

Recipient Details

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Responses

Curriculum and assessment

Many standardised assessment measures document a gap between regional/remote students and others. While certain regional schools get high HSC results (e.g. Coonabarabran), sometimes one school's achievement comes at a cost to other nearby schools. Higher SES does not always correlate to strong achievement records (e.g. Wade High in Griffith). The Independent Review report draws well-deserved attention to the need for culturally and contextually responsive teaching in rural schools, and to the differences in perspective about the "purpose" of schooling and what successful schooling looks like for different communities. Chronic low expectations of kids, parent and teachers (their own perceptions and those of others) are another important issue.

UNSW and other universities can contribute to the growing body of knowledge about "what's working", by identifying examples of successful rural schools for all age levels and conducting further research. Central schools, schools with strong middle years programs, distance education schools and schools with strong community and family partnerships should be identified and studied further, to learn from examples that may be applicable to similar contexts. UNSW, for instance, has particularly strong capacity in the areas of culturally responsive schooling, educational leadership, and assessment. Funding directed toward this type of research will have high value for money in that the best ways of spending future funds can be identified and refined.

Some areas of government will be more receptive to proposals aimed at closing the urban/rural gap if explicit links can be made to the economic growth that would result. Outside of the educational research sector, further investigation should be made into the economic impact if that gap could be bridged, e.g. the potential rise in GDP or number of jobs created. The economic costs of an undereducated workforce to local and national industry cannot be overemphasised. We also suggest the need to look at the economic value of the education sector as compared to other sectors in terms of what it brings to regional areas – according to former Minister of Education Adrian Piccoli, the education sector is larger than the wheat/dairy industries and a significant employer in the regional economy.

Rating: 7

Teachers and teaching

Incentives often attract teachers in the short term but do not persuade them to commit to rural teaching as a long term career choice. The current point system can encourage teachers to leave the regional areas after the required amount of time. Many teachers in regional schools are also teaching outside of their subject areas, which can impact their efficacy and student engagement/achievement.

Undertaking a practicum experience in a rural school exposes pre-service teachers to the realities of working in a remote environment, helping them make more informed choices about pursuing such job opportunities. NSW does not currently provide funding for rural Professional Experience placements – successful examples exist in Queensland and Western Australia. Federally, a scheme along the lines of the New Colombo Plan could incentivise placements/internships in the country. Currently of UNSW education students, 70% are interested in overseas placements/jobs, but only 4% in rural/remote areas. Financially supported placement options could shift this.

Bonded scholarships for teacher education degrees could be explored; for example a model using the ATO zone list in which loan repayment is suspended as long as the teacher lives and works outside a metropolitan area. These could be offered to both metropolitan students and rural teacher education students who want to teach in rural areas, or extended to all rural teachers with HECS debts, ensuring they do not have to repay their HECS while in hard-to-staff locations.

The sector needs to make the most of its experienced teachers, ensuring they are used for mentoring and leading in the classroom, and not for administration. This could mean allowances they can use to off-set costs or undertake professional learning in their own time (as lack of a supply of relief teachers in rural areas constrains opportunities for PL). Given rates of teacher turnover, it can be a risk for rural schools to invest in professional learning. There is considerable potential for UNSW to provide professional development to rural teachers; further funding could help existing initiatives through ASPIRE and the School of Education be made available online or support presenters to travel to regional areas for workshops.

Rating: 7

Leaders and leadership

Issues that arise in metropolitan areas, such as the battle for school funding and parent choice across multiple sectors (government/Catholic/Independent) play out similarly in regional areas.

A hub-and-spokes model could help this splintering effect – make strong secondary schools feel responsible for outlying schools. Communities of schools that closely work together can pool resources and strengthen offerings for each, but this does not work when schools feel in competition with, rather than in cooperation with each other.

Recent case studies of high schools being consolidated show profound impacts economically (businesses close) and pastorally (families want schools situated within their communities). Some areas have tried a shared principal model with an assistant principal based at smaller schools (e.g. Griffith/Wade) but this has not been popular.

