Recipient Details

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Responses

Curriculum and assessment

This response is on behalf of EPHEA (Equity Practitioners in Higher Education Australasia). EPHEA representatives interact with regional and remote students across the spectrum of student equity practice in Australian universities, from outreach initiatives to providing support to students throughout their studies.

This submission provides examples of good practice that could be more widely implemented if supported through policy and funding. Recommendations are included in final comments section.

Curriculum

Students from regional and remote communities often lack access to information that can inform their aspirations for post-school pathways. If students are 'learning so I have a real choice about what I do' (discussion paper p21), then they need to know the broad range of the options open to them. The range of experience that informs future aspirations is quite narrow in some communities and often there are limited University-educated role models to inspire young people as they develop ideas about their future.

A focus on career development from primary school onward is an important aspect of building knowledge and awareness of options. Inclusive curriculum that provides real world examples relevant to regional and remote contexts supports self-development, broadens the world view of students in smaller communities and informs their aspirations. Often this focus is missing, even in secondary schools, as resources and expertise are lacking in rural schools.

University outreach programs can help address this gap through partnerships with schools. Examples of programs include: delivering a career development focus and resources targeted to the local communities; supporting academics visiting schools to talk about their subject area or offer hands-on interactive activities; arranging current students from the region to talk about their studies; developing career resources that showcase 'local heroes', both those who came from the region and have succeeded in a career elsewhere and those who have used their education in employment in their community; delivering mentoring relationships via online tools; offering professional development in career development resources for teachers and career resources online and in hard copy designed to be relevant to regional and/or remote communities; and encouraging industry-school-university partnerships to support career development and work experience.

Rating: 7

Teachers and teaching

The Higher Education Partnerships and Participation Program (HEPPP) supports universities to deliver outreach with schools across Australia by forming partnerships with schools and other organisations, to widen access to higher education.

A robust partnership can deliver benefits to the school, its community and the university through creating opportunities to interact. Ideally, partnerships between universities and regional and remote schools can help teachers access additional resources and professional development. Examples from existing HEPPP and National Priorities Pool projects include:

- Visits to schools to deliver activities developed by outreach team, for example a maths activity or a financial planning activity, which can then be shared with the school and resource pack donated;

- Visits from academics willing to share professional development activities to teachers in regional schools – for example, maths education specialists

- Sponsorship of teachers to attend a university-sponsored conference – for example, on student well-being and mental health awareness

- Professional development and networking opportunities for teachers who accompany students on residential camps to university campuses

- Access to expertise within the university for teachers and opportunities for schools and researchers to collaborate

- School based teacher PD on pathways to higher education, scholarships and access options

- Partnerships which include universities, schools and business/industry e.g. local bank, local engineering company, local hospital etc

School-university partnerships can reduce the isolation sometimes experienced by staff in regional and remote schools and demonstrate that the school and its students are valued by institutions beyond its community.

Rating: 7

Leaders and leadership

School leaders can help foster a culture of achievement through partnerships with universities. An active and productive partnership between schools and universities fosters discussions about school to university pathways. The relationship can support the school leader in developing a culture of excellence which is integral to school success. The partnership sends a message to staff and students that higher education is a goal and the expectation is established for the future, even when no student has previously gone to university. A vibrant partnership that creates opportunities for students to visit the university campus, access learning opportunities from visiting university staff and student role models and creates positive links between the school and the university contributes to the reputation of the school.

The leadership of school principals in supporting continuation of the HEPPP has been appreciated by equity practitioners delivering partnership programs. The Commonwealth has recommended that HEPPP is revised to ensure that all regions have some connection with a university, as the recent Review of HEPPP revealed gaps in delivery. This Review could reinforce this recommendation by encouraging all secondary schools to seek partnerships with a university, if one is not already

established. Many universities also work with primary schools, recognising that the earlier students are engaged, the more opportunities are presented to explore career options and life choices.

School leaders may also be able to leverage a university partnership to engage with industry in the region. Equity practitioners have worked closely with their Development and Alumni Offices to identify alumni and current industry partners in the regions who might be able to work with the principal to add value to activities at the school. Examples include a mining company annually sponsoring an academic and several students (including Indigenous students) from the Business School to visit several schools in the remote region where industry is based and share experiences and lead activities; industry partners offering site visits when regional students visit campus; industry partners working with students on projects or offering work experience.

Rating: 7

School and Community

Equity practitioners acknowledge that parents and communities are important influencers in decision-making about future employment and study choices. Parents and peers are identified as key influencers, followed by teachers and career advisers, but community culture and attitudes also exert an influence. In communities with generational disadvantage and high unemployment, there may be distrust of the school and education generally or at least, little knowledge of options, benefits and costs. Equity practitioners acknowledge that it is important to work beyond partnerships with schools to engage with the community and with parents.

