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## **TALKS ‘SHED POSITIVE LIGHT’, BUT TAX CONCERN REMAINS: RUN**

The Regional Universities Network (RUN) says discussions with Higher Education Minister Kim Carr in the past week have shed positive light on several areas of uncertainty for the sector, but the proposal to cap tax-deductible education expenses remains of concern.

Incoming RUN Chair, Professor Peter Lee, welcomed Senator Carr’s rejection of the push by some universities to reimpose minimum ATAR entrance scores.

“The Minister recognises that the tendency to focus on some limited measures of inputs rather than the end results of tertiary study, does not provide a particularly useful measure of the quality of higher education,” Professor Lee said.

“RUN universities have pioneered higher education access schemes that enable low socio-economic status, regional and remote students, first-in-family, mature aged and Indigenous students to participate and succeed at university. If we were simply to restrict university to those students who achieved high ATAR scores we would entrench the lower educational outcomes in regional Australia which must be addressed for the national good.”

Professor Lee also welcomed a commitment to honour the “pipeline” of students to ensure the viability of a range of newly established courses at RUN universities. These courses include allied health (e.g. physiotherapy, occupational therapy, oral health, speech pathology, podiatry, chiropractic) at CQUniversity, engineering at Southern Cross University, and law and engineering at the University of the Sunshine Coast.

Professor Lee said Senator Carr also expressed his support for the Australian Government’s \$377.2 million Structural Adjustment Fund to help universities meet the challenges of the demand-driven system, including the \$200 million Education Investment Fund.

But with modelling by Universities Australia showing that postgraduate full-fee student numbers could plummet by up to 30 per cent in just four years under proposed tax changes to education expenses, Professor Lee said it was time for a rethink.

“The tax cap as currently proposed will particularly disadvantage some of our key student cohorts such as women, students from low socio-economic backgrounds and those who live in rural and remote regions,” Professor Lee said.

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“Universities Australia has developed a counter-proposal that will share the burden more widely, with a much lower impact on individuals and I think that it is something that should be seriously considered.”

RUN also urged the Government to consider the continuation of the Collaborative Research Networks program beyond 2015 to further build research capacity at regional universities.

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