There is substantial scope for universities to offer more support for new principals and teachers, perhaps by organising coaching, mentoring, professional learning or communities of practice that further feed into research. University students could be deployed to offer classroom assistance, as in a current model UNSW uses in metropolitan schools in which students spend 15 days in a school as an assistant and observer. As mentioned earlier, further research into examples of strong models of leadership in remote areas (e.g. Chris Sarra and Cherbourg State School) would provide a valuable springboard for reform in similar contexts.

Rating: 7

School and Community

The Review rightly points out that community relationships with schools are central to success in education, and even for defining what success means for a particular community. This is context-specific and requires ongoing, genuine and sustained relationships. Further research is required into how community expectations affect student outcomes, access to and pursuit of further education.

The UNSW ASPIRE pilot outreach program “Beyond Borders” pre-empts the Government’s regional hub initiative and is showing very positive early signs. Two UNSW ASPIRE project officers are based in a regional school (Gilgandra High) and work across a cluster of schools in the surrounding area to raise awareness of and aspiration to, higher education. Part of the program’s initial success stems from a simple visibility and familiarity with the local community - parents and local clubs, as well as the schools. The value of genuine face-to-face connection and relationships cannot be underestimated. The program is vital, but costly and challenging to manage well.

For research-intensive, metropolitan universities to invest resources into regional communities in the long term will require a substantial and secure funding pipeline. The priority must be to establish and maintain a trusted, premium quality educational experience, rather than simply creating a second rate and tokenistic ‘outpost’ which offers little of any real academic worth. It would be useful to expand the Department of Education’s existing “Hub School” partnerships to both metropolitan and rural schools; thus each university could partner with a cluster of schools in a systematic and sustained way.

Schools could function physically as education hubs for multiple providers (e.g. TAFE, university satellite campuses) in afternoons and evenings. Universities should expand offerings of alternative pathways through tertiary education, not just into tertiary education (e.g. associate degrees, hybrid courses and flexible study arrangements), and these arrangements must apply to undergraduate degrees, not just postgraduate. Universities should investigate innovative ways to reduce accommodation costs and time away from home and work by investing in “low residency” degrees in which students come to campus for a few short stints a year. Tertiary connections with industries relevant to regional areas must be strengthened.

Rating: 7

Information and Communication Technology

Technology access is still a major issue for rural schools – basic internet/phone issues still provide huge hurdles for things like online mentoring and tutoring, access to Connected Classrooms, etc. This can prevent teachers from accessing existing services or integrating technology into their teaching due to the potential for things to go wrong. Metropolitan schools are not exempt from these issues, but they are compounded in remote schools.

New initiatives such as Aurora College, the online selective school program, show promise and need to be formally evaluated. There is further scope around this model – online schools based around STEM, languages, creative and performing arts, etc.; connected clusters for specialised study.

At UNSW, ASPIRE is currently providing support for rural schools in STEM subjects, via in-school workshops and on-campus events. There is also a pilot ‘Click-on Mentor’ program in two regional schools, providing mentoring to students, and a ‘Read-with-me’ pilot in which adults situated at UNSW provide reading support to Yr. 2/3 students in rural schools via Adobe Connect. ASPIRE is currently investigating the opportunity to develop senior school students as technology assistants within rural schools.

At tertiary level, it is imperative to strengthen technology access in regional areas to improve access to and support during online university learning. Universities need to strengthen and diversify their online offerings. However, we believe that not all the answers to increasing higher education attainment for rural students lie in the online space. Online offerings are often “invisible”; universities need to be visible in rural communities and create genuine relationships and presences in those communities to increase their relevance and spark student motivation to enrol.

Rating: 6

Entrepreneurship and schools

As mentioned in other sections, strengthening industry links between schools, universities, and industries relevant to regional areas is key to making further study relevant to rural students and to attracting metropolitan students to consider relocating to regional areas. Economic development is certainly important for rural communities and for giving children a sense of future opportunities, but such initiatives should be done in consultation with communities to ensure alignment with community values and to take into account concerns specific to each context.

Rating: 5

Improving access – enrolments, clusters, distance education and boarding

University is often seen by rural communities as distant, unachievable, and in some cases irrelevant. Sparking students’ interest early in their education so that they are motivated by the time they reach their senior years is important.

UNSW is looking at getting the University Prep Program recognised as part of the HSC; receiving credit in high school courses can help students start a uni degree in their own community. The ability to start taking uni courses online during year 11-12 could also help students’ self-confidence to be able to undertake university-level work and aid in secondary-tertiary transition.

