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AN AMBITIOUS BUDGET FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

The Regional Universities Network (RUN) welcomes the announcement in the Budget of an ambitious program of reform for higher education which recognises the importance of the sector to Australia. The Treasurer and the Minister are to be congratulated for highlighting the important role Universities play in Australia's future.

The Chair of RUN, Professor Peter Lee, said that the network was pleased that the importance of equity and participation of students in higher education had been recognised in the higher education measures, and that RUN was keen to work with the Government on the detail of the reforms.

"Regional Australia plays a key part in Australia's national prosperity and productivity, and a third of the population lives outside capitals. More regional Australians must have a higher education degree to enhance the productivity of regional communities and industry. We are particularly pleased that the Government has decided to keep the demand driven system for bachelor places and extended it to sub-bachelor places. This will assist in providing pathways and lift participation in higher education in regional Australia for less well prepared students," Professor Lee said.

"We are also pleased that the Government has chosen not to lower the Higher Education Loan Repayment threshold to the minimum wage, as recommended by the Commission of Audit. This will ensure that most students in part time work won't have to repay the debt while studying.

"We recognise that, in a deregulated fee environment, the Government has chosen to ensure that scholarships are available for low SES and other students from backgrounds underrepresented in higher education. While we welcome this measure, we also note that the vast majority of people who are educated in the regions stay in the regions. It will be essential that such new arrangements do not deprive the regions of the educated human capital needed to ensure regional Australia retains its vitality and innovative approaches to growth and prosperity.

"We welcome the simplification of the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program, and look forward to working with the Government on the detail of its implementation.

"We are disappointed in the decision that all programs will be indexed by the Consumer Price Index rather than the Higher Education index – this will mean a loss in revenue for our universities.

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“The Government has not taken the opportunity in this budget of addressing the Higher Education Loan Program doubtful debt.

“We are also disappointed that research training students will now have to pay 10 per cent of the cost of their degrees. Although this is deferrable through the Higher Education Loan Program, it may deter Australians from undertaking research degrees. This is a regressive step given the decrease in the number of Australians undertaking PhDs, and our economy’s need for more research-trained graduates, including in regional Australia.

“We welcome the announcement by the Government of the extension of funding for the National Collaborative Research Infrastructure Scheme, Future Fellowships and the new Future Fund for health research,” Professor Lee said.

“We look forward to actively working the Government to refine many of the details of implementation.”

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