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The Chair
Regional Education Expert Advisory Group
Department of Education and Training
C50MA7
GPO Box 9880
Canberra ACT 2601

Email: regionalstrategy@education.gov.au

Dear Dr Napthine,

**National Regional, Rural and Remote Education Strategy Framing Paper
Response from Macquarie University**

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the *National Regional, Rural and Remote Education Strategy Framing Paper*. Comments are attached.

Should you require any further information on this matter, the University's Director of Government Relations, Peter McCarthy, can be contacted at peter.mccarthy@mq.edu.au

Sincerely,



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Feedback to the Regional Education Expert Advisory Group: Macquarie University

There is a common misconception that students from regional, rural and remote areas—RRR students—are a homogenous group and that their access to higher education can be managed with income support and scholarships. Certainly, those are necessary interventions. However, as a 2017 report from the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE) on [*Successful outcomes for regional and remote students in Australian higher education: Issues, challenges, opportunities and recommendations*](#) argues, these students ‘face complex, multidimensional issues in accessing and participating in higher education’ and then, when they have completed their studies, in accessing employment, either in their home regions or in metropolitan locations.

The NCSEHE report shows that:

there are general issues that apply across the whole of regional Australia and affect all students from regional areas, but there are also many unique issues that are specific to local areas. Ultimately, each region and locality is subject to different drivers and shapers of change to different degrees (2017: 3).

To deal with these challenges, it is absolutely essential that universities in both metropolitan and regional, rural and remote locations are provided with funding to build aspiration and participation. The additional cost of running programs in regional, rural and remote areas has not been factored into funding for programs such as HEPPP and NPP and consideration should be given to supporting universities which run robust programs. This will help to maximise student choice across the whole sector and improve rates of progression and achievement.

Response to Key Questions:

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 Government’s funding for Regional Study Hubs is welcomed and we hope that this investment produces strong collaborations with universities. To expand study options in RRR areas, Hubs are potentially very useful. For example, they provide the space for courses delivered by metropolitan universities in formats such as blended learning and intensive teaching blocks.

There are national and international examples of best practice to draw on which demonstrate that these models work well when government:

- invests in infrastructure, especially technology;
- leverages existing physical resources; and
- ensures that programs are people-rich, as exemplified by many HEPPP-funded programs.

Given an aim of the regional hubs is to provide RRR students with opportunities to stay in their local communities, these students will need appropriate income support and/or local jobs while they study. However, in many communities there is not enough paid work, housing, or other infrastructure to support them adequately. There needs to be strategic alignment and connection to industry for work-integrated learning as well as for employment.

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?

Experience that Macquarie University has with consortia—particularly the NSW Consortium, *Bridges to Higher Education*, points to the importance of specific funding to support collaborative work. This is essential, for example, to meet the costs of travel and accommodation in RRR areas. (Relevant background can be found in two NCSEHE publications, on [Partnerships in Higher Education: Make Tomorrow Better](#) (2014) and [Higher Education Participation and Partnerships: Seven Years On](#) (2017).)

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?

The latest [Student Finances Survey \(2017\)](#) produced by Universities Australia—a survey that has been charting the cost of living challenges of students since the 1970s—shows that undergraduate and postgraduate students across Australia are dealing with severe financial pressures.

A 2014 article written by NCSEHE Visiting Fellow Mary Kelly, [Will the real Commonwealth Scholarships please stand up?](#), clearly identifies problems with current funding arrangements. This article shows that, since the introduction of Commonwealth Learning Scholarships in 2004, there has been a steady deterioration in this program to the detriment of RRR students. Initially, Commonwealth Learning Scholarships were established to support education and living costs and were issued by universities to needy students. The combination of deferring HECS-HELP and having this support (as well as options for Centrelink benefits) meant LSES students could survive at university and spend less time in paid employment. By 2010 these Scholarships were renamed Start-Up and Relocation Scholarships, moved to the Department of Human Services under Centrelink, and linked with study payments such as Youth Allowance, Austudy and Abstudy.

In 2017, the Start-Up Scholarship were converted to loans, increasing the pressure on students to cover education costs. Centrelink benefits, which have not kept pace with the cost of living, and additional obligations for students on some payments (including job searching), are impacting the ability of LSES students to access higher education. At the same time, Relocation Scholarship guidelines have been narrowed, reducing the opportunities for students to move within regional locations or to urban locations for their course of choice.

Similar pressures confront students engaged in postgraduate coursework to upskill and who are relying on Newstart Allowance as their own income support. They are now having to comply with a job search regime where they have to create a Job Plan and report fortnightly, even though their job plan is to upskill. More generally, there are particular difficulties that equity groups face in progressing to and completing postgraduate study because of current funding measures; more on this can be found in a Council of Australian Postgraduate Association's discussion paper on [Income Support for Domestic Postgraduates in Australia](#).

Students with disabilities are particularly disadvantaged. Many study part-time on the recommendation from medical professionals. And their opportunities to find employment during and following study are more limited. So, without sufficient financial support, they struggle to stay at university.

In the context of this Review, we recommend:

- A review of the current Scholarships package in order to reinstate Start-Up Scholarships;
- An increase in accommodation scholarship opportunities for RRR students; and

- Consideration of better financial support arrangements for RRR students to enable them to progress to postgraduate opportunities.

