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Responses

Curriculum and assessment

Overcrowded curriculum. This is a problem for all students, but regional students are affected even more. When contact time is precious (and it always is), then disruptions or requirements that take time away from academic engagement will reduce this precious contact time and adversely affect learning. Examples of disruptions include significantly increased travel time to events and activities. Participation in events outside of classroom contact is essential and develops aspects of students' character and learning that cannot be addressed in the classroom. The time cost associated with this participation is always greater for regional students.

The rigid, highly competitive and stifling system associated with the determining an ATAR for students who choose this path must be abolished. Our country seems to be moving slowly towards a system where universities, who are eager to enrol students, offer early entry based on existing progress, a portfolio or an interview process. Under this emerging system an ATAR is irrelevant. What is relevant is that students maintain their final performance relative to the performance that earned the early offer. In Western Australia, the ATAR system is already circumvented by offering regional students a discount on the ATAR cut-offs that are required to attend university. For example, while general entry to the University of Western Australia has an ATAR cut-off of 80, access to the Broadway program allows students entry with an ATAR cut-off of 75. While this is considered helpful, gaining entry to the tertiary institution is a first hurdle that could be considered to be the lowest of hurdles.

Rating: 7

Teachers and teaching

Regional, rural and remote areas struggle to attract the quantity of applicants for teaching, and other roles associated with the educational health of the regional student. Reduced competition for positions can lead to a reduction in the quality of the successful applicant. Schools must add a premium to salary or provide other benefits to attract excellent staff. Even inner regional schools in desirable locations in Western Australia have significantly fewer applicants – this is particularly true in STEM learning areas.

Rating: 6

Leaders and leadership

Rating: 7

School and Community

There is a charm and quality to regional students that is unique, heartening, and one of the significant factors which draw teachers and others away from urban areas. There is clearly

something happening with these children's upbringing that is extremely positive. It is unlikely that "charm" factors would be measured, as the subsequent Independent Review into Urban Charm might reveal that city kids need urgent help. My point is that there are other things to measure that show a regional upbringing has many positive aspects. A community relations exercise that led to regional, rural and remote communities feeling positive about their strengths and the good work they do raising good children, would be money well spent.

Rating: 7

Information and Communication Technology

Data costs are excessive outside of capital cities

Rating: 4

Entrepreneurship and schools

There is an entrepreneurial flair or a "can-do" attitude associated with the regional students. Providing space within the school day to engage students in real-world problem-solving, and social, environmental or business-related entrepreneurship would build on these strengths and raise social capital in regional, rural and remote communities. This is a reasonably new way of thinking about engaging children in education and one that does not lend itself readily to regulation and objective oversight - necessary qualities for the bureaucrat but stifling for the creative, innovative and entrepreneurial mindset.

Within Australia we have a broad range of understandings around what constitutes an effective education. From the rigorous, prescriptive, didactic teaching of concepts that can be recalled and tested through to entrepreneurial education where knowledge and understanding is developed as it is needed and based on real-world problems that engage students. One end of the spectrum requires rigid curriculum and standardised testing while entrepreneurial education requires passionate and engaged teachers working with students for extended periods of time when mistakes are expected and tolerated, and progress measured on individual outcomes. There is no perfect system and a blended arrangement is appropriate but only possible when restrictions are removed.

Rating: 5

Improving access – enrolments, clusters, distance education and boarding

Rating for enrolments: 5

Rating for clusters: 5

Rating for distance education: 5

Rating for boarding: 5

Diversity

Rating: 5

Transitioning beyond school

Attendance at tertiary institutions often equates to relocation to the closest capital city. The opportunities for part-time work, the plethora of course options and the well-worn trail leads to a capital city University. For many regional students the financial cost associated with attending a university away from their home is not viable. The extent of this financial hurdle is such that many

students do not attempt ATAR courses because they already know – or think they know – that they cannot afford to leave home and attend university.

The allowance available for youth living independently and studying does not cover even half the cost associated with a University college and the qualifying rules are not attainable in regional areas.

Rating: 7

Additional Comments

There are well-understood barriers to attaining an inspiring education, and this is the case regardless of location: remote, rural, regional or urban. For this review, it will be difficult to separate educational issues that face all Australians from those that face only regional, rural or remote students (these students will be referred to as “regional” for the remainder of this paper). In some cases it is a nuance to the problem faced by all students that will significantly affect the education prospects of regional students.

For many young Australians, home life is less than ideal. This is borne out through statistics that register increases in mental health problems, particularly depression and anxiety. In addition to these mental health problems it is anecdotally recognised that parenting skills have changed to the extent that parenting roles are neglected, misunderstood or wilfully ignored.

Areas that struggle to attract paraprofessional support are less likely to find solutions to these parenting and mental health issues. Even when support is available, this does not ensure that the situation improves.

Social issues seem to be the factor that needs addressing first. Developing social capital must be a priority in remote, rural and regional areas. Specific funding for speech therapists and social workers for early childhood centres within all primary schools should be considered.

Within Australia, the despair associated with falling NAPLAN results, and the implied failure directed at the young people taking these tests is not warranted. I believe students continue to perform at high academic standards – in general. I also believe the world has changed, the social milieu has changed, the considerations that students make when undertaking the cost benefit analysis associated with the effort they will provide when completing a NAPLAN test – has changed.

What if students question the benefit associated with making an effort on NAPLAN tests and their analysis of the benefit is influenced by the negative publicity that often flows at the time of NAPLAN testing? As spokespeople and the media speculate on the negative effects of national testing, as we speculate on the cost benefit analysis for the country, surely we influence the thoughts, the inclination, and the effort students are willing to make on what they might conceive to be an unpopular system.

There are clearly strong patterns associated with poorly performing areas on the NAPLAN testing, but in general, analysis is lacking if researchers assume that student effort and engagement with NAPLAN is satisfactory and that this is constant or predictable between urban, regional, rural and remote locations.