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BUDGET 2016: RUN WELCOMES CONSULTATION BUT CUT TO HEPPP WILL HURT REGIONS

The Regional Universities Network (RUN) welcomes the Government's commitment to consultation on future higher education policy and the provision of clarity on some key issues in the higher education budget.

The Chair of RUN, Professor Jan Thomas, said that the deferral of the higher education reforms until 2018, and the abandonment of full fee deregulation and the efficiency dividend offers some certainty for the sector.

"We welcome the Government's commitment to consultation through its policy options paper to develop a direction for higher education which facilitates opportunity and choice, fairness and equity, excellence and quality, affordability and sustainability. Consultation on the options proposed should provide a good basis for a consensus solution to be adopted," Professor Thomas said.

"However, the cut to the Higher Education Partnerships and Participation Program (HEPPP) announced in the budget will disproportionately hit regional universities and their communities.

"The reduction in funding of \$152 million over 4 years from the program is substantial, and amounts to a little over 20 per cent of the total funding. RUN universities typically receive from over \$2 million to over \$6 million from the fund per annum, and this support cannot readily be replaced.

"HEPPP is designed to increase and support the participation in higher education of students from low SES backgrounds at university. The fund is used for outreach and aspiration raising programs to schools and community groups, as well as a range of other activities. This includes scholarships and special projects to support improved student outcomes, student engagement and enhancing the student experience. The cut will hurt regional students and communities.

"We note that HEPPP will be reviewed in the consultation process and that a structural adjustment fund for regional and outer metropolitan universities is still on the table to assist in a transition to new arrangements. However, the cut to the HEPP is a set-back in the short term.

"Regional Australia has relatively low levels of educational attainment. In 2014, the proportion of persons aged 25-34 years with Year 12 or above was above 80 per cent in major cities and between 56 and 60 per cent in regional Australia. The proportion of 25-34 year olds with a bachelor degree or above in major cities was about 42 per cent compared

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to around 21 to 18 per cent in regional Australia.

“The jobs and industries of the future will need highly skilled university graduates who can connect regional Australia with the global, innovative economy. For every 1000 new graduates entering the workforce, 120 new jobs are created for people without a degree,” Professor Thomas said.

“Lifting participation of regional Australians at university will take a sustained effort and will not be assisted in the short term by this cut. We look forward to working with Government to reshape HEPPP to benefit low SES and regional students.”

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