Outreach programs have engaged with community members through initiatives such as:

- Attending agricultural shows, sporting and community events with information on careers and study pathways from an equity perspective, rather than recruitment;

- Timing school visits to coincide with parent/teacher evenings;

- Having a visible present when visiting schools, so that parents recognise that university staff are in town (branded vehicle, shirts) and encourage interaction;

- Delivering community events such as astronomy evening where community can come on school grounds, enjoy a family event (sausage sizzle, activities for younger children, information about what universities do, meet current students from region);

- Having permanent presence in regional hub e.g. using existing premises such as local library, council, or business which creates additional partnership opportunities;

- Equity staff embedded in regional schools (2 UNSW staff in Gilgandra High School working with partner schools in region);

- Delivering short courses regionally like ICT basics for adults, to make connections with parents;

- Inviting parents and the community to Open Days, especially regional university campuses, or other events on campus;

- Inviting families to graduation ceremonies locally to acknowledge participation in outreach activities (Children's University, completion of mentoring programs, etc);

- Providing on-campus experiences where all costs are covered for regional/remote students, including flights, accommodation, food. These experiences can be life-changing – a remote inland community child experiencing the ocean for the first time; visiting a shopping mall and riding an

escalator – in addition, students experience diversity on campus and begin to imagine themselves as part of it.

Rating: 7

Information and Communication Technology

Quality Information and Communication Technology (ICT) expands opportunities for regional and remote students to explore beyond their community. Equity practitioners have adopted ICT to create resources that can be easily accessed and shared. Most universities have extensive on-line resources that aim to provide information about higher education pathways and career choices that are open to everyone to use and explore. Many are targeted at younger audiences than current students. Online resources may not be specifically for regional and remote students but will include some examples, often real-life success stories.

Uses of ICT to widen participation include:

- Online Games that help students learn about university (Curtin) other examples include what's uni like www.whats-uni-like.edu.au/

- Online mentoring programs via Skype or similar

- Career Development modules e.g My Future

- Information videos of aspects of university life, made with needs of regional and remote students in mind – accommodation, scholarships, resources and support available e.g. Make your Mark www.makeyourmark.edu.au/; Think Your Way www.thinkyourway.edu.au/

- Academic skills resources, in online modules designed for equity students

- Use of social media tools like WhatsApp groups to connect students from regional and remote schools who have met while attending residential camps. This fosters friendships, so that students have established friendships if they enrol at university

- Online chat sessions to answer questions

- Orientation modules online

- Apps that students can access with their phones.

Rating: 7

Entrepreneurship and schools

Universities encourage entrepreneurism, particularly amongst students, and can offer models that support this activity. Students have established 'incubator labs' on campus to encourage 'start-ups' and could share experiences with regional communities. Hackathons are intensive activities to generate resources, usually apps. These kinds of events could be sponsored in regional centres or teams from regional and remote schools sponsored to attend competitions. Again this creates opportunities for students to create their own opportunities and to partner with local business and industry.

Entrepreneurs can support these activities through philanthropy. An example is a WA entrepreneur who was educated at a school in the Pilbara. Every year he sponsors about 15 students from upper secondary on a trip to Perth, Sydney and Canberra. Students visit company headquarters and meet staff, are linked to a professional in their area of future careers, visit university residential colleges

and dine with their sponsor, his family and equity staff (who have a link with their school), visit the Opera House and other Sydney attractions and visit Parliament in Canberra, as well as Questicon and various museums and galleries. The program is designed to broaden their world view; and convince them they can achieve great things. The program's strength is the personal focus of the sponsor and his interest in each student.

Rating: 7

Improving access – enrolments, clusters, distance education and boarding

EPHEA's members have been actively involved in promoting and supporting pathways to university that support the student's individual circumstances. These options include enabling preparatory programs; portfolio entry, provisional entry pathways, bonus points for ATAR entry, principal's choice schemes, VET-university pathways – mostly with dedicated support to ease the transition to tertiary study. Whilst the range of options is positive, the choices can create problems for students.

The complex array has made it difficult for prospective students to navigate and select the best option for them and studies have shown that regional and remote students do not have ready access to information in a timely, appropriate format. The Higher Education Standards Panel has recently released a report on transparency in admissions process, with recommendations to improve admissions transparency accepted by the Department of Education and Training. Although the move towards transparent processes is laudable, there is still a need for equity practitioners who are familiar with the options to be upskilling and updating staff in regional and remote schools and helping students and families identify what the best options are for them.

