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CONFERENCE HIGHLIGHTS IMPORTANT ROLE OF REGIONAL AUSTRALIA

The 2014 Digital Rural Futures Conference comes at an important time to focus on the critical role of science, engineering and agricultural science degrees as regional universities face challenges in proposed Government changes to tertiary education.

The Conference, initiated by the Regional Universities Network (RUN), is an annual national event designed to raise awareness of opportunities and challenges affecting rural and regional Australia.

This year's conference, to be held at the University of Queensland (USQ) Toowoomba on June 25-27, will have three key themes: regional futures, agricultural futures and digital futures.

RUN Chair, Professor Peter Lee, said although science degrees are expensive courses to run because of their practical component, they are crucial to regional universities and the Government's proposed cuts could have a lasting impact on regional economies.

"The importance of tertiary education in regional Australia cannot be overstated and it is vital that it remains accessible and affordable," he said.

"Regional universities have a fundamental role to play in the development of the nation. They drive regional economic, social, cultural and environmental development, innovation and productivity, and help unlock the full human potential of their regions.

"University Experience Survey data show that more than 65 per cent of RUN students are first in family to attend university. Students who study in regional areas tend to remain in the areas after graduation and provide a ready supply of professionals to fill crucial regional roles."

Professor Lee said despite common misconceptions, the population of regional Australia was increasing.

"Between 2007 and 2012, the population outside of major cities rose by 6.6 per cent and by 2026 is expected to grow by 26 per cent.

"Regional Australia plays a key part in Australia's national prosperity and productivity – 67 per cent of the nation's economic assets and productive activity are located outside capital cities."

Under the Government's proposed changes the cost of an Agricultural Science degree could

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rise significantly at the same time that the number of Agricultural Science students has dropped substantially.

“As Australia continues to develop trade agreements which require increased agricultural exports and rainfall patterns are changing, it will be even more important for regional universities to provide the research in agricultural and other sciences.

“RUN universities are relatively young and the research effort is increasing significantly. Funding invested in research will be highly productive, focussed and yield a high return.

“It is fundamental to our mission that we continue to grow our research in strategic areas relevant to regional Australia, the nation and the world,” Professor Lee said.

For more information about, or to register to attend, the Digital Rural Futures Conference visit www.run.edu.au/

For media enquiries:

Dr Caroline Perkins, Executive Director, Regional Universities Network, 0408 482 736

Issued by: Diana Streak, RUN Media Adviser, 022 536 064

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