

28th August 2023

Dear Committee,

It is my pleasure to make this submission to the Australian Universities Accord Interim report consultation on behalf of the [Rural Education, Curriculum and Communities research group](#) in the [Centre for Sustainable Communities](#), at the University of Canberra. This submission focuses upon important influences on achieving the objectives of the proposed accord that we feel could be further developed, specifically senior secondary curriculum access and achievement, data access, rural schooling and rural students experiences in higher education. References are cited by number in brackets after each point, with full references and open access links included (where available) at the end of this document. We are happy to provide further detail to assist the committee.

1. Curriculum access.

We strongly support the interim reports recommendations to increase participation in higher education for rural, regional, and remote students and students from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds. However, we would like to highlight that a key driver of the lower participation of these students in higher education relates to pathways through secondary schooling and limited access to the senior secondary curriculum.

To lift academic results and increase the number of students from less advantaged backgrounds going on to further education and training, we first need to increase access and achievement in the senior secondary years and/or change the ATAR dominated entry pathway. Building upon the discussion paper which refers to the low school completion rates for rural, low socioeconomic status background, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, our research has shown that there are limited opportunities to learn (9) for less advantaged students. Specific findings include:

- a. The senior secondary system advantages students from higher SES background families. Students from higher SES background families study subjects that have a higher average ATAR scaling at rates significantly higher than other students (6, 13).
- b. The senior secondary system favours traditional academic study over vocational learning, and students from lower SES background families, and from schools with higher proportions of lower SES background students, are funnelled into vocational pathways (2, 6, 13).
- c. The senior secondary system favours schools in the city and schools with high socioeconomic student enrolments. In a recent review for NSW (1) students and community spoke about the issue of the lack of relevance of the curriculum to rural students (1, 2, 7, 14). Significantly, “powerful” subjects are less accessible to students in rural schools and schools with low SES background enrolments (2, 6, 8, 13). Furthermore, when student socioeconomic advantage is considered students from non-metropolitan schools still achieve grades lower than their metropolitan peers (3).
- d. The senior secondary system disadvantages Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. While there has been an increase in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students completing secondary schooling, these students are overwhelmingly not studying ATAR eligible pathways. Concerningly, a higher proportion of Aboriginal

and Torres Strait Islander students in a school is associated with less offering of “powerful” subjects and ATAR eligible subjects (4, 5, 6).

- e. In one national study on aspirations for STEM careers in rural regions (14) we found that rural students were not able to see the connection between STEM subjects in the senior secondary curriculum and carers in the broad rural sector in which they planned to work. Teachers, often trained in traditional understandings of the disciplines, were also not able to make these connections effectively as these industries were unfamiliar to them.

In response we argue that the university accord needs to consider earlier school decision making by students in underrepresented population and reducing the reliance of ATAR in university entry. While there are concessions given to underrepresented populations in their ATAR calculation it is evidently not sufficiently reducing this gap. These issues need to be alignment with the next School Reform Agreement and ensuring a specific focus on the senior secondary years (years 11 & 12), enhancing access to the senior secondary curriculum and ensuring post-school pathways are better articulated in these curricula and through university outreach programs. University pre-requisites and assumed knowledge requirements need to also consider the likely pattern of pre-university study of these students as they may well be at a significant disadvantage in assumed content and skills.

2. Data access

Data needs to be more readily available for research and data linkage for education research needs to be regarded as equally significant as medical research. Data at the senior secondary level also needs to be monitored and reported as part of broadening access to university. Data published on senior secondary is extremely scarce and often reported at such a general and aggregated level to be near meaningless. Access to data is constrained by restrictive interpretations of privacy legislation and influenced by sectoral interests. The way privacy is interpreted by many curriculum authorities make research near impossible. University ethics, and jurisdictional agreements, ensure privacy must be maintained and identification not enabled. Our research cited in this application has only been enabled through prior agreements and strict controls. The issue of sectoral reporting is significant and a major constraint on assessing the effectiveness of equity measures. Concerns for the publication of “league tables” is used to constrain genuine research, something that does not stop media outlets accessing and publishing results through freedom of information requests. However, the restrictions on reporting at the level of school sector often mean details of schools are suppressed and the real cause of inequities masked – namely unequal resources by sectors.

