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MYTHS AND MISCONCEPTIONS SURROUND COMMENTARY ON REGIONAL HIGHER ED ISSUES

When The Nationals put out their full election policy plan earlier this week, some subsequent reporting included commentators making incorrect claims about the state of regional higher education.

RUN Chair Professor David Battersby said, "RUN supports some of the policy ideas put forward in The Nationals' plan and we think it important to correct some of the common misconceptions that were repeated in reporting around the context of regional higher education.

"Firstly, some claim that the population in the regions is falling. According to the ABS, the opposite is true.

"Secondly, some have focused on domestic undergraduate students and noted that the share of regional and remote students has declined over this time. This is true. However, actual student enrolments have increased substantially over this time, from fewer than 52,000 in 2001 to more than 68,000 in 2012. The growth has all taken place since 2005.

"Most importantly, there has been strong growth in regional and remote student numbers since the introduction of the student demand-driven system with regional enrolments for domestic commencing students increasing by 6.9% between 2011 and 2012.

"Regional Australia still has half the participation in higher education compared to the capitals and at the same time regional Australia needs to diversify industry and attract more professionals to work in the regions to drive national productivity.

"A study undertaken for RUN on the economic impact of our universities showed that between 60-80% of our graduates work in regional Australia. The best way to get people to work in regional Australia, diversify regional industry and drive regional productivity is to train students in regional Australia.

"One problem is that there are many barriers to participation for regional students, including financial, with about two-thirds of students reported incomes below the poverty line.

"A multi-pronged policy approach is needed and we have welcomed a number of the measures suggested by the Nationals in their policy platform.

"It's in the national interest to address the significant national problem of under-participation in higher education in regional Australia and we welcome policies put forward by any party that would address this problem. We just need to work on the basis of facts, not misconceptions about regional higher education."

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