School-university partnerships that facilitate this information exchange can help clarify options. Advice informed by an equity perspective that understands the issues facing the student can advise on the whole range of options, in contrast with a recruitment focus aiming to attract enrolments to one institution. There is always a tension between recruitment and widening participation but dedicated equity funding that supports equity outreach for regional and remote Australia can support a non-partisan approach.

Rating for enrolments: 7

Rating for clusters: 7

Rating for distance education: 7

Rating for boarding: 7

Diversity

EPHEA supports diversity and acknowledges that the cohort of regional and remote students is diverse, in and of itself, whilst being considered as one of the six key equity target groups under-represented in higher education. EPHEA works closely with Indigenous centres at each university and takes a lead from Indigenous colleagues when working with Indigenous students and in predominately Indigenous communities. A recommendation of this submission is that Indigenous knowledge is valued in reviewing advice to this Review from Indigenous university staff, teachers and communities.

Diversity includes mode of study and many regional and remote students are studying remotely, often part time. These students are often mature-age and may have many other responsibilities to juggle. Often part-time students are not eligible for any type of financial assistance but they may also have no option to study full-time. If we are serious about diversifying student population to

support regional and remote students, then there needs to be flexibility in access to financial support.

There has been a gender-imbalance for some years in students from remote areas, with females over-represented. Recent data from NCSEHE Equity Fellow, Louise Pollard, notes 68% of remote students are female. Further research is needed to determine whether males are disengaged or whether they have other non-study options. If they are disengaged, then some specific strategies to engage this group will be needed to encourage longer term stability in communities and a culture supportive of entrepreneurial activities.

Rating: 7

Transitioning beyond school

For regional and remote students relocating to university, the initial challenges are often financial support, finding accommodation and overcoming homesickness.

Many regional and remote students have to take a gap year and earn money to qualify as Independent and be eligible for financial support. The recent change to eligibility for Independent status to 14 months after completing high school rather than 18 months has eased the problem somewhat but not resolved it. Students need funds to establish themselves and many of those costs must be met before semester starts. Many don't qualify until March-April and so can find themselves in difficult circumstances right at the time when they need funds. Often scholarships are not paid until after the Census date of March 31 or August 31. Some flexibility in providing financial support from time of orientation (week before semester starts) would ease transition worries.

University accommodation is expensive but is a good option initially for regional or remote students who may be the only person from their school in student housing. Often support services are part of the accommodation service and offer academic support in addition to friendly face and advice. Having information that points out the pros and cons of different accommodation options is important for regional and remote students, as they may not include items like internet, electricity costs, transport to campus for classes etc when weighing up costs of various options. Some universities have developed calculators that will estimate options and make a comparison.

Universities offer extensive support services but connecting students with services is sometimes challenging. Students from schools with university partnerships have often been introduced to support services through outreach visits to campus or other outreach activities so are more willing to seek help: another benefit of partnerships that connect students to resources throughout their journey from primary school to higher education.

Rating: 7

Additional Comments

EPHEA appreciates the opportunity to provide feedback and some examples of the many innovative initiatives to support equity students access and succeed in higher education. There are many excellent examples showcased in publications from the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, accessible from their website. EPHEA's executive members would also be very happy to provide more details, if requested.

Recommendations are summarised below:

1.   Support policy decisions that give regional and remote students choice about their study options. Some students want to relocate, some have the choice of their preferred course at local

university, others prefer online or blended models of course delivery, which might include brief intensive periods on campus.

2.	Financial barriers are real deterrents and not just for students who qualify as low SES. Many regional and remote families are caught in unpredictable cycles in agriculture and the mineral resources sector and may struggle to continue supporting their children even if they are asset-rich on paper. Regional relocation scholarships should not be converted to loans, the Start-up loan should become a scholarship again and there should be flexibility in determining eligibility for financial support that takes account of changing circumstances. Students from remote/very remote regions facing high costs in relocation should be prioritised in scholarship allocation.

3.	The HEPPP review recommended that all universities deliver outreach activities in regional and remote Australia; that gaps were addressed; and that duplication was avoided. These recommendations should be implemented. The current model does not take account of the high costs of delivering quality programs in states like Queensland and Western Australia, where distance is a major cost factor.

4.	Many regional and remote students are mature age. Encouraging options for life-long learning and re-skilling are vital for regional sustainability.

5.	Encourage universities to set targets for access, participation and retention of regional and remote students and monitor progress against targets.

6.	Robust, sustained partnerships between a school and a university that are responsive to local contexts and flexible to adapt and include other parties such as industry partners or local government can help create a culture of achievement and create myriad opportunities for regional and remote students. To be successful they need funding that is long-term and covers the real costs of engaging remote and very remote communities.