

1st August 2023

Dear Committee,

It is my pleasure to make this submission to the Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System 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 senior secondary curriculum access and achievement, data access and rural schooling. 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.

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. Building upon the discussion paper which refers to the low school completion rates for rural, low socioeconomic (SES) status background, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, our research has shown that there are limited opportunities to learn (13) 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, 12, 19).
- 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, 12, 19).
- 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, 16, 21). Significantly, “powerful” subjects are less accessible to students in rural schools and schools with low SES background enrolments (2, 6, 12). Furthermore, when student socioeconomic advantage is considered students from non-metropolitan schools still achieve grades lower than their metropolitan peers (3). NAPLAN as it currently operates exacerbates these differences, with a randomised controlled trial of making NAPLAN contextually relevant reducing the rural-urban gap in achievement by 33% and the Indigenous-non-Indigenous gap by 50% (7).
- 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, with the higher proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in a school highlight associated with less offering of “powerful” subjects and ATAR eligible subjects (4, 5, 6).



In response to this we argue in favour of the next School Reform Agreement including a specific focus on the senior secondary years (years 11 & 12) and enhancing access to the senior secondary curriculum. This should include monitoring access to subject breadth, inequities in outcomes across subjects, supporting enhanced staffing levels for less advantaged schools and better preparation of teachers to work in non-metropolitan schools to make the curriculum relevant to students in non-metropolitan schools. We also urge the committee to revisit recommendation 9 from the previous Gonski 2.0 review which recommended “a nationally coordinated review of the purpose, content and structure of senior secondary education to make sure it is contemporary, and adequately prepares students”.

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. 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.

3. Rural schools

Rural schooling is considered a distinct schooling context requiring distinct professional capacities and skills (16). The preferred approach of most recent reviews to deny the influence of context and transpose approaches from an assumed (usually urban) context to rural, regional, and remote schools has failed, as evidenced by the widening gaps referenced in the discussion paper. As noted above rural schools have less access to the curriculum and

when student SES background is considered still achieve lower grades (3). The previous Gonski reports typically conflated rurality with average lower SES populations, and as such initiatives to overcome inequities were focussed on SES only. In state-based funding redistribution systems rurality is calculated as a base calculation associated with the costs of transport and access to services, not as producing inequity in outcomes (3). We refer the committee to two recent reports focussed on rural specific issues and proposed initiatives that we partnered in - the recent review of rural schools in NSW (1) and incentives (23).

Rural, regional, and remote contexts are often taken for granted in research and policy (16). There is virtually no research that focusses specifically on “what works” in rural, regional, and remote schools (1). Furthermore, less than 10% of research that purports to be rural related research meets the Australian Education Research Organisations standards of evidence for high quality research, that genuinely addresses rural issues (14).

While it has been a recommendation of review for over 30 years (e.g., Schools Commission 1988, HREOC 2000, Halsey 2018, Regional Education Commissioner 2023) there is no distinct focus on preparing teaching to work in rural, regional, and remote schools. Indeed, our analysis showed no Australian university has mandatory units for preparing rural teachers and only 3 have elective units (15). We partly attribute this to the fact that the Australian Professional Standards of Teaching include no reference to rural, regional, or remote schools or location at all. Instead “diversity” and “context” are used which, as shown above in research, often mean rural, regional and remote contexts are overlooked or taken for granted. We suggest a deeper understanding of rural, regional, and remote contexts is needed and that teachers need specific development to work in these contexts and adapt curriculum for students in these communities (1, 3, 14, 15, 21). Taking approaches from other contexts and dropping them into rural, regional, and remote contexts has failed and goes against the principles outlined by the Australian Education Research Organisation (1, 3, 14). Rural, regional, and remote contexts also need to be explicitly named in the Australian Professional Standards of Teaching.

The staffing of rural, regional, and remote schools remains a perennial challenge (11, 23). Problematically, we seem to keep recycling the same solutions with very little innovation (8, 11, 17, 18) and ultimately resulting in the same outcome. The persistent representation of rural schools as hard to staff, disadvantaged and achieving poor outcomes reproduces a deficit discourse narrative in public perception (1, 15, 16, 23). New approaches are needed that go beyond an assumption that financial incentives alone will attract and retain staff (8, 10, 11, 18). We suggest a dedicated and proactive approach to valuing rural, regional, and remote teaching as a distinct professional expertise. This would be akin to the rural health strategy that links the distinct aspects of rural professional practice with other incentives. The idea is supported by the NSW review of incentives which showed that a distinct rural career pathway exists using employment data (23 - appendix 1), with similar results shown in our research on rural school leadership (20). This approach would ensure the skills to engage diverse communities, reshape policy initiatives and curriculum to better align with students lived experiences, and bridge learning gaps based upon a deep understanding of students lived experiences were developed and celebrated by the profession.

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,

Philip Roberts

Associate Professor Curriculum Inquiry & Rural Education
Faculty of Education, University of Canberra.

