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RUN URGES SENATE TO PASS HIGHER EDUCATION BILL WITH AMENDMENTS

The Regional Universities Network (RUN) urges the Senate to pass the Higher Education and Research Reform Amendment Bill with amendments following the release of the Senate Education and Employment Legislation Committee report on the bill.

The Chair of RUN, Professor Peter Lee, said that the passage of bill with changes proposed by RUN would help regional students attend and succeed at regional universities and would increase the number of professionals working in regional Australia.

"The findings of the committee in large part support the changes that RUN has been advocating," Professor Lee said.

"RUN also recommends that Government reduce the size of the proposed cut to the Government contribution to student places, thereby putting downward pressure on fee increases, making Higher Education more affordable for all students.

"The committee recommends that the government examine HELP indexation measures in light of evidence presented to the committee, recognising unforeseen impacts of the proposed reforms on students.

"RUN advocates that the bond rate should not be applied to student loans. We suggest that the loan rate be set at 50 per cent of the Long Term Bond Rate, with the students' interest rate on the loan capped at a maximum of 4 per cent.

"Such a measure would add further impetus to the affordability of Higher Education for all students.

"The committee has recommended that the guidelines for the Commonwealth Scholarship Scheme seek to address some of the financial barriers faced by low socio-economic status students and regional communities in accessing higher education.

"RUN advocates for regional scholarships funded by Government or pooling the proposed Commonwealth Scholarships to provide regional universities with more scholarship funding than they would receive under the original proposal. It is important to encourage students to study in regional Australia so that they will work in the regions. The decision to study at a particular university should be at the choice of the student, not because one university or another can offer large scholarships.

"The committee recommends that the government explore the provision of a structural adjustment package to assist certain sections of the higher education sector transition to a

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fully deregulated system.

“RUN is pleased that the committee has recognised the need to provide support to parts of the higher education sector in the context of the reforms. We advocate a Competitive Regions Fund to assist universities in thin markets. This would help in preserving the excellent teaching and learning environment at our universities, including for the mature age, low SES, and Indigenous students, who are well represented at our campuses. To be effective it must be a recurrent allocation as the issues associated with thin markets are not one off or temporary, but rather an ongoing source of disadvantage to regional universities. The fund should be reviewed after a period of operation, say 3 years.

“RUN supports the committee recommendation that the government explore avenues to recover the HELP debts of Australians residing overseas,” Professor Lee said.

“We also advocate imposing a threshold to the Higher Education Participation Program which would ensure that more funding is allocated to those universities with relatively high proportions and significant catchments of low socio-economic status (SES) students so that we can increase our aspiration raising and outreach activities.

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