

14 May 2024

CAN KICKED DOWN THE ROAD IN UNIVERSITY REFORMS

The 2024-25 Budget is large on rhetoric and promises of sectoral reform but does little to address the pressing needs of Australia's higher education sector, especially Australia's regional universities.

While the Regional Universities Network (RUN) is gladdened to see some recommendations from the Accord adopted in the Budget, especially those ensuring the education system is more affordable to students, we are disheartened at the response that does not address the pressing needs of universities today.

The establishment of the Australian Tertiary Education Commission (ATEC) from July 2025, and the introduction of a reformed needs-based funding system alongside managed growth of Commonwealth Supported Places from January 2026 are positive steps, and RUN looks forward to engaging with the Government and the Accord Implementation Committee in ensuring these reforms will achieve outcomes for all Australians.

Executive Director of RUN, Mr Alec Webb said that RUN is particularly supportive of the \$350.3 million over four years from 2024-25 to expand access to university enabling and preparation programs through a new FEE-FREE Uni Ready Courses program from 1 January 2025.

"Regional universities know from firsthand experience how impactful enabling and preparation programs can be for students transitioning to university.

"The FEE-FREE Uni Ready Courses will be a vital step in ensuring that more students can benefit from the lifechanging impact of university study," said Mr Webb.

While the Budget has provided a roadmap for the newly established ATEC to follow, it was silent on the Accord findings that the diseconomies of scale facing regional universities were real and the additional costs of regional education delivery required urgent resolution.

"The reforms needed to ensure there are robust and thriving world standard universities in our regions, to support the broader vision for development of the regions evident elsewhere in the Budget has been kicked down the road.

"Higher education reform is not a zero-sum game. Universities need students, and students need universities. We cannot have one without the other, and both have needs that must be addressed and met," said Mr Webb.

This budget does not address the dearth of infrastructure funding for universities, nor the current fiscal challenges universities face as a result of the unnecessary mass rejection of international student visas.

www.run.edu.au

RUN has concerns about the recent announcement of the draft International Education and Skills Strategic Framework and will work constructively with the Government to ensure that all universities are able to grow international student cohorts regardless of the size of their balance sheet.

RUN is disappointed by the \$57.2 million cut to Destination Australia, a scheme designed to encourage domestic and international students to study in Australia's regions.

"Ceasing funding for new scholarships for domestic and international students under the Destination Australia program is a retrograde step and further demonstrates a lack of Government support for Australia's regions.

"For all the intent that the Budget outlines for the future, it does not come close to addressing the immediate needs of Australia's regional universities," said Mr Webb.

For media enquiries:

Alec Webb, Executive Director, 0408 482 736

www.run.edu.au