References

1. Beswick, K., Roberts, P., Eacott, S., Holden, R., Alonzo, D., Downes, N., Mularczyk, L., Loughland, T., Cridge, S., Corbyn, E., & Bedford, M. (2022). [Rural and Regional Research Education Project: Final report](#). Sydney: UNSW Gonski Institute for Education and School of Education. (For NSW DoE)
2. Dean, J., Downes, N., & Roberts, P. (2023) [Access to and equity in the curriculum in the Australian government school system](#). *SN Social Sciences*.
3. Dean, J., Roberts, P., Downes, N. & Goldsmith, A. (2023) [The spatial implications of academic achievement in Year 12: Rethinking discourses of disadvantage in rural locations](#). *Australian Journal of Education*.
4. Dean, J. & Roberts, P. (2023) [History, Space and Schooling Inequality Among Indigenous Australians](#). In Elizabeth J. Done & Helen Knowler 'International Perspectives on Exclusionary Pressures in Education: How Inclusion becomes Exclusion'. Palgrave Macmillan. pp 163-182.
5. Dean, J. & Roberts, P. (2021) [Knowledge, justice and equity: Access to the academic curriculum among Indigenous school students in Australia](#). In Neimann, T., Felix, J. J., Shliakhovchuk, J. & Hindman, L. L. 'Policy and Practice Challenges for Equality in Education'. IGI Global.
6. Dean, J., Roberts, P. & Perry, L. (2021). [School equity, marketisation and access to the Australian senior secondary curriculum](#). *Educational Review*. 75(2), pp. 243-263.
7. Dobrescu, I., Holden, R., Motta, A., Piccoli, A., Roberts, P., & Walker, S. (2021). [Cultural Context in Standardized Tests](#). UNSW Economics of Education Knowledge Hub Working paper.
8. Downes, N., Roberts, P., & Dean, J. (2021). [Researching the schoolhouse: Rethinking research on the staffing of rural, remote and isolated schools in Australia \(2000-2019\)](#). Centre for Sustainable Communities.
9. Downes, N., Roberts, P., & Barbour, M. (2020). [Defying distance, ameliorating access: school education for remote Australian students](#). *Education in the North: the journal of Scottish education*, 27(2), 248-255.
10. Downes, N & Roberts, P. (2018). [Revisiting the schoolhouse: A literature review on staffing rural, remote and isolated schools in Australia 2004-2016](#). *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education*, 28 (1). pp.31-54.
11. Downes, N. & Roberts, P. (2017). [Staffing Rural, Remote & isolated Schools in Australia: A review of the research literature \(2004-2016\)](#). University of Canberra, ACT.
12. Green, B., Sawyer, W. & Roberts, P. (2022) [Dividing Practices: Senior English and Social Inequality in New South Wales](#). *Australian Educational Researcher*.
13. Perry, L., Thier, M., Beach, P., Anderson, R., Thoennesen, N-M. & Roberts, P. (2023).



- [Opportunities and Conditions to Learn \(OCL\): A Conceptual Framework](#). Prospects.
14. Roberts, P., Downes, N. & Reid, J. (2022) [Engaging Rurality in Australian Education Research: Addressing the field](#). *Australian Educational Researcher*.
 15. Roberts, P., Downes, N., & Reid, J. (2022). [Teacher Education for a Rural-Ready Teaching Force: Swings, Roundabouts, and Slippery Slides?](#). *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 47(3).
 16. Roberts, P & Fuqua, M. (2021) [Ruraling Education Research: Connections between Rurality and the Disciplines of Educational Research](#). Springer.
 17. Roberts, P. & Downes, N. (2020) [The challenges of staffing schools in a cosmopolitan nation: Rethinking the recruitment and retention of teachers in Australia through a spatial lens](#) in T. Ovenden-Hope & R. Passy, *Exploring Teacher Recruitment and Retention: contextual challenges from international perspectives*. London, Routledge. Ch 17.
 18. Roberts, P., & Downes, N. (2020). [Incentivising the Profession: A national mapping of incentives to attract and retain staff in Australian non-metropolitan communities](#). Centre for Sustainable Communities.
 19. Roberts, P., Dean, J., & Lommatsch, G. (2019). [Still Winning? Social Inequity in the NSW Senior Secondary Curriculum Hierarchy](#). Rural Education and Communities research group. University of Canberra. Centre for Sustainable Communities Monograph Series No.1.
 20. Roberts, P. & Downes, N. (2019) [The Rural Difference Trope: Leader Perceptions on Rural, Regional and Remote Schooling Difference](#). *Leading & Managing*, Vol. 25 (2), pp. 51-65.
 21. Roberts, P. (2018). [Enhancing Aspirations for STEM Careers in Rural, Regional and Remote Communities: Project final report](#). University of Canberra, ACT.
 22. Sikora, J. & Roberts, P. (2023) [Do linguistically diverse migrants dominate advanced mathematics? Comparing Greater Sydney with the rest of New South Wales](#). *Australian Educational Researcher*.
 23. Societal (2021) [A Review of Rural and Remote Incentives in NSW Public Schools](#). (For NSW Department of Education).