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OPPORTUNITY FOR UNIVERSITY STUDY VITAL FOR REGIONAL AUSTRALIANS

Providing opportunity for the third of Australians who live outside capitals to study at university is key to economic growth, the Regional Universities Network (RUN) said today.

In response to an editorial published in The Australian on August 4 “Raise the bar on campus”, the Chair of RUN, Professor Peter Lee, said that it was critical to grow the proportion of professionals working in the regions.

“It is more important than ever for Australia to have strong and prosperous regional economies. If regional Australia, including peri-urban, regional capitals and more remote areas, is to have sufficient, educated professionals to fully participate in the world economy, we need to continue to encourage regional Australians to study at university. The demand-driven student system is key to this. Australia’s economic success increasingly depends on the skills of our people,” Professor Lee said.

“Regional universities and those that focus on online courses are more likely to deal with students who are less advantaged and may be less well prepared for university education. Many are first in family to higher education, mature age, from low SES backgrounds, and distance students. They need more support to succeed. That’s why extending the demand driven system to sub-degree programs is so important.

“While the headline attrition rates at regional universities are, in general, higher than those at metropolitan universities, this reflects the background of our students. The situation for mature aged students is often starkly different to on-campus school leavers: mature aged students often have to deal with the complexities of life, whether as parents, caregivers and workers and as such, have to make decisions to stop their university studies for specific reasons, only to re-commence these studies at a later date. While many students succeed at university, some do not finish, but their lives and prospects are nonetheless enriched by the experience. The official attrition data is year on year – it does not give any real indication of the longer term success of individuals’ ability to complete their degree and the fact is that many students do indeed return to study after a period of time longer than one year.

“We should not deny capable regional Australians the opportunity to study at university. The demand driven system has given many a chance, and most will successfully complete university study,” Professor Lee said.

“Giving students the opportunity to study for a degree does not mean that academic standards are at risk: there is no inherent conflict between equity of opportunity and maintaining academic integrity.

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“As the mining boom wanes and congestion in capitals increases, there is growing need to diversify the regional Australian economies. More university educated professionals are a vital part of this.”

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