Postgraduate CSP places could offer incentives for further study, giving priority to individuals in rural/remote areas. Business, law, engineering CSP places could be made to consider regional status (currently, the process is blind to geographical area).

Rating for enrolments: 4

Rating for clusters: 6

Rating for distance education: 6

Rating for boarding: 3

Diversity

The difficulty in acquiring specialist services to meet individual needs has been highlighted in the review. UNSW can support careers advisors, teachers and school leaders with resources and knowledge. UNSW departments such as the Optometry Clinic, exercise physiology, psychology or social work could also offer clinics or student placements in regional areas.

The diversity of experience among students and schools in rural areas must be recognised and accounted for in policy and funding directions. Equity initiatives to increase diversity at universities and in university admissions processes should continue to be studied and developed.

Support and scholarship programs that target students in a sustained fashion across key transition points (primary to high school, high school to TAFE/university or work, sustaining success while in

tertiary programs) are needed. ASPIRE offers work in this space as well as UNSW School of Education partnerships with philanthropic organisations such as the GO Foundation.

Rating: 7

Transitioning beyond school

University admissions processes disproportionately impact regional students. The relation of ATAR to WAM after a student's first year is not observable; i.e. low SES impacts a student's ATAR, but the disparity vanishes at university. Next year the Gateway program at UNSW will make regional kids eligible for a UNSW offer if they are within 10 points of the ATAR cutoff (for 90 ATAR programs and below).

UNSW ASPIRE is an award-winning widening participation outreach initiative that works with school students from primary years through to Year 12, in low socio-economic status schools and communities in Sydney and regional/remote NSW. The program has been proven to raise awareness, enable aspirations and support the academic attainment of students to help them progress to university.

UNSW ASPIRE measures social and educational impact using qualitative and quantitative data to track attitudinal shifts and progression to university. It seeks independent evaluations of its work to understand what works for partner schools in diverse communities. Since 2010 UNSW ASPIRE has tracked the university offers received by students in UNSW ASPIRE partner schools. From 2010 to 2016 there has been a 120% increase in offers to students. The number of universities making offers has increased from 8 to 15, suggesting that students are setting broader goals for themselves and meeting more university entry standards.

Particular events, such as 'Focus on Success', a career planning and awareness raising event for Yr. 11 students in Dubbo, and the annual 'Connect' residential experience at UNSW, have been well received by rural students and teachers. Qualitative pre and post-event data shows that students undergo an observable attitudinal shift, reporting greater inclination to consider a university pathway, and heightened sense of self-efficacy in their capacity to successfully make the transition to higher education.

Since its inception UNSW ASPIRE has utilised HEPPP funding to investigate and develop a range of initiatives to support rural schools and students. The recent uncertainties around such funding present considerable challenges to universities in terms of forward planning and the longitudinal nature of our outreach work into regional communities.

Rating: 7

Additional Comments

The report has addressed most of the key areas of concern, and offered many valuable suggestions.

While the review encourages the use of existing resources effectively, not just allocating more of them, it is important to realise that it is expensive and resource intensive to work effectively in this space, and to address areas of need meaningfully.

Universities play an important role in supporting rural communities, and in contributing to progress in raising aspirations, academic attainment and transition to further study. In each of the nine theme areas of the review, there is opportunity for universities, including UNSW, to contribute to progress.

Particular aspects UNSW could focus on include:

- Contextual Entry scheme. 'UNSW Gateway' is currently being implemented, and provides students from Regional /Remote schools a differential university offer of up to 10 ATAR points for some courses. There is room to develop this scheme further and to investigate other more equitable entry schemes.
- Teacher professional development: especially that which is targeted to meeting current needs such as coding, STEM, and facilitating cross-curricular and wellbeing skills.
- Provide, or contribute to specialist services to schools and students. e.g. Careers, health and IT support.
- Supporting collaboration and innovative teaching and learning in regional schools through authentic, problem-based and enterprising approaches to curriculum content.
- Promote, and support, the establishment of regional hubs by which UNSW and other universities establish a presence in regional areas, facilitating access and participation for regional students, creating employment and building social capital via tangible connections with the broader higher education community.
- Continue to encourage rural placements for preservice teachers.