REGIONAL STRENGTH. NATIONAL SUCCESS.

Submission from the Regional Universities Network on the National Regional, Rural and Remote (RRR) Education Strategy Framing Paper

Some key suggestions:

1. A demand driven system for enabling, sub-degree and degree places, particularly for campuses and study hubs in areas where higher education attainment and participation rates are below the national average, including in regional, rural and remote (RRR) and peri-urban areas.
2. An expanded Higher Education Participation and Partnerships program, with dedicated funding to support initiatives for RRR students who study in RRR Australia.
3. A National Regional Education Commissioner, to be an advocate for regional tertiary education in the medium- to long-term, and to articulate a joined-up approach to broader policy in the regions and the national benefit of such an approach.

Challenge A: There are fewer study options available in RRR areas
   1. *What opportunities exist to expand options for further study in RRR areas?*

The thinness of regional, rural and remote education markets, and the ongoing lack of comprehensive NBN coverage, is a challenge in the expansion of options for further study in RRR areas. Universities located in thin markets also carry a higher proportion (against total revenue) of fixed infrastructure costs and lower returns on asset investment compared to metropolitan-headquartered universities.

Expanding non-conventional campuses provides an alternative for conventional university campuses in smaller communities. Shared-use infrastructure for the delivery of secondary and tertiary education, and regional study hubs where more than one university may support the online delivery of degrees, are models which are currently being used and expanded. Different models may suit different markets e.g. community-led study hubs may work well in smaller towns, whereas co-location of TAFE and secondary schools on an established, regional university campus may be a suitable model for larger regional centres. Evaluation of what works in existing models, and where, would be useful to guide future development.

Embedding higher education in regional industry is another possibility for expansion. A government-led co-investment model could be developed similar to the apprenticeship degrees in the UK, where

students are employed by, and based at, a company or government organisation during their university studies.

Government and industry facilities in the regions should be made more available to VET providers, particularly in areas of community and skills need.

Online and flexible course delivery provides useful options for study for mature age students balancing work and family, and these options should be expanded and enhanced.

2. What potential is there for universities, vocational training providers and other service providers to better work together in RRR areas, including opportunities to expand service offerings and better support articulation between VET and higher education?

Better articulation of students between VET and higher education providers should be encouraged, however, not all VET students wish to undertake higher education.

Some higher education graduates undertake VET qualifications after their university study.

The development of qualifications at all levels, that is sub-degrees, degrees, post-graduate qualifications and micro-credentials, in particular, those that are relevant to local employment needs or emerging areas of need, should be encouraged.

The development of more micro-credentials will facilitate the better articulation between VET and higher education providers.

Demand driven places are needed for enabling, sub-degree and degree places particularly for campuses and study hubs in areas where higher education attainment and participation rates are below the national average, including in RRR and peri-urban areas.

Additional funding should be provided for VET in Schools programs, which engages senior students in their learning while providing them with articulation opportunities into tertiary education.

There should be consistent recognition by higher education institutions of prior learning delivered by VET providers.

Work integrated learning opportunities and entrepreneurialism should be facilitated, including in start-ups located at university and other innovation precincts. Participation of additional industries, health services and community groups in the provision of Work Integrated Learning and internship opportunities should be encouraged.

Challenge B: Relocating RRR students face significant financial, emotional and social challenges
3. What financial supports work best for students from RRR backgrounds, including those who choose to relocate?

Supporting students to remain in their local areas, rather than relocating to study, should be a priority, as students who train in the regions largely stay in the regions to work.

More and better scholarships are needed for RRR students who study at regional campuses, to cover the costs of education, accommodation, living expenses, travel costs and text books, including

regional, undergraduate teacher education scholarships, and scholarships for regional teachers for relevant post-graduate qualifications.

Targeted bursaries for equity students are important. Many of these would be for relatively short periods and small amounts e.g. University of the Sunshine Coast's Equity Bursary uses a criteria-based system for distributing funds to the most disadvantaged students which privileges multiple disadvantage.

Expanded scholarships for RRR students could be funded via a new initiative within an expanded Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP).

Further improved access to Youth Allowance should be considered for RRR students, particularly or students from low SEIFA areas and drought and/or disaster-affected regions. For all RRR students, the current 14 month period to prove independence should be reduced to 12 months to align with the academic year.

