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RUN SUBMISSION TO SENATE COMMITTEE ON THE HIGHER EDUCATION AND RESEARCH REFORM AMENDMENT BILL

The Regional Universities Network (RUN) has called for a Competitive Regions Fund, regional scholarships, and an interest rate on HECS/HELP loans to be set at 50 per cent of the Long Term Bond Rate, with the students' interest rate on the loan capped at 6 per cent.

In its submission to the Senate Committee on the Higher Education and Research Reform Amendment (HERRA) Bill, RUN also proposes imposing a threshold on the Higher Education Participation Program (HEPP) to allocate funding to those universities with relatively high proportions and significant catchments of low SES students.

The Chair of RUN, Professor Peter Lee, said that, given the continuing decline in Government funding per student over a long period of time, the deregulation of student fees is the only feasible way that the sector can maintain quality and remain internationally competitive, provided that the specific circumstances facing regional and disadvantaged students and regional universities are recognised in the new policy regime.

"We strongly oppose a reduction in Commonwealth Grant Scheme funding as proposed under the HERRA Bill because, if these cuts proceed without modification, there will be a substantial negative impact on regional universities' teaching, research and community engagement activities," Professor Lee said.

"A Competitive Regions Fund would be specifically targeted to those providers whose total proportion of domestic undergraduate students from regional and remote areas is higher than the mean for all providers, to recognise those universities operating in thin markets.

"We also propose funding regional scholarships in addition to the proposed Commonwealth Scholarships Scheme, or, if this doesn't eventuate, pooling some or all money from the proposed Commonwealth Scholarships Scheme to redistribute to universities with a high proportion of low SES students to allocate to disadvantaged students, or to give directly to students.

"In combination, a reduction in Government funding and real interest rate on loans will have a disproportionate impact on the regional and disadvantaged students who study at RUN universities, as well as the communities from which they come.

"It will be seen as unfair and is likely to exacerbate the divide between the city and rural and regional Australia by ignoring the real structural differences we have in this nation between metropolitan and regional higher education. We therefore advocate a change to the Government's proposed real interest rate on student loans.

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“These measures, combined with a threshold on the HEPP, will ensure that regional universities can continue to play a fundamental role in the development of their communities.”

The RUN Submission to the Senate Education and Employment Legislation Committee on the Higher Education and Research Reform Amendment Bill can be seen at www.run.edu.au/

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