Exacerbating the situation is that increasingly third-party data linkage agencies need to be used. While these may be government owned most have now moved to a cost recovery bases and as such are unaffordable to education researchers. This seems at odds with principles of data accessibility, and data informed policy. For example, we recently received a quote of approximately \$95K to link data and hire the data linkage agency’s virtual machine on which to do the analysis (another mandated condition). These new requirements result in outcomes at odds with their intent and push research grants beyond the typical funding range for education research (\$150-380k) in competitive schemes such as the ARC. This makes

research directed to socially just outcomes unachievable. Lack of access to data makes meaningful research about pathways to university unachievable.

3. Rural schools

The underrepresentation of rural students in higher education cannot be separated from the perennial challenges associated with rural schools – staff shortages, teachers teaching outside of their areas of expertise, and generally lower academic outcomes (See Halsey review 2018). Systematic engagement with rural schools (and schools in low SES communities) should be regarded as university core business. However, the business model of universities results in a narrow focus on student income, particularly in the core professions such as teacher education. Instead, the mission of these institutions should include deliberate engagement with developing pathways for the future professional workforce (their students).

As an example, while rural schooling is considered a distinct schooling context requiring distinct professional capacities and skills (12) there are no pre-service teacher education programs that specifically focus on preparing rural teachers (11) and research that focuses specifically on rural issues is scarce (10). Given the scarcity of funding for research and the competitive nature of research funding such topics are often not seen as significant in current grant schemes or having the same gravitas in attracting international rankings. This limitation was exacerbated by the removal of funding schemes aimed at improving practice and professional preparation such as those once supported by Office of Learning and Teaching. Furthermore, research in rural contexts is often expensive due to the high travel and accommodation costs, and the time involved in staff hours. This often puts rural research at a major disadvantage in terms of “cost effectiveness” which typically a significant component of research assessment. Furthermore, the time involved often takes staff away from other tasks and responsibilities making research less desirable to many researchers. These structural issues mean that broad engagements in developing professionals for these contexts and the social good are often put up against the market imperative, where they are inevitably not significant potential income streams. Funding related to such social goods as the preparation of teachers and research for less advantaged communities needs to be enhanced or they will further diminish.

4. Rural Students Experiences in Higher Education

Rural, and low SES students, experience unique challenges throughout their higher education courses. While the challenges of achieving university entry, the costs of relocation and accommodation, and pressures on course completion are well canvassed in the interim report there is a lack of recognition of the social and cultural elements of rural, and low SES, students’ experiences while at university. These include a sense of being out place, perceptions of belonging reinforced by a lack of representation and a persistent deficit representation of rural places in the curriculum.

In our research we interviewed rural students in four Australian Universities, two Go8, one regional university and one metropolitan university that serves a surrounding rural region (7). In this research students identified a distinct difference in the nature of knowledges that were

valued in their hometowns and valued in their university lives. This was evident in the knowledges that were valued in their coursework, awareness of different perspectives, conversations and socialisation that occurred, and their career expectations when they graduate. For example, in their course work students felt that there was a lack of representation of perspectives outside the city and that the rural was persistently presented as deficit and a problem to be fixed. That is, they were not valued spaces. This reflects the general positioning of rural Australia as a deficit space and a problem to be overcome rather than a valuable and knowledge producing space (12). Because of this, careers in rural areas were positioned as lesser outcomes and less desirable. Combined these representations impact a student's sense of belonging and discourage non-rural students from considering rural careers. Furthermore, the lack of understanding of rural communities and rural cultures made it hard to socialise and make friends as many felt different from other students. This was reflected in conversation topics, social outlook and even dress. The combined consequence of these experiences meant students reported feeling "out of place" and that their rural place was not seen as important for their studies and future careers. Participants reported that existing "widening participation" programs focussed on getting to university, study skills and meeting people, but overlooked some of these social and cultural dimensions as they normalised the urban students experience.

To address these disconnects between rural students social and cultural experiences and university education we suggest the next Universities Accord needs to ensure universities extend support programs to include fostering a sense of belonging that values rural cultures in addition to academic supports. Furthermore, universities need to adhere to their social contract and encourage and promote research that values rural people, places and communities. It is also important for rural students to see their communities valued in the curriculum. Consequently, we suggest it is important for the next universities accord to encourage universities to be more inclusive in their curriculum to ensure rural students experience a greater sense of belonging free of implicit discrimination.

Conclusion

The Rural Education, Curriculum and Communities research team would be happy to provide further detail on this submission to assist the work of the committee.

Regards,

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References

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