4. What forms of support might be useful in helping students from RRR backgrounds to continue with their tertiary study?
Financial issues are a very significant contributor to students dropping out of university, and this issue has been addressed in response to Q.3.

Early intervention is required to support students who are "at risk" of dropping out. This requires early identification of those at risk, and support to help them succeed.

At a number of UK universities with a high proportion of first-in-family students, and those from non-traditional backgrounds (e.g. University of the West of Scotland, University of Bolton), there is a new wave of data-driven, student support activities, which have and are having a major impact on reducing attrition. These include: personal tutoring/academic advising, including academic staff assigned to a group of tutees to provide advice and pastoral care; and academic/student quality enhancement officers, who are professional staff working with academic program teams to improve student learning outcomes and performance. The approach is costly with individual intervention, but is reaping rewards.

We suggest that an expanded HEPPP include a new funding stream for RRR students to support a range of data-driven, individually targeted support activities.

Long-term certainty of funding is required for higher education providers to offer adequate support to students.

5. How can universities assist RRR students to feel like they belong on their campus?

Many RRR students have an attachment to home community. This is underpinned by family, social, sporting and workforce participation drivers. Residential students will commonly travel long distances to return to their home communities to maintain these connections. Creating and maintaining a similar connection to the university community is a key strategy employed by regional universities during orientation and pre-arrival engagements with students. Research has demonstrated that students who are more connected to their campus community are more likely to be successful in their studies.

Specialised HEPPP funding for RRR students for projects to further support student orientation, mentoring, scholarships, engagement etc. would help.

For students moving from remote areas to residential colleges at regional campuses, there is significant support. Further initiatives could be implemented for those living independently, supported via an expanded HEPPP.

Programs at RUN campuses include orientation sessions and support (including for distance students); transition support (including via digital modules); equity and leadership scholarships; mentoring programs (including with alumni in specific industries); academic support, including digital literacy, maths and stats support; engagement activities; support desks for students in libraries; bursaries for university placements; and various projects targeted to mature age students.

Challenge C: Raising aspirations for tertiary education
6. What actions would help to raise aspirations and support informed career choices for students from RRR backgrounds?

Long-term programs with public policy commitment and funding stability are needed to fundamentally change the aspiration for, and participation at, university by RRR students.

Universities working in partnership with regional and local schools, the VET sector, communities and industry are important in lifting higher education participation rates. More mentoring by alumni should be encouraged, as should universities/faculties "adopt a school" initiatives.

Programs and funding for professional development for teachers and careers advisers at regional schools should be provided to ensure that students select a relevant pathway and career.

Quality teaching service in regional, rural and remote communities should be better recognised, and there should be additional incentives for regional university pre-service teachers to be placed in rural and remote schools.

With respect to access (pre-entry and admission), and outreach, sustained connectivity of the programs ensures the building of capacity for higher education. Engaging students early in their education creates an ongoing relationship between the university and its community.

Demand driven enabling and sub-bachelor places would give students who are less well-prepared for bachelor degrees time to transition to higher education, and provide a basis for more informed degree choices.

Challenge D: RRR often experience multiple forms of disadvantage
7. What practical steps can be taken to support RRR students who experience multiple forms of disadvantage?

QILT data reinforces the case that financial reasons are a very significant contributor to students dropping out of university. More scholarships and targeted bursaries to support students while they complete their studies would assist.

Early intervention is required to support students who are "at risk" of dropping out. This requires early identification of those at risk, support to help them succeed, and dedicated and sufficient funding.

Data-driven student support activities, such as academic/student quality enhancement officers, personal tutoring, and strategies to improve the employability of graduates for "graduate level" employment are important.

An expansion of HEPPP to accommodate more funding for RRR students is recommended.

8. How can we better support Indigenous people from RRR areas to access and succeed in tertiary education?

RUN universities have relatively high proportions of low SES, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, first in family and regional students, but we are continuing to try to improve our performance.

Many of the broad approaches used and advocated for in terms of encouraging the access, both pre-entry and admission, outreach, participation and success of other first-in-family RRR students are also relevant to Indigenous students.

Effective and meaningful engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, organizations and communities across the whole business of the institution – research, learning and teaching, services, procurement and outreach - is important, as is increasing appropriate and affordable accommodation options for students.

More access to Indigenous role models, including university staff at a range of levels and roles, including academics, and government and universities working with Indigenous communities / elders and families to inform and support aspirations, would help. Indigenous-focussed groups and activities on campus would help further increase participation of Indigenous students. Specific funding for access and school engagement programs for Indigenous people should be considered.

The establishment of a Regional Centre for Aboriginal Community Engagement, Learning, Research and Excellence would provide a more focused and long-term solution to support aspirations.

Challenge E: Attracting people and jobs to RRR areas
9. How can tertiary education providers further stimulate economic growth in RRR areas?

The impact of regional universities and VET providers can be greatly enhanced by the nuancing of policy and programs to respond to place-based needs.

Tertiary education providers can further stimulate growth in RRR areas through
- Lifting higher education attainment in regional areas to provide graduates who will largely work in the regions. Seven out of 10 of graduates from RUN universities work in the regions, compared with 2 out of 10 nationally, and increase real wages in their regions by 3.2 per cent (Nous Pty Ltd 2018, Jobs and productivity effects of the Regional Universities Network, http://www.run.edu.au/resources/RUN%20Jobs%20and%20productivity%20report%20final.pdf)
- Embedding universities and VET providers and human/social capital in plans for regional development, including city deals, developed by key regional stakeholders, to address areas of natural strength or emerging need;

- Playing a major role in social innovation and tackling some of the big, intractable social challenges faced in communities, such as homelessness, and youth unemployment;
- Providing facilities for community organisations to operate that otherwise would not be able to afford to function;
- Undertaking research which is focused on the needs of regional communities and industry which otherwise would not be done by metropolitan universities;
- Continuing to provide the courses that require specialist academics who relocate to the regions to take up academic opportunities;
- Strengthening collaboration and partnerships with local businesses and various levels of government to build programs, "hubs" and specialist cluster initiatives;
- Bringing researchers to regional communities;
- Ensuring purchasing processes are inclusive of local businesses; and
- Being the most multicultural organisations in their communities, and facilitating international connections through international staff, students, and alumni.

Flexible use of base funding to universities must be maintained, so that funds may continue to be used to support the teaching and learning, scholarship, research, and regional service activities that underpin the role of regional universities as anchor institutions for their regions.

10. What actions would further strengthen and increase the attractiveness of regional universities?

The following actions are suggested to further strengthen and increase the attractiveness of regional universities

- Introducing a demand driven student system for enabling, sub-bachelor, and bachelor places, particularly at campuses in areas where the higher education attainment and participation rate is below the national average, to help regions "grow their own" workforces;

- Increasing funding for the regional loading and reviewing the current arrangements;

- Supporting long-term investment in outreach, aspiration raising, community connection and student success programs in RRR areas;

- Provision of funding for updating and refresh of regional campus infrastructure, to improve asset efficiency and provide safe, affordable and accessible access to learning resources and support.

11. What policies would attract more metropolitan and international students to study at RRR areas, including regional universities and campuses?

Targeted campaigns, including digital campaigns, social media and key influencers, more scholarships to cover education and accommodation expenses, transport concessions and assistance with housing and medical costs could be used to encourage more domestic metropolitan and international students to study at regional universities. Reduced HELP loan/course fees for choosing regional study options, and regional scholarships where the graduate is "bonded" to work in the regions for a certain period of time could be considered.

Government could more actively work with education agents overseas to promote the excellence of education at regional universities and the benefits of living in regional destinations.

Promotion needs to be targeted to the specific value that particular regional universities offer and the types of students they attract.

More niche, high demand courses (e.g. allied health) could be introduced.

More metropolitan students could be attracted to regional cities through incorporation of regional universities in the broader national narrative about regional and national development, and the promotion of the better quality of life, lower cost of living, and amenities of regional cities.

Personal stories are very powerful and can help overcome any concerns potential students or their parents might have about study at a regional university. These could be the stories of current students and alumni, including, in the case of international students, those who have stayed on in Australia and those who have returned home.

