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POSITIVE POINTS IN NATIONALS' POLICY FOR REGIONAL EDUCATION AND DEVELOPMENT

Lifting participation in education in regional Australia, including in Year 12 and in higher education, remains a major challenge and is required to further regional development and to lift productivity in regional Australia.

The Chair of the Regional Universities Network (RUN), Professor David Battersby, welcomed the release of the Nationals 2013 policy platform which proposes a number of initiatives to encourage students to study and work as professionals in regional Australia.

"There are a number of policies put forward to assist regional students access regional higher education. The initiatives are in keeping with policies advocated in the RUN policy document Smarter Regions, Smarter Australia," Professor Battersby said.

Among other initiatives proposed by the Nationals are: a new Regional Education Fund aiming to ensure that the key issues of equity and access to educational opportunities for regional students are addressed; a new Tertiary Access Allowance, which will be available for students for whom public transport is not reasonably available within 90 minutes of their place of study; study support for students studying at regional institutions (including the development and implementation of annual loan scheme as part of the plan to attract students to regional areas); and assisting universities establish more residential-hall style accommodation dedicated specifically for use by regional students.

"Encouraging more students to study at regional universities will provide more professionals to work in regional Australia. The Nationals are also advocating other policies to encourage graduates to work in areas of skills need in the regions, including incentive payments that encourage qualified teachers to relocate to, or remain in, rural or regional locations; bonded scholarships for regional students to study in areas of skills shortage at university with the proviso that, at the end of their studies, they agree to return to an area of need for a fixed period of three years; and refunding the HECS fees of graduates who work in regional areas of need and contribute to the economic development and social fabric of regional Australia," Professor Battersby said.

"A number of measures are also proposed to enhance strategic research and innovation including assisting universities obtain the resources and scientific and professional research skills they need; measures to facilitate collaboration between universities and industry, particularly in the area of agriculture and agribusiness, to ensure a sustainable workforce into the future; and an Agricultural Research Fund to ensure that relevant university research is supported.

"RUN also welcomes the recognition in the Nationals' regional development policy of

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of the role regional universities can play in further enhancing the social, cultural and environmental development of their regions.

“It is proposed that universities, service organisations, cultural groups, sporting clubs, business and community leaders will work with Regional Development Australia offices to assess local needs and identify targeted initiatives. This proposal is broadly consistent with the RUN regional development policy position which advocates that regional universities should be central to a new, systematic regional development strategy.

“If a Coalition government is elected on September 7, RUN would welcome working with it to implement these initiatives,” Professor Battersby said.

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