Submission to the Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education
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I write as an academic with seventeen years' experience working in the field of education and learning for regional development, in regional, rural and remote Australian communities across three states. I address the Terms of Reference of this Review with specific reference to **post-school study**.

The Terms of Reference refer to differential educational achievement, barriers/ challenges and effectiveness of current policies and practices for regional, rural and remote students. The Discussion Paper, however, refers specifically to 'young people' (page 5). Section 6.9 on post-school study again limits the discussion to 'young people' (page 45).

It is important to clarify that all *students* are not *young people*. In today's economy and society, lifelong learning is a necessity. Many people return to study in their twenties, thirties, forties, fifties…and beyond. These are *students*, and so they are within scope of the Review; however, they are not acknowledged at all in the Discussion Paper. This is a significant omission. There is need to enable equitable access to education for all Australian students, including so-called 'mature-age' students.

The Review seeks to understand why it is proportionally less likely for Australians who live outside a major city to apply for or attain a university degree or VET diploma, and what can be done about it.

I have organised my response as follows: 1) Barriers to educational achievement and potential solutions for young people who move away from home to study (this is the only cohort acknowledged in the Discussion Paper); and, next, barriers to educational achievement and potential solutions for two other student cohorts not acknowledged in the Discussion Paper: 2) young people who remain in their home communities, and 3) mature-age students.

1) For *young people who move away from home to study*: Section 6.9 canvases some valid research about the barriers represented by costs and logistics; costs and logistics are very real challenges for many families. At the same time, recent in-depth research conducted in North West Tasmania (Hawkins 2014) has challenged the language of 'lower aspirations' as used in the Discussion Paper. Rural high school girls in this research all had strong aspirations for careers and further study, including university study. They did, however, often lack confidence, contacts, and knowledge of how to navigate the system – that is, key cultural capital for university study. Making study accessible for young people who are firstin-family to enter higher education, especially when they have to leave home to do so, is a cultural challenge as much as a financial one. And it is unrealistic to expect 100% of the effort to come from young people themselves; institutions also need to make an effort to be accessible, user friendly and culturally aware. There are some great examples of enabling and pathways programs that do a fantastic job easing the transition into higher education for 'non-traditional' students, giving universities a human face and helping students gain confidence and skills to succeed. See, for instance, the University Preparation Program at the University of Tasmania. There are also great examples of first year experience programs, and programs mediating the cultural transition into university for Indigenous students. There are various excellent examples; yet the problem is that universities don't receive

much money or kudos for successful enabling programs. The vital student interface that makes the difference between students' transitioning successfully to university or giving up, is often a labour of love by skilled but low-paid junior staff on insecure contracts with few institutional resources at their disposal. If the government is serious about closing gaps for equity groups, there needs to be serious investment in both the financial and cultural enablers of student success.

2) *For young people who choose to stay in their home communities*: Section 6.9 of the Discussion Paper observes that there are many exciting industry developments in rural, regional and remote Australia (p. 48), and this is certainly true. However, there is an obvious missing link in the discussion about how to leverage these industry opportunities into postschool careers for local students. The missing link is regional campuses – VET and university campuses based in these localities – that engage directly with industries and students to offer relevant local education and skilling pathways. Regional campuses have a key role to play in educational inclusion in rural, regional and remote Australia, but they are not even mentioned in the Discussion Paper. This is a significant oversight. Around 70% of Australia's universities have some presence outside the capital cities, and in my own work I have calculated that there are 73 distinct regional university campuses across Australia, in every state and the Northern Territory (Eversole 2016, p.81). There is an even stronger presence of VET campuses. These campuses have been established to support education participation and regional development in localities beyond the capital cities. Yet currently, many are struggling even to survive: in recent years, with the university sector under pressure and decisions made primarily in capital cities, regional campuses have been disinvested in aggressively. Staffing has been cut to the bone, and regional campus students forced to study online for the same fees their city colleagues pay for face-to-face learning. Regional campuses require strategic investment to ensure an equitable student experience, and to recognise the important regional education and development roles these campuses play. Importantly, investment in regional education needs to be controlled and spent from the campuses and communities it aims to benefit, in order to avoid regional education funding being captured by capital-city campuses. Regional Development Centres, as cross-sector institutions based on regional university campuses, could provide a model for targeted investment that supports both student and community development outcomes 'in place' (See Eversole 2017).

3) *For 'mature-age' students* in regional and rural areas: This cohort has very few options, as mature-age students tend to have family and work commitments in their home communities that make it difficult or impossible for them to relocate to a capital-city campus to study. Mature-age students comprise an enormous range of people, from people starting or changing careers late in life to professionals seeking higher qualifications. Looking beyond a narrow focus on 'young people' recognises that a wide range of people beyond the capital cities are seeking to study to develop new skills and improve their enterprises, industries and communities. Many mature-age students in regional, rural and remote areas are first-infamily to undertake post-school study, and higher education institutions are culturally unfamiliar terrain. The downgrading and closing of regional campuses particularly affects these mature-age students. Research conducted by the Regional Universities Network (RUN) suggests that regional university campuses play a particularly important role in making university accessible to the large part of our population that is over age 20: RUN member universities average about 50% mature-age students (RUN 2014, p. 9). Where

functional regional campuses with face-to-face or blended study options exist, mature-age students can and do access higher education options, often in significant numbers. Yet increasingly, the only study option accessible to mature-age students outside capital cities are online courses, often of mediocre quality, with no face to face support or interaction with lecturers, tutors or fellow students. There is a need to broaden study opportunities for mature-age students in regional, rural and remote areas, whether through strengthening regional campuses, Regional Development Centres, or other models.

The Review seeks innovative approaches to address barriers and help rural, regional and remote students transition into post-school study and employment. The following points summarise some approaches that can make a difference for regional, rural and remote students:

1) Both capital-city and regional campuses need to be supported to invest in strong enabling and pathways programs for first-in-family students of all ages, as a key strategy to overcome the cultural barriers to higher education study. Effective enabling programs respect where students have come from and help them navigate the cultural transition into higher education. They also help educational institutions engage with these 'non-traditional' students more effectively, valuing the life experiences and critical engagement they often bring into learning environments.

2) Regional campuses in particular are a strategic policy instrument to support education for regional, rural and remote development. Regional campuses can create pathways for students into cutting-edge regional industries, as well as professional learning opportunities for regional leaders at every level. Innovative institutional models such as Regional Development Centres can bring together universities with VET providers, industries and communities to co-create relevant education programs tailored to the needs and opportunities in particular places.

3) Programs and funding targeted to 'regional education' need to flow from the centre to the coalface to support regional, rural and remote students and the campuses, centres and staff that are directly engaging with and enabling these students and communities on their learning journeys. It is important that funds intended to benefit students in regions are devolved to those who have the local knowledge to understand what is required to support these students to enter, stay, and succeed in post-school education.

Works cited

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