legislation to build on this record of reform to:

- remove regional eligibility distinctions for Youth Allowance with effect from 1 January 2012; and
- increase the value of relocation scholarships available for eligible regional students who need to move away from home to study.

After years of neglect by the former Coalition Government, when participation in higher education by regional students fell, Labor is working to ensure that regional students can share fairly in the lifelong benefits of higher education.

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