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RUN OPPOSES HIGHER EDUCATION REFORM BILL

The Regional Universities Network (RUN) does not support the passage of the higher education reform Bill through Parliament.

The Chair of RUN, Professor Greg Hill, said that the network had stated in its submission to the Senate inquiry on the Bill that, while too little detail is available to be able to model the full impact of the complex suite of reforms, it fears that there will be serious consequences for regional universities, students and communities arising from the package.

“Regional universities are anchor institutions for our regions. Core teaching and learning funding contributes to the myriad of ways that our universities provide for our students and communities – we do not receive separate funding for our contribution to regional development. We are more reliant on government funding for teaching and learning than older metropolitan universities. The proposed efficiency dividend on core funding will, therefore, impact more on regional universities and what we can provide for students.

“For example, the University of New England estimates that impact of the efficiency dividend alone will be of the order of \$5.8 million in 2018 and 2019, and the University of the Sunshine Coast estimates it to be at least \$7.5 million in each year. Performance funding will put another \$7.5 million or more at risk per year per institution,” Professor Hill said.

“The reforms may work to further lower the participation rate of regional students in higher education. The proposed increase in student contributions may deter some students, particularly those who are mature age and /or part-time. Students from these groups make up a large proportion of RUN’s student cohort.

“The decrease of the first threshold for the repayment of student loans from around \$52,000 to \$42,000 is a significant change and will disproportionately affect low income households, which may also be subject to an increased burden under other budget measures (e.g. the Medicare levy). Financial circumstances have been shown to be a major contributor to students dropping out of university.

“The proposed higher education reforms will work against other government initiatives designed to develop and encourage people to live and work in regional Australia. These include regional City Deals, the Regional Jobs and Investment Package, the decentralisation of Government bodies, and the new Regional Growth Fund.

“Some parts of the package, such as the uncapping of approved sub-bachelor programs which articulate into bachelor awards, and the legislation and reforms of the Higher

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Education Participation and Partnership Program to assist low SES students succeed at university, are welcome and well thought out,” Professor Hill said.

“Other elements, such as the changes to enabling places, Commonwealth supported post-graduate places, and how performance funding will be determined, are unclear.

There should be a transparent, fair, exhaustive and inclusive consultation process on these reforms, and the detail spelt out, prior to their further consideration.”

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