Students who studied at RUN universities report: a high level of satisfaction with the learning experience; smaller class sizes and a lower cost of living than in major cities; a friendly and supportive environment; flexible mode of study; good quality of life; and practical degrees as some of the positives of studying at RUN universities.

For international students, further additional benefits of studying at regional campuses include: exposure to the attractions of an authentic Australian regional lifestyle; and more opportunity to network with domestic students, lecturers and local communities to build English, career and life skills.

Regional universities provide a rich lived experience for international students, with opportunities for close connections with Australian people and communities. Government can do more to promote this message.

Government could promote place-based destinations for study for both Australian metropolitan and international students. Tertiary education should be part of city and regional deals (e.g. Darwin and Launceston City Deals).

Funding could be provided to regional universities for participation in offshore campaigns, for visits by influencers from targeted markets and to build community, government and institutional connections.

Government could provide and promote incentives for international students to study in regional destinations including:

- priority for visa processing
- advantageous post study work rights
- advantageous permanent residency points (e.g. an increase from the current 5 to 10-15),
- scholarships
- transport concessions
- assistance with housing and medical costs
- assistance with settling in
- modern, flexible student accommodation and
- free schooling for the children of international students.

Partnerships between metropolitan and regional universities to create regional study opportunities for domestic and international students could include: dual degrees; joint programs offered at reduced prices; students undertaking some units at regional campuses; access to work placements or internships with regional companies/organisations/local government including in agriculture, regional health, education etc.; provision of scholarships and higher degree by research grants to students studying in regional campuses; joint study tours and research projects; and development of a strong entrepreneurship and innovation ecosystem in regional study centres.

Challenge F: Implementing and monitoring a national strategy
12. Would there be value in establishing a National Regional Education Commissioner to oversee the Strategy and, if so, what should their role be?

There would be great value in establishing a National Regional Education Commissioner to oversee the strategy.

As in the case of appointing a National Regional Health Commissioner, a National Regional Education Commissioner would provide a national focus, and be a champion for, an important regional issue, and could articulate its relevance to broader policy. The relevant person would provide independent advice to Ministers, and, if appointed for a period of say, 5 years, would give a commitment to regional education beyond election/ministerial cycles. Advice from someone who is not a politician to support, and invest in, regional education could not be easily dismissed as "pork barrelling". Furthermore, the appointment of a National Regional Education Commissioner would send a signal to the nation that addressing regional education is an issue of national importance.

RUN suggests that the National Regional Education Commission should:

- o Provide advice to the Minister for Education and Training to:
    - enhance access, outcomes and opportunities for regional, rural and remote students
    - enhance the contribution of regional tertiary education to regional development; and
    - inform the development of relevant policies and strategies;
- o Work with tertiary regional education and training providers, and other key regional stakeholders to facilitate a joined-up approach which links tertiary education policy and programs to other policy initiatives; and
- o Perform other relevant tasks as requested by the Minister.

- As part of the advice, the Commissioner would
    - o Contribute to a national regional higher education and training strategy, including providing advice on strategies to improve the performance of regional universities and vocational education and training providers in student retention, teaching quality, equity and contribution to social and cultural prosperity and regional development;
    - o Regularly report on progress in tertiary educational attainment in regional Australia, and progress against a National RRR strategy and
    - o Provide advice on guidelines for regional development programs ensure that the contribution of tertiary education and development of human capital is an important component.

13. How should success be measured? What goals and targets, including for tertiary education attainment, should be considered both at a national and individual community level?

Ultimately, the aim should be to have parity in higher education participation and attainment between RRR and metropolitan Australia. However, this goal is likely to take a generation or more to achieve, so improvements in higher education access and attainment should be measured on a step-by-step basis, with goals set for closing the achievement gap for particular regions every 5 years or so.

Participation rates and attainment should be considered at a community level – Statistical Areas Level 2, as defined by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, which represent regions that interact socially and economically, would be appropriate to identify pockets of educational disadvantage.

Policy settings should be put in place to facilitate closing the gap e.g. adequate pathway enabling and sub-bachelor, as well as bachelor, places are needed to encourage RRR students to study in the regions.

Higher education policy settings should work with other policy, such as immigration, to encourage university-educated young people to live and work in the regions. The numbers of graduates who live and work in the regions, post-tertiary study, could be monitored.