4. *What forms of support might be useful in helping students from RRR backgrounds to continue with their tertiary study?*

Support for RRR students to continue tertiary study should be based on the following principles identified by Louise Pollard for the NCSEHE in 2018 in her [Remote Student University Success: An Analysis of Policy and Practice](#). Pollard proposed that these should 'guide universities and the government in enhancing remote students' university success' but the principles obviously have wider application. They are:

- Know your students: recognise diversity across the student cohort.
- Support for students across the student life cycle.
- Collaborate: in the classroom, across institutions, and in the community.
- Celebrate and value remote Australia: in the classroom, through co-curricular activities, and across institutions.
- Recognise the challenges associated with geographical isolation through university and government policy.
- Provide financial support to those who need it, when they need it (2018: 8).

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

Pollard's [2018 report](#) also recommended that universities take the following steps to achieve the principles set out above and, again, these have a wide application as ways to encourage "belonging" among RRR students. The recommendations are:

- Develop a better understanding of the diversity within the student cohort and communicate it effectively across the university.
- Be responsive in the design of learning and teaching strategies and student experience programs, recognising complexities within the remote student cohort.
- Enhance the presence of Indigenous knowledges and cultures across the student experience, drawing on Indigenous leadership, research and best practice program design when developing and implementing programs that support remote student success.
- Implement strategies to maintain engagement with remote students who defer an offer or take a break from study.
- Enhance the links between academic and co-curricular programs, embedding activities that are traditionally outside the classroom, into the curriculum.
- Cultivate partnerships with organisations in remote Australia to create valuable learning and enrichment opportunities for students.
- Explore the opportunity of working across institutions to create student learning activities that showcase the value of working and living in remote Australia through the curriculum and through co-curricular activities such as volunteering, work experience and practicums.
- Refine relevant university policy to recognise internet connectivity challenges facing students studying in remote Australia.
- Introduce bursaries for online students experiencing financial challenges (full-time and part-time), recognising the cost involved with attending compulsory intensive units on campus; and completing practicums (2018: 8-9).

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?*

Data prepared by the NSW Department of Education and Training in 2017 shows that around 40 per cent of students in regional NSW with an ATAR of 75 or more are not directly transitioning from school to university, compared with around 26 per cent of students in metropolitan areas. This has been a consistent trend since at least 2010. So, there is considerable scope to focus on building aspirations among high achieving RRR students. Macquarie University's *Roadshow* and *InRoads* programs seek to address this need; however, the costs involved, against the limited budget provided by HEPPP, makes expansion of the programs problematic.

Three particular strategies are recommended here:

- i. To inform students of university courses and pathways through information sessions, open days and parent/careers engagement sessions;
- ii. To keep parents/carers, teachers and career advisors fully informed of career pathways, course requirements and alternative entry pathways; and
- iii. To promote partnerships between school and industry with universities being the intermediary to broaden the career aspirations of students.

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?*

Ideally, all universities should have dedicated Regional, Rural and Remote transition officers who are fully informed of the challenges RRR students face and can provide personalised and timely support. While RRR students can be dealing with multiple disadvantages, a focus of that support should be on recognising the *strengths* they bring to their learning. RRR students have prior life and work experiences which bring diverse perspectives to learning opportunities and which can be embedded in university curricula.

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

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students require all of the support services of other RRR students. However, there are also additional strategies that would ensure the success of these students; these are:

- Holding RRR roadshows, providing high school students and the community with information about university life, its opportunities and challenges;
- Involving high school Aboriginal Education Officers and Careers Advisors so that schools build rapport with universities and have their support in encouraging students to see university as an option;
- Having a dedicated workforce, located in RRR areas, who are employed to support student transition from high school to university;
- Removing financial barriers, for example, by providing accommodation scholarships and specific educational scholarships;
- Setting up strong Aboriginal Units in universities, where the staff are aware and informed about the challenges of RRR students. It would also be beneficial for these staff to have connections with the communities from which students are relocating;
- Promoting a holistic approach to university life, recognising that it includes, for example, social sport, cultural activities and on-country experiences, gym memberships, and student association memberships;

- Providing relevant training for non-Indigenous staff, including to develop a basic understanding of RRR communities; and
- Funding travel home for business, including for example, for sorry business.

Challenge E: Attracting people and jobs to RRR areas

9. How can tertiary education providers further stimulate economic growth in RRR areas?

There is scope to develop partnerships between tertiary education providers and RRR economic development authorities with the aim of delivering local economy-focused projects that create economic development and employment opportunities.

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

N/A

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

Efforts to give more metropolitan and international students the opportunity to study in our regions are obviously desirable. However, care needs to be taken in distinguishing between regional and metropolitan universities as policy is developed here.

First, it should be noted that regional universities are recruiting students from South Asia, though to their city campuses rather than to their regional headquarters. So, no neat distinction can be drawn here between 'regional' and 'city' universities. Nuance is needed in the development of policy that will support future growth in international higher education right across the sector.

Second, it would be wrong to assume that all universities within the major capitals are benefitting equally from current arrangements and that their different interests in maintaining or building international student numbers can be set aside as policy is developed. In fact, as a recent report from the [Nous Group](#) points out, there is not only a heavy concentration of international students in Sydney and Melbourne but also considerable differences in the levels of recruitment by universities within these cities. The report actually speaks of an emerging 'Group of Four'—Sydney, UNSW, Melbourne and Monash—which dominates the market, particularly for recruitment of students from China and India.

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 value in having a National Regional Education Commissioner, able to provide guidelines for strategy implementation, encourage sharing of program ideas to avoid duplication of programs/service offered by tertiary providers and encourage both collaboration amongst tertiary providers and engagement with industry.

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?

As well as the standard measures for access, retention, progression and achievement, some thought should be given to taking account of the individual students' perspective on their